A Queer Approach to Understanding LGBT Vulnerability during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, advocates have argued for the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) people in humanitarian response efforts. Yet the application of this differential focus has been mixed among international policy guidelines and national programs. This research note details a queer theoretical approach to humanitarian crises that considers the intersectional factors that produce specific vulnerabilities within LGBT communities. We take two examples from distinct LGBT communities during the COVID-19 pandemic to demonstrate the analytical risk of treating the umbrella acronym LGBT, indicating distinct identity groups, as monolithic and not differentiating within identity groups based on other factors. We contend that this monolithic approach risks obviating the way different structural forces further compound precarity during crisis. Thus, we make the case for rooting intersectional approaches in any queer analyses of crisis.

Keywords: Queer, humanitarianism, crisis, COVID-19 pandemic response, differential focus, vulnerability

D uring the COVID-19 pandemic, experts have argued for the inclusion of LGBT people in humanitarian response

efforts.[1] The multifaceted nature of LGBT vulnerability is evident in a joint statement on LGBT suffering during the pandemic, signed by 97 United Nations human rights experts (OHCHR 2020). As researchers and advocates, we provided public analysis of the differential impact of pandemic response efforts on LGBT people (Reid 2020; Ritholtz 2020). Through this process, we began to consider what defines a "queer" analytical approach to the COVID-19 pandemic response. In line with a heritage of queer theorists, we argue that queering an event — in this case, a global pandemic — requires deconstructing the processes that produce its result. Thus, we argue, it is not enough to make LGBT people the object of inquiry, but to *queer* — as a verb — and deconstruct the intersectional factors that produce specific forms of marginality within LGBT communities.

   We start with a brief analysis of the literature on LGBT vulnerability during crisis and the methodology of queer critique. From there, we introduce our data and analytical approach. We then analyze two empirical case study examples as evidence, and we conclude with a summary of our argument.

ASSESSING LGBT VULNERABILITY DURING CRISIS

The differential impact of crises on LGBT people has been largely absent in international policy guidelines and in national responses to crisis events. This absence is noteworthy because general societal prejudice maligns many members of the LGBT community in "normal times," leaving them particularly vulnerable to shocks. Amie Bishop (2020, 14) attributes this absence "partly . . . to the historic lack of research and documentation as well as to the broader invisibility of the community in many countries." Among academic literatures on humanitarian crisis, a focus on LGBT people has increased in the past decade, particularly regarding LGBT inclusion in disaster risk-reduction efforts (Gaillard, Gorman-Murray, and Fordham 2017; Roeder 2014). In regard to public health crises, studies of the AIDS epidemic set the precedent for LGBT inclusion because of the virus's disproportionate impact on these communities (Kayal 2018; McKechnie, Bavinton, and Zablotska 2013).

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   1. We use the term "LGBT" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) as the umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities in this article. We reserve the use of the word "queer" for academic discussion — both as a method of critique and a theoretical position. Lastly, we do not include the I for "intersex" in our acronym because the article does not specifically address the experience of intersex people.

LGBT-focused public health emergency studies developed a pattern of either focusing on the communities' differential risk to the disease or analyzing their behavior as vectoral.

COVID-19-related academic research has followed this pattern. The studies already available discuss the sexual behaviors of men who have sex with men during the pandemic or focus on the disproportionate nature of LGBT vulnerabilities (de Sousa et al. 2020; Lee and Miller 2020; McKay et al. 2020). While there have been efforts to include a gender perspective in pandemic policy response — and recent feminist scholarship that persuasively identifies the gendered impacts of pandemics has received institutional recognition (Azcona et al. 2020) — there has been inconsistent inclusion of LGBT people. For example, Bishop (2020) notes that LGBT people were not included in the guidelines produced by a Gender and COVID-19 Working Group of prominent university researchers, but were incorporated into the gender analysis report by CARE and the International Rescue Committee (Haneef and Kalyanpur 2020; Wenham, Smith, and Morgan 2020).

Within studies of LGBT vulnerabilities, there is a risk of treating the umbrella acronym — indicating distinct identity groups — as monolithic and not differentiating *among* identity groups based on other factors (O'Sullivan and Phillips 2019). How sexual orientation and gender identity impacts their experience of crisis is not static across identity categories and greatly varies depending on other factors, such as socioeconomic or immigration status. These limits of using identity-based categories as an analytical lens have been a focus of queer critiques of crisis. In analyzing anti-LGBT violence, José Fernando Serrano-Amaya (2017, 157) notes that "what is usually seen as anti-homosexual violence is an assemblage of several, sometimes disparate, forms of violence." Serrano-Amaya's point is not to "deny the role of violence in the creation, maintenance and transformation of unjust gender and sexual orders" but instead to challenge the "silo-isation" of sexual politics research, which ignores other identities and dynamics in its sole focus on sexuality (159; see also Bennett 2010). Thus, Serrano-Amaya rightly argues that a queer methodological approach goes beyond a totalizing focus on sexual identity and deconstructs the different factors that contribute to the marginality of diverse LGBT populations.

Duong (2012, 381) similarly notes that considering "the category 'queer' strictly in terms of sexual orientation . . . subsequently depoliticize[es] the category of 'queer.'" Halberstam (2003, 361) recognizes the potential in a "moment of queer studies [that] refuses to see sexuality as a singular mode

of inquiry and instead makes sexuality a central category of analysis in the study of racialization, transnationalism and globalization." Queering thus acts as an analytical effort to challenge assumptions that undergird our understandings of identity. Shlasko (2005) summarizes this tension of queer critique as treating queer as a "subject position" versus as a "verb." As a subject position in academic inquiry, queer can be the study of those with non-normative sexualities and genders (Morris 1998). As a verb, queer becomes a contestation against any normative structures: a way to challenge the shortcomings of established identity categories and consider structural conditions that go beyond sexuality (Greene 1996). Challenging a monolithic concept of identity requires the recognition of how identities intersect in compounding ways and are shaped by other factors, notably gender inequality, and economic disparities.

In this article, we employ "queer" as a verb to show how analysis of LGBT vulnerabilities during conflict can avoid the trap of "silo-isation" while recognizing sexual orientation and gender identity as elements of vulnerability.

DATA AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Our analysis draws from the programming of Human Rights Watch (HRW), an international human rights organization. HRW has an LGBT rights program that monitors human rights violations experienced by LGBT people worldwide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the program documented the changing situation of LGBT people around the world. It undertook a range of actions, both public and private, to ensure respect for the human rights of LGBT populations.[2]

The COVID-19 pandemic and response effort provide an opportunity to revisit the utility of conducting intersectional queer critiques that go beyond a monolithic focus on sexuality during humanitarian crises. We have selected two specific case studies of organizations engaged with HRW's LGBT rights program: the first, the predicament of LGBT migrants in South Africa as documented by the organizations the Fruit Basket and People Against Suffering, Suppression, Oppression, and Poverty (PASSOP), and the second, the precarity of lesbian and bisexual women in Ghana as documented by an organization that has requested anonymity. We selected these cases not because they are generalizable representations of

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2. The authors went through the appropriate internal review process within Human Rights Watch to ensure the accuracy and ethical use of its material.

the entire LGBT community during crisis, but because a deconstruction of their similarities and differences reveals the importance of intersectional queer critique. While LGBT migrants in South Africa and lesbian and bisexual women in Ghana both experience discrimination that contributes to pushing them into the informal economy and distances them from familial/communal bases of support, the processes of their marginalization differ. These differences, however, are obscured when the analytical lens *only* takes into account sexuality. Our case selection approach is not to test a theory, but instead to reinforce the importance of an established methodological critique in the setting of humanitarian crisis.

LGBT VULNERABILITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA AND GHANA

South Africa

South Africa is a common destination for LGBT asylum seekers from across the continent because its constitution protects against discrimination, and its Refugees Act (130 of 1998) provides asylum on the grounds of gender and sexual orientation. LGBT asylum seekers are pulled by the allure of legal protection and the desire for a better life and pushed by discriminatory laws, hostile social attitudes, violence, and family rejection in their home countries. But the reality of South African life for LGBT migrants is difficult — jobs are scarce, xenophobia is a barrier, the asylum process is slow, and support networks are limited. Additionally, anti-LGBT discrimination still persists throughout the country, and pervasive gender-based violence means that populations within the LGBT community have very different experiences. Notably, black lesbians and transgender men face high levels of discrimination and violence throughout the country, linked to perceptions of being a threat to hegemonic masculinity (HRW 2020a; Nath 2011).

The stringent lockdown measures in response to COVID-19 highlighted the vulnerability of all migrants. While the government provided basic necessities to citizens during the lockdown, undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were unable to access aid programs, including food parcels. Thomars Shamuyarira, leader of the LGBT asylum-seeker support group the Fruit Basket, said that group members struggled to access employment, food, medicine, and accommodation (HRW 2020b). Victor Chikalogwe, director of the LGBT-focused refugee advocacy group PASSOP, noted that asylum seekers, who tend to work in

the informal economy, have been hard hit by the stringent lockdown measures, and with no safety net (HRW 2020b). LGBT refugees in South Africa, like other migrants and asylum seekers, are economically marginalized by their immigration status. Their LGBT identities compound this marginalization as they are not able to rely on diasporic support networks nor local aid institutions as a result of homo/transphobia.

Ghana

HRW has previously monitored the situation in Ghana and documented the economic vulnerability of lesbian and bisexual women (Isaack 2018). This research has found that lesbian and bisexual women in Ghana experience a particular marginality because of the general socioeconomic status of women in Ghanaian society. A common dynamic for women in Ghana is to rely on their immediate families and community networks as avenues of economic support. At the same time, women experience remarkable pressure to conform to social and sexual norms, including heterosexual marriage. To refuse such norms risks alienation from these economic support networks, as they are traditionally arranged through natal families or marriage. This economic vulnerability thus results from a very specific form of gender-based discrimination that leaves women economically dependent on family and community. Lesbian and bisexual women risk becoming disowned, losing access to family financial support, and jeopardizing opportunities for formal employment due to transgressing these expected gender norms.

Thus, when crisis hits, these vulnerabilities are exacerbated. These women must rely on support groups to meet immediate needs (Isaack 2018). In response to the heightened challenges arising because of the COVID-19 pandemic, an entity catering exclusively to the needs of lesbian and bisexual women in Ghana sought emergency help from aid agencies for their members and volunteers, with assistance from HRW. The groups' most pressing needs were for basic essentials, such as food, shelter, medical supplies, and hand sanitizer. Similar to LGBT refugees in South Africa, lesbian and bisexual women experience economic marginality worsened by crisis. For both populations, the transgression of societal norms of gender and sexuality has impacted their capacity to navigate the pandemic. However, such observations are incomplete. The pathways to this marginality in crisis differ in that migrant status is an additional source of vulnerability for LGBT refugees in South Africa,

while intrafamilial gender norms play a particular role in perpetuating socioeconomic inequality among lesbian and bisexual women in Ghana.

CONCLUSION

This research note challenges a monolithic approach to the study of LGBT vulnerability during crisis. Our analysis showed that two different groups of sexual and gender minorities in two different sub-Saharan African states had similarly precarious situations during the pandemic. Left with few options but to subsist in an informal economy that nearly disappeared overnight, and without the support of traditional community institutions, these two groups became reliant on humanitarian assistance. Upon further review, while both their experiences of marginalization resulted from their sexual orientation, their vulnerabilities compounded differently. In Ghana, local intrafamilial gendered expectations of womanhood led to the socioeconomic isolation of lesbian and bisexual women. In South Africa, LGBT migrants were unable to access aid because of their migrant status, and then received little support from diasporic and local communities because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

For both groups, their sexual orientation had an impact on their vulnerability, as did their transgression of gender norms. However, a simple focus on their sexual identities would not fully reveal the processes through which their vulnerabilities exacerbated. Their gender, race, socioeconomic position, and migrant status also impacted their vulnerability. Presenting their sexual orientation as a sole source of precarity obviates other socioeconomic factors which further compound suffering. We thus encourage an intersectional queer approach in any future analyses of LGBT vulnerability during humanitarian crisis.

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