SDDirect Pride Blog Series

At SDDirect, Pride month has been an opportunity to reflect, learn and celebrate queer joy and progress made for LGBTQI+ rights globally, while deepening our understanding of the challenges that remain. Through this blog series, we continue our exploration of how LGBTQI+ communities are impacted by some of the global development challenges of today, and reflect on the barriers and opportunities for LGBTQI+ inclusion within our areas of work.

'We will find some other reason': a personal reflection on queerphobia within women's rights work and the Official Development Assistance (ODA) sector

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During a previous international development assignment in a fragile and conflict-affected country (before I joined Social Development Direct), I was evacuated and lost my job because I am a queer woman. Someone had found out about my relationship with my partner and sent a letter threatening to report us both to the national government. They had sent the letter to my partner's Country Director and demanded that her contract was terminated. In the letter, the author wrote that my partner should not be in her position and that we were *'clearly influencing our women using homosexual mind inclinations.'*

My partner was evacuated from the country, was given support, and her contract was wound down over several months. In contrast, when the letter was sent to my former employer's Country Director, I had to evacuate myself, I was told to cease speaking to my colleagues, who were left in the middle of an emergency response that I had been leading, and I lost my job. A security assessment, risk assessment or review of my safety was never conducted. The threat was never properly assessed. But even where there was a threat (I am not so naïve to think that my safety was not at some risk), the at-will contract I was working under left me with no rights whatsoever. The differing treatment of me and my partner was purely based on the internal politics of the organisations we worked for. There were no provisions in either organisation's policy related to LGBTQI+ people, and although what happened to my partner was more dignified than what had happened to me, it was still discriminatory.

The profound sense of loss and distress I felt was accompanied by an overwhelming sense of injustice. My safety was used as an excuse to remove me from a role where we were facilitating change on women's rights (I played lead role on gender-based violence work at the time). The knee-jerk reaction from my organisation was not in any way proportionate to the risk.

In another job, working in a large Asian metropolis, I was asked for an interview by a prominent magazine about being an open queer woman in the city. When I told my organisation's human resources department about this, they told me that I was not allowed to be interviewed. When I asked if I would lose my job if I did, they confirmed that I would and that they would not fire me for being gay but would find 'some other reason' instead.

"I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own." (1)

In my work in equal education, women's and girls' rights and safeguarding, I am often reminded of the experiences I describe above, some 10+ years after the events took place. I feel that queerphobia flourishes in the Official Development Assistance (ODA) sector in a way that would not be possible in the broader UK context. People still often use cultural relativism as a means to prohibit progress on LGBTQI+ rights work within ODA, whereas this argument has broadly been dismissed on other areas of human rights (such as women's rights).

Even within sectors seeking to advance rights, such as the women's rights sector, discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals continue. Within women's rights meetings I have been told that 'it isn't your time yet' when seeking to work with Lesbian, Bi and Trans women within

programming and advocacy initiatives. Whilst working on safeguarding, when trying to add a question on a form relating to a survivor's self-disclosed sexual orientation and gender identity, I was informed that 'LGBT people don't exist in our programming in X location.' These perspectives dismiss our existence both within the ODA workforce and in the communities our sector serves. They fall into a trap of heteronormativity (2) which reinforces some of the very issues those who seek to make our sector, and world, safer, wish to challenge. For example, not acknowledging queer women's existence reinforces compulsory heterosexuality and women's lack of bodily autonomy (3).

Looking inwards

As a white woman in the sector, I am aware that I have a large amount of power and privilege. I have privilege enough now to be open and 'out' within this sector. There are legal protections in place in the UK, where I am working now, that enable me to feel safer in my position. I'm also able to feel comfortable in being 'out' because I work for a company that supports me. Although I can speak out about some of the abuses I see in the sector, I am not an expert on what the majority of my colleagues may be feeling. I have privilege enough to complain, but perhaps those who don't have that privilege will likely see the exclusion from programmes and policies have two choices: to either live with that exclusion and discrimination; or leave the sector.

Whilst writing this blog, I informally spoke to colleagues outside the UK. Some had lost jobs; some had decided to leave their roles and the sector all together because of this issue. Some felt comfortable to be out and others did not. For our sector, this is a grave shame and disappointment, but when we consider this in terms of safeguarding, we run into other issues. Where a colleague within the ODA sector is not able to feel safe in their organisation to be out, there is an increased risk for abuse in multiple ways including in the form of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. This factor is often missing from our discussions on safeguarding.

Looking ahead

All too often, LGBTQI+ people are overlooked or marginalised in ODA projects, and at worst they are excluded entirely. The same can be said for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ people within safeguarding and HR policies, practices and procedures. Where provisions are in place within the legal framework of the context of operation, then LGBTQI+ people are included – for example, in the UK, my rights are enshrined within the 2010 Equality Act. But where this is not the case, LGBTQI+ rights are often side-lined or neglected by international development agencies that have the power to push the bar. This invisibility, as well as the exclusion of LGBTQI+ people and their concerns from programming, reinforces discriminatory views. Through sensitive and more inclusive policies, practices and procedures, the sector has an opportunity to make the LGBTQI+ community visible without much risk at all – yet we remain largely hidden. When people are not visibly protected, they are at risk of abuse. This thought played on my mind during Pride month this year, particularly as many ODA actors had Pride celebrations at 'HQ,' whilst many of our queer siblings across the world remain unprotected from harm perpetrated by their co-workers, their governments *and* their communities.

In recent years, our sector has been challenged by #AidToo (linked to the movement tackling sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment in international development) and a powerful, much-needed call to decolonise aid. In parallel, there is a need to challenge the sector with regards to LGBTQI+ rights. Perhaps we can 'Queer ODA' at the same time as supporting decolonisation and advancing the rights of women in the sector through cross-movement building. Cultural relativism when used by individuals who are not from a country or context, may well come with assumptions that are linked to racism. For example, when I lost my job in the circumstances outlined above, the assumption was that my team would be homophobic, that colleagues I had worked with for two years would attack me and that there would be no support for me from them. This is a racist notion and unfounded. Meanwhile, the link between women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights has been documented extensively (4).

To #QueerODA, our organisations and leadership need to address the issues of discrimination and marginalisation within the workplace as well as in aid projects and programming. We need to facilitate change by creating safety within the workplace, whilst shifting norms externally. It is only then that we can truly say that no-one will be left behind. Please look at the pledges below for tangible ways you can contribute to making our sector a little safer for LGBTQI+ staff, as well as for people in the communities we serve.

Pledges

- **Be an ally**: If you are not queer, support queer colleagues, use pronouns in meetings, educate yourself on queer rights and of the queer-landscape in each context where you engage and advocate for our inclusion.
- **Train staff on LGBTQI+ rights:** Engage with LGBTQI+ and gender equality and social inclusion specialists. Many LGBTQI+ specialists and specialist organisations are from the LGBTQI+ community. Paying for their time and knowledge is essential to valuing their work and mandate.
- **Partner with LGBTQI+ civil society organisations:** Don't try to go it alone if you are not an expert. Working with and funding these organisations, Again, partner and pay for LGBTQI+ expertise for similar reasons as above. These funds may also support them to deliver other work to advance the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals in the sector and/or community they work within.

Women's rights sector

- **Recognise queer women's existence in every context**: We know that queer rights and women's rights are intrinsically entwined. Neither the queer community nor the women's rights sector can afford not to engage with one and another – certainly if there is to be long-term and sustainable change.
- **Include LGBTQI+ issues within your analysis and assessments**: Including and engaging the LGBTQI+ community in gender and inclusion analysis is extremely important but they are often overlooked.
- **Include LBT women in GBV response work**: Train staff to adhere to the guiding principle of non-discrimination within their case work and to receive LBT women survivors safely and with dignity.

Safeguarding sector

- **Add LGBTQI+ rights to your global policies, practices, and procedures**: Creating visibility is the first step. Add LGBTQI+ people to your list of protected characteristics within your HR, grievance, diversity and inclusion, and safeguarding policies. Similarly, add LGBTQI+ visibility to training materials, to case handling processes and procedures and risk analysis tools.
- **Work closely with Diversity, Equality and Inclusion colleagues**: Abuse of power is at the root of safeguarding abuses. Work with colleagues to create an action plan to support LGBTQI+ staff to feel safe and to come forward if they experience abuse or discrimination.

(1) Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (1981). Audre Lorde, an African American, queer feminist scholar, activist and poet stated: *"I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own."* Lorde had an amazing capacity to distil intersectional feminism into sentences which stick like glue to readers, and which will undoubtedly continue to influence feminists for generations to come. Although her speech directly addresses racism, it can be applied to any form of 'womanhood' that does not conform to whiteness, cis-gendered-ness, hetero-ness and the discrimination and the anger we collectively feel at our exclusion.

(2) Heteronormativity locates heterosexual coupling as the legitimate site of rights, reproduction and romance. It assumes a natural sexual and social pairing of male and female bodies for the family and community. Heteronormativity further contributes to a division amongst women themselves concerning sexual orientation and gender identity, exacerbating gender norms and the expectation that men control the bodies and lives of the women they 'own.' By working to dismantle heteronormativity, we also work to dismantle the false social constructs of binary gender norms and the violence which results from this.

(3) In many of the places where ODA actors deliver programmes, LGBTQI+ women and girls are less visible than LGBTQI+ men and boys. Patriarchal norms intersect with oppression based on sexual orientation to eradicate queer women and girls. When women don't have the privilege to choose who they marry, when they marry, how many children they have and when they have them, whether or not to keep their children if their husband should pass away – then there has to be an assumption that they do not have the space to be able to express their queerness **not** that they do not exist.

(4) See Htun and Weldon's *The Logics of Gender Justice* for more information.

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