

Feminism and LGBT Issues in Europe

By Patricia Prendiville, Executive Director, ILGA-Europe

ILGA-Europe welcomes the invitation by the European Feminist Forum to contribute to the discussion of matters of interest to both feminists and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. And of course it is possible to be both feminist and lgb or t!! To make sense of the questions for discussion below, I start by outlining the mission, vision and strategic objectives of ILGA-Europe. Then I outline a number of areas of common focus and finally move to the questions which I hope will stimulate some discussion!

ILGA-Europe

ILGA-Europe is the European Region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association.

Vision

Our vision is a world in which the human rights of all are respected and everyone can live in equality and free from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity or express

Mission

Our mission is to act as a voice at the European level for the rights of those who face discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. We promote the right to equality and freedom from discrimination through lobbying and advocacy, and by educating and informing the European institutions, such as the media and civil society. We also seek to strengthen the capacity of European human rights organizations who are fighting against discrimination around sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in their work for equality through their involvement in advocacy campaigns and networking, the exchange of best practice, and the dissemination of information and capacity building programmes.

Our strategic objectives are:

1. Increased recognition of fundamental human rights
2. Working towards full integration in the labour market
3. Working towards full social inclusion, particularly with regard to access to goods and services
4. Increased recognition of the diversity of family relationships
5. Strengthened capacity of member organisations
6. Strengthened capacity of ILGA-Europe to achieve its mission

Areas of common history and struggle

The feminist and LGBT movement have united in fighting against patriarchy and the restrictive definitions of women, men, gender roles, gender identity and gender expression, challenging the gender power relations in society which are rooted in stereotypes of gender. Many lesbian and bisexual women were very involved in the feminist movements throughout the world. There has been much support and solidarity amongst women and oppressed groups and yet there have been some instances of lack of solidarity, where some women have spoken against the rights and equality of other

women. We know about the debates about white, able-bodied, heterosexual women of privilege not identifying with women of colour, lesbian or poor women. It is time to now explore again where we all are in relation to solidarity, acknowledging the complexity of identity, the multiple ways in which women can be discriminated against and the hierarchy of inequalities that has emerged in some places. Is this evidence of the age old mechanism of getting the oppressed to do the work of the oppressor?

Areas of common concern

There is the on-going issue of gender roles – what it is to be a woman, to be a man in society? While this can vary - there are invariably strong stereotypes in all societies about what it means to be a woman or a man. These oppress both women and those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, as well as contributing to the realities of lack of openness on gender identity or gender expression. Secondly, there is the very prevalent legitimization of violence against women and against lgbt people. In language, speech and behaviour so many sections of public discourse legitimate violence, hatred and crimes against lgbt people and women. This is done through de-humanising us, making it seem as if we are somehow not equal.

I believe that we have a common purpose, to redefine the gender roles which are based on stereotypes and lead to discrimination and inequality, and to create momentum to change laws and policies and practices to ensure the equality and human rights of all.

Some questions for discussion and debate

Marriage

There has been a historical objection by the feminist movement against the institution of marriage – and yet the lgbt movement is embracing it as an indicator of inclusion, equality and full recognition of our human rights. I think it would be interesting to discuss now what the feminist perspectives on marriage are. Especially given that within the Western world the traditional model of marriage is not what it used to be in terms of separate identities, goods, bearing of children etc.

The patriarchal analysis of the model of marriage

Secondly, how strongly relevant is the patriarchal analysis of the model of marriage which is now prevalent, how world-wide can this analysis be is this any longer current or relevant – and then to think about the situation of women in certain parts of the world where marriage is not so much a choice as a necessity?

Parental Rights and Responsibilities

There has been an increasing recognition of the reality of lgbt parents and a lobby to protect their rights. This intersects with questions within the feminist movement, such as, how are donors incorporated into parenting? What are the rights and responsibilities of sperm donors? What is the perspective on surrogacy? Apart from the legal questions about each of these issues, it is interesting to explore the ethical situation, including the relative rights of the child, the biological mother, the biological father, the social parents and the legal situation arises out of these arrangements.

The Role of Care

A third area for discussion I think is the role of care in older age in particular. Who is caring for whom and how is this organized. How does the feminist analysis of care in society include the reality of lgbt care requirements and care giving?

Issues of same –sex relationships and the responsibilities of the partners towards and for each other – in relation to housing, health care, care, inheritance, social welfare and taxation systems. This is linked to the question around marriage or going for partnership. Is marriage acceptable? Should partnerships be open to opposite sex couples? Why don't opposite sex couples use this mechanism more in the countries where it is possible? Are these seen as second-best? Or as a viable alternative to marriage? The privileges and responsibilities of marriage are not given to same-sex couples, so how can these issues be taken into account. The dilemma for some feminists might be the question of the individualization of tax codes/social welfare provision, the notion of 'dependency' and the lack of independence of income in some of these situations. Should we even be debating partnership? Should we be discussing individualization instead?

Transgender and Gender Identity Issues

What do the feminisms now say about the questions of gender identity and gender expression – and in particular about trans-sexuality? This was a very heated debate in earlier years, where is it now?

Multiple Identities

How does feminism view the debate about multiple identity – or a complex of identities e.g. race, older age, (dis)ability, sexual orientation. Taking this into account some women feel that gender equality will be marginalized, in that we won't talk about women as a group – rather the variations within that group.

Sex Work/Prostitution

Finally, there is a question of how feminisms views sex work/prostitution and how the lgbt movement has been working with the concept of sex work? Where is the debate on rights of sex workers, legalization, criminalization and the need to provide services for people who work in the sex industry? Where are the links to exploitation of vulnerable people, trafficking, coercion into sex work and lack of economic choices? What are the differences between opposite sex working and same-sex working? Is sex work different for women and for men i.e. when it is women and men as sex workers – because of the nature of patriarchy?

Let's Discuss!

There are many topics which the two movements can usefully discuss together. I don't have the answers to these questions, I just have my own point of view and I look forward to the debate that will emerge! ILGA-Europe is made up of over 200 organisations in 46 countries of Europe and we don't necessarily have an agreed position on all of these issues. I hope the discussion and the debate can be stimulating, thought provoking and while challenging, respectful of the various realities we all occupy.

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