

Struggle For Autonomy And Relevance

Landscape Analysis of Trans*-led and Lesbian-led Organising in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Executive Summary

Context

Feminist, lesbian, and trans* activists have played a major role in creating an enabling environment and shaping agendas for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and intersex (LGBTI) movement in Sub-Saharan Africa. It was African feminists who first introduced the approach around sexual rights and bodily autonomy into their work and began to mobilise same-sex loving people, thus helping create some of the first spaces for LGBTI-led organising in and outside Southern Africa. The formation of the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) in 2003 by feminists, lesbians, and gender non-conforming activists from across Sub-Saharan Africa is a prime example. The multiple identities of lesbian activists informed early activism, which focused on challenging patriarchy, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression based on gender or sexuality.

Over the next decade, lesbian-led organisations across Sub-Saharan Africa worked with gay-led ones to develop strategies and create spaces for LGBTI organising. Because of the urgency of the HIV epidemic and its epidemiological profile in the LGBTI community, HIV risk management among men who have sex with men (MSM) became the main focus of the emerging movement. Since then, African LGBTI activism has been struggling with two main implications. First, the agenda has been driven by the politics of HIV/AIDS funding, not the realities, needs, and politics of gender and sexuality. Second, the preoccupation with epidemiology and infection risks has associated the entire LGBTI experience with disease and danger. Together, these two factors marginalised the concerns of lesbian and trans* communities who were organising around sexual rights and bodily autonomy. Most lesbian-led organisations from the early 2000s are now struggling to survive or inactive due to funding cuts or burnout.

Beginning in 2005, a cisgender woman and her then partner, a trans man, were instrumental in initiating trans*-led organising in South Africa and facilitating the emergence of trans*-led organising in other countries, especially in Southern and Eastern Africa. Challenging the tyranny of gender and sexuality norms, trans*-led groups and organisations focused on creating safe spaces for community-building and advocating for access to health care and legal rights. Many of the first trans*-led initiatives outside South Africa were founded by trans men involved in feminist and lesbian organising. Since then, trans*-led groups and organisations have been trying to define their identities and build an autonomous movement.

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In late 2015, the Baring Foundation commissioned an exploratory qualitative research to better understand the distribution of trans*-led and lesbian-led organising in East, Southern, and Western Africa. The report summarised here was one result of this research. Most of the data came from activists in Southern Africa and East Africa, where trans*-led and lesbian-led organising has been taking place longer than in West Africa. A total of 67 groups and organisations including 20 trans*-led and 47 lesbian-led were identified. Forty respondents from 31 groups and organisations directly contributed data to the study – this includes 24 LGBTI groups and organisations, 6 funding organisations and 1 international NGO. Twelve of the 24 groups and organisations surveyed were based in East Africa, 10 in Southern Africa, and two in West Africa. There were an equal number of lesbian and trans* organisations, all but two of which were trans*-led or lesbian-led. Twenty-two of the 24 groups and organisations were self-led, and 15 of these were formed within the past five years, including 73 percent of the trans*-led ones and 55 percent of the lesbian-led ones.

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Summary of Key Findings

Surge in trans* issues and activism

In line with global trends, there has been a surge in trans* organising in Sub-Saharan Africa driven by trans* activists who urgently want to build an autonomous, visible, trans*-led movement.

Struggle for relevance and visibility

The increased interest in trans* issues has not been matched by increased interest in lesbian ones. Lesbian organising is impeded by patriarchal “gate-keeping” in the LGBTI movement and a persistent tendency to overlook specific lesbian issues and subsume lesbian activism into general LGBTI activism.

Propensity to form an organisation

Forming an organisation is seen as activism’s default starting point, and new organisations have proliferated in an environment of competition and little to no collaboration, with few links between emerging and established organisations. Emerging lesbian-led groups, in particular, get little support from LGBTI organisations and coalitions. Some respondents questioned whether an LGBTI movement even exists when so many organisations are competing for funding from the same shrinking pool of donors.

Few models of organising. Practically all the groups and organisations interviewed have adopted the dominant form of social-change organising through NGO models. Achieving legal registration then becomes a major priority, while a corporate structure of governance and leadership militates against genuine grassroots engagement. These models are cumbersome to administer, involve a steep learning curve for most activists and community members, disconnect activists from the grassroots, favor privileged members of the community, and encourage elitism, top-down management, and donor-driven agendas. All the groups and organisations surveyed are plagued by lack of capacity and problems recruiting qualified staff, yet there is no analysis of how NGO models contribute to these challenges and disconnect formally educated staff from the grassroots. Trans* activism is particularly disadvantaged. Due to discrimination, most trans* individuals have had limited educational or employment opportunities. Those who want to get involved in activism face huge challenges meeting the demands of NGO-style organisations.

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Caught between community needs and donor agendas. There is little space or opportunity for activists to discuss and reflect around how to build a politically cohesive movement. Activists are too busy with administrative work, too fearful of offending donors, or too dependent on activism for their economic survival to be

open and critical about what they really want to do and how to organise around that. They organise and position themselves based on perceived funding trends and, when they receive funding, get caught up in the work of showing “results.” This makes it difficult for them to critique their activism in relation to the actual concerns of their communities or to program their work to address these concerns even when they are able to analyse and articulate them. As an example, much of the new organising around the issues of trans women focuses increasingly on HIV/AIDS programming, which limits what can be envisioned for trans women-led organising.

Typology of Trans*-led and Lesbian-led Groups and Organisations

Map

Southern Africa pioneered Sub-Saharan African LGBTI organising in the 1990s and has been its hub since then. However, in the past few years, major donors have withdrawn from Southern Africa, and although trans* activists are very active in the region, longtime lesbian-led groups and organisations have closed, become dormant, or are struggling to survive. Meanwhile East Africa has emerged as a new hub. In both regions, trans* activists and a new generation of lesbian activists are leveraging social media to build communities free of geographic limitations. Central Africa tends to be lumped together with other regions by both donors and activists, rather than seen as a separate region with its own political and cultural experience. LGBTI activism there gets little interest, except in Cameroon, where it has been highly visible for over a decade. In West Africa, activists have not been able to build movements across colonial language barriers, and HIV prevention dominates activism so narrowly that lesbian and trans women’s issues are largely erased.

The first concerted effort to build an African trans* movement took place in Kenya in June 2015 at a preconference for trans* activists before the Changing Spaces, Changing Faces (CFCS) event.

Political Agendas of Trans*-led Groups and Organisations

Most trans*-led organising in both regions is driven by the personal agendas of leaders to the detriment of continuity and sustainability. The first concerted effort to build an African trans* movement took place in Kenya in June 2015 at a preconference for trans* activists before the Changing Spaces, Changing Faces (CFCS) event. Gender recognition was identified as the movement’s main priority, with the following focus points: social and cultural rights, violence (personal and structural), economic justice, access to health, access to justice, and legal and social gender recognition.

In practice, most trans women’s groups and organisations in East Africa are mobilising around sex work and HIV/AIDS, with legal reform a priority for only one organisation in Kenya. In Southern Africa, the focus is increasingly on legal reforms, access to health, and the issues of black trans* individuals and communities. Only one organisation is concerned with trans* feminism. HIV/AIDS programming and policy and legal reforms driven by donor interests around gender markers, provision of direct services, and reform of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) codes are obscuring the larger goal of radical social change.

Political Agendas of Lesbian-led Groups and Organisations

Despite having been active for a decade or more, lesbian-led groups and organisations still get little support to articulate their issues on their own terms. However, some newer ones are experimenting with models of organising that reflect a specifically queer feminism. Three broad agendas inform the new lesbian-led organising: sexual rights and reproductive health, violence against LB women, and increasing the visibility of LB issues in other LGBTI communities and society as a whole.

Organisational Structure and Capacity

Most groups and organisations rely too much on volunteers, their “paid” staff are usually underqualified and poorly paid, and boards or steering committees are often weak or inactive. The resulting lack of capacity was a universal complaint, yet most funders will not pay for overheads or support long-term organisational development.

There is a “class” divide between organisations led by activists with privileged backgrounds and formal educations, which are able to access space and build connections with funders, and those led by activists with little formal education, which struggle to get past the nascent stage. A handful of LGBTI organisations have fairly large budgets, but most trans*-led and lesbian-led groups and organisations operate with very limited resources. The difficulty of raising core support funding was a major concern. Most funders allow only 10-20 percent of project funding (around 80 percent of grants in 2015) to be used for core support, whereas activists say they need 30-40 percent. Grants tend to be overregulated, with strict, complex protocols that devour time and energy. Leaders of organisations spend 90 percent of their time researching and writing grant proposals and reports yet still have to run their organisations and implement projects.

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Burnout and leadership transition

Leader burnout is a serious problem, but leadership transition is a challenge. Due to the chronic financial insecurity produced by short-term funding, it is hard to develop staff or retain the best, so when a leader is burned out, there is usually no one qualified to take over. Leaders are overburdened, overstressed, and underpaid, yet they usually depend on the group or organisation for their livelihood and are reluctant to leave something they may have dedicated years to build. There are few professional development opportunities for staff, and the dominant leadership style is individualised and elitist, which discourages the grooming of replacement leaders. In any case, when a leader leaves, it is difficult to find anyone else willing to do such demanding, stressful work for inadequate compensation.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified by the study, the report recommended that funders should:

- Consider supporting initiatives with alternative organisational structures that reflect the group’s or organisation’s actual capacities and specific contexts
- Accommodate groups’ and organisations’ actual stage of development rather than demanding standards expected of a more mature stage
- Be more aware and accepting of the diversity and fluidity of gender expression and identities and of local definitions that fit local contexts when evaluating groups for potential funding
- Invest in people by facilitating the development of peer learning and peer support mechanisms rather than overvaluing rapid results at the expense of the human needs of those who do the work
- Stay engaged with groups and organisations by maintaining ongoing communication through regular check-ins and honest conversations to share progress and challenges and identify opportunities for improvement
- Support leadership development and sustainable leadership change by fostering a culture of solidarity and shared ownership, engaging proactively on leadership continuity, and supporting groups and organisations to develop short-term and long-term leadership transition plans
- When providing core support, help groups strategically allocate unrestricted funds by working with grantees to identify capacity-building needs, so that, when grantees receive unrestricted core support, they will appreciate the value of investing a portion of it in organisational development
- Commission further research to understand the diversity of issues and actors driving the nascent trans* movement and to understand the particular issues and practices of lesbian-led organising at a more granular level that does not subsume lesbian activism into general LGBTI activism.