INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FUNDERS GROUP

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Funding Global LGBTQI Rights: The Basics

July 14, 2014
9:45-10:45am

Facilitator:

- Carla Sutherland, Associate Research Scholar, Gender and Sexuality Law Center, Columbia University Law School

***Panelists*:**

- Mariam Armisen, Founder/Program Coordinator, Queer African Youth Network
- Andres Rivera Duarte, Director, *Organizacion de Transexuales por la Dignidad de la Diversidad*
- Haneen Maikey, Director, Al-Qaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society

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Carla Sutherland, Associate Research Scholar of the Gender and Sexuality Law Center at Columbia University Law School, introduced the session by asking funders, "How do you talk about something that many people feel uncomfortable talking about?", especially if this sentiment is at the core of certain international communities and culture. She challenged the funders in the room to consider what kinds of issues they should take into account given *this* background.

In leading the audience to unpack assumption and norms, Carla highlighted the importance of language – what kind is used and what is its significance. She asked participants to consider the following questions:

- What is the significance of specific language? SOGI? LGBTQI?
- What happens when you pack different identities into a single acronym?
- What's heard by activists and/or people from another community when they hear LGBTQI?

Carla concluded the introduction by suggesting that words mean different things to different people. As such, people can have an entirely different understanding about what you're talking about. What does it mean as an activist to navigate through all of that complexity? In particular, how do we do so in a space that is reflective of power dynamics? At best, the choice of language can make a work space effective. At worst, it can make a work place dangerous.

Mariam Armisen, Founder and Program Coordinator of Queer African Youth Network, shared her experience of language and sexual identity in Burkina Faso. In Burkina Faso, there exists a long list of names to refer to one's sexual identity, one that continues to shift depending on one's own identity and depending on whom they are dating. For example, a woman dating a woman could be identified by the name for "feminine woman" and

within another dating context could be referred to by the name for “masculine woman”.

According to Mariam, while a very diverse and long list of identifiers exists in Burkina Faso, when her organization organizes in a global movement around LGBTQI umbrellas, they use the standard kind of language (ie, LGBTQI). Since those are more commonly used activist names, they can more easily connect with global movements. But, within their communities at home, they use the vast array of different terms to self-identify.

“What does this mean for funders?” Carla posed this question to the audience.

*****How much of the following was Bob’s response vs Carla’s reaction?*****

J. Bob Alotta, Executive Director of Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, shared that the ‘language of sensitivity’ challenge as a program officer is translating it back to the funding organization. How can you educate your board as to what you are actually funding? They are looking for focus and impact. The challenge then becomes to educate within your own organization on how to identify within the LGBTQI framework. Which part of the acronym are you specifically funding?

A participant from American Jewish World Service (AJWS) shared that a lot of grant applications ask for the list of acronyms without specifying which part of the spectrum people are working on. This leads to a less nuanced understanding of what that LGBTQI could mean.

Carla circled back by reminding the audience that it is important to realize that people make mistakes, “We don’t all know those definitions.” Once this argument is taken outside of funding institutions and to individual donors, it has to be translated even further. Grantmakers should be more cognizant of what that language means and should take time to explain it in a more meaningful way to individual donors.

She then highlighted that it is also important to remember that part of the language choice *is* about power and resources. What does identity mean? They are names that we call ourselves, but when a state calls you a lesbian it can often connote violence and lead to discrimination. Additionally, identity can change over time and language changes meaning across different geographies. It shouldn’t be forgotten that we are using language as a proxy for other things.

Activists call themselves LGBTQI, whereas those in communities do not. How does that drive a wedge between people organizing funding and the community? It is key to talk to activists as a way to understand a community. Funding strategies tend to separate them out from their communities. In fact, the interests of the activists may be very different from the people living in the community.

Carla called for the audience to move away from labels, and to talk about sexual orientation as a descriptor rather than as an identity. (ie, LGBTQI[C] – curious). In the public health realm, the term MSM-ers has taken a stronghold to refer to men who have sex with men. These descriptors, for example, have now become identity.

Andres Rivera Duarte, Director of *Organizacion de Transexuales por la Dignidad de la Diversidad*, detailed how activists, particularly trans* activists, have had to respond to the challenges of working in a field that’s labeled. “I don’t like boxes,” he shared, “they limit us as human beings.”

Andres also highlighted the challenges of language choice even within a region. For example, in Latin America, not only are there differences in relation to Europe, but also between countries within Latin America. Funders want standard terms, but this isn’t accurate. When donors say they want to support projects, what they are

saying is that they want to support the standard movements, but just as identities change so do the strategies and movements.

For example, the depathologization campaigns in Latin America adopt different strategies. To not treat trans* people as "mentally ill" might mean that trans* people will lose some rights, such as government sponsored support. This is also an example of how the state uses identities.

When it comes to using the term SOGI, Andres proposes a separation of sexual orientation and gender identity. He continued by sharing that the trans* movement has sufficient support to stand on its own. Trans* activists in Latin America often feel boxed in when they hear the term LGBT. As Andres noted, it is often translated as gays first, with trans* relegated to the bottom of the list. Trans* activists no longer want to be in the sub-world. It's time for more recognition.

Haneen Maikey, Director of Al-Qaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, shared her perspective on homosexuality and labeling in Palestine. She particularly highlighted how to frame discourse and strategy as a political choice.

When establishing their organization in 2001, they decided that establishing themselves as a LGBT group would not help them be integrated into society. Instead, they chose to go beyond SOGI and to broadly talk about sexual and gender diversity in order to focus on the dream of what kind of society they wanted to be a part of rather than their own personal struggles. Using the term Sexual & Gender Diversity does not mean that they are ignoring LGBTQI issues, but rather that they are using this experience to talk more broadly about the society they envision. The hope was to bring power to the discussion rather than to approach the topic from the all-too-common victim lens. They believe that Sexual and Gender Diversity is a shift from framing the struggle as a singular struggle and right - a framing that maintains a hierarchical dynamic. For them, it's how sexuality is related, both as queers and unqueers. Their hope was to break the binary as queers and unqueers in order to broaden the issue so that it can relate to everyone. This way they are able to position LGBTQI in a framing that is relevant to a larger group and to move into a discussion about responsibility and accountability.

By focusing on accountability, Sexual and Gender Diversity is built on an intersectional understanding of different struggles. It's an inclusive approach that invites all to join the movement without knowledge of their sexual identity and desires. Sexual and Gender Diversity is a culturally sensitive approach. This is how they can talk openly about sexuality in Palestine. Additionally, it positions sexuality as a relevant struggle that challenges the notion of hierarchy in the Palestinian struggle.

Carla concluded the session with the following takeaways:

- What are the collective resources that we can use to make identity and language (ie, LGBTQI) as easy and understandable as possible, especially for people who are not going to take the time to understand it themselves, such as board members and executive directors? If funders want to do well, this is a particular area that needs self-reflection.
- Context is everything. It's useful to use SOGI in some contexts and not in others. It's worth taking the time to look at where we're working and where we're not working.
- Program officers are continually acting as the bridge between the inside of organizations and busy government structures. How can program officers best simplify and make the language manageable without minimizing it too much, so that governments, donors and activists alike can understand it.
- This area of language, identity and common terminology needs research, especially since millions of dollars are being strategically dedicated to LGBTQI issues.

Carla left the audience with this lasting thought, “This is really something that a collective should be thinking about – how people are constructing sexuality and gender and *where* those ideas are coming from!”

Question & Answer

One participant stated that in Africa they do not refer to transgender as mentally ill. Had this helped movements and changed perception? Has the designation of mental illness in Latin America helped the community at all?

Andres responded that in Latin America it depends on the state. Some states pathologize and others do not. Some states will only give you access to health rights if you go through psychological evaluations that determine you are trans*. In those cases, trans* identities are pathologized and covered in psychology books and manuals.

Miriam added that as more people are starting to claim trans*, they are beginning to see a backlash.

Another participant mentioned Paperbird.net as a space in which some of these issues are grappled with in a very engaging way. One of the questions that is unpacked there is how to raise this conversation in a space where talking about sex is not a comfortable or commonly acceptable thing. One of the concerns raised on Paperbird.net is that very often when people hear homosexual, when it’s not part of a discourse, what they actually hear is child molester or pedophile or someone who imposes. The challenge for funders is to consider what it means to be going into that context. “What does it mean when a large part of your audience does not think you're talking about human rights but about child molesters?”