Intervention – "Gay-Friendly or Homophobic? The Absence and Problems of Global Standards"

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Introduction

The place of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (and, although often not addressed) Trans, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ)[1] rights in a nation's agenda and its link to economic growth is being used as a development indicator for nations across the globe. Whilst some view this as a progressive indicator of change that addresses global homophobia, others have noted how the superiority of the Global North in relation to sexual rights can be invoked as a rationale for moral superiority and at times military intervention (see, for example, Currah 2013; Hubbard and Wilkinson 2015; Morgensen 2010; Oswin 2007; Puar 2007, 2013). Coupled with this, allocation of monetary funding has begun to be linked (uneasily) to LGBTIQ rights. For example, when Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill was signed by the President Yoweri Museveni, Norway and Denmark cut their aid support (Plaut 2014). The US put their position under review, and the decision reiterated the UK's position of channeling support away from the government through alternative routes for the Ugandan people. The World Bank is debating how to mainstream LGBT rights in its development agendas (Tyson 2014) and to this end it has recently drafted an economic assessment report for homophobia in India (Badgett 2014). In a similar vein, the European Parliament has recently voted to include LGBTI rights in its development policies (European Parliament Intergroup on LGBT Rights 2014).

Given these recent developments, we might expect to see data and research on measures appraising LGBTIQ friendliness/inclusion nationally and internationally. As part of a project on 'Liveable Lives: Rethinking Social Exclusion', the research team set out to use the internet to identify the measures currently used to evaluate countries as LGBTIQ-/gay-friendly or homophobic.[2] In this short commentary we will first outline the available measures to highlight that there is no systematic evaluation or standardized approach used globally; instead there are measures independently created and used by LGBTIQ organizations, corporate entities, and academic sources. We will then argue that this absence could offer a welcome opportunity to work with LGBTIQ people across different contexts and cultures to create our own measures and

analyses, and thereby disrupt attempts by commentators, nation states or international organizations to standardize data and measures in ways that reiterate geopolitical power relations. [3] This might include, but cannot be limited to, legislative change within the context of a Global North understanding of equality and human rights.

Measures of LGBT-Friendliness

In total we found 45 entries from LGBTIQ organizations and corporate entities. These were split between specific measures (n. 32; five of these are the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's yearly measures that were classified as one in the analysis – see Table 1) and opinion-based pieces (n. 13 – see Table 2). The latter were populist opinion-based literature that 'ranked' countries according to LGBTIQ-friendliness. The populist pieces were not linked to other indices and did not report other people's measures; rather, these rankings were created by the authors. It is likely that there are other measures and opinion pieces located in magazines and other places. The most frequent criteria used to create the measures were the introduction of same-sex marriage or civil partnerships, the decriminalisation of same-sex sexual activity, and employment-related support or protection.

First, at the outset we anticipated that globally standardized measures might exist, given the way in which nation states are linking LGBT rights with development agendas. Second, in addition to measures broadly based on rights, equality, and friendliness, we expected to find more measures/indices. Third, we expected more geographically-based measures. These paucities might be related to the recent introduction of legislation, a formalized understanding of human rights issues, and the recent interest in measurements in this area where some cities/countries are seen to be progressive and thus can be ranked against other countries. The non-academic groups and organisations producing these measures are LGBT rights organisations (including national and international organisations such as HRA and ILGA), some of whom are paid by companies to rank their LGBT-friendliness (such as Stonewall in the UK). It can be concluded then that there is a lack of systematic agreement or indeed publicly accessible measures from major supra-national organisations.

This has implications for understanding and engaging in discussions about pro-/anti-LGBT countries. These measures are not standardized and those who claim to rate countries are in the main selective about which countries are included; but, nevertheless, they could be used to inform more generally development agendas, aid decisions, and corporate action globally. Thus, decisions about countries and how, for example, foreign aid might be allocated are based on non-standardized and limited data that is often related to sensationalist and specific events – such as legislation that addresses homosexualities. This lack of collated evidence and systematic comparison may see some countries highlighted, whilst others pass under the radar. It also may fail to grasp the complexities of LGBT equalities and friendliness.

Beyond Measures: What Makes Lives Liveable

Given the absence of standardized and systematic measures, one might argue for the development of universal ranking measures. These measures, it could be contended, should be systematically established, supra-nationally agreed, and used to make more robust decisions regarding monetary allocations that are based on specific evaluations of homophobia[5] (whether this would apply to trade decisions and agreements might well be a fraught question). However, such a position makes a number of assumptions, including: [i] that sexual and gender identities and related discriminations can be captured in the term 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans' and that these are

useful and universal categories that are globally applicable; [ii] that all sexual and gender dissidents and relatedly sexual and gender freedoms are related to these categories; [iii] that measures of equality/human rights are rightly defined and aid decisions implemented by supranational organisations such as the World Bank; and [iv] that these assumptions rely on a conceptualization of LGBTQI people as recipients, and a uniform mass, who share common agendas. All of these assumptions are inherently flawed and have been robustly critiqued in scholarly and popular circles (see Barker et al. 2012; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Epprecht 2012; Epstein 2002; Manalansan 1993; Monro 2005; Muñoz 1999; Petchesky 2009; Puar 2007; Puar 2013; Rahman and Jackson 1997; Seidman 1993; Stone 2009; Stychin 2003; Warner 1993; Weeks 2002).

Even the measures we found, such as cartographic representations and reports by organizations such the ILGA[6] and Pew Research Center on 'homophobia' and 'the global divide on homosexuality'[7] construct place-based imaginaries about freedom and rights for LGBTIQI people. These implicitly order nations as 'backward' and 'forward'. The maps and reports may not explicitly espouse hierarchizing places on the basis of the presence or absence of legal provisions and social attitudes. Nonetheless, as Rao argues, they seek to mobilize shame to "motivate states to improve their laws…by applauding those who move in the direction of progress and shaming those who do not" (2014: 170). Reminiscent of colonial tropes between the civilized and the savage, these artifacts are thus neo-Orientalist in nature (ibid.). These very geographical considerations draw into question the desirability of a universal 'LGBTQI-friendly/homophobia index'. We are therefore not arguing for such a universal or globalized measure. More than not arguing for, we question the usefulness and validity of universal or globalised measures defined elsewhere and applied globally through audit rather than dialogue with people living their lives in the areas being judged.

Such a measure is likely to erase contextual understandings of how LGBTIQ and other sexual and gender non-normative people, groups and communities create 'friendly spaces' in nations without affirmative legislation and how discrimination, marginalisations and prejudices may continue to exist in nations and cities where legal protections are in place and the cities exalted for their inclusion of 'gay' people (see Browne and Bakshi 2013) or indeed be perpetuated in new guises through what has been termed 'homonormativity' (see, for example, Bryant 2008; Duggan 2002; Richardson 2004, 2005).

Even if we were to accept LGBTIQ as a useful identity in some spatio-temporal contexts (see, for example, Browne and Bakshi 2013), diverse freedoms for LGBTIQ people should centre on, and be designed by and for, LGBTIQ people. An approach that centres these systematic analyses may foreground the 'findings' of 'experts' above lived experience, and put the focus entirely on the organisations being examined, be they supranational, national, or employer, without any involvement of LGBTIQ people or those that they are supposed to 'protect'. Indeed, nation states and professional organizations are too often accorded primacy in juridico-political understandings of freedom and human rights. This is repeatedly at the expense of multifarious lived experiences around the everyday politics and practices of living and is often used to frame issues around sexuality politics. In contrast, lived experiences may reveal the presence of resources other than juridico-political ones, that will enable a more constructive navigation of everyday places in both state-sponsored 'homophobic' and 'non-homophobic' contexts.

Conclusion

This commentary has sought to highlight both the paucity of universal rankings of homophobia/LGBTIQ-friendliness and the problems with deploying these rankings. There was no standard, or somewhat agreed and/or perceived measure of what 'gay-friendly' or 'homophobic' might mean. Governments or supra-national organisations, such as the EU or World Bank, who currently take decisions regarding the links between aid and LGBTIQ rights agendas, did not produce them. However, rather than suggesting a need for the development of universal and universalizing measures, this commentary went on to question whether standardized measurement is desirable or useful in addressing issues for LGBTIQ people. We question the power relations associated with the rank ordering of nations along the lines of standardized LGBTIQ-/gay-friendly measures, such as affirmative legislation. Such rankings erase contextual understandings of how LGBTIQ populations create positive (friendly?) spaces in nations without affirmative legislation and how homophobia, biphobia, transphobia as well as phobias against intersex and queer people, may continue to exist in nations where legal protections are in place. Any measure will fail to grasp the complexities of LGBTIQ-friendliness and equalities. However, we would argue for the inclusion of LGBTIQ people in creating analyses and rankings of the LGBTIQ friendliness that they do and do not experience.

Notes

[1] We recognize the limitations of this term, including its geographical specificity. We use it here to demarcate a category for sexual/gender identity that is commonly used by both non-profit organizations and social and political movements, and in relation to discussions of 'progress' and 'backwardness' in political discourse. We use LGBTQI to refer to communities and people as a more inclusive term. At times we use LGBT to indicate that QI were not considered and are not named.

[2] This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council ('Making Liveable Lives: Rethinking Social Exclusion' – grant number ES/M000931/1). The data for this was collected through an internet search. This was over a three-week period (22 September – 10 October 2014). Searches were for measures, indices and opinion-pieces on LGBTIQ equalities and friendliness. These searches were performed systematically through online search tools, particularly Google. This was supplemented by specific searches in Google Scholar and Copac. The data was quantified to give an indication of trends and patterns. Further analysis of these trends and patterns gave rise to the findings and conclusions.

[3] We are aware that some might feel that queer geographies are 'beyond geographies.'

[4] Note that organizations such as Pew Research, HRC, Stonewall and ILGA collected/collated more than one measure.

[5] Often this is the sole focus, with trans/bi and other phobias related to queer and intersex people rendered secondary if they are considered at all.

[6] See http://old.ilga.org/Statehomophobia/ILGA_SSHR_2014_Eng.pdf for ILGA's report on state-sponsored homophobia.

[7] See http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality/ for The Global Divide on Homosexuality.

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