2

Navigating Homocolonialism in LGBTQ2+ Rights Strategies: Sexual and Political Possibilities beyond the Current Framing of International Queer Rights

Momin Rahman and Adnan Hossain

Introduction

LGBTQ2+ rights have reached a threshold of international attention and promotion and, concurrently, provoked widespread resistance from many governments, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and socially conservative and religious movements, both in the Global North and Global South.[1] This process of contention between homophile proponents and homophobic opponents, results in what we call "homocolonialism": a political process through which LGBTQ2+ human rights are deployed and then resisted as part of both an actual and perceived neo-colonial dynamic (Dellatolla 2020, Rahman 2014; 2020). This dynamic consists on one side of a globalized but yet modular strategy of promoting LGBTQ2+ rights and, on the other, political homophobia consisting of particular forms of social stigma and legal oppression, led by the state but often in alliance with conservative social movements (Bosia and Weiss 2013) and targeted at the full range of non-heterosexualities. Below, we explain the homocolonial dynamic and then suggest pathways to disrupt its negative effects. To illustrate the potential of these disruptions, we focus on a case study of the queer movement in Bangladesh, a South Asian Muslim-majority nation that has retained legal homophobia from the British colonial era. We then conclude with a discussion of the implications of such examples for a different approach to queer human rights beyond a focus on "known" sexual identities and the prioritization of legal rights-based strategies.

---

[1] LGBTQ2+ refers to the range of non-binary non-heterosexual identities and genders, primarily lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and 2-spirit indigenous in the North American context, with the + aiming to capture other forms not included in the list. This term is often used synonymously with "queer" to capture the same range. Rights associated with these identities are also increasingly referred to as SOGIESC rights because they address issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. In all cases, the abbreviations refer to socially marginalized sexual and gender behaviours and identities, often in implicit contrast to socially dominant forms of binary heterosexual gender and sexual identities or "heteronormativity". For simplicity, we use the term "homophobia" to capture political resistance to LGBTQ2+ even when that may be specifically focused on one population such as transgender (trans*), for example.

The Homocolonial Dynamic

July 2016 saw the appointment of the UN's first dedicated human rights official for LGBTQ2+ issues as a direct result of the 2012 report *Born Free and Equal*. These rights remain contentious in many parts of the UN but have gradually expanded across many countries since the 1990s, although the European Union (EU) and the Organization of American States (OAS) remain the only intergovernmental organizations to directly incorporate LGBTQ2+ within their human rights framework (Ayoub and Paternotte 2020, ILGA 2020, Thiel 2021). Furthermore, the promotion of LGBTQ2+ rights has been at times part of the official foreign policy of many within the EU, such the Netherlands, as well as countries like Brazil, Canada, the UK and the USA.

It may seem that the global acceptance of LGBTQ2+ rights is on the horizon. Indeed, LGBTQ2+ political organizations such as ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association), as well as the governments and intergovernmental organizations mentioned above, often portray this recent emergence of international rights strategies as the logical next stage in the historic expansion of LGBTQ2+ protections *as* human rights. At the level of everyday experience, it also makes sense to many who live in places where LGBTQ2+ rights are codified—we have gone from complete social stigma and invisibility to increasing public visibility and social rights over the course of a few decades, most visibly in the rich Global North that stretches across North America and Europe but also in some outside this Euro-begotten zone, such as Taiwan and Argentina.

There remains, however, a global divide on the acceptance of LGBTQ2+ rights and identities, and many well-cited analyses seem to suggest that many non-Western countries are depicted as lagging behind (ILGA 2020; Pew 2013). Research has also come to focus on new waves of opposition to LGBTQ2+ rights (Corrales 2020), including states that have implemented harsh legal and social restrictions against an alleged "gay peril" even in the absence of significant LGBTQ2+ related social or political organizing. These have often involved global networks of anti-LGBTQ2+ agitation connecting actors hostile to sexual and gender minorities from the Global North with similar movements in the Global South, such as the leading role that American Christian churches took in anti-gay campaigns in Uganda, for example (Bosia 2015) or more recently, alliances across European nations, both within and outside the EU (Thiel 2021). In assessing this resistance, there is a danger in assuming that countries simply need to "catch up" to those perceived as the most pro-LGBTQ2+ jurisdictions through an expansion of LGBTQ2+ rights frameworks and, more pertinently, that

LGBTQ2+ identities look the same across cultures. An approach to sexual and gender minority organizing that is based in current western understanding of LGBTQ2+ identities as inevitable or the result of logical progress could actually *prevent* LGBTQ2+ human rights frameworks from serving as effective equality resources where sexual diversity is yet to be culturally and politically normalized. On the other side of these politics, there is also a danger of simply accepting state homophobia as a legitimate exercise of postcolonial or anticolonial autonomy. This global divide represents a new wave of homophobia, one that claims resistance to homophile movements as a cultural defense against "alien" but mostly "western" forms of gender and sexual organization and culture that are being *imposed* on a country, in an apparent replay of colonial era cultural and legal domination, but state homophobias are also not innocent of using the anticolonial argument to accrue power to the state or specific political parties. We describe this dilemma of promotion and resistance as one of *homocolonialism* (Rahman 2014; 2020). Let us unpack the stages of this political process and the assumptions it contains.

First, as in the UN report noted above (2012), LGBTQ2+ rights are conceptualized as universal, implying a transhistorical and trans-cultural understanding of sexual and gender identities and their social regulation. In opposition to this perceived universalism, the internationalization of LGBTQ2+ human rights is criticized by many governments and local conservative/religious social movements as being based on *western* experiences of LGBTQ2+ identities and the non-traditional organization of gender relations (Human Rights Watch 2020). Moreover, this identification of LGBTQ2+ as "western" then justifies resisting such human rights as *neo-colonialist* impositions from "outside" the national and/or regional ethnic and religious culture. Homocolonialism thus represents a dilemma for LGBTQ2+ rights because it potentially replays the historical colonialism of western imperialism in contemporary times by forcing a contemporary western understanding of sexual and gender identities, thus provoking resistance framed as anticolonial cultural autonomy. The framing of sexual diversity based on western ideas is evident in many corridors of the UN, EU and in the foreign policies of those countries that both promote LGBTQ2+ rights and provide refugee pathways for LGBTQ2+ peoples. Effectively, the rights are assumed to "attach" to sexual identities that are public (or need to be to claim those protections), individual, and stable across biography, time, and location. This universal characterization of sexual and gender diversity is being deployed in the space of international relations and operates dialectically toward "traditional" cultures; those that are less economically "developed," both within and outside the "west," such as Poland, Hungary, and Russia; often the Global South in general but most regularly Muslim-majority countries and minority immigrant populations, as well as many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Through this dynamic, western governments, western queer political organizations—as well as the general public on behalf of which these organizations may claim to speak—are provided with a reassurance of their civilizational superiority, manifested by citizenship rights allied to increasingly normalized versions of homosexuality such as same-sex marriage and increasing public visibility in media and culture and, increasingly, trans* rights. Moreover, and most crucially, this is then contrasted with the apparent absence of apparently universal sexual and gender identity rights in non-western communities worldwide, including minority immigrant groups in the west, creating "others" abroad *and* at home: a classic colonial tactic of creating a respectable norm and foreign others. This homocolonialism then encourages local and transnational cultural resistance to LGBTQ2+ rights by reinforcing the notion that they are "western" and, therefore, somehow incompatible with anti-colonialist politics and cultural autonomy, *even* (and often) at the expense of recognizing local, pre-colonial, traditions of gender and sexual diversity.

This framing of resistance is evident in political campaigns from across the globe, within many minority immigrant communities in the west, and from various Caribbean nations, to Poland, Russia (including Chechnya), Egypt, Uganda, Iran, to name but a few (Bosia 2020). Within this homocolonialist dynamic, *both sides* of the divide accept the premise that LGBTQ2+ rights are western, but one side sees the western as universal because human rights are a 'universal, while the other sees these rights as particular, profoundly western and colonialist. This reinforcing homocolonial dynamic makes it extremely difficult to argue for a rights framework that both recognizes and protects the universal rights of LGBTQ2+ individuals *and* recognizes differences in how sexual identities are understood and socially regulated. To be effective, any deployment of LGBTQ2+ rights must acknowledge this dynamic, particularly when the very deployment could *provoke* a focus on LGBTQ2+ individuals that harms their ability to stay safe from harassment, violence and death. See, for example, the backlash against raising rainbow flags at the embassies of Canada and the UK in Iraq in May 2020 (Nabeel 2020).

Navigating Homocolonialism: Bangladesh in Focus

We discuss here the difficulties of operationalizing this complex conceptual understanding. In doing so, we argue the need to think through how rights strategies may either reinforce or disrupt the equation of sexual and gender diversity with western culture and political power, and thus undermine or support attempts to identify sexual and gender minority concerns with a local, rather than neo-colonialist agenda. Many transnational queer organizations and allied governments may assume that there can or should be a "model" of LGBTQ2+ rights based on western experiences of identities, progress, and human rights. The UN report (2012), for example, nods to cultural differences but asserts a universal existence of queer identities and, moreover, prioritizes strategic deployment of rights frameworks, as do many governmental or IGO policies such as those promulgated by the EU (Thiel 2021). There may be, however, much to learn from local groups about the national specificities of sexual and gender minority movements and identities, the depth of heteronormativity that they face, and what opposition they encounter across cultural and political realms, as well as the differences between queer groups in terms of what they see as important for their lives and what capacities they have to engage in political activity.

Exploring these issues in detail through a case study, we turn to the context of Bangladesh, a Global South Muslim-majority country that was formerly part of British India. Bangladesh is not an exemplary case study of any particular success or failure, but rather illuminates the complexities of the homocolonial dynamic and the difficulties in disrupting its negative effects. While it was the colonial administration that introduced the criminalization of homosexuality, these laws have been retained by the postcolonial state, first as part of Pakistan from its 1947 independence from British rule, and subsequently since Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in 1971. More recently in this region, we have seen rights advances for trans* identified people, while anti-homosexual laws and attitudes have often remained (Munhazim 2020), although the largest country in the region, India, decriminalized homosexuality in 2018 after many years of activism by queer communities. Varied forms of same-sex sexualities and intimacies exist in Bangladesh that are neither culturally recognized nor linguistically marked. The homosocial configuration of social life—two persons of same-sex/gender characteristic being together in both private and public space—is not accorded any homoerotic connotations and is often conducive for the efflorescence of same-sex intimacies. For example, people of same sex/gender can spend time or live together without provoking any cultural anxieties about same-sex sexualities while similar kinds of heterosocial interaction are frowned upon and can lead to social controversy. Furthermore, same-sex intimacies are often dismissed as "frivolous play," fun and/or a passing phase that one is expected to overcome as one engages in marriage with an opposite gender partner, although most of our knowledge of such diversity is derived from studies focused on "men" rather than women (Hossain 2019). A strong patriarchal sociocultural framework ensures that males are often able to take advantage of such homo-sociality in ways that females cannot. For example, while it is relatively easier for men to stay outside and away from their home, women do not enjoy similar freedoms. Such differential treatment plays a critical role in shaping the cultural expressions of same-sex sexual intimacies. This is particularly evident in the relative lack of public visibility and cultural discussion of female-to-female same-sex sexualities in contrast to male-to-male sexualities.

Public discourse on same-sex sexualities emerged in Bangladesh with the advent of HIV/AIDS activism and intervention in the late 1990s (Hossain 2017). Acknowledging the fact that men who were not gay-identified engage in sexual intimacy with each other, an alternative framework of men who have sex with men (often truncated as "MSM") was proposed as culturally more appropriate by public health specialists and community activists. Both the government of Bangladesh and NGOs worked hand in hand to address sexual health needs of these "MSM" communities without generating any cultural backlash. Over time, "MSM" became part of the standard policy documents, briefs and instruments of the government, even while same-sex sexualities remained (and continue to remain) a criminal offense under section 377 of Bangladesh penal code, the British colonial era inheritance.

NGO initiatives to cater to "MSM" communities across the country resulted in the setting up of DICs (Drop-in Centers) in many major urban and semi-urban areas in Bangladesh. These DICs served not only as sexual health clinics that taught these same-sex loving and attracted men about safe sex and STI and HIV, but also served as sites where community building took place (Hossain 2019). Predicated on a *kothi-Panthi* (insertee-insertor) model, it was and continues to be the *kothis* (effeminate males literally translated) who are most visible in public space. In this gendered sexual cartography, men who take on a penetrative role in sexual encounter with other men are framed as *panthis* while those who are sexually receptive are labeled as *kothis*. While *kothi* also is used as a label for self-identification, *panthi* is a word used by *kothis* to designate their penetrative sexual partners. In other words, there is no community of men who claim themselves to be *panthi* as is the case with the *kothis*.

While these *kothi-panthi* groups predominantly emanate from working class backgrounds, middle-class gay-identified groups began to emerge as online communities from at least 2000 onwards. These more affluent gay communities were critical of health-focused models and epidemiological categorizations of same-sex attracted men as "MSM." They also positioned themselves as part of a transnational LGBTQ2+ movement. A testament to their cosmopolitan aspiration and transnational alliance building was their launching of various international activities including the celebration of international day against homophobia (now IDAHOT, the International Day Against Homo and Transphobia) in public space. In the years that followed, several members of gay-identified groups participated in various regional and international LGBT-themed conferences and platforms, most notably ILGA conferences. In 2015 the largest network of gay men in Bangladesh and abroad, then called Boys of Bangladesh (BOB), working with several lesbian identified content developers, launched Project Dhee, a lesbian themed comic strip as an advocacy tool in Bangla with support from the US Department of State, challenging the male-dominated LGB activist scene in Bangladesh generating social awareness about female same-sex sexuality (Khan 2016). Thus, what started off as a loose network of online based diasporic and local Bangladeshi gay men over time morphed into a more inclusive space that also included women who identified as lesbians.

On the heels of the activism spearheaded by community-based NGOs working with the "MSM" communities as well as the middle-class gay men, *Roopbaan* was launched as a new magazine and platform in 2014. Pitched towards the middle-class queer populace, *Roopbaan* covered issues ranging from gay tourism in Thailand, to campaigning for the repeal of section 377, to male underwear hygiene (Hossain 2019). *Roopbaan* became publicly linked to homosexuality and LGBTQ2+ rights after two prominent activists associated with this platform were brutally killed on 25 April 2016 in Dhaka. A local Islamist organization with links to al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the killing. A significant event under the banner of *Roopbaan* was the launching of a rainbow rally in 2014 as part of the Bengali New Year celebration. The intent of the rally was not to send any explicit message to the wider society about the presence of the LGBTQ2+ community. Instead, it was designed as part of the wider celebration of the Bengali New Year. Yet the rally brought *Roopbaan* into mainstream view after an online news outlet reported the event as a "gay parade," giving rise to vitriolic public reactions and death threats to many associated with *Roopbaan* and the rainbow rally. The killing of these two activists brought homosexuality into the mainstream public view in Bangladesh for the first time in history, as the media reported the death with explicit reference to same-sex sexual activism and LGBTQ2+ rights. Previously unintelligible to the mainstream populace, the initialism LGBTQ2+ is now often transliterated in Bangla media reporting (Hossain 2019). The killing of Xulhas and Tonoy two years following threw into sharp relief the long-standing tension between the putatively Western-fabricated gay style identity politics and the behavioral model of male-to-male sexuality described as "MSM." Today many mainstream civil society actors, including LGBT groups, view the *Roopbaan*-led queer movement as a strategic suicide that has done a disservice to a nascent community, while the NGOs focused on men who have sex with men see the wider social reaction to *Roopbaan's* emergence and the gruesome murders that ensued as yet another proof of sexual health-focused model being culturally more appropriate than an identity-based approach (Hossain 2019). This brief history illustrates two key points: first, that formations about sexual and gender diversity vary from assumed western categories and identities and second, that nonetheless, the impact of "foreign" aid structures and politics force an engagement with more western categories to secure resources and support, via development monies and targeted funding and organizational support from pro-LGBTQ2+ diplomatic missions. Moreover, the national government may endorse the former, if it is politically palatable under a "health" discourse, and will even turn a blind eye to the latter, unless the issue becomes caught up in a homocolonial dynamic that forces the state to disavow "western influence."

Let's add another layer to this complexity. Another social group internationally known as the third sex/gender of South Asia is publicly institutionalized in Bangladesh. This is very different from most Western experiences and can only be explained by "local" traditions of *hijra* or "third gender" in South Asia, that has been "translated" into the western idea of trans* from local identities that are seen as culturally resonant and authentic, rather than "foreign." Popularly described as neither men nor women, hijras are people typically assigned a male gender at birth who often surgically remove their penis and the scrotum and identify themselves as either non-men or as women (Hossain 2021). However, there are both hijras with a penis as well as those without and both groups are part of the hijra subculture in Bangladesh. While hijras have conventionally been seen as asexual and above desire, the image of hijra asexuality has been challenged with the advent of HIV/AIDS activism (Hossain 2017). The epidemiological framework that propounded the MSM model in the context of targeting male-to-male sexual behavior discussed above also encompassed the hijras, though soon enough it dawned on the activists and public health specialists that hijras represented a separate constituency and could not be reached through DICs (Drop-in Centers) set up to cater to an "MSM" population. Separate interventions in the form of "transgender" DICs ensued, singling out hijras as an at-risk transgender population.

Following HIV/AIDS focused activism came a social campaign for the legal recognition of the hijras as a third gender/sex in Bangladesh. Unlike MSM and gay identities, hijras are culturally seen as "local" and the demand for the legal recognition of hijras was seen as culturally legitimate (Hossain 2017). More importantly, conventionally hijras were seen as special people with the ability to confer blessings and curse the mainstream society. As specialized ritual performers, hijras rendered music and dance on special occasions namely childbirth and weddings in exchange for gifts in both cash and kind (Hossain 2021). Against this backdrop, the government of Bangladesh legally recognized the hijras as a distinct sex/gender in 2013 through a policy decision and a gazette notification to that effect was issued later in 2014. While the legal recognition has been hailed both nationally and internationally as an example of a progressive politics, hijras have been defined as "hormonally, genitally, genetically and sexually disabled" in official parlance (Hossain 2017). Thus, while the public visibility and legal acceptance of hijra may seem to open a door to wider recognition and organization for the full range of LGBTQ2+ identities and rights, it is not clear that this will happen, given the circumscribed definition of medical dysfunction that hijra rights depend upon. Nonetheless, the public discussion of hijras does permit community organizing that links gender and sexual diversity, often with the help of western missions and transnational organizations that does not always or immediately provoke a homocolonial reaction from the Bangladeshi state or public culture. Somewhat similarly to the homonormative trajectory of lesbian and gay rights strategies in many western countries, this example may, above all, illustrate the conditional and tactical necessity of engaging with whatever opportunity structure becomes possible in a heteronormative society.

Conclusion

Resistance to LGBTQ2+ globally varies from political discourses to legislation and organized violence. Across all these realms it is important to assess whether a demand for LGBTQ2+ rights is an *enabling* resource for local movements or whether it creates disabling levels of resistance. Perhaps a more effective strategy would be to focus on community building through services and clinics that focus on sexual health or online community platforms, rather than expecting people to publicly identify through rights claims that might provoke a harsh response. Not only could such a response avoid prompting homocolonialist outrage from national governments and cultural/religious movements that further narrows the possibilities of identifying sexual diversity with local forms, but it could also further avoid the devaluing of rights institutions and freedoms for civil society organizing in general. It may still be that one of the most effective areas an outside government or NGO can work in is to build the infrastructure to support human rights overall, rather than focus on LGBTQ2+ specifically and if a policy-driven focus has for some reason to be on LGBTQ2+ populations, to recognize rights are not necessarily the most effective organizing principle. Many non-Western nations and groups have led the recent activism on LGBTQ2+ rights internationally, but too often, these rights claims are caught up in a regressive dynamic within national polities because they are seen as imposing a Western view of sexual identities. Crucially, we must move toward some decolonial reformulations of the concepts of sexual diversity, if such rights are to be a genuine resource for equality. Otherwise, they are held hostage by this homocolonial dynamic that disempowers *both* universal LGBTQ2+ rights and local, non-western, versions of sexual diversity.

Chase, Anthony Tirado , Pardis Mahdavi , Hussein Banai , and Sofia Gruskin , ed. Human Rights at the Intersections: Transformation through Local, Global, and Cosmopolitan Challenges. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 6 Oct. 2023. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350268692>.

Accessed from: www.bloomsburycollections.com

Accessed on: Fri Oct 06 2023 12:17:51 British Summer Time

Copyright © Momin Rahman. Adnan Hossain. Hussein Banai Anthony Tirado Chase Sofia Gruskin Pardis Mahdavi 2023. This chapter is published open access subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). You may re-use, distribute, and reproduce this work in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.