

# Gender, sexuality and disadvantage: Intimately entwined, but perpetually divorced within international development?

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## Introduction

Gender and sexuality are widely recognised as being intimately related to social injustice and inequality, and intimately related to each other. We use the word ‘intimately’ deliberately, given the worldwide fixation with types of bodies and what they do, where, who with, how, and how often.

In terms of the relationship to injustice and inequality, both gender and sexuality function as ‘parallel and interlocking’ social hierarchies that shape basic relationships and access to resources and power (Collins 1993:37). Race or ethnicity and class, caste, and socio-economic status also function in this way (and in some cultures, other hierarchies form; for example religion, or age) (Acker 2006; Collins 1993; Connell 2002, 2005 [1995]; Kimmel 2014; Ore 2009; Rahman and Jackson 2010; Schmitt 1988).

Ilkkaracan and Jolly (2007:3) note that the hierarchies and norms related to gender and sexuality can have ‘repercussions related to poverty, marginalisation and death’. Gender and sexuality are not ‘add-on’ issues; they should be central to the development endeavour.<sup>1</sup> As the lead author has argued elsewhere:

Work that seeks to address inequalities must affect change in the social, historically shifting and political hierarchies and norms that create and sustain such inequalities. These hierarchies and norms include those related to gender and sexuality, as well as class or caste, race or ethnicity and, in some countries, age and religion (Fletcher 2015:1).

In relation to the entwinement of gender and sexuality, Rahman and Jackson (2010:5) state: ‘The social construction and significance of one can rarely be understood without considering the other’. It is often impossible to say whether something is an effect of gender, or of sexuality. For example, we observe this entwinement when men and boys who display a non-dominant form of masculinity are subject to violence and abuse, or when male, female and trans\* sex workers experience stigma and discrimination that is related not to the physiological sex of their body, but to the way in which those bodies engage in sex that lies outside of the normative bounds of non-transactional, preferably monogamous sex, that occurs within certain types of relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, within the field of international development there is a tendency for gender and sexuality to be treated as independent silos, addressed separately from one another (DFID 2014; AusAID 2012). One of these silos is considerably larger than the other: a quick search of the

DFAT website in April 2016 produced 13,639 documents containing the word ‘gender’, and 67 documents containing the word ‘sexuality’.

This paper begins with a brief overview of research undertaken by the authors and sexual health and rights practitioners in a Southeast Asian country examining the intersections of gender, sexuality, disadvantage, and how that plays out in reality for practitioners. It will then describe and discuss the outputs of a workshop run by these collaborators as part of the ACFID University Network conference in 2015. The workshop, which attracted participants from both academia and the world of development practice, provided an opportunity for people to discuss the complexities and realities of working within gender and sexuality silos while seeking to generate wide-ranging social change. This paper will conclude with a discussion of implications for donors, and International Non Government Organisations, of recognising the intersections between gender, sexuality, and disadvantage.

## Background

In 2014, the authors received a grant from the La Trobe University Transforming Human Society Research Focus Area to explore the following questions:

- How are gender and sexuality understood within two case study organisations that seek to improve the lives and rights of marginalised and disadvantaged people in a South East Asian developing country?
- How do these organisations incorporate understandings of gender and sexuality into their work?

Our rationale was: gender and sexuality are intimately entwined; both are connected to injustice and inequality; and international development work tends to address gender and sexuality as independent from each other. Further, we argued that within international development there is a tendency for gender and sexuality to be described and engaged with through ‘categorical thinking’ (Connell 2012:1628). Gender is frequently conceptualised and addressed through recourse to binary categories of sex (man/woman) that are assigned to most people at birth. For example, the aspect of gender-based violence (GBV) that is most commonly addressed is that of violence against women. This focus can, unintentionally, hide or marginalise other forms of GBV, such as rape of men in war. Gender inequality is another area of work where the focus on the sexed categories of men and women effectively erases a broader understanding of gender. Sexuality is frequently understood within

international development through recourse to binary categories of sexual identity/orientation: heterosexual or non-heterosexual without paying attention to the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect, for instance, the association of particular forms of masculinity (and femininity) with heterosexuality.

Systemic inequalities do exist across the world between both women and men, and heterosexual and non-heterosexual people. The following paragraph from Connell (2012: 1681) focused on gender, but we argue that it can be extrapolated to refer to both gender and sexuality:

Categorical thinking does not have a way of conceptualizing the dynamics of gender [and sexuality]: that is, the historical processes in gender [and sexuality] itself, the way gender [and sexuality] orders are created and gender [and sexuality] inequalities are created and challenged.

The aim of working with partner organisations from Southeast Asia was to explore people's understandings of gender, sexuality, and the connections between the two, as well as to understand the effects that these understandings had on the day-to-day practice of these organisations.

Given this was a pilot study, we began by reviewing the organisations we knew and considered whether it would be worth approaching them to become our case study partners. The first organisation we approached agreed to participate in the project, so we then began searching for a second organisation in the same country. The second organisation we approached also agreed to participate. Both organisations expressed the desire to have space in which to do more thinking and reflection on issues of gender and sexuality, so our research request was timely. Our community partners were:

1. A national organisation with a focus on sexual health promotion, treatment and advocacy, which worked with communities including young men and women, men who have sex with men (MSM), sex workers, and trans\* women; and
2. An urban organisation working on community mobilisation to address issues of sexuality and poverty for lesbians, bisexual women and trans\* men.<sup>3</sup>

## The research

Data for a qualitative study were collected from three sources: interviews with organisation staff members and managers, participatory research workshops, and key documents. The informant interviews and the workshops were designed to explore participants' conceptual understandings of gender and sexuality and the influence that such understandings have on the day-to-day practice of their organisations. The document analysis, which focused on materials identified by participants as having contributed to their and their organisation's conceptualisation of gender and sexuality, provided another viewpoint. Research ethics approval was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee, and fieldwork was undertaken in October 2014.

Briefly, a total of four semi-structured informant interviews were conducted (two per partner organisation) and participatory workshops held with staff from Organisation A and Organisation B. A total of nine participants took part in the workshops, including five participants in Workshop A and four participants in Workshop B. The workshop for Organisation A ran for two days, while the Organisation B workshop was 1.5 days.

The workshop facilitators used Participatory Learning in Action tools, including mapping and Venn diagrams, to encourage participants to describe and explore their own knowledge of the communities in which they work in relation to spheres of disadvantage (including, but not limited to, gender and sexuality). Participants were also asked to reflect on what influenced their understandings of gender and sexuality, and to talk about their own work and the challenges faced. At the end of the workshops, facilitators asked participants to reflect on how improvements could be made in future work. The two workshop facilitators took notes of the workshop discussion and destroyed any original workshop materials as required by the ethics approval.

Details of documents that had contributed to participant and organisational conceptualisation of gender and sexuality were sought in both interviews and workshops, and then either sourced by the researchers themselves or provided by the organisations. A total of 20 internal and external key documents were identified, including those produced by organisations such as the World Health Organization, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and the UK Institute of Development Studies.

Prior to the ACFID University Network conference in 2015, representatives of both organisations and the research team met together to brainstorm the themes emerging from an initial analysis of the data. These themes were then presented in our joint ACFID University Network conference workshop session, where representatives from our partner organisations had the chance to speak directly about their work.

## The conference workshop session

A total of 35 conferees attended the workshop session. They were first presented with the themes emerging from the research. These are being reported in full elsewhere, but can be summarised as:

1. Participants from the two Southeast Asian organisations saw gender, sexuality and disadvantage as interlinked, for example:
  - Inequality of access to power and resources for people who do not 'fit' certain norms.
  - Limited employment opportunities.
  - Limited access to services (e.g. sexual health; restriction on access to formal education for some young mothers).
  - Limited 'voice'.
  - Inequality of rights before the law (especially in relation to sexuality).

2. Work on gender and sexuality faces strong opposition in the research site:
  - ‘Tradition’ and ‘culture’ were identified by all participants as contributing to disadvantage related to gender and sexuality.
3. Gender and sexuality are difficult to define, and often very difficult to ‘take apart’:
  - There is ongoing international academic debate.
  - Confusing definitions are provided in many key documents (particularly when it comes to talking about ‘gender roles’ and ‘gender identity’ without reverting to talking about physiological sex).
  - Understandings of gender and of sexuality focused on issues of known or assumed identity, rather than on social/political/historical power analyses; further, these understandings were deeply grounded in a physiological sex binary.
4. Participants wanted to further develop their understandings of gender, sexuality and inequality, in order to improve the effectiveness of their work.

In the light of these themes, and of presentations from organisational partners on the day-to-day realities of their work, workshop participants broke into groups to consider the following questions:

1. Do you think using a more intersectional understanding of gender, sexuality and inequality might help us to help us tackle disadvantage more effectively? Why, or why not?
2. What might a more intersectional approach look like? What could we change?
3. What are the challenges in taking a more intersectional approach? Would anything be lost by doing so?

‘Intersectional’ was used to refer to work that understands and responds to social hierarchies (including, but not limited to, gender and sexuality) in relation to each other, and to their social, economic and historical dimensions (Connell 2005 [1995]).

Answers to question one fell into three groups: ‘yes’, ‘no’, and ‘maybe’. Participants immediately raised the issue of power—and the need to be able to recognise and respond to the power relationships and constraints on access to power and resources that link gender and sexuality with inequality. Many participants argued that a more intersectional understanding of gender and sexuality *could* help to tackle disadvantage, *if* this work on power was undertaken. The importance of understanding and working with culture in order to undertake effective intersectional work on gender and sexuality was also raised—the balancing act between challenging unjust and inequitable norms related to gender and sexuality without being accused of being ‘culturally inappropriate’ or threatening ‘tradition’ has been well noted in development (Jolly 2000; Maticka-Tyndale and Smylie 2008; Pigg 2002). Civil society strengthening and paying particular attention to ‘unintended consequences’ of intersectional work were also proposed for such an approach to be effective.

Those participants in the ‘maybe’ camp were concerned about the potential for loss of specificity within a move to an intersectional approach. Comments included: ‘We need to identify what the connections/intersections are, and still recognise differences and different needs’.

The ‘no’ camp argued that the development sector functions in a way that requires ‘clear’ strategies and responses, defined on a sector-by-sector basis. An intersectional approach, some people thought, could not be effectively implemented within such a structure. Others in this camp also argued that development ‘may be ready to explore gender, but not sexuality’.

In relation to question two: ‘What might a more intersectional approach look like? What could we change?’ participants commented that a rights-based approach, in which states are reminded of their role as duty bearers of human rights for all, would be essential. This, of course, is nothing new (Gready and Ensor 2005; Langford 2010). The rhetoric of rights-based approaches has long been part of the development canon; yet sexual rights remain contested (Correa and Petchesky 2007 [1994]; International Planned Parenthood Federation 2016; Maticka-Tyndale and Smylie 2008).

Participants also agreed that effective implementation of intersectional work on gender and sexuality that is rights-based was dependent on ‘holistic responses’ that brought together individual champions, institutional-level policy and legislation, and structural change. One participant summed up the group discussion as follows: ‘The common ground needs to be that freedom from discrimination and recognition of differences are fundamental rights’. Another added: ‘It’s a web. We need policy change. We need local champions. We need appropriate strategies for all levels of intervention’. The importance of context was stressed and being aware of when to push for change, where, and how.

In relation to the question ‘What are the challenges in taking a more intersectional approach? Would anything be lost by doing so?’ a number of participant-posed questions arose including: What are the challenges of ‘dealing with multi-dimensional issues and complexity’ within current development frameworks? ‘How would we market an organisation that works in this way?’ And ‘How can we document evidence for funders?’ Such comments clearly relate to ongoing development debates on the politics of evidence in a sector characterised by complexity (Eyben, Guijt, Roche and Shutt 2015; Ramalingam, Laric and Primrose 2014). The challenge of skills development was also mentioned, as well as the reality of conflicting agendas and conflicting organisational priorities. Finally, one participant asked: ‘Will anyone know what intersectional means?’

## Implications for donors and other agencies

From the quality and content of workshop discussions, we think it is fair to say that the majority of workshop participants were interested in, and saw the value of, taking a more intersectional approach to challenging inequality, while raising important caveats, including terminology use and the desire not to introduce yet another technical English-language term to an already overcrowded lexicon.

The majority of caveats raised related to the existing form and functioning of international development super-structures, and whether or not these were capable of supporting an intersectional approach or, rather, would actively hinder it. As noted, much has already been written about the politics of evidence and the need to address complexity in international development. Yet, participants remained unconvinced that systems of program design, monitoring and evaluation, marketing, and funding could ‘cope’ with work that does not fit within current development systems.

Taking a more intersectional approach would, however, require a reframing of these systems in ways that acknowledge and engage with the emergence and uncertainty of shifting and intersecting systems of power and inequality. Gender work would have to set aside the ‘add women and stir’ approach for one that recognises gender as a process, grounded not in the sexed body but in norms and judgements of masculinity and femininity. As Cornwall (2000: 1) has written, one of the biggest challenges for international development in effectively promoting change regarding gender relates to the ‘pervasive slippage between “involving women” and “addressing gender”’. This, in turn, would require monitoring and evaluation systems that are designed to deal with emergence and non-linear pathways of change. Marketing could no longer proffer easy fixes (e.g. ‘give us money and we will save this child’) and funding would need to be less siloed and more intersectional itself.

Perhaps the greatest challenges for donors and other agencies, however, exist in the realm of values. The comment offered during workshop discussion sessions as to development being ‘ready’ to tackle gender but not sexuality was a telling one, particularly when considered in light of further comments regarding promotion of universal rights. If one accepts that gender and sexuality are intimately entwined, then it is not possible to engage with gender issues without also engaging in issues of sexuality, albeit unintentionally. For example, women’s access to contraception is a sexual right. Not advocating for access to contraception for all, regardless of marital status, has the effect of undermining this right, and reinforcing norms and stereotypes that apply a double standard to men and women when it comes to pre-marital sex. Similarly, running ‘women’s’ programs that do not engage with trans\* women can unintentionally reinforce the view that one’s (born) sex organs determine who you are, and how you should act in the world. Gender-based violence programs that do not recognise the violence committed against those of non-normative gender and sexual minorities do the same thing, reinforcing being born with female genitalia as a precursor of victimhood, while being born with male genitalia is a precursor of the perpetrator role. This unintentionally serves to mask the historical, social and power-based processes of gender inequality, and ignores the reality that the issue is with a particular form of dominant masculinity in which physical violence is a first recourse.

Even if one does not accept that gender and sexuality are entwined, then taking a rights-based approach surely

requires that sexuality-related inequality is taken as seriously as gender-related inequality?

## Conclusion

This project reminds us, once again, of the messiness of international development and the complexity and intersection of the issues many of us seek to address. There are no simple boundaries between work that is gender related, and work that is sexuality related. Yet as the conference workshop reminded us, we function within systems that do not cope well with such complexity and intersection.

Nevertheless, there is a readiness and an interest among academics/practitioners to delve into the mess, and to continue to ask questions. This was demonstrated during the workshop, which proved a highly valuable addition to our research process. It is also demonstrated by recent levels of engagement by many within Australia’s international development sector in an ACFID Community of Practice on Sexual Rights in Development which is co-convened by the lead author. The work continues.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> We note that the words ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’—and the frameworks in which they are used and understood within the development industry—are English-language constructs that can serve to over-write pre-existing concepts (and identities). This paper is, in part, a response to this hegemony, but further discussion of this issue is outside of the scope of this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> We use the word trans\* as an umbrella term for people who present and/or identify as neither man nor woman, or whose presentation/identity differs from the societal expectations of the body with which they were born.
- <sup>3</sup> The organisations, and the country they are from, are not named for ethical reasons.

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