

## **ISA 2018 Workshop Report: ‘Finding Pathways through the International Polarization of LGBTI Rights’**

The organizers, Momin Rahman and Markus Thiel, informed participants about the upcoming workshop modalities and reminded them to register in time, and to circulate a 2 page outline of their contribution to the workshop, focused on 3 key issues and 3 key recommendations in their sub- area of LGBTI politics expertise. Each participant submitted their workshop presentation outlines and reviewed in advance the other ones.

On Tuesday, April 3, we began at 9am with welcome words and a short introductory round. We then started immediately with short, focused 10 minute presentations by 5 experts each in 3 subsequent areas as laid out in the proposal (Global cultural contexts, Institutional Equality Architectures/IGOs, and NGO Policy Actors), followed by 30+ minutes of roundtable discussions on each of these themes, debating the merits and issues with each of the proposed contents. The format resulted in a well-structured exchange of ideas and debates, though rather than developing solutions to the highly complex issue of global LGBTI Rights promotion, we were only able to sketch the complexity in each sub-field, and synthesize some broader joint themes (see details below). We aim to publish the joint proceedings from the various presentations in a) the *Oxford handbook on Global LGBTQ Politics* and b) in the ‘Current Controversies’ section of the journal *Human Rights Review*.

Below we’ll highlight the main points made in the presentations and the following debates, centered around the three core areas:

### **1. 9am to 10.30 am: Global cultural contexts (facilitator Thiel)**

Presenters:     Bosia (global homophobia)  
                      Rahman (homocolonialism and Islamophobia)  
                      Picq (indigenous intersections)  
                      Wilkinson (nationalisms)  
                      Altman (global queer wars)

This section was designed to provide the cultural, social and theoretical context to the comparative issues of global LGBTI rights promotion policies. To begin with, a few participants raised the issue of terminology, stating that ‘polarization’ is not an ideal concept as it suggests a binary that queer scholars tend to avoid. Bosia presented on his concept of state homophobia, Rahman on his research on homocolonialism, Picq on indigenous sexualities, Wilkinson on the appropriation of nationalistic ideals to counter LGBTI rights expansion, and Altman on the global and transnational tensions contained in LGBTI rights promotion.

One common theme was the challenge to move to broader, more localized and less Western-centric forms of activism outside “LGBTI”, given that Western-based groups (especially European) tend to strongly promote those rights and fund NGOs.

Another issue raised was how to ‘translate’ (indigenous) LGBTI rights into a modern normative language or conceptual policy framework that resonates with local groups and stakeholders, rather than alienates those? This includes religious actors (churches, pastors, etc.), which are often critical of LGBTI rights promotion attempts, but also need to be engaged more strongly; there is no need to be ‘accepted’ but

to be tolerated; religion in the global south is deeply intertwined in coloniality, but at the same time the heterogeneity of religious traditions globally need to be recognized.

It was also highlighted that the polarization cannot be disconnected from a larger drive towards populism and authoritarianism; larger geopolitical shifts impact on how to respond to states that use that LGBT rights just as a trope/scape goat for their own objectives.

In terms of translation and localization, the problem with lack of local adaptation is structured by the Western human rights umbrella (which requires identities to gain equality) and the limited rights framework, which is the inattentive to economics, security issues, and how they are interconnected. Especially the neglect of huge inequality issues between 'the saviors' and the 'saved' were noted; hence global work needs to be grounded dialogically ; the issue of how to individualize strategies (by working with organizations on the ground) while avoiding easy policy 'fixes' was raised, as well as the need to be respectful of what/how much support those local organizations want. There is general little value added to Western organizations protesting; localized knowledge is essential because it is authentic (getting THEIR voices out, while protecting anonymity >> difficult balance for NGOs). In conclusion, there is more need for research in how 'localized' knowledge is Western-informed and can avoid such trappings (such as the idealized Western 'Boomerang effect').

## **2. 10.45am to 12.45pm: Equality architectures (facilitator Bosia)**

Presenters: Thiel (EU)  
Slootmaeckers (Eastern Europe)  
Lind (Latin America and Caribbean)  
McEvoy (Gender, Security & Human Rights)  
Ryan Kaminski (UN)

This panel and debate was aimed at establishing the main policy issues that come with institutional equality policies in various intergovernmental fora and regions. Thiel presented on the pitfalls of the EU's highly visible LGBTI right promotion efforts in third countries, Slootmaeckers on the EU's enlargement conditionality in the Balkans, Lind on the Latin American and Caribbean securitization of LGBTI rights and OAS attempts to counteract, while being constrained by left-right divisions, McEvoy on the role of SOGI in post-conflict settings, and Kaminski on global coalitions within the UN Human Rights Council setting.

A number of presenters highlighted the EU as conflicted normative power, in which LGBTI rights remain in tension with other (security) politics, e.g. enlargement (Serbia's geopolitical significance overrides actual lack of progress in enlargement negotiations). This allows for instrumentalizing LGBTI rights to prove 'modernity'; hence the EU's 'pinktesting' largely fails. Their recommendation was to abolish conditionality and 'pink-testing' benchmarks, and look towards processes and substance, rather than performance benchmarks! (which are in itself neo-liberal concepts)

It was further noted that Latin American politics are not right-left oriented with regards to homophobia, but constituted within the authoritarianism – liberalism spectrum. So the strength of counter-

movements emerges from the transnational right allied with churches and neoliberal companies, as well as the radical left, both of which are instrumentalizing religion and LGBTI rights for their own motives; and promote under neoliberal constraints the idea that the national collective ought to be 'purified' from unwanted elements.

Participants recognized that a different point of departure is needed that asks how people can enjoy their rights, and that goes beyond a 'human rights framework'; we need to decouple identities from ideas about colonialization, modernity, post-conflict stability etc. In particular, the UN as a forum for LGBTI rights is a contested arena, as sexual violence norms still exclude LGBTI individuals, and the UN Human Rights Council is a volatile institution reliant on rights-protective state-alliances (to counteract homophobic coalitions). Aside from these issues, there is the problem of IGO commitments versus implementation (see e.g. the number of resolutions without corresponding implementation in Universal Periodic review or SDGs), especially in regards to lack of research on HIV outcomes. Moreover, the closing of Civil Society Space was listed as problematic for IGO activism ('NGO' Committees, Procedural silencing at UN), but some positive developments were also noted (e.g. the alliance for new UN SOGI Independent Expert came from 870 NGOs based in 157 countries).

### **3. 2pm to 4pm: Policy actors and makers from IGOs and NGOs (facilitator Rahman)**

Presenters: Janoff (Global Affairs Canada and Equal Rights Coalition)

Tabengwa (ILGA PanAfrica)

Waites (Commonwealth)

Correa (Sexual Policy Watch Brazil)

Edenborg (Swedish Institute of International Affairs)

This panel in particular examined the role of NGOs and other civil society and policy actors in relations to states and IGOs, in agenda-setting, policy-promotion and implementation. Janoff presented Canadian attempts to work in IGOs such as the UN or the OAS, Tabengwa highlighted ILGA Africa's NGO role in pursuing non-western localized 'low-visibility' approaches towards generalized human rights protection, Waites looked at civil society in the Commonwealth and the consequences of Brexit on those, Correa reported about the Latin American, including Brazilian SOGIE NGO promotion experiences, and Edenborg captured the complexity of LGBTI rights promotion in Russia its sphere of influence.

Many of the civil society and policy experts agreed that rather than focusing on one specific arena (such as UN) or concept (such as LGBTI rights), groups need to make use of localized strategies that are broader in scope without diluting the issue, or falling into a generalized 'democratization' trope advanced by Western organizations.

It was also noted that inevitably, with success and visibility comes pushback from a number of actors that should be expected as visibility is a double-edged sword politicizing the issue on domestic levels.

Similarly, the polarization is not only over questions of sexuality and gender, but related to seemingly disconnected issues such as authoritarianism, narco-politics, and general national insecurity that many Global South states experience and that are connected to the larger North/South rift over language, policies, resources and political power.

Moreover, tensions among LGBTI activists, feminists, abortion activists etc. exist, and it should be recognized that each conflict is country-specific and no homogeneity of issues really exist. In policy practice, however, broader coalitions are more successful yet hard to achieve, and the framing to decouple LGBTI promotion from discourse of national and Western exceptionalism and modernization rhetoric is similarly difficult.

**Plenary: 4. 15pm to 6pm: Plenary session structuring contributions to the Handbook (facilitators Bosia and McEvoy) and the policy brief (facilitators Thiel and Rahman)**

In an attempt to draw together the main thoughts from the preceding panels, the recognition of a deeper recognition of the theoretical/conceptual issues (relating to the Human Rights frame, see panel 1), and of more practical policy-related IGO/CSO issues (relating to Western support, securitization and conditionality, see panel 2 & 3) was noted. In particular, the fact that human rights approaches are indispensable but insufficient, and how to deal with this tension, especially the dilemma between the increased academic scrutiny against 'human rights' and the increased use by activists, and the fact that the rights frame is open to mis-appropriation by both pro/contra LGBT actors. In order to drive the debate on both levels forward, the plenary debated the next steps forward for research advancement and dissemination, in particularly aiming to:

- i. Edit Section IV of the forthcoming Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT Politics (edited by participants Bosia, McEvoy, Rahman). Co-editors Bosia and McEvoy leads this attempt in 2018/19.
- ii. Draft 'current controversies' section pieces, published in *Human Rights Review* (with short pieces by individual participants). Conveners Thiel and Rahman lead throughout 2018/19.
- iii. Prepare 1-2 panels for ISA 2019. Led by interested participants from 2018 workshop, these will be co-ordinated by workshop conveners Thiel and Rahman.