

The LGBTIQ and sex worker movements in East Africa
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The LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer) and sex worker movements in East Africa are movements of minorities struggling with many issues: identity, marginalisation, denial of citizenship, invisibility, discrimination, human dignity and oppression, at the same time as dealing with contentious issues within and between movements that can make it difficult to forge common interests, goals and strategies. In this case study we consider the background and development of the movements, the connections between them, and their strategies, tactics and agendas. We discuss key achievements of the movements and the challenges that remain, and we ask what lessons can be learnt about inclusive movement building for social justice and human rights.

From individual consciousness to collective organising

Over two decades ago, in the early 1990's, individual lesbian and gay community members and activists stepped into rough waters to claim their right to be human, to engage on issues deeply passionate to themselves. The nascent LGBT movement was mainly organising around binaries of masculinities and femininities – one either had to be gay or lesbian. Activists worked with and were supported by key individuals from feminist and women's rights movements. Later in the 1990s, the sex worker movement in East Africa grew from small scale regional organising to more joined-up activism which was strengthened by ongoing capacity building and leadership training to encourage sex workers to engage in policy processes and influence decisions.¹ As a result, loose coalitions such as the African Sex Worker Alliance emerged.²

In 2005, Urgent Action Fund Africa convened the first regional meeting under the theme: 'LGBTIQ organising in East Africa: the true test for human rights defenders', aimed at identifying LGBTIQ priorities and finding ways of supporting them. This was followed by several conferences and regional 'Changing Faces, Changing Spaces' meetings in Kenya. These spaces brought opportunities for LGBTIQ and sex work activists from the East African region to come together with human rights, women's

¹ For example: sex workers petition parliament: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFbpVNYMiys>.

² Key organisations included Akina Mama wa Afrika in Uganda, the Kenya Human Rights Commission and Urgent Action Fund Africa in Kenya.

rights and health advocacy activists, as well as progressive donor organisations that support human rights and sexual minority activism in the region. Working together, they could gather and track trends in the sector, explore new thinking and innovations, share successful models for intervention in the sexual minority health and rights sector, reflect on funding strategies and build greater alliances between groups in the region and beyond.

These developments occurred against an environment of abuse, discrimination, restrictive legislation and violence towards LGBTIQ persons and sex workers. This environment propelled them to mobilise and organise to demand respect and fulfilment of their rights (Tamale 2007, Wanjiku, 2005). In Uganda in particular, the state took on a moral policing role. In 2008 and 2010, training sessions on health and economic empowerment training for sex workers were banned by the Minister of Ethics and Integrity (NSWP, 2010). In 2009 an anti-homosexuality bill was proposed, to prosecute homosexual behaviour. It was coupled with a series of police raids on LGBTIQ and sex worker meetings and spaces that had previously been considered safe.

Connecting the dots: a merger of the two nascent social movements

Connecting the dots between the LGBTIQ and sex work movements was precipitated by the need to garner collective support and agenda setting through the power of numbers. However it also came about due to a push from external stakeholders, especially funding partners from progressive social movements including feminist movements. Another important factor was that more or less similar challenges and bottlenecks were being faced by both movements: police raids; weaker organisations; and leadership crises, among others. This merge has over the years culminated into stronger spaces for engagement, peer-to-peer support and mentoring and collective positions. However it has not been uncomplicated; issues of ideology, identity, class and location have caused differences and divergences at times.

Agendas, strategies, tools and tactics of engagement

The presence of feminist organisations, individual feminists and activists, and feminist movements³ in the East African region contributed greatly in creating space for dialogue and engagement within the women's movement on issues concerning sexuality and diversity. This encouraged the integration of sex worker and LGBTIQ rights into the women's movement's agenda and into discussions on sexual and reproductive health and rights and HIV/AIDS (Akina Mama wa Afrika, 2010). Many feminist organisations and activists supported and spearheaded the birth of the CSO coalition that campaigned against the homophobic bill in Uganda, and rallied to petition the

³ Key among these are the Uganda Feminist Forum and Africa Feminist Forum

government of Uganda against the closure of leadership training workshops for sex workers.⁴

In 2009 Akina Mama wa Afrika, Hivos, the Open Society Institute and Urgent Action Fund-Africa organised the first ever one week regional convening and training for sex workers in East Africa: a radical African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) held in Mombasa, Kenya under the theme: 'Breaking Boundaries: Collective Organising for a Just Society'. 22 incredible sex worker rights activists from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda attended the ground-breaking, inspiring, and transformative forum that set the pace for feminist activism and movement building in East Africa.

The LGBTIQ and sex work movements have been involved in influencing policy decisions in the region. For example in Rwanda, LGBTIQ groups lobbied to support their members in seeking elective parliamentary office with a view to amending repressive laws criminalising homosexuality (Urgent Action Fund, 2005). In Kenya advocacy was mainly on key constitutional and human rights provisions that strengthened the principle of non-discrimination.

Both movements have endeavoured to increase public awareness on sexual rights, demystify myths on sexuality, and fight the anti-homosexual propaganda disseminated through right wing religious extremists and church lobbies. This has been achieved by sustained media campaigns such as the 'Hate No More' campaign, public dialogues, festivals and talk-shows (Pambazuka News, 2011), as well as unbelievable strength and determination, and incredible depth, heart and spirit. LGBTIQ and sex worker movements have employed a documentation strategy, enabled by the use of new social media, internet and ICTs in order to share information about what is happening. This has kept them knitted together and looking out for one another.

Organising through formal and informal spaces such as community based groups, loose coalitions and alliances, umbrella groups such as Sexual Minorities in Uganda, the Gay and Lesbian Coalition in Kenya, the South Africa based Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce and the Kenya Sex Worker Alliance, collaborative initiatives to strengthen movements have emerged which offer alternatives in times of hostility or pending harm (Urgent Action Fund, 2005). While sex workers have not utilised the internet as much as LGBTIQ groups, they have formed strong alliances and regional bodies such as the Kenya Sex Worker Alliance, the Uganda Human Rights Alliance and regional networks such as the African Sex Worker Alliance. Organising for both movements has also involved the creation of safe spaces for introspection, reflection and strategising. Key among these is the two-yearly 'Changing Faces, Changing Spaces' conference, organisational safe spaces, gay churches in Kenya and gay pride events (Instinct, 2012).

⁴ For more information on the petition follow link <http://www.iglhrc.org/binary-data/ATTACHMENT/file/000/000/456-1.pdf>

Achievements and remaining challenges

Key achievements

Visibility – More than ever, today the LGBTIQ and sex work movements in East Africa are visible, key players as well as actors that other social movements connect with. This visibility goes beyond the conventional perception of sexual rights as only about sex and pleasure, engaging in deeper politics of sexuality and body politics that include identity politics, choices, citizenship rights, discrimination and human dignity.

Effective use of atomised collectivity and organising – Technology change and increasing use of ICTs in East Africa has been one of the key milestones that the LGBTIQ and sex work movements use to communicate, mobilise, inform, educate and garner support, as well as expanding activism beyond localised populations and out to many young people who were previously not reached through other means.

Cross border organising and inter-movement linkages - Key among these have been work around anti-homosexuality legislation in Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda; sex work organising in Kenya and Uganda; and working with other progressive social movements, especially the feminist and human rights movements.

Building of capacities – This is being done through leadership development, building stronger organisations, mentoring and coaching of key movement leaders and increased resourcing and networks.

Strategic litigation – A number of strategic court cases have been lodged by the LGBTIQ and sex work movements to challenge the constitutionality of repressive legislation as well as to pursue inherent human rights.

Key remaining challenges

Repression and shrinking political space for civil engagement – The East African region has experienced the rise of homophobia, religious extremism, religious, military, cultural and conservative fundamentalisms, legislative clamping of the rights of sexual minorities and closing space for diversities. At the same time, political space for civic engagement is shrinking and citizens find they are spending most of their energies, time and efforts fighting their governments.

Stigma and discrimination - In the East African region, patterns of discrimination and abuse based on sexual identities, gender diversities and minorities have been persistent due to re-moralising and problematising of sexuality. The written laws in East Africa are moralistic and take away the rights of groups whose sexual orientation, even when lived privately, has been criminalised. This has affected personal security and it limits how

LGBTIQ and sex workers assemble and organise (Urgent Action Fund, 2007; Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2011). Activists face arrest, torture and brutality from the community, local authorities and police (Akina Mama wa Afrika, 2010), as well as closure of meetings and workshops and organisational closure and raids.⁵ Organising amidst hostility and brutality within the community has led to the death of activists in Kenya and Uganda.

Poverty and disadvantage - Organising and mobilising is hindered for LGBTIQ and sex workers in the East African region by high levels of poverty which require them to earn a living for survival first and foremost. In addition, their mobility and ease of access is greatly affected by the stigma attached to sex work, sexuality and their identity (AWID, 2010).

Continued criminalisation of homosexuality and sex work - Research found that registration of LGBTIQ groups is detrimentally affected by the criminalisation of homosexuality in East Africa (Urgent Action Fund, 2005). It leads to some people operating under the umbrella of different activities or agendas that are less susceptible to government interference.

Power struggles, leadership crises and capacities - Conflict and power struggles within and between various leaders, groups and organisations across LGBTIQ and sex work mobilisation, and the fact that activism agendas have been personalised and owned by only a few leaders, have negatively affected the sustainability of movements. More work is needed on movement building, mentoring, and allowing new players on the scene. In addition, the strength and vibrancy of the movement has been hampered by negative media portrayal and increased security risks for individual activists and groups. Low levels of expertise and skills in movement building constrain the internal growth and sustainability of movements and limit leadership potential to a few individuals.

Connecting globally, disconnecting locally - While great strides have been taken in building movements virtually, this has nonetheless disconnected activists from local level movement building, collectives and activism. In some cases movements' agendas have not been internally generated, but rather are externally motivated and defined by donors, partners and other supporting social movements.

The future of the LGBTIQ and sex work movements in East Africa

In order to ensure growth and sustainability, there is need for LGBTIQ and sex work movements (as with other social justice movements) to move beyond donor funding and fund their own revolution. In addition, leadership is significant in taking the movement forward and needs to be developed to be transformational as well as broadened beyond a few individuals. The future has many opportunities, but at the same time enormous

⁵ See petition by women's organisations and human rights defenders protesting the closure of training for CSWs by the state <http://www.iglhrc.org/binary-data/ATTACHMENT/file/000/000/456-1.pdf>

challenges, especially in an operating environment for the movements that includes shrinking civic engagement, rising levels of fundamentalisms, economic crises and changing priorities in the development sector. So what lessons can be learnt from this example?

Build on commonalities between movements and actors

The LGBTIQ and sex work movements' constituents have always been present in societies, but they became more visible through collective mobilisation. This led to issues of identity politics being seen by other movements as human rights concerns. Other social justice movements and actors, especially feminists, realised what they had in common with the LGBTIQ and sex work movements; all are trying to change the status quo. There are plenty of people who do not identify as LGBTIQ or as sex workers but are interested in human rights, and are engaged with the movements. These people, such as Sylvia Tamale in Uganda, do not want to see their friends, families, allies or co-workers discriminated against. They have realised the power of building on commonalities between movements.

Build relationships with champions in mainstream social justice movements

Particularly in Uganda, the concerns of sex workers and LGBTIQ people have been included in the macro-level goals of feminist and other social justice movements. This happened because of the work of champions within these movements, and because activists in the sex work and LGBTIQ movements have capitalised on personal relationships with activists in other movements. This is more difficult to do via online technology.

Pay attention to what could divide the group

Class and power dynamics within social justice movements have worked against sex workers and trans people. Even within LGBT movements, the 'T' tends to be marginalised. In the case of sex work activism, there is some fear of joining the elite in the mainstream movements, as the elite tend to despise sex workers; in the Ugandan feminist movement five years ago, sex workers were advised to seek god and turn over a new leaf. Lobbying to be accepted in other movements takes political action and awareness raising, and challenging power dynamics and hierarchies of rights.

Listen to both the message and messenger

Often the tendency is to reduce LGBTIQ and sex workers' multiple selves into a single aspect: sexuality and gender identity. Groups and leaders that have exploded this stereotype have succeeded in functioning successfully in mainstream movements. In Uganda the leadership of Wonetha (a sex workers group) and FARUG (a lesbian group) has been fundamental in representing their groups in mainstream movements, but also engaging in these movements in their own right as human rights defenders and as knowledgeable leaders. Their work has shown bravery, determination and collective will. Leaders, their goals, strategies, and tactics are important. Iconic leaders in these

movements sing, dance, drum, laugh, suffer, sacrifice and, of course, deliver. A leadership able to politicise LGBTI, sex work and sexuality, as well as other rights and national concerns, and demonstrating the links in between, carries more weight in the mainstream and creates more effective and inclusive social mobilisation.

Avoid NGO-ising the movement

It is vital that movements can retain their roots in their communities, countries and causes. Some of the most vibrant NGOs leaders are like roving ambassadors, travelling abroad from one country to the other spreading knowledge and awareness. But they can lose touch with their communities, they no longer tend the flame of activism and may even douse it with their absence. Movements must take care not to turn from their original path, or become institutionally rooted; if they do they risk losing their activist edge, becoming bland, and invite conflict and confusion.

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Thika sex workers demand better working conditions:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wt_33KvwHTE

Sex workers donate to church: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHveFZ8kGI8

Ugandan gay rights activist David Kato bludgeoned to death:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGkuwuqYDfE>

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