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# SEXUALITY

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The global context:  
Sexuality and geopolitics

Selected texts

SPW Working Paper, N. 7, April 2012

The global context:  
Sexuality and geopolitics

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Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW)  
Brazil secretariat  
Brazilian Interdisciplinary AIDS Association (ABIA)  
Av. Presidente Vargas, 446/ 13o andar  
Rio de Janeiro/RJ – 20.071-907 – Brazil  
Phone: +55 21 2223-1040 Fax: +55 21 2253-8495  
E-mail: [admin@sxpolitics.org](mailto:admin@sxpolitics.org) Website: [www.sxpolitics.org](http://www.sxpolitics.org)

US secretariat  
Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health  
Department of Sociomedical Sciences  
Allan Rosenfield Building 722 West 168th Street, 5th floor  
New York, New York 10032 USA  
Phone: +1 212 305-3286 Fax: +1 212 342-0043

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Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW) is a global forum composed of researchers and activists from a wide range of countries and regions of the world. Inspired by local and international initiatives, the SPW's mandate is twofold: to contribute to sexuality related global policy debates through strategic policy-oriented research and analysis projects, and to promote more effective linkages between local, regional and global initiatives.

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## **Summary**

<b>Reflecting on 2011 events: scattered notes on how sexual politics intersect with a shifting global landscape</b> <i>By Sonia Corrêa</i>	4
<b>Aid conditionality and respect for LGBT people rights</b> <i>By Luis Abolafia Anguita</i>	9
<b>Aid, resistance and Queer power</b> <i>Hakima Abbas</i>	16
<b>Interview: Radhika Balakrishman</b>	20



## Reflecting on 2011 events: scattered notes on how sexual politics intersect with a shifting global landscape

*By Sonia Corrêa<sup>1</sup>*

*April, 2012*

Since late 2010, the world has witnessed a sequence of outstanding and relatively unexpected events. In late December, the unpredicted Arab political spring erupted and, since then, has been unfolding in contradictory ways: the deep political transformations but also deadlocks in Tunisia and Egypt, the “granted” constitutional reform in Morocco, the political stalemates in Bahrain and Yemen, the Libyan war and its paradoxical outcome and the ongoing bloody Syrian slaughtering.

As the Arab revolution evolved, mobilizing and resistance was also shortly visible in countries like Uganda and Malawi, even when these events did not captured much media attention. Not surprisingly, in the same period, the Chinese state adopted public security measures – including the arrest and imprisonment of dissidents – in an attempt to prevent these winds of change from crossing the Great Wall. The Chinese political containment would be, however, obscured by the tragedy of the Japan earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear disaster that painfully stirred the memories of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Chernobyl, tragic icons of the bi-polar world that have left deep traces on the contemporary experience.

As the word was still processing the shock of the Japan disaster, Osama Bin Laden was executed by a US highly specialized military team in Pakistan. The multiple implications of the Bin Laden killing were not yet fully debated when the signs of a deepening economic crisis in the Euro Zone became flagrant. People took over the public space in Portugal, Greece and Spain to shout against the failures of misguided economic policies, but also to make explicit their indignation in the face of the structural deficits of liberal democracies in responding to societal aspirations. In June, a national strike was called by UK unions to protest against the cuts in public spending adopted by the conservative government. By July, the winds of popular protest had reached Santiago (Chile) and Tel Aviv (Israel), in the first case to call for public funded and quality education, and in the second to cry out against rising living costs, which mostly affect young people.

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<sup>1</sup> **Sonia Corrêa** is SPW’s Co-Chair.

<sup>2</sup> A neologism used to describe the excess of information flows that characterize



Then, also quite unexpectedly the Norway bombing shattered the image of Nordic countries as stable and pacified societies. The episode also revived somber 20<sup>th</sup> century memories recalling that Fascist ideologies do not die away easily and can be revamped in times of uncertainty. The Norwegian events have also splintered the simplistic association between terrorism and Islam that had been crystallized in geopolitical discourses, mainstream media analyses and societal imagination after 9/11. It bluntly reminded that Christian religious dogmatism has killed in the past and that it may also kill today in the name of faith. As reported by the press, the Norwegian terrorist acts may have been inspired by the cumulative political gains of the Tea Party in US politics. If this information is correct the connection is not at trivial.

Meanwhile Norwegian society mourned the lives lost in the terrorist attacks, the US Congress was paralyzed by the political filibustering around the debt-fiscal ceiling resulting from radical Tea Party calls for reducing of "big government". When, in early August, an agreement was finally reached that, by and large, accommodated the extreme Tea Party demands, the global financial instability got worst threatening now Italy and perhaps also France. As these words were being written the stock exchange losses shared the headlines and screens with the glaring flames of the UK riots. As correctly noted by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura dos Santos (Folha de São Paulo, August 16th, 2011) the headlines of the week projected a frightening symmetry between the greed of financial markets and the furor sweeping through British cities. At the other side of the world, in India, protests against corruption gained visibility when its leader was arrested, an episode that, among other, reveals the authoritarian trait of one of the most stables democracies South of Equator.

This brief recollection merely connects the dots. Yet it is rather perplexing how intense and shifting the last seven months have been. Furthermore, I have realized how easily and fast relevant and tragic events may be swallowed into the vortex of contemporary infoxication<sup>2</sup>. Today it is increasingly difficult to capture the meanings and potential linkages between facts and trends, to keep alive the feelings of pain that many of these events have sparked, or to critically reflect on their immediate and long term implications for human rights, gender, sexualities or even the environmental uncertainties of our times.

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<sup>2</sup> A neologism used to describe the excess of information flows that characterize contemporary communication systems in terms of both circulation and reception.



It is neither simple nor easy to interpret more deeply the contours that emerge from this dot connecting exercise. Yet in broad strokes, this rapidly shifting landscape recalls those analyses that, for some time, have signaled towards the decline of Western economic hegemony. But it also revives the literature on the effects of finance based capitalism and the unrestrained perverse effects of de-regulated financial markets, texts examining the intersections between persistent inequalities and unchecked appeals of consumerism, as well as analyses suggesting that market forces may, in unexpected ways, amplify aspirations for freedom in ways that de-stabilize authoritarian regimes. The 2011 trends in world politics once again confirm the polymorphous and globalized nature of religious dogmatism.

While retracing this sequence of events I have also asked myself: if and how it intertwined with the multiple dynamics at play in sexual politics, broadly speaking? In the next paragraphs I will share some scattered insights that emerged while I examined the contours of this changing cartography using a sexual politics lens. I may start with the Norwegian terrorist attacks, because there has been an important gap in the media reporting about its connection with Christian dogmatism. Nowhere have I seen a mention to the fact that, since the early 1980s, in the US, Christian Right activists had bombed abortion clinics and kidnapped and killed abortion providers. In fact the last of these episodes occurred two years ago when Dr. Tiller<sup>3</sup> was shot in Wichita, Kansas, when arriving at his church to attend a cult.

When the lenses are shifted to the sequence of political mobilizing inspired by the Arab spring, the connections between gender, sexuality and politics are quite glaring. The reason may be that that 2011 "revolutions" have been predominantly youth rebellions. Since April, a string of Slut Walks<sup>4</sup> has quickly spread from Toronto to dozens of cities as disparate as Delhi, Malmo and Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Sexuality was openly expressed in the big kiss protest performed by Chilean students on the week of August 15th. In the Madrid pride parade, the M15 related the Orgullo Indignado (Indignant Pride) protested against the public funds being provided to the upcoming visit of the Pope. Gender was one inescapable dimension of the UK riots, sparked as they were by a "classical" episode involving the police and young males.

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<sup>3</sup> Read more at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination\\_of\\_George\\_Tiller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_George_Tiller)

<sup>4</sup> Read more at <http://www.sxpolitics.org/?p=6262>



Gender and sexuality were indeed flagrant dimensions at play in the complex transformations underway in the Middle East. As extensively analyzed, women's voices and political action were crucial in the uprising and sustainability of political resistance, particularly in Egypt. But in the sequential waves of occupation and dislodging of Tahir Square, the control and disciplining of women's autonomy and sexuality has been used as blatant tool of political coercion. The ongoing conflicts and state repression in Libya and Syria painfully revive the somber realities of systematic rape as a weapon of domain.

Most principally, since January, the "absence" of sexual dissident bodies and voices in the Arab revolutions became a subject of concern of the Western mainstream media and a few Northern LGBT groups. In responding to the queries raised by these actors many local voices stressed that while people of diverse sexualities were indeed part of the revolution, LGBT visibility should not be defined as an indicator of democracy. Others correctly reacted saying that the insistence on the topic was simply aimed at further stirring anti-Islamic feelings. While these debates were evolving, for few weeks, the Syrian lesbian blogger – A Gay Girl in Damascus blog – captured the hearts minds of Western audiences before being disclosed as fraud. The episode sparked a whole range of old and new critical reflections on the pitfalls of virtual politics, on Western biases on Islam and sexuality and the ways in which pink-washing has become an insidious feature of the ways in which politics and sexual politics entwine in the Middle East.

Lastly, I was definitely instigated by the geopolitical implications of this landscape because it strongly indicates that the global power dynamics and state-societal relations that presided over the legitimizing of sexual and reproductive rights as human rights, in the mid 1990s and early 2000s, are drastically changing. States' support in relation to gender, reproductive rights, sexual rights or even LGBT rights specifically seem to have become entirely imbricated with strategies designed to cope with growing internal contradictions and potential losses or gains in terms of geopolitical power. In June, the Italian group Facciamo circulated a series of reflections, which may throw some light into the shadows of this new era we seem to be entering into:

The implementation and institutionalization of feminist and LGBTIQ issues in many European countries has led to sexual policies that have improved the lives of many women, lesbians, gays and transsexuals. But a contradiction is there palpable that must be addressed. In particular, we want to disclose the ways in which sexual politics can be turned into a tool that is used by the systems to



justify its own struggles for hegemony... “Sexual democracy” can also be a “regime of justification” that deploys discourses appraising the recognition of sexual citizenship as a distinguishing mark of the superiority of the West, which coexist and are interwoven with imperialist and nationalist discourses that legitimize this supposed superiority<sup>5</sup>.

There is nothing new about states happily bargaining issues of gender and sexuality in global negotiations. Many of us have seen that happening repeatedly at UN conferences and other instances. Yet what Facciamo correctly suggests is that under the effects of the rapidly shifting geopolitical balance of power these bargains tend to become more ferocious, and within this context the “sexuality card” tends to be played as a superior feature of states that are either being threatened on other fronts, or are re-positioning themselves in the global check board. Needless to say that these novel and tricky conjunctions will play differently depending where you are located, not simply in regard to North and South or Western or non-Western, but also in relation to gradients of emergence and decline and the re-configurations underway in regional terms. Food for thought!

Further reading:

>> [Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?](http://www.sxpolitics.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/paul_ammar.pdf), by Paul Ammar  
Permalink [http://www.sxpolitics.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/paul\\_ammar.pdf](http://www.sxpolitics.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/paul_ammar.pdf)

>> [The force of organisations consisting of women and youth was decisive](http://www.sxpolitics.org/?p=5895)  
Permalink <http://www.sxpolitics.org/?p=5895>

>> [Egypt women protesters forced to take ‘virginity tests’](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12854391) (BBC)  
Permalink <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12854391>

>> [Iman al-Obeidi, Libya Woman Claiming Rape, Will Face Charges](http://huff.to/h4MsZF) (Huff Post)  
Permalink <http://huff.to/h4MsZF>

>> [After ‘Amina’: Thoughts From Cairo – OpEd](http://bit.ly/lbQq2H), by Scott Long  
Permalink <http://bit.ly/lbQq2H>

>> [Gay Girl in Damascus is actually Straight Man in Scotland](http://j.mp/mmutue) (GenderIT.org)  
Permalink <http://j.mp/mmutue>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.facciamobreccia.org/content/view/516/136/>





## Aid conditionality and respect for LGBT people rights

By Luis Abolafia Anguita<sup>6</sup>

March, 2012

In late October 2011, during the Commonwealth Meeting of Heads of State, David Cameron, the UK Prime Minister, threatened to reduce development aid to countries that criminalize homosexuality. A few weeks later, the Obama administration also announced that they would use all available mechanisms, including measures related to development cooperation, to promote the rights of LGBT persons (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans). These announcements revived the debate on the appropriateness of the aid conditionality as a tool to promote human rights, and have provoked different responses on the part of affected governments and their societies, as well as of human rights activists.

In countries like Ghana and Nigeria, indirectly fingered by Cameron, the reaction was immediate. In Ghana, the democratically elected president declared that he would never legalize homosexuality and religious groups took the opportunity of the British Prime Minister's speech to trigger homophobic sentiments in the society. In Nigeria, the Senate passed a bill criminalizing same sex marriage, any public expression of affection between two persons of the same sex, as well as the public defense of the rights of LGBT people.

The response of African organizations working with LGBT people also came quickly in the form of a statement signed by more than 50 organizations and many individual activists have also publicly rebuffed the British threat. The main argument raised by these voices was that the withdrawal of aid would cause a violent reaction against LGBT people, producing a rift between LGBT organizations and other social movements. The African statement also affirmed that the reduction of aid would negatively affect LGBT people, a social group that already experiences high levels of vulnerability. The statement also emphasizes that the affected population should have been previously consulted and that

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<sup>6</sup> **Luis Abolafia Anguita** is member of *Fundación Triángulo*, a Spanish LGBT organization which works with development cooperation. Nowadays, he is in charge of advocacy issues at the organisation. Luis represents *Fundación Triángulo* in a network of Northern LGBT organizations advocating on their own countries for a more inclusive and tolerant development cooperation and foreign policies for LGBT people. This network has been tackling the issue of aid conditionality and better ways to engage with organizations from the South for more than 2 years now. Last working meeting was held last September in Madrid, co-organised by Luis.



Western governments should seek more respectful ways of working with the African continent.

The reaction of Northern organizations working in the area of LGBT rights was more slow and confused, because they were trapped between the satisfaction of seeing top leaders of some powerful countries making explicit statements about their support of equality at the international level and the necessary caution regarding the impact of conditionalities in recipient countries. Internal discussions amongst organizations of different countries kept evolving during many weeks and no consensus was reached in relation to the appropriateness of conditioning development cooperation to the domestic respect for the rights of LGBT persons. It should be noted, however, that discussions about this matter is not new among Northern organizations. Since 2008, a specific group has been working on the issue and meetings have been organized that included the participation of African activists who shared their point of view on conditionalities.

The African organizations that signed the public statement highlighted the case of Malawi as an example of how international pressure and threats of aid reduction may cause a witch-hunt against the LGBT people in the country. In late 2009, a couple of men were arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison because they celebrated their wedding. After an international campaign and various threats from countries like Germany, UK, Norway and Sweden indicating that they may cut development support to Malawi, President Mutharika granted a pardon to the couple. Even so, the UK and Germany withdrew their aid, claiming that the reason was growing authoritarianism and misuse of funds. The Malawi government blamed the LGBT people for aid reduction, thereby increasing the levels of homophobia and as a result, the leading LGBT activists were threatened and had to hide or leave their homes.

In retrospect, the experience in Malawi, as the prime example of international pressure and aid conditionality to ensure the respect for the rights of LGBT persons, is, at best, a bittersweet episode. From a short-term perspective, the action was successful: the Malawian president granted a pardon for the couple. However, the medium-term effects have been negative: increased persecution of LGBT people; reduction of government funding, which probably will increase poverty levels; the weakening of local LGBT organizations; executive power overriding the judiciary system to grant a pardon, a procedure that sets a bad precedent.



Whom may we ask for explanations on what happened? Northern based LGBT organizations? Organizations from the South? The governments that cut off aid? I have written myself a press release, on behalf of my organization, criticizing the couple's arrest, and many other Northern based organizations did the same. Some of these organizations asked their governments to condemn this episode explicitly. I suppose that many of these organizations contacted the reference group in Malawi, CEDEP, to ask about the appropriateness for them to speak or not publicly on the matter, as I did.

From my point of view, the main problem is the misguided focus on trying to determine whether it was suitable to condition development aid to the respect of the human rights of LGBT people. I do think we should challenge ourselves to climb a step further and try to see the whole scene, to abandon for a moment the detailed picture (LGBT) and look at the broader one (human rights). In doing so we notice problems such as: the incoherencies between development policies and foreign and trade policies of donor countries; the power dynamics between North and South and between former colony and colonizer; the systematic marginalization of sexual and reproductive rights; the division between civil and political rights, on the one hand, and economic and social rights, on the other; a sort of disconnection between North and South based organizations, as well as in relation to local agendas; and, finally, great uncertainty in respect to the role that BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia India, China and South Africa) may or not play in the promotion of the human rights of LGBT persons.

For many years, organizations that worked in development cooperation from Northern countries have done their best to ensure that cooperation policies were disassociated from foreign policy rationales, to attempt to eradicate neo-colonial biases and avoid using aid merely to promote the economic interests of Northern countries' administrations. As a result, in many countries, including Spain, we have advanced in the direction of a rights based development cooperation approach, designed as a tool to reduce poverty and promote citizen awareness that everyone certain inherent rights. However, foreign policy has continued to serve national interests, sometimes in frank opposition to guidelines adopted by the development cooperation branch of the same government. Spain provides a sharp and clear example of these contradictions. Morocco is one of the main recipient countries of Spanish development cooperation, but it also receives specific earmarked funds to police the European Union border. These funds finance a repressive apparatus that prevents people from black Africa from crossing to Europe. It is also important to call attention to the shameful



agreement of re-admission, signed by Spain with Morocco and Senegal, that allows for the expulsion of unaccompanied children from these countries. What is the rights based approach of this policy?

It is also necessary to more closely analyze the power dynamics behind development cooperation and impregnating the present relations between former colonies and former colonial powers. David Cameron launched his threats to cut development cooperation to countries that do not respect the rights of LGBT people at the Commonwealth Meeting of Heads of State. Perhaps, someone should have reminded him that the Commonwealth is a legacy of the former British empire and that it is, at least, quite embarrassing to see a British authority publicly instruct the heads of states of former British colonies on what is or not acceptable in terms of human rights. Many of the problems currently experienced by a number of African countries have originated in the policies adopted by former colonial powers, including the support given over many years to dictatorial, violent and corrupt regimes.

It is important to reflect on the marginalization of sexual and reproductive rights in those countries where homosexuality remains criminalized. It is necessary to place the violation of LGBT rights in the broader context of denial of sexual and reproductive rights. It is not exactly a coincidence that in those countries where these rights are curtailed, women, children and LGBT people endure greater poverty, exclusion and have less access to fundamental economic and social rights, such as health and education. Therefore, in certain contexts, the main challenge is to work towards preventing the dominant sexual morality of prevailing, as a broader strategy to defend LGBT rights.

When we locate LGBT rights in the broader framework of sexual and reproductive rights we can also identify how current debates around aid conditionality and the lives of LGBT persons has been restricted to civil and political rights, ignoring the relevance of economic and social rights. As spelled out in the statement issued by the African organizations, which was mentioned above, when aid is suspended in the case of countries that do not respect LGBT people, the economic and social rights of the population as a whole will deteriorate, particularly in the case of the most vulnerable groups, including LGBT persons, who are not sheltered by the neo-patrimonial social protection networks of many states. Thus, those who are supposed to be protected will be the very first affected by its detrimental policy effects.



Another more general problem is the insufficient communication between North and South based organizations and the divergent agendas between them. Sometimes, because of our excessive zeal, organizations from the North want to quickly respond to rights violations in other areas. Even when consulting Southern based organizations many times we do not allow them enough time to reflect on what could be the best strategy to pursue. Furthermore, we must be aware that many times these organizations do not have enough staff, or most of the work is done by volunteers, who find themselves flooded with questions raised by hundreds of Northern organizations. There are also times when we prioritize making our own governments and societies take action in response to the violation of LGBT rights in another country, in ways that give primacy to our own political agenda in detriment of the needs of Southern organizations.

We must also recognize that we have not reflected enough, across North and South, about the potential role to be played by the BRICS as new actors in development cooperation. India and Brazil are already performing a very important role in Africa and their development cooperation budgets today match the level of funds channeled by Canada and Sweden. A country like India, where local meanings of sexuality do not coincide with Western concepts and categories can maybe provide support to LGBT rights in more flexible terms, which can eventually be more easily understood by certain African governments. Regarding Brazil, despite recent and worrying setbacks, the existence of a vibrant civil society is a potential platform to enable the state to start promoting internationally sexual and reproductive rights that are formally guaranteed at the domestic level. Organizations from both North and South working in the realm of human rights of LGBT people should engage in collective efforts to push Brazil, as a leading Southern country, to contribute to the enhancement of sexual and reproductive rights in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific. However, as far as I know, no consistent strategy has been yet designed by any organization working for LGBT people.

To summarize: when we analyze more in depth the problems and effects of aid conditionality as a means to protect human rights, we realize that more effective alternatives exist, such as:

- To promote greater coherence between foreign and cooperation policies in our own countries.
- To prevent the continuation of neocolonial dynamics.



- To situate LGBT human rights in the broader framework of sexual and reproductive rights as to circumvent the rejection on the part of homophobic governments.
- To avoid the fracturing of human rights through the prioritizing of civil and political rights in detriment of social and economic rights.
- To ensure a constant flow of communication between North and South based organizations engaged in LGBT rights work.
- To subordinate the interests of Northern organizations to definitions and strategies of South based organizations.
- To develop a common strategy aimed at persuading some BRICS countries to more fully engage in the global promotion of the rights of LGBT people.

And other ideas may be also added such as:

- The freezing of assets, bank accounts and adoption of travel bans in the case of leaders proved responsible for the systematic violations of the rights of LGBT people.
- To ensure the control of North based organizations that are providing funds to fuel intolerance against LGBT people in the South, there including criminal and economic sanctions when necessary. More funds to support the work LGBT organizations in Southern countries.
- To promote and increase networking among organizations that provide support to South based LGBT rights initiatives.
- To promote accountability and juridical safety in regard to the relationship between donor and recipient countries. This would imply negotiating new agreements including specific provisions concerning the respect for the rights of LGBT persons, not imposing them overnight.
- To require donor countries to include LGBT organizations on every consultation forum with civil society regarding development cooperation agreements.
- To invest more funds in the implementation of accountability mechanisms in recipient countries as to ensure that local civil society organizations, including those working with LGBT people, are able to hold their government accountable.

It is quite evident that many positions exist among Northern LGBT organizations – as well as among organizations based in the South, I would say – in regard to



the appropriateness of aid conditionality as a tool to promote the rights of LGBT people. However, a significant number of Northern LGBT organizations share common ideas in relation to this matter, which resulted from our joint work and reflection about what conditions must be advocated before resorting to aid conditionality. These conditions include: the rule of always consulting with organizations working with LGBT rights in the country where violations have occurred before requesting our governments to take any measure; to always make sure that if aid conditionality is eventually adopted that it is linked to a broader human rights frame; to recall that LGBT people may be the victims of backlashes and warn donor governments of these risks; always consider the redeployment of funds as an alternative to the suspension of aid (although this is not feasible when aid comes in the form of state budget support).

I left to the very end the thorny problem that arises whenever we talk about LGBT people's rights, which is: the clash between cultural relativism, affirming that not all rights are applicable in all cultures, and universalism, arguing that human rights are inherent to all people. Fundamentally this is the kernel of the question and it will remain so. Meanwhile Northern states will continue to misuse the language of rights as an excuse to impose their own values and, most principally, their interests. This makes it crucial for Southern organizations to address LGBT rights in their own cultural references and language. Southern organizations must teach Northern based organizations how to do rights work under the conditions in which they live and claim rights, in the same way as they have taught us how to more fully understand the limits and caveats of aid conditionality.





## Aid, resistance and Queer power

*Hakima Abbas<sup>7</sup>*

*March, 2012*

LGBTIQ Africans are currently at the crux of an ever-increasing conservative (dare I say fascist) assault perpetuated primarily by the ruling elites in collusion, and often financed by, global right wing forces using the apparatus of the state and institutions such as the Church. African progressive forces, through LGBTI and Queer movements and allies in the feminist, academic, human rights and social justice communities, have been resisting this onslaught and attempting to bring to bear a new understanding and discourse on so-called LGBTI issues in Africa notably by contextualizing these in the ever growing democratic regression and class struggle on the continent. In light of this situation, global attempts to stand in solidarity with African LGBTI persons and communities have brought these issues to the forefront of international attention. Western policy makers, often at the demand of European and US civil society, have responded with several forms of intervention including the threat of tying development aid to human rights protection of LGBTI persons. These attempts have not always been met with elation by Queer communities or movements in Africa. In order for us to understand some of the resistance within the Queer movement to the use of aid as a stick to African governments to shift their policies and laws towards LGBTI persons, we have to deconstruct and understand the foundation of aid in general, the history of aid in Africa as well as the context and politics of Queer organizing.

In the 1950's as Africa was gaining independence and attempting to create South-South alignment outside of the cold war allegiances, the development paradigm was gaining grounds in international affairs with the United States of America (US) in particular positioning themselves as the benefactor of both a crumbled post-war Europe and of Europe's former colonies. The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) also sought to gain ideological alliance based on socialist principles and effects. While the war was cold for most of the world, it was cataclysmic in Africa where legitimate governments were overthrown, proxy wars were fuelled, natural resources exploited and economies devastated. With capitalism offering little in the form of social and economic rights for the masses, as was the call during the struggle for independence, what it did offer was 'aid and development', while its liberal proponents further expounded the virtues of a singular brand of democracy and human rights (read as civil and political).

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<sup>7</sup> **Hakima Abbas** is the Executive Director of Fahamu Network for Social Justice.





The end of the USSR would spell the dominance of liberal capitalism, and therefore dominance of the aid and development discourse in Global North-South relations. It is with much fanfare that developed nations continue to pledge significant sums of money in aid to countries of the Global South, but none more than in the continent of Africa. However, a large proportion of aid pledges to Africa remain unfulfilled while another large proportion of aid serves to contribute to the donor nation, being tied to services and products provided from companies in donor countries. Most foreign aid has been provided in the form of loans, bearing high rates of interest and creating a crippling debt crisis that has perpetuated the underdevelopment of African economies. Africa today pays more in debt servicing than it receives as aid from Western countries and blocs: it is estimated that while Africa receives less than \$13billion in aid annually, it spends \$15billion annually on debt repayments. For every dollar that an African country receives in grants, it pays \$13 in interest on debt. While some aid conditionality is used to protect and promote human rights, the majority of conditions are elaborated to entrench further dependence on donor countries creating for example trade preferences, sole contractor agreements, etc.

Aid, as it is currently constructed between the West and Africa, is therefore not sufficient to redress the conditions that maintain the levels of poverty in Africa despite the continent being one of the richest in raw materials. Rather the aid and debt crisis is a reflection of the historical and present relationship that Africa and the rest of the world maintain. In short, it is about power – a relationship based largely on dependence and exploitation. I have argued elsewhere (1) that while many are focused on reforming the aid architecture, African energies should be spent on seeking alternatives such as fair trade, reparations and cancellation of odious debt.

So if aid is not in the interests of African peoples', why would aid conditionality be a tool for African social justice? The language of human rights has been lauded by liberal western democrats who assume that they must coerce Africa into understanding notions of equality and justice without acknowledging the devastating effects of globalized neo-liberal economic policies and the limitations of elective democracy as practiced by two party states with only one acceptable ideology. In the last decade LGBTI issues have been put squarely in the geopolitical arena. In Africa, the homophobes are using the very notions of citizenship and African identity as rhetoric to exclude and oppress LGBTI persons and communities. This does not come in a vacuum of oppression. Indeed a democratic regression and looming economic recession has created systematic entrenchment of various forms of oppression. Notably, oppressions that seek to



exert power over bodies and sexuality are gaining ground in an increasingly fundamentalist state and religious rhetoric armed with populist power. On the flip side, LGBTI issues have gained ground in the international arena as a barometer to determine who the 'good liberal' countries versus the 'bad backward' ones are. With racist undertones about the 'barbaric' and 'uncivilized', it has been written that the 'cultures' and 'traditions' of the Black and Brown peoples of the world have not yet been civilized enough to tolerate gay and lesbian people. And with this undertone, 'gay rights' (terminology used as if it should suffice to encompass the collective diversity of LGBTIQ equality and liberation) has become a card on a bad deck for Western governments to use as political mileage internationally, again with much fanfare. It is truly unfortunate, because behind some of these efforts there are indeed individuals who sincerely seek to stand in solidarity with LGBTI communities and people all over the world. And perhaps that is the place at which we start, a discussion about what we understand by genuine solidarity and how to achieve it.

Receiving criticism from the African LGBTIQ movement about their broad aid withdrawal statements, some Western governments have rather talked about a redirection of some aid to civil society movements who are working on LGBTIQ rights and equality. All movements need resources and there is a myth that the LGBTIQ movement in Africa has been inundated with funds, and will continue to be because of the special interest bestowed upon it by Western governments. The reverse is in fact true: on very little, the African LGBTIQ movement has made great strides. If funding is to genuinely be a strategy for solidarity, the African LGBTIQ movement must be afforded the space to dictate its own funding priorities. In spite of the divergent opinions that will inevitably exist, there are certainly priorities that can be agreed among a broad spectrum of activists. The movement also needs to begin to set the parameters of what money is acceptable given the political framework in which the movement operates and seeks to have an impact on.

Aid conditionality for LGBTI rights is currently being used to show muscle for an otherwise vulnerable minority, but this action, not taken with the full consultation ignores the adverse effect that the action would actually have on LGBTI Africans. All Africans would suffer if, for instance, our education and health systems were further crumbled. Certainly, the withdrawal, or threat therein, of foreign aid only reinforces the argument that homosexuality is a Western construct. And of course the homophobes, knowing full well the illegitimacy of their argument, encourage this connection as when President Museveni talked about why he withdrew the Anti-Homosexuality bill ignored or obliterated the



significant widespread Ugandan and African movement to fight the bill, but focused only on Western pressure thus stirring backlash.

An emerging Queer movement in Africa is engaging in this context and conversation not from the point of view of 'gay rights' but from a framework of queer liberation. Attempting to dismantle the binary notions of gender and sexuality to talk about pluralism and complexity. This movement seeks not to separate LGBTI issues from the broad spectrum of issues that affect all Africans including Queer Africans. This implies that what affects Africans negatively is indeed bad for Queer Africans but also, and critically, that the reverse holds strong.

There are a myriad of opinions in the LGBTIQ movement about the use of aid as a tactic. This is exactly as it should be and reflects the plural and multifaceted nature of a steadily growing movement. Just like sanctions for South Africa became a tactic that the liberation forces had to debate and build consensus around internally: whether the effects on Black people could be counterbalanced by the potential victory over the Apartheid system. So, too these are tactics that must be debated, discussed, and decided by the African Queer movement. When difficult measures that will impact whole communities and nations are used, they must be used responsibly, as an urgent resort and always with the decision making of those directly affected. Nevertheless, while aid for LGBTIQ rights and equality are being discussed, significant shifts in global geopolitics almost render the discussion futile. With so-called 'emerging' powers wielding as much political and economic clout as former colonial powers, the aid system is likely to significantly transform and aid conditionality may be rendered obsolete. In this context, the Queer African movement must again consider how to make global alliances, with whom and with what tactics, and must continue to engage critically on the nature of genuine solidarity with these allied partners.

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(1) 'Aid and Reparations: Power in the Development Discourse', Hakima Abbas with Nana Ndeda (2009) published in 'Aid to Africa: Coloniser or Redeemer?', by Pambazuka Press (Edited by Hakima Abbas and Yves Niyiragira), ISBN: 978-1-906387-38-9



## Interview: Radhika Balakrishnan



*February, 2012*

SPW talked to Radhika Balakrishnan, the Executive Director and a Professor at the Center for Women's Global Leadership, about aid conditionalities to developing countries and its impacts on national human rights agenda. Read the interview below.

**SPW: How do you evaluate the use of aid conditionality to protect women's or LGBT human rights? What are the effects of conditionality on recipient countries?**

**Prof. Balakrishnan:** This is really a very complicated issue. Conditionalities have been a core component of IMF structural programs since the 1990's and although people say and think that these programs are over, they continue to be implemented and many of them include different versions of conditionality. I think we need to be very careful. I am really worried that women's rights may now be used as another conditionality for aid, meanwhile there are no substantial investments in women's human rights as a goal in itself. Everyone is now talking about a rights-based approach to development but we need to be careful that rights are not used as a form of aid conditionality. I would argue that this must be turned upside down. We must in fact emphasize that those working within a human rights framework need to use the framework to assess the quality and effects of donor assistance and development programs.

For example, when the IMF asks governments to cut health care expenditures, it forces states to violate the rule about non-retrogression on the right to health. Using such a reverse frame we can hold accountable states and institutions who impose these types of conditionality, by reminding them that these rules violate the ability of national governments to fulfill fundamental human rights standards. In other words I think that we must shift the focus towards those who impose conditionality, rather than using rules of conditionality to guarantee the human rights of women.

I can give you one example from the work we did on human rights and macro economic policy in the US and Mexico. In order to accommodate NAFTA the Mexican constitution had to be changed. The NAFTA agreement required Mexico



to change its constitution in regard to principles enshrined in the constitution to guarantee economic and social rights, such as the premise of collective ownership of land, that had been established by the 1910 revolution. Using the reverse lenses it became evident that NAFTA, a trade agreement, forced Mexico to violate long established human rights obligations.

**SPW: Have you thought more specifically about the possible impact of aid conditionality in relation to sexual rights?**

**Prof. Balakrishnan:** Once again it is very complicated. On the one hand, you want to support sexual rights and want to find ways to pressure those governments that resist or even violate those rights. But if you resort to conditionality to make this pressure you risk alienating people who could become allies to your cause, as they may see it as something alien. The work on reproductive and sexual rights, which are extremely sensitive issues, must always be closely linked to groups on the ground and attuned to what they are asking.

**SPW: Many people argue that conditionality is typical of Western colonial modes of operation and that specifically in the case of LGBT rights it reflects the hegemony from groups in Europe and the US over local movements elsewhere. What is your opinion about this?**

**Prof. Balakrishnan:** First, I would disagree with those who say that LGBT rights is a Western concept, being imposed on others. What happens is that quite often donor governments raise these agendas without having any dialogue with local groups working with sexuality issues. In doing so, the perception arises that their money and support is just another external imposition and this may strengthen the position of the conservative voices who affirm that sexuality rights are a Western-imposed idea. Any donor or group concerned about LGBT issues must necessarily dialogue and work closely with groups on the ground and reach strong political consensus with them about what actions may be more useful and what actions are not to be done.

I can tell you a story, which is not precisely about LGBT issues, but presents many similarities. Many years ago, when working for a donor agency, I had learned that another donor decided to fund schools for girls in Bangladesh. This program triggered a strong reaction of the Islamic conservatives who attacked the project as a Western donor-imposed agenda and burned the schools down. We must recognize that, at one level, what they said was not untrue: the decision about building the schools was taken in Italy, not in Bangladesh. On the



other hand, if the agency had engaged properly with local groups and developed a program designed from the bottom-up this disaster may have been prevented.

For more information, please look at GCAP-Feminist task force, DAWN, Third World Network and AWID who have been working on these issues. Search for "aid effectiveness", there's tons of materials there.