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## Sexual Rights, Identity, and Strengthening the Human Rights Movement

**Tuesday, January 26, 2009, 1:15 -3:15 am**

*Facilitator:*

**Randall Miller**, Program Officer (Equality & Justice), Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

*Session Organizer:* **Sexual Rights Working Group**

*Panelists:*

**Anna Kirey**, Executive Director, Labrys (Kyrgyzstan)

**Nadine M.**, Founder, Meem (Lebanon)

**John Newsome**, Public Equity Group

*Sponsors:*

**Sexual Rights Working Group** members, including the **Channel Foundation**, the **Global Fund for Women**, and the Sexual Health and Rights Project of the **Open Society Institute**

### **Nadine**

Nadine began with a brief overview of the hostile climates that make the LGBT movement in Lebanon and elsewhere difficult to organize and effectively provide vulnerable people with services. She continued by stating that identifying ways to advance these movements cannot be done by emulating western thought or practices that favor individualism since eastern cultures place a higher value on family systems. She went on to stress that the LGBT movement cannot be thought of as a movement independent of other movements if it is to be successful in its efforts to advance the sexual health and rights of sexual minority groups.

Nadine clarified that the oppression of LGBT groups is a result of a socially constructed desire to uphold heteronormativity. She stated that religion, capitalism, and other constructed institutions are grounded in heteronormative ideology and are challenged/threatened by the LGBT movement. Thus, she stressed that it is impossible to look at sexual rights outside of all systems of oppression. With multiple issues interrelated, she encouraged the participants to view these issues through various lenses in order to develop a strategy that will effectively address all bodies of oppression.

## **John Newsom**

Newsom shared a story of a gay bar in San Francisco that was discriminating against women and people of color. When he has shared this story in the past, there has been general disbelief in the idea that segments of the LGBT community would be discriminatory to other groups. The bar has since been proven to have discriminatory practices.

Newsom continued by articulating his experience helping to mobilize Californians to vote against Proposition 8. He recounted how he was funded a small amount to sway public opinion of Proposition 8 in communities of color only 3 weeks prior to the vote. He stressed that opponents of Proposition 8 neglected to include communities of color in their efforts to defeat the proposition until just before the vote and then returned to state of negligence as soon as the vote was over; thus stressing a disconnect between interrelated communities. Additionally, Newsom argued that there is a disconnect between funders and activists that manifests itself in ambitious projects with inadequate financial support.

Newsom clarified that he would not consider himself a sexual rights activist if it were not for the sub-communities within mainstream movements who are most vulnerable to inequities, such as transgender and people of color populations, of whom he is an advocate for.

## **Anna Kirey**

Kirey shared two stories of transgender men in Kyrgyzstan who have experienced discriminatory practices and emotional and physical harm by the medical community as a result of the dearth of knowledge regarding transgender issues. She stressed that efforts at the community level need to be organized to build support, advocate for, and educate others on LGBT issues. Additionally, she stated that strategies to provide people with a safe space, emotionally and physically, where they can be taught skills to advocate for themselves, should be a primary focus. She added that the organization she co-founded, Labrys, was built on this premise and has grown significantly in a few short years.

Kirey echoed previous sentiments expressed by the other panelists for the need to unite movements. She noted that she has found strength in advancing the health and rights of sexual minorities in Kyrgyzstan by allying herself with the women's movement. By identifying commonalities between members of these respective groups, she has formed strong relationships with local women's groups and this has helped to advance their separate and united goals.

## **Question and Answers:**

### **Are the goals of the LGBT movement the same across regions? What are the challenges?**

**NM:** Situational complexities impact the work. However, despite variances in class, national situation, etc., oppressions of sexual rights do not vary greatly. The dichotomy of the global north and the global south is actually people who understand the issues and the people who don't. There is a need for a global strategy that bridges the huge gap between people doing the work (activists), people funding the work (foundations), and the thinkers (academia).

**JN:** There are similarities across regions. However, more nuanced way of sharing similarities and differences need to be developed. The lines of the global north and south are not so clear.

**AK:** Human rights are new to countries of the former Soviet Union. The current human rights portfolio ignores or does not incorporate LGBT issues in this region. LGBT issues are placed into either a medical category (HIV) or sex worker rights.

**What makes a 'good' funder?**

**NM:** Movement building is a process/evolution. The Open Society Institute (OSI) gave her organization, Meem, its first grant despite the 'amateur' quality of their initial proposal. By recognizing Meem's vision and working alongside them to develop more clearly defined objectives, OSI was able to assist the young organization in the areas it needed to ensure its success. OSI's financial support gave Meem the credibility it needed secure support from other funders.

**JN:** Good funders are those that are advocates, take risks, make programs fit and give 'big gifts'. Good funders are also comfortable with pulling funding from programs that aren't working to allow other groups to enter the field. Bad funders are those that don't fund to scale.

**What are effective strategies?**

**NM:** There is a need to engage in more transnational strategies, not panels. Funders need to sit down and strategize with activists on the ground.

**AK:** Capacity building is extremely important. There are many activists in various regions that do not speak English and cannot communicate with other leaders, funders, etc. Documents need to be translated in languages other than English and French (i.e. Russian, Arabic) to engage leaders in disadvantaged regions. Additionally, many members of the LGBT community do not have a formal education or additional resources necessary to be effective leaders as a result of expulsion from their homes and schools.

**JN:** Community building, investment in leadership and infrastructure of small organizations. Funders should fund more core grants.

At this stage its is important to just do it rather than spend time on measuring the impact.