

THE INVISIBLES

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The LGBTQ movement, which by default is considered diverse and equal, in fact has gender issues like any community. The interests of lesbian, bisexual and queer women (LBQ) are under-represented and women themselves are essentially invisible. A comment by *Liliya Ten*.

THE MAIN FOCUSES OF LGBTQ AGENDA IN CENTRAL ASIA AND EASTERN EUROPE

In 2017 news about the persecutions and murders of several gay men in Chechnya made it into the international media. These events were investigated by several independent Russian media outlets and were reported on and acknowledged by the international community. A number of gay men were evacuated to European countries where they found a safe haven. But there are hardly any reports about the violence and so-called »honour murders« against LBQ women within the widespread anti-LGBTQ purge happening in Chechnya. The Russian activist Valentina Likhoshva from the Moscow Community Center explained in a 2019 presentation that »in a patriarchal society, even if the man is gay, he still is a human. His life matters. Whereas, a woman is not considered an individual human; she is property of the family.« The fact that LBQ women receive less attention is also evident in the agenda of the LGBTQ community itself, which tends to focus on the needs and rights of men and neglects the fact that the needs of LBQ women are different. In Kyrgyzstan there are several groups and organisations of gay and bisexual men in five from seven oblasts (regions) but only two LBQ women organisations, both of which are situated in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. This not only shows the under-representation of LBQ women in the community but also the difficulty these women face in finding a safe meeting space.

THE INVISIBILITY OF LBQ WOMEN

The rights of LBQ women are being neglected because of the lack of information about their needs and the threats they face. The logic here is simple – the more data there is about an issue, the bigger the problem. The bigger the problem, the more attention it receives. But there is no or very little statistical data available concerning LBQ women. In comparison, there are dozens of studies on gay and bisexual men's health and rights issued annually in Kyrgyzstan, but only three studies dedicated to LBQ women have been issued within the last 10 years. To improve the situation and to conduct more studies, grassroots organisations need funding, but the rights of a small group of invisible women like LBQ are overlooked by international funders and the Kyrgyz government. And this situation is common in all countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The other important aspect is invisibility and social stagnation of LBQ women resulting from the influence of patriarchal norms, unequal payment, parental responsibilities and household duties. For example, even if all expenses are covered by the organisers, it is challenging for a group of 30 LBQ women to attend a three-day training outside of the city because of these social factors. Plus, some of the LBQ have to ask permission from their parents and have to lie about where they are going because they cannot speak about their sexual orientation freely. Some might have children from a previous marriage with a man and have to find and pay a babysitter. But most women earn less than men and usually don't have the extra money for such expenses. Living under such circumstances, they have less time and opportunities for social activities, are unable to attend events conducted by organisations, and thus become invisible.

And the third but most important cause is discrimination. The LBQ women live under the burden of double discrimination – firstly by being women in a patriarchal society and secondly because of their sexuality. This intersectional discrimination makes them also more vulnerable to violence. If a heterosexual woman experiences outside violence, she can usually turn to family support. But for many LBQ women, their family and relatives are often more likely to be the source of violence and sexual assault. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, there are two types of sexual assault on LBQ women registered in Kyrgyzstan:¹ assault in order to punish or assault »to correct« them. In particular, sexual assault »to correct« sexual orientation is commonly initiated by the family. Few LBQ women who experienced sexual assault find the internal strength to overcome the shame and speak about it with a counsellor or friend. Domestic violence against women in general is very common in Kyrgyzstan, but it is not given serious attention within the society or by the government.

Within the LGBTQ community, gay and bisexual men and transwomen are often faced with police brutality and blackmailing. In comparison to violence against women, these cases mostly attract more attention from the media and society. Even the LGBTQ community sometimes argues with LBQ women saying, »You don't suffer from police brutality like we do« or »Violence for you is not a problem«. It is often assumed that the rights and interests of LBQ women are being considered in the women's rights movement and in the LGBTQ agenda, but in fact they are not included in either of them. →

CHANGE FROM THE BOTTOM UP

The roots of the problem of LBQ discrimination and invisibility are deep within the system. Significant changes are only possible with the support of the government and radical changes in society. But change could also happen from the bottom up. It is therefore time for LBQ activists to start the discussion on this issue within the movement itself. LBQ should identify themselves as an independent community, articulating their rights, needs and goals.

Each community can find its own successful strategy for standing up for their rights. The Kyrgyz LGBTQ organisation the GRACE, for example, uses videos as an advocacy tool to raise important topics, provoke discussions, and to inform and educate society. Recently,

the GRACE produced a documentary film about the lives of LBQ women in Kyrgyzstan. This is the first film about LBQ created by the community itself. Its purpose is to show the influence of patriarchal norms, family pressure, domestic violence and discrimination that LBQ women are exposed to and to bring attention to their invisibility and vulnerability. Through promotion of this film at international film festivals, the organisation is attempting to attract attention to the question of LBQ women's rights in Kyrgyzstan and worldwide.

1 »These Everyday Humiliations: Violence Against Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Transgender Men in Kyrgyzstan«, Human Rights Watch, accessed January 28th, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/10/06/these-everyday-humiliations/violence-against-lesbians-bisexual-women-and#>.



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LANGUAGE & LABELS

Localizing the language of gender and sexuality? The acronym LGBTIQ is commonly understood – yet frequently questioned and rightly accused of perpetuating (neo)-colonial power structures. The CCP workshop on Gender & Diversity gave room to discuss questions of labelling LGBTIQ, to reflect on historical trajectories of gender and sexuality and to ask questions such as: Is there a need for universal terms? In which circumstances do new labels evolve? Do we have to label sexual identity at all?