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Supporting Queer Feminist Mobilisations for Peace and Security

Introduction

Those committed to gender justice have spent decades promoting the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, most notably achieving recognition by the Security Council in its Resolution 1325 and subsequent WPS Resolutions. Yet, conversations, analysis, and decision making continue to not fully address the gendered dimensions of violence and operate within heteronormative (the assumption that everyone is heterosexual) and cisnormative (that assumption that everyone identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth) views.

As conflict places those socially excluded – including people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, sex characteristics, and gender expressions (SOGIESC) – most at risk and is driven by hetero- and cisnormativity as well as gender inequality, development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors need to ensure a more equitable peace for all. Beyond inclusive provision of humanitarian aid and recognising the shared root causes of violence, a queering of this agenda invites broader understanding of both peace and security. It recognises that LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual) people experience harm during peacetime and may be targeted to a greater degree following political wins such as the securing of gender rights within a peace deal.

In this policy brief, we centre the experiences of activists working at the intersection of WPS and LGBTQIA human rights and highlight the importance of listening to and reflecting their views, experiences, and needs. We present the work already being done and the challenges activists face before outlining entry points that exist to better support them.

The Centre for Gender in Politics serves the growing community of feminist scholars and activists in international studies who apply a gendered lens to understand challenges in global politics. Research conducted at the Centre investigates the centrality of gender, in intersection with other categories such as race, class, sexuality and ability, in shaping local, national and global dynamics.

What work is already being done?¹

The work done focuses on the following six areas:

1. **Rights awareness and direct service provision.**² Activists and their organisations focused rights awareness work on government actors and/ or LGBTQIA people. For example, some queer activists in Afghanistan who organised using social media had been working on gender equality as well as LGBTQIA rights since 2016, with focus on community engagement. Activists also engaged in service provision, for example around gender-based violence and, while in some contexts women's rights organisations could be hesitant to work on LGBTQIA issues, others found that (cis) women in conflict-affected areas felt comfortable working with and seeking support from queer people, including gay men and trans women.
2. **Documentation, investigation, and reporting.** Activists described keeping records of violations against LGBTQIA people, including those which occur in conflict affected areas. They documented arrests and violations in state detention such as the use of anal examinations as evidence in court, kept a database of violent killings, and created research toolkits to support others to gather data, interpret and report research, and write reports for their country's Universal Periodic Review (UPR).
3. **Legal aid and strategic litigation.** The ability to focus on legal aid and litigation generally came in conjunction with or after work in other areas of direct service support. While organisations educated others on what providing legal aid to LGBTQIA people looks like, areas of focus for strategic litigation included changing gender on

birth certificates or addressing domestic violence within the family

4. **Advocacy through media, online campaigns and cultural activism.** There is a lack of awareness about LGBTQIA experience and activists were navigating which stories were told and how, especially given that an absence of news and media was linked to impunity for harms. Organisations used social media, websites, and online radio stations and participated in campaigns such as the 16 Days to End Violence Against Women to raise awareness about lesbian, bisexual and trans women, or to offer interviews to radio and television.³
5. **Movement building, networking and collaboration** Feminists and their organisations could be natural allies, particularly given the number of queer women who worked in and led them. Gender and sexuality training was one site where women's rights organisations included discussion of SOGIESC, for example through offering participants ways to talk about intersex and trans people without using western terminology. In some instances, organisations were working regionally, for example on advocacy and online campaigns. Through this movement building, networking and collaboration, organisations had greater access to human rights mechanisms and co-authored shadow reports to UN agencies and confront binary approaches to gender in peace and security. Furthermore, this movement-building was important to confront how homophobia and transphobia continued to be barriers to SOGIESC inclusion in WPS organisations and peace and security work in general.

¹For more about queering women, peace and security please see: Hagen, Jamie (2016) Queering Women Peace and Security, *International Affairs*, 92(2) p. 313-332; Trithart, Albert (2020), 'The Women, Peace and Security Agenda is Not Just for Straight Cisgender Women', *Global Observatory* <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/10/the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-is-not-just-for-straight-cisgender-women/>

²Some humanitarian organisations have published new policy guidelines inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) people, for example, IPPF, 'LGBTIQ+ Inclusion in Humanitarian Action,' 2019, https://www.ippf.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/2019IPPFHumanitarian_LGBTICapabilityStatement.pdf.

³The 16 Days of Activism campaign began in 1991 by the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) at Rutgers University. Given the focus of several of the resolutions on addressing conflict-related sexual violence (see WPS SCRs 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, and 1960) many connect the 16 days of Activism to WPS advocacy, including CWGL. MOSAIC is one example of an organisations that has also explicitly brought attention to addressing LGBTQ gendered violence in this work to address conflict-related sexual violence within a framework of the WPS agenda.

6. **Engaging local and foreign governments.** Respondents detailed ongoing efforts to work with their own governments. They provided training so government agencies would be more inclusive in their work, addressed military abuses, and provided input into National Action Plans on WPS. Concurrently, groups and organisations engaged foreign governments to exert influence on law, policy, and practice, particularly in countries with authoritarian or military dictatorship governments. Activists could also be critical of policy and legal reforms, noting that they often remained only “words and reports” rather than leading to meaningful change.

otherwise resourcing only those with this relative power.

3. **Working outside dominant WPS frameworks** Over the past twenty years, the scope of what is considered as WPS has narrowed to Security Council definitions. Those working on a range of threats to human security⁴ fall outside networking, funding, influencing, and other opportunities and see WPS, tangled in regional and global discussions, having little relevance to their lives.
4. **Lack of capacity and resistance on SOGIESC and/or feminism in human rights movements** Most WPS actors lack understanding of SOGIESC communities and their ongoing organising. Likewise, many LGBTQIA rights organisations dominated by gay men lack an awareness of feminist approaches. Homophobia and sexism drains time and energy (spent engaging and educating other civil society and international actors) and constrains movement building.
5. **Homonationalism, racism, instrumentalisation, and tokenism** Discussions by outside actors are full of racist and Orientalist⁵ depictions while homonationalists⁶ support abusive regimes. In addition, work on SOGIESC and WPS can be deprioritised, extractive, and without accountability. Even when there is commitment, the resources, tools, and incentives needed are often missing. Moreover, international actors can compartmentalise rights. Activists see mobilisations against police brutality, military coups, and authoritarian regimes as integral to their LGBTQIA rights and WPS work but outside actors often do not understand the complex, interconnected, and political nature of struggles.
6. **Threats due to state and non-state violence** Discriminatory laws and policies constrain national and local public advocacy, often through criminalisation. They embolden violence from a range of actors. Activists are subjected to extrajudicial killings, physical and sexual violence, banning of organisations, and other targeting.

What challenges do activists face?

Activists spoke of facing the following challenges:

1. **Missing research, analysis and conceptual frameworks** Although global literature is growing, national and subnational gaps remain and there is little shared feminist understanding. In its absence, focus on more prominent people and violations (often against gay men) reinforces existing discriminatory gender, class and other dynamics and binary approaches. Emphasis is on queer victimhood not more holistic understandings, including how heteronormative patriarchies drive conflict, queer people’s perpetration of violence, and queer feminist mobilisations against militarism and police brutality.
2. **Exclusionary rather than intersectional movements** Despite their activism, people and groups living at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression are often left out and overlooked by national movements and international actors. Violations that draw attention and concern map onto gendered public/private divides. Those with national and global platforms tend to be educated, urban, and English, French, or Spanish speaking. External actors often exacerbate these dynamics, including by funding, giving platform to, and

⁴Such as GBV, police extortion by people with diverse SOGIESC, and cosmetic genital surgery on intersex babies and children.

⁵Orientalism is the racist, colonial stereotypical depiction of people and cultures of Asia, often presenting the West in a binary opposition to the East: Edward Said *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1978).

⁶Homonationalism is the linking of nationalism with promotion of a certain form of homosexuality/LGBTQ rights regulated by a Western colonial understanding of gender and sexuality: Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, (2007, Duke University Press) and Puar, Jasbir, 2013. “Rethinking Homonationalism” in *International Journal for Middle East Studies*, 45, 336-339.

Organised anti-rights movements at national and global levels can lead many women's rights and other civil society groups to be wary of SOGIESC inclusion lest doing so jeopardises progress. In many contexts, these dynamics occur in a shrinking civic space where authoritarian leaders and governments are in power. Yet, despite physical, digital, and mental health risks, holistic security approaches are also largely absent from international support.

7. **Lack of funding and other resources** Queering WPS must not mean more funding for international NGOs and UN agencies with few resources reaching organisations doing this work in conflict-affected contexts. Yet, despite commitments to civil society support and localisation, the majority of development, human rights, and humanitarian funding remains in the hands of INGOs and UN agencies.⁷ Even within LGBTQIA funding (less than 1 percent of funding globally), only 5 percent is specifically directed to lesbian, bisexual and queer issues and communities⁸ and 3.5 percent to trans organisations.⁹

What entry points exist to better support activists?

Throughout conversations with activists, we identified three main entry points to better support their work:

1. **Support and fund collaboration between LGBTQIA rights and women's rights organisations to better integrate gender justice work across movements.** Doing so would also help these organisations develop, adopt, and operationalise feminist analysis of the links between SOGIESC and WPS.
2. **Engage in collaborative research partnerships to produce evidence to inform local, national, and global policy and practice** Donors and international NGOs should support queer feminist activists in conflict-affected countries to generate and share evidence and knowledge,

using a range of creative means, in the spirit of genuine partnership rather than extraction.

3. **Fund queer feminist organisations in conflict affected contexts** With long-term and flexible support, activists will be able to respond to the needs and opportunities they identify, build movements (including with women's rights organisations), put in place holistic security and safety mechanisms, and engage in joint analysis, networking, sharing of lessons, and strategising. Women's and LGBTQI funds such as Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice or Initiative Sankofa d'Afrique de l'Ouest provide pathways for donors to support a diverse range of organisations and the growth of movements.

We thank all of those who spoke with us for this research, including participants from feminist and LGBTQIA human rights organisations in conflict-affected countries, international NGOs, and UN agencies.

⁷Only 8 percent of gender-focused aid to civil society went directly to organisations in developing countries and resources for women's rights organisations are typically small-scale and short-term: OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality (GENDERNET), *Donor Support to Southern Women's Rights Organisations*, (OECD, 2016).

⁸Linda M Saleh and Neha Sood, *Vibrant Yet Under-Resourced: The State of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Movements*, (Mama Cash and the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, 2020).

⁹Dave Scamell, *The State of Trans Funding: Funder Briefing*, (Global Philanthropy Project, American Jewish World Service, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and GATE, 2019).