

Furthering LGBTIQ+ Inclusion and Rights through Feminist Foreign Policy

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The problem with international development is that some human rights defenders are sexist, some feminists are transphobic and homophobic, and some LGBTIQ+ advocates racist.

In 2018, a landmark intersectional human rights festival was run in Hong Kong to celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Surrounded by incredible trans advocates from the Pacific, disability advocates from the Middle East, and gender diverse young people from Asia, the above quote stood out. The sentiment was shared by one of our co-authors, Matcha Phorn-In, a lesbian human rights defender who works with ethnic minority and indigenous women and gender diverse folk on the Thai-Myanmar border. Her on-ground expertise and deep global experience in international development highlights the devastating reality for many LGBTIQ+ folk globally, as well as those working for LGBTIQ+ rights and inclusion.

Put simply, LGBTIQ+ inclusion and rights have often been marginalised in international affairs. Critically, it is not just conservative states who have pushed back on supporting diverse LGBTIQ+ folk and perspectives, with human rights defenders and more progressive state actors often perpetuating inequalities and discrimination – unintentionally or not. Progress is often non-linear and does not remain static – the rights of LGBTIQ+ people once earned are not always guaranteed, creating a shifting international landscape that is difficult to map out.

Feminist foreign policy (FFP) principles emphasise the need to transform the global systems which uphold and perpetuate inequality – including patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and others. Yet to date, the application of FFP principles to LGBTIQ+ inclusion and rights has been limited. This issues paper seeks to extend principle of

'transforming global systems' - particularly homophobic, transphobic and heteronormative systems – to set forth an agenda for how FFP can enable progress and prioritise action around LGBTIQ+ inclusion and rights.

The Core Problem

In many parts of the world, severe persecution and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ folk is common, from both state and non-state actors. Roughly 70 nations still criminalise homosexuality in some form, almost half of which are in the Asia Pacific regionⁱ. Communities face everything from inhumane conversion therapy practices, an increased risk of violence in day-to-day life, targeted terrorism, high rates of mental health issues, bias and discrimination in employment, and limited access to certain rights – particularly around topics such as health, employment, and relationships. In conflict affected states, LGBTIQ+ refugees and asylum seekers may be subjected to extreme harm, including from stigmatisation, sexual and gender-based violence, abuse by or lack of protection from security forces, arbitrary detention, and exclusion from essential servicesⁱⁱ. For indigenous LGBTIQ+ communities, gaining Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is also a challenge, particularly with regards to development projects that impacted their livelihood or their territories.

Patterns of LGBTIQ+ discrimination, marginalisation and violence are not always predictable, either. Norway, which might otherwise be considered to be a leading state for LGBTIQ+ inclusion and rights, witnessed a deadly targeted terror attack on LGBTIQ+ communities in the June 2022 Pride celebrationsⁱⁱⁱ. In 2018, the United States – usually a norm-setting leader on civil rights issues like LGBTIQ+ inclusion – changed visa rules to require those seeking a spousal visa to be married prior to entering the United States^{iv}, a reality only possible for those countries around

the world who allow same-sex marriage^v. Despite a change in administration in 2020, this requirement remains in place under the Biden Administration^{vi}. The differences in inequalities and experiences across countries make it difficult to generalise and apply one-size-fits-all policy, however, it does reinforce the universal nature of challenges and degradation of rights experienced by LGBTIQ+ communities.

Discrimination and violence are not the only core problems an FFP approach can address, however. International actors must also remember that there are many countries and cultures that have both historically recognised LGBTIQ+ people and currently recognise and celebrate their role in society. Prior to the exportation of colonial concepts of a gender binary, indigenous cultures across the Pacific recognised and celebrated gender and sexually diverse individuals: the fa'afafine and fa'afatama of Samoa, the aikāne of Hawai'i and the mamflorita of Guam being just a few of amongst many Pacific Indigenous terms for gender diverse and same-sex attracted people^{vii}. Operating from national or cultural stereotypes or assumptions - that differing cultures are presumed as homophobic by default - fails to acknowledge the wide spectrum of attitudes and relationships to LGBTIQ+ across the world. Additionally, although it is not the full story of LGBTIQ+ emancipation, there are currently 32 countries around the world that have legalised same-sex marriages^{viii}, with others gradually repealing restrictions and evidencing strong LGBTIQ+ communities - even if more covert. Failure to acknowledge that our international counterparts recognise, celebrate, or have diverse gender and sexuality communities and histories is therefore also a crucial foreign policy problem. Embedding LGBTIQ+ rights and inclusion is therefore a critical foundation for an FFP seeking to understand and engage with different cultures.

FFP's engagement with LGBTIQ+ inclusion

Although not much is written on the intersection of FFP policy with queer/LGBTIQ+ rights and inclusion, to be considered credible, an FFP approach must be fundamentally intersectional to live up to its emancipatory aims^{ix}. FFP approaches seek to remedy silences, increase representation, and promote diverse critical thought that shapes the foreign policy options that emerge as viable. Failing to include LGBTIQ+ perspectives in this effort means that we are missing the full picture, and therefore making critical decisions about international relations with incomplete information.

Significant barriers to this effort to date include narrow conceptions of "gender" in foreign policies – essentially meaning "women and girls"^x – often limiting the scope of action and focus of foreign policy and development work to cis-gendered women and heteronormative relations. Coupled with language and thinking that replicates the gender binary (focusing on men and women, without acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of male/female, men/women delineations) foreign policies may be limited in terms of action for and acknowledgement of non-binary and gender diverse individuals, as well as in their potential to have a transformative impact on patriarchal power structures which are heavily invested in

upholding binary notions of gender. As the IWDA notes, the need to transform patriarchal systems is apparent considering the patriarchy's role in defining and policing people into binary gender roles, limiting their ability to live freely^{xi}. Given LGBTIQ+ people are often discriminated against due to a nonconformity to gendered social norms and gender inequalities, and it is precisely these norms FFP aims to transform, LGBTIQ+ people must be more centred in both action and solution instead of sidelined as gaining a by-product benefit from an FFP approach. Echoing mantras used by disability advocates and activists (and others since), we argue: nothing about us, without us.

The big opportunity and challenges to navigate

There are tangible benefits to being explicit in the pursuit of LGBTIQ+ inclusion and rights through an FFP approach. One benefit of an LGBTIQ+ FFP approach includes increasing states' credibility and reputation in the eyes of interlocutors, demonstrating a holistic and intersectional approach to human rights issues. The approach is also an important investment given that in some countries the documented percentage of the population who publicly identify as LGBTIQ+ is rapidly increasing. Indeed, in the United States, a 2021 Gallup Poll suggests that one in six (1:6) Gen Z adults identify as LGBTIQ+^{xii}. Recent conflicts in Ukraine and Myanmar highlight that LGBTIQ+ people are amongst those most persecuted and least supported^{xiii}, whilst LGBTIQ+ communities are also likely to be more impacted by climate change given existing marginalisation and vulnerabilities. This further emphasises the need for centring LGBTIQ+ inclusion and rights in FFP approaches.

It is also important to recognise that there will be challenges to pursuing this agenda, in terms of dealing with potential backlash, and centring LGBTIQ+ perspectives respectfully and in ways that do no further damage. To conservative states and actors LGBTIQ+ rights and inclusion are often one of many issues to be rejected. For such states/actors, an FFP approach in and of itself is already radical enough, and therefore the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people is not likely to have much effect in terms of additional backlash: more is lost in excluding LGBTIQ+ people than is gained by acquiescing to conservative and discriminatory ideology.

Ensuring LGBTIQ+ people are not further exposed to harm through the process of mainstreaming their voices and concerns remains a challenge to consider. LGBTIQ+ people are already vulnerable in many situations globally. Raising their profile, including unintentionally 'outing' individuals where they may not already be out (or 'out' in those contexts), exposes them to greater risks and scrutiny – from media, government, and publics. It also potentially re-traumatizes individuals who are likely to experience high levels of violence and report low levels of safety and mental health^{xiv}, even more so during conflict. Through consultation and involvement of communities wherever possible, such challenges are not insurmountable, yet are important to consider. Over time, such issues should become easier to address when LGBTIQ+ people remain a part of the conversation.

Building the foundations of an LGBTIQ+ inclusive FFP

For states pursuing FFP or advocates and allies lobbying for FFP approaches, there are a few key considerations to better incorporate and support LGBTIQ+ inclusion and rights. Some key suggestions include:

- Update definitions of gender. Gender is socially constructed and comprises a spectrum of recognised genders across the world, beyond binary male/female delineations to include non-binary, gender-fluid, transgender, and other individuals.
- Get rid of the binary. Replace language like ‘both genders’ with ‘all genders’. Move past talking about ‘men and women’, to ‘men, women and other gender identities’, or use gender neutral language like ‘individuals’ or ‘people’ where necessary.
- Ensure all foreign policy professionals are equipped with the tools and training to recognise the effect of gender inequality and gendered social norms on sexually and gender diverse individuals – and account for this in their actions.
- Invest in research around LGBTIQ+ people, experiences, and perspectives in foreign policy and development, and build awareness of issues and implementation of solutions that actively includes them.

Through holistically seeking to understand and incorporate LGBTIQ+ communities and perspectives, foreign policy concerns can also be prioritised according to need – a need determined by rather than for the community.

LGBTIQ+ foreign policy priorities

With these foundational elements in place, strategic LGBTIQ+ foreign policy priorities can be pursued in meaningful and impactful ways. With Australia’s new Labor government elected in May 2022 and the appointment of Australia’s most senior LGBTIQ+ foreign affairs leader in Foreign Minister Penny Wong, we have arrived at a critical juncture. Whilst Australia’s past foreign policy has been able to influence LGBTIQ+ rights, particularly when it comes to lobbying around decriminalisation of homosexuality in our region and more recently supporting other nations’ pathways to same-sex marriage, there is enormous opportunity to have a more substantial impact. In the Australian case, elevating the commitment to First Nations Foreign Policy with inclusive FFP principles, particularly around LGBTIQ+ rights, represents an enormous opportunity to further support Indigenous LGBTIQ+ communities – both in forging connections between Indigenous LGBTIQ+ communities and in centring voices in foreign policy debates.

Priorities include:

- Fund and capacity-build LGBTIQ+ organisations who can provide specialised support services, foreign policy advice and help in international disaster management and conflict settings.

- Embed LGBTIQ+ experience and expertise within international development and humanitarian organisations – including assessing current organisational capacity gaps and investing in research, education and awareness raising around how to provide tailored support to LGBTIQ+ communities.
- Ensure human rights violations suffered by LGBTIQ+ people are documented and investigated, and that pathways to justice are accessible.
- Meaningfully engage with LGBTIQ+ civil society in crisis planning and crisis response, foreign policy, public diplomacy, and national security settings. Where possible, these should be sought from the disaster/conflict setting, to support local, grass-roots, connected and trusted organisations with a track record within LGBTIQ+ communities.
- Review definitions of what international development and humanitarian support might be available to ‘families’, ‘couples’, particular genders, etc. – definitions of family/couples/other terms vary considerably among and within LGBTIQ+ communities.
- Apply an LGBTIQ+ lens (like applying a “gender lens”) to a review of current foreign policy goals, objectives, strategy and policies, seeking ‘gaps’ and strategic points of leverage, or to understand where and how LGBTIQ+ people may be affected by policy. Utilise these learnings and form meaningful intervention points to maintain existing goals while broadening inclusivity.
- Leverage existing LGBTIQ+ networks, conventions and events where broader foreign policy goals may be achieved alongside LGBTIQ+ inclusion and rights discussions. In Australia, this includes capitalising on opportunities such as Sydney’s 2023 World Pride and the Brisbane 2032 Olympics.

Specific focal areas of foreign policy advocacy and influence include trans rights (creating and extending protections, reviewing policies that may intentionally/unintentionally discriminate), banning conversion therapy, repeal laws criminalising same-sex relations and transgender people, promoting availability and access to same-sex marriage, review laws on the medical emancipation of intersex people, and safeguarding freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly of LGBTIQ+ people^{xv}.

Next Steps

Given an FFP approach already seeks to amplify marginalised voices and transform gendered power structures that perpetuate inequalities, there is great strategic alignment in amplifying LGBTIQ+ rights, inclusion and needs in foreign policy. Australia is at a critical juncture where the newly announced First Nations foreign policy agenda may dovetail neatly with feminist and LGBTIQ+ inclusion aims, to produce a foreign policy that is values-aligned and rich in potential impact. Remembering and accounting for the fact that the allies and communities Australia seeks to influence have varied understandings of

gender and sexuality is key. Gender diverse cultures (beyond binary conceptions of gender) are evidenced on nearly every continent^{xvi}. Further, many LGBTIQ+ groups globally have been at the heart of international cooperation on climate action, refugees and conflict resolution, and likewise, many of those involved in foreign policy and international cooperation comprise LGBTIQ+ individuals among their ranks.

From the well-established frameworks developed by FFP approaches, there is great potential to strengthen relationships with like-minded allies whilst partnering with states and subnational communities to improve circumstances of LGBTIQ+ people, and ensure their needs are not forgotten in disasters and conflict. If realised by states, this is the exciting new promise of an LGBTIQ+ inclusive feminist foreign policy approach.

THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across a range of sectors including foreign policy, defence, security, women's rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is an approach which places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, in recognition that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues, and provide practical ways forward.

Endnotes

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