

Gabrielle Le Roux

Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice
Thought Paper

TOWARDS A VISION OF SEXUAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE by Gabrielle Le Roux

The opportunity of sharing visions of sexual and economic justice in such stimulating company is very exciting. I have battled terribly and spent many sleepless nights with the questions which I found very dauntingly academic. Here I attempt to answer them but probably raise more questions than answers. My approach is pragmatic not academic, I am a feminist activist and an artist. In my work I learn from listening to ordinary people and believe that differences in education need not create barriers to communication. I am inspired and nourished by many examples of courage and commitment and in the process come to understand the broader world we share.

It is in the ground-breaking and exciting sexual rights activism geared to service the needs of working class sexual minorities that connections are made between labour rights and sexual rights, between the various groupings who are particularly vulnerable to the extremes of homophobic and transphobic violence and hate-crimes. The gap between what has occurred in order to build the sort of global gay movement that anyone with an online computer can use to access the world of alternative lifestyles, and the utter isolation of people all over the world without that access, is an economic gap. Class is the issue too often ignored in much sexual rights activism.

Often less resourced organisations don't know about each other. They may not be known about by the groupings that have high-level discussions either so their examples of good practice are not incorporated at the levels where there are real resources. Linking up and sharing information between exciting organizations and creating initiatives that facilitate travel both virtual and physical for the people doing the work, and result in materials - videos, books, talks, performances, exhibitions that can be distributed broadly and stimulate public debate is important. Their work is not reflected in the mainstream media - what do we do about the media?

People need to talk to each other in language everyone understands about the diverse problems they face across all the divides of privilege, poverty, gender, race, sexual orientation, education and so on. The process of bringing people together and facilitating discussion so that everyone's voice can be heard is profoundly transformative, people educate each other, it is a political intervention. This is something I have rich experience of. People change each other's lives with their stories. Each group/class/sector has its own language and terms, our lived experience is buried in that language, learning the languages is the beginning of understanding different experiences and concepts. I find academic language dries up that freedom people feel to express themselves. Although probably for academics the reverse is true.

Effects of socialization include how access to resources and education shape one's chances of getting heard and taken seriously in the world. The less money you have and the less you conform to prescribed gender and sexual norms the further you slide from the likelihood of being granted respect and rights. Respect itself is key to finding

workable strategies that can create sexual and economic justice. It is too little valued – more emphasis is placed on being respectable. Even the term “respectability” conjures a picture of middle-class conformity. The old virgin and whore divide is still in place and misshapes our world. It even affects many human rights groups where attempts to be respectable so that their struggle can be seen as legitimate are divisive and this is being exacerbated by funders right-wing agendas. Sisters, a drop in centre for transgender Thai sexworkers I spent time in in Pattaya was only allowed by USAID to do health support but no advocacy or educational work. All too often transgender people are made to feel unwelcome in both the gender and sexual rights sectors in spite of all they have to teach about both.

The intention of the project below was to find and share information about organizations and movements engaged with sexual rights where the priorities of the poorest, most vulnerable and socially ostracized members of the community shape the agenda. Where this is happening there is no gap between sexual and economic justice. I collaborated with Nigerian blogger Sokari Ekine at the World Social Forum in Nairobi earlier this year in this ad hoc and unfunded online exhibition of portraits and podcasts. “Sexuality and Social Justice at the WSF 2007” pays tribute to activists who put their lives on the line for sexual rights. www.pambazuka.org/blogs/wsf2007

Brief extracts from that project follow with the corresponding portraits:



Victor

Mukasa, Ugandan LGBTI activist, Frontline Human Rights Defender, co-founder of Sexual Minorities Uganda, SMUG, now working with IGLHRC recently took the Ugandan government to court in a brave move that mobilized the LGBTI community in an unprecedented way. Victor's life is lived at the intersection of sexual and economic injustice. Commenting on the threat of homophobic legislation, the proposed Nigerian Same Sex Marriage Bill:

“The bill prohibits activism around gay rights and will tie the hands of human rights defenders. If passed in Nigeria it will spread like a fire around Africa and it will take us back twenty years.”



Manohar Elavarthi director of campaigns and founder of Sangama - a vibrant organization with many thousands of members from sexual minorities in Bangalore describes its inception:

"I'm queer myself and I faced lots of police and thug violence. I joined the student movement in India at the age of 16. In spite of being an activist I found there was no space in the Communist party, the women's movement, students movement and trade unionist movement to talk about my sexuality. That's the main reason I started Sangama.

We realized at Sangama all sexual minorities don't face the same problems. Women face very different problems than men. Men at least are free to move around and women are not free and have to get back home early. Often women don't have jobs and economically are in a different position than men. Transgenders face very different problems to gender-normative people - people can find you out and you are the target for homophobes and transphobes.

With working class people we realized that if you are English speaking and have internet access and you have private space, you can pick a partner using internet, be part of the global gay community. If you're a working class person who doesn't speak English you think you're the only one in the world, there's nobody else like you, you don't know there's a global queer community, you don't even have a name for your sexuality, for your sexual behaviour.

Often the only place you can meet people like you is in a park, in a public toilet in a dark corner where police can abuse you, thugs can beat you up, you can get raped, it's a life-and-death situation. The class makes the extra difference. So that's why we decided to work more and more with people who didn't speak English and working class because they're the ones who needed us the most.

We invited people to come and talk and share their problems and to my surprise, out of 30 people who came to the first meeting, 20 said they were sex-workers and they were facing lots of police problems and needed solutions for this. That opened our eyes and now sexworkers are at the centre of this work.

Initially there were bitter fights and distrust and rejection between the groups. That's when we started building this common identity as a sexual minority person: a person who's excluded, discriminated or facing oppression because of gender identity or sexual expression."



Fadzai Maparutsa, gender officer of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe warns that popular beliefs about low HIV/AIDS transmission between women who have sex with women may be misleading in an African context. Coerced sex with men and “curative” rape mean the figures “could be very high”.



Phumi

Mthetwa, Director of the Equality Project in Johannesburg started young with political and LGBTI activism in South Africa and then South America. She talks about the importance of process and principle. "The old slogan 'An injury to one is an injury to all' is as valid now as it was under apartheid. The role of activists is not only to look at my corner but to know what's happening in other places. We have to speak to each other more, international campaigns like 'In a diverse world equality comes first' are important.

We need to see how what is happening in Darfur happens in Colombia and Philippines and we need to see the links. We need an analysis of the context in which we live and how it affects our struggle for sexual rights.”

Conclusion

The people with the most knowledge about economic injustice are the poorest and the ones with the most knowledge about sexual injustice are those who are vulnerable to its worst abuses. Multi-pronged strategies are needed locally, South-South and globally and nothing can be traded off against anything else – we need progressive legislation, and participatory research around issues, creative initiatives and high-level advocacy. Most of all we need to work respectfully and inclusively and break down the barriers in our own lives.

Who gets seen and heard, what gets given importance, what gets seen as political, who and what gets silenced? My portrait and story projects are my response to those questions. They are about seeing, hearing, recording and paying tribute to people whose brave work and choices in the face of poverty, prejudice and societal blindspots goes unrecognized.