

Que[r]y[ng] the Climate Debates

by Nina Somera



In Full Force and Colour. The 2008 pride march in Taipei, Taiwan was attended by over 18,000 participants.

Photo from David Reid

Peter Tatchell asserted: “There is not much point campaigning for LGBT human rights unless we have a habitable planet on which to enjoy these rights. If global warming results in climate destruction and economic downturn, our quality of queer life will be seriously diminished.” Tatchell helped launch the so called 10:10 campaign that calls for the United Kingdom to cut their emissions by 10 per cent in 2010. “Queers make up one in ten of the population. By reducing our energy consumption by a tenth, ‘pink power’ can help save the planet,” he added.

Meanwhile in her essay “Subsistence as a Lesbian Revolution,” Jeanne Neath shared her retreat to a farm, along with her partner, in an attempt to have a self-sufficient and healthier

As interest on the climate talks is picking up, more organising are done on the ground and mobilisations staged. Theories are being revisited and expanded. More and more links are also made as the climate crisis is increasingly realised as a systemic problem – the same one that has constantly spawned inequality, deprivation and violence which have left their marks on the identities, bodies and lived experience of people. One of these links is that between climate change and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities.

lifestyle. “In many ways, we have been able to create a small lesbian feminist chunk of reality. Yet we still are entrenched in the larger patriarchal society.”

But there is more in the link between climate change and various LGBT individuals and communities. Both issues stem from the fundamentalist desires to dominate and control other people’s environment, resources, contexts and desires. Neoliberalism has been working hand in hand with neoconservatism that stretches beyond the United States’ right-wing politics. This was clearly reflected by the Bush administration’s attacks especially in Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of “war on terror,” its aggressive promotion of consumerism and global gag rule, that prohibited funding for reproductive health.

As Reihana Mohideen wrote, “All religions have buttressed patriarchal systems and ideologies. Conversely, all patriarchal systems and ideologies have used religious reinforcements.”

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More than a Safe Zone. An enabling environment for multiple identities necessitate a diversity within any given process.

Graphics from the LGBT Resource Center, University of Southern California
<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/glbss/allies.html>

It is interesting to note that though they had their respective starting points, the two main agenda of 2009 Commonwealth Summit’s main agenda were climate change and gay rights. While the former is a symptom of advanced capitalist society, the latter was a result of stone age policy that punishes homosexuality.

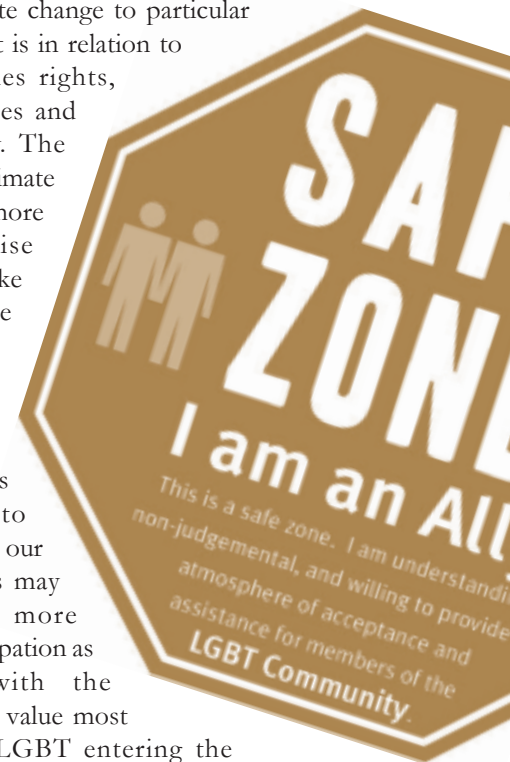
The connecting dots between climate change and LGBT are also instructive in reevaluating the more dominant theoretical handles on gender and climate change particularly ecofeminism and reemphasizing intersectionality. Forwarded by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, ecofeminism sees women’s special relationship with nature given their shared experience of oppression because of patriarchy and capitalism. As one who has embraced it said, “If I had to do it all over again, I would become a Lesbian herbalist growing herbs and spices on Womensland and making them available to other women and Lesbians. That would be my protest.”

However, ecofeminism has been criticised for its essentialising tendencies, including its perspective of women as a class. The quote above, for instance suggests a disengagement from societies, despite an attempt to carve a conducive space for a marginalised group. In addition, ecofeminism tend to affirm particular gender roles that have been disempowering for

women in particular contexts. As Sowmya Dechamma pointed out, “For many ecofeminists, liberation does not require women to sever themselves from their sexual and reproductive biology or from nature. In an already gendered society where gender roles are specific and prominently used to justify [the] subjugation of women to a domestic, ‘natural’ sphere, such essentialising connections are no way liberating.”

Moreover, given the diversity of women’s contexts and capacities as well as the shifting terrains in both patriarchy and capitalism especially in an increasingly globalising process, there has been a call to speak not just of nature but of a political ecology. The same political ecology necessitates multiple resistance communities such as people living with HIV/AIDS and LGBTs.

It is for this reason that engagement in the climate talks need not be based on the close proximity of climate change to particular issues or the way it is in relation to indigenous peoples rights, agriculture, fisheries and renewable energy. The discourse around climate change has to be more open to otherwise unusual suspects like LGBTs, people living with HIV/AIDS, labour migrants, communicators and many others who are poised to initially ask, “what is our entry point?” This may also enable a more empowering participation as people enter with the identities that they value most rather than say, LGBT entering the climate talks through another issue like HIV/AIDS.



In one paper that advocates for inclusion of HIV/AIDS in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process, the links between the two issues have been made by citing the vulnerability of migrants in contacting HIV/AIDS and the aggravating impact of water stress. But it is silent on the difficulty of people living with HIV/AIDS and their caregivers' access to water because of discrimination.

The intersectionality in identity politics also remains quite important for it surfaces the forms of discrimination and degree of responsiveness of policies, programmes and projects. Although a comprehensive set of financial mechanisms for climate change mitigation and adaption has yet to be in place in many countries, it is not surprising if there would be fears that these mechanisms may favour certain individuals and communities over others based on gender, ethnicity, caste, religion and citizenship. These are lessons learned from many existing mechanisms on health care and microcredit, among others.

In the case of LGBTs, these mechanisms might be heteronormative in both framework and implementation. As Diane Foster asserted in her essay in *Sinister Wisdom*, "When Lesbians become sick from drinking bad water or inhaling deadly fumes, the establishment is less likely to address our health concerns. We have to beg, cry and fight for medical support simply because we are Lesbian[s]."

Identity politics is likewise crucial in surfacing the strengths and the gaps even of a social movement. The short story by Honorio Bartolome de Dios, "Giyera" [War] from the Philippine gay writing anthology, *Ladlad 3* reflects on a community's selectivity of issues, one that has become transformed into discrimination. In "Giyera," the protagonist gay beautician Bernie and her friends join a mobilisation against the logging operations and the construction of an industrial plant in the agricultural village of San Martin. Despite being known as a trusted aide by San Martin's elite,

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality calls for the simultaneous appreciation of the axes of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and other bases of identities and differences. In her essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Kimberle Crenshaw wrote: "My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately."

In this essay, Crenshaw introduced structural intersectionality and political intersectionality. In structural intersectionality, she explained how women of colour are not prioritised in shelter systems. Unlike white women who seek refuge in such shelters, women of colour are burdened by their poverty, child care responsibilities and lack of skills which are needed for them to find a job and be independent. Structural intersectionality is likewise observed among women migrant workers, who are physically abused by their partners. In most cases, they respond to threats against their continued stay in their host countries, rather than the threats to their bodies. These abuses are also suffered in silence when the legal status of one's whole family may be put at risk.

Meanwhile political intersectionality highlights a person's imbrication within two or more subordinated groups that pursue conflicting agenda. Black women for instance struggle for women's rights quite differently from white women while their community struggle for citizenship and welfare rights, which are enjoyed by the majority population. However, the collective struggle has then and now placed women's rights at a marginal tier in a scheme of priorities.

Source: Crenshaw, Kimberlé. (No. 43, 1991). "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" in *Stanford Law Review*.

Bernie's inclusion in the movement is questioned based on her sexual identity:

"The people were laughing when they saw the three, along with the farmers and fisherfolks who were marching towards the municipal office...Bernie and his friends ignored those people. But they did not join the succeeding rallies anymore. Bernie was right in his suspicion...However close he has become to an important person like Dona Estela Salvador,



people still know him and his friends as gays from the parlour [Translation mine].”

Later Bernie transforms her parlour as an inconspicuous post for rebels, whom she transforms into women to protect them from the military and hired goons. Pageantry and performance thus become a form of resistance that would be belatedly acknowledged in the end.

Finally, acknowledging multiple identities strengthens the claims for historical responsibilities and social reproduction especially in the present global context that is increasingly attacked by fundamentalist forces that results in multiple violence. Although climate change is not necessarily a new phenomena, its impact is not limited to the changes in temperature one can sense on her skin. Instead it aggravates long-standing inequalities and peculiar situations that strike one's layers of identities – as a tenant farmer, industrial worker, lesbian mother, landless widow, indigenous woman and so on.

Admittedly, this task is difficult even in shaping an advocacy. As one feminist mentioned, it is already hard to attribute a

result to a particular social issue. One was also reminded of the campaigns for economic justice where civil society organisations (CSOs) have allied themselves with the Catholic church in repudiating the odious debts of the South. But the same Catholic church has repudiated reproductive justice that women have been demanding. Gita Sen asserted that even most feminist movements have yet to reconcile this “third site” where women are oppressed as members of particular economic class, caste and citizenship with the previous sites that criticised the power relations between women and men.

Yet it is an inescapable challenge that stakeholders need to address rather than evade especially in deconstructing and transforming the personal relationships and social relations within a dominant system that is attempting to annex and destroy the only planet we all share. ■

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