

Framework document for the conference

Resistance to the dominant model from a perspective of sexual and gender diversity



A challenge and an imperative

The desire of many individuals and organisations involved in development and education for social change is to make this world more livable in the face of dominant models that consistently exclude people and commit serious violations of our rights. Moreover, we are currently observing an increasing number of institutions and NGOs that are including this desire in the area of sexual and gender diversity.

Announcements made by public institutions, cooperation projects, higher visibility given to continued violence against the LGBTI community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersex people), the organisation of workshops, and other efforts show that sexual and gender diversity is beginning to gain relevance.

Addressing these issues means facing new challenges if we are to take a more desirable, critical approach rather than stick to a hegemonic model of neoliberal, heteronormative and ethnocentric development.

Incorporating sexual and gender diversity in the projects and processes of NGOs and institutions through their policies can become yet another component of discrimination and neocolonialism if only a single and universal model for approaching diversity is considered. That is why this incorporation poses both a challenge and an imperative: to overturn the classic perception of the sex-gender system which has been instrumental for so many years and has been used in numerous projects, programmes and organisational policies. A perception that excludes and pushes aside many people because they do not fit into the binary heterosexist logic and do not identify with the rigid expectations of male or female sex categories.

* The Nahia team is made up of ALDARTE (centre for gays, lesbians and transsexuals), CEAR-Euskadi (support for refugees in the Basque Country) and INCYDE (initiatives for cooperation and development).

The purpose of this paper is to put forward thoughts on bodies and desires that will help in the analysis of this classic gender perspective. We propose a debate, an ongoing debate, as the pillar of the Conference on Resistance to the dominant model from a perspective of sexual and gender diversity, organised by the Basque Agency for Development Cooperation, and the Bilbao City Council Area for Equality, Cooperation, Coexistence and Festivities.

1. Mapping bodies and desires

Sexuality is the system that regulates our bodies and our desires. This regulation is conducted in a social context that follows the dominant neoliberal, ethnocentric and heteronormative model, which influences not only major global issues but also our everyday lives.

Sexuality regulates our bodies and our desires based on normative, global and discriminatory moulds that leave no room for diversity and are influenced by the dominant model founded on heteronormativity and gender binarism. Desire and bodies are seen exclusively under a prism of already defined guidelines.

Marriage, reproduction and romantic love have been the historical justifications for sexuality and still influence our perceptions today of what is legitimate, better and worse, regarding our sexual practices. The path from “good” to “bad” sexuality goes from marriage or sex with love, to sporadic sexual encounters, to same-sex relationships, to relationships outside the stable couple, to the far end of “bad”, i.e., fetishism, sex for money, transvestism, etc.

Sexual hierarchies create dominant power relationships in society. The people on the top of the hierarchy are rewarded with legality, physical and social mobility, institutional support, material benefits and recognition of “a good bill of mental health”. The people lower down (homosexuals, lesbians, trans, sex workers, cross-dressers, etc.) are excluded and seen as abnormal, dangerous, violent, sick or sinful. As a result, they are often faced with social and economic exclusion, and are excommunicated, arrested, raped or murdered.

We are more diverse than we are different. Diversity is our richness and a certainty we can embrace. A diversity that can be seen not only in connection with our sexuality but also with our gender. A diversity that encompasses a wide spectrum of gender-related identities, expressions and experiences, whether they are in sync with or fall outside of stereotypical gender norms. A diversity that, on par with sexuality, allows us perceive gender as a thing in constant movement, and which includes multiple possibilities: feminine men, transgender individuals, masculine men, masculine women, transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag queens, queers, feminine women, gay men, lesbian transsexuals, hijras, and minors with diverse, flexible and creative genders.

This diversity of genders is not generally seen in our society since social construction is organised into two sexes and two dichotomous, complementary, exclusive and hierarchical genders: male-female, masculine-feminine, man-woman. This social organisation is based on a power structure in which inequality between women and men is considerable. This often creates

situations of invisibility, violence and discrimination toward women, who on many levels are considered second-category citizens. We have highly normative gender roles.

Normative gender is the process by which we acquire the attributes, behaviours and subjectivities defined by society as feminine and masculine; our behaviour and subjectivity depends on whether we are women or men. The sex-gender system shows us a model of society in which biological sexuality is translated into inequality between men and women, the latter being at a disadvantage in the process. It is structured by relations of power and domination among men and women, dismissing sex as the underlying cause of these inequalities but rather the socially constructed positions of gender.

It is therefore assumed that gender is built on biological sex, which would be a social category. This breeds a dichotomy of nature-nurture. In other words, it presupposes that sex is the natural, biological, unquestionable and unchangeable thing, and that gender is based on sex and can therefore be changed. The gender perspective that is emphasized in so many projects – in the area of development policies, for instance – is founded on this theoretical approach. But it is not exempt of limitations:

- It is binary: it takes into account only two sexes (female-*feminine* and male-*masculine*) and two genders (man and woman). Based on this binarism, we are assigned a strictly defined gender at birth. If you are female your gender is woman; if you are male your gender is man.
- It leans toward heterosexism: in this binary gender system, only heterosexual desire is taken into account, assuming that women will be attracted to men and vice-versa. This structure is discriminatory.
- It is biology-oriented and naturalizes both sex and gender: this approach understands sex as the biological part, what we are born with, and gender as the cultural part, our social construct of feminine and masculine. Bodies considered feminine are assigned with the female gender and socialized in the corresponding norms. The same thing happens with males.

This theoretical approach tends to be simplified by the socially widespread idea that we are born with a gender (man or woman). The result is that the role of culture in the construction of gender as well as sex can be ignored. We overlook the fact that labeling someone as male or female is a social decision and that sex is not a purely physical category. The bodies society defines as feminine or masculine are influenced by our concepts of gender.

The most immediate result of this sex-gender system is that people are excluded when we fail to consider the sexual and gender diversity of individuals. Following this binarism-, heterosexism-, and biology-based logic, three groups of people can be excluded: 1) people who are not heterosexual; 2) people who were not born with “sufficiently clear” genitalia to be considered

male or female, and as a result cannot be assigned one of the two genders; and 3) people who experience a mismatch with their birth-assigned gender, or people who have more than one gender or none at all.

Understanding gender as a social construction, we have questioned and then reconstructed the ideas of femininity and masculinity that we have been taught. We have learned to break the binarism between sexes and genders that conform to the supposedly natural scheme of things. We have revealed the mechanisms of hierarchy and oppression in the categories man-woman, denouncing the situation of women, and have made democratic demands to achieve equality, raise the visibility of women in politics and denounce the oppression of women.

Starting with this enormous baggage, the challenge is to continue along the path travelled, building on what we have already learned. It is now time to rethink the sex-gender system without seeing the challenges of sexual and gender diversity as a threat. This way we can uncover discrimination against women and discrimination against people who adopt ways, feelings, desires or behaviours associated with non-assigned gender identities.

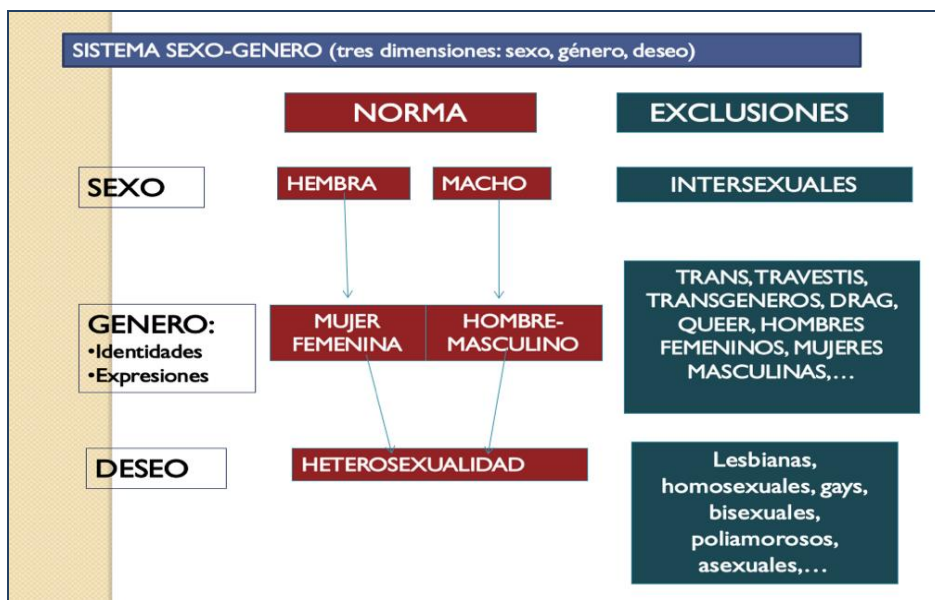
Non-normative gender expressions and identities – those which depart from the established norms, such as transsexual and transgender – call into question the idea of gender identity as two single opposing categories, man or woman, and call for a broader understanding of gender and its multiple identities. This involves 1) revising the practice and morals of numerous explicit, implicit and unwitting social agreements concerning basic aspects, arrangements and institutions in our lives and our society, from what color and clothing are appropriate for each sex-gender, to which queue to stand in at school, to which public restroom to use, etc.; and 2) taking a stand against clinical- and pathology-related definitions given to individuals whose gender does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

As necessary as it is to adopt the perspective of gender diversity, it is equally important to overhaul the meaning we attach to sexual diversity, a matter that concerns all people, whether sexually normative or not. Sexual diversity goes beyond what we know today as LGBTI; it involves all people. Diversity is not a matter of people “affected by their homosexuality or their transsexuality” and it does not exist only when we “see” or think we are dealing with “a clear case”. There is always diversity (whether or not it is visible).

LGTBIphobia affects everyone, not just lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual or intersex people. It exerts pressure by limiting the diversity of sexualities people can have and the genders that people inhabit. LGTBIphobia is also the specific violence that punishes people who decide to depart from social norms to live as a gender different from the one assigned to them or to experience sexuality forbidden to them by laws or cultural and religious traditions. Many lesbians, homosexual and trans people face serious human rights violations in their daily lives.

Many groups have been excluded by the patriarchal and normative sex-gender system without our even noticing. We must acknowledge these exclusions, and incorporate these sectors of society into our work. This would enable us to be more inclusive and radical – radical in the sense of the fundamental nature of the problem, in other words the root of the system that sustains this kind of oppression.

Source: own elaboration based on Miquel Missé (2014)



2. Everyone or no one – promoting non-normative development

The so-called economic crisis is dismantling a welfare state in which people's needs are seemingly less important: resources and social services are cut determined by purely economic criteria based on greed and a lack of solidarity; there is generalized impoverishment of the social majority; and Europe has limited the numbers of refugees and their right to asylum.

The dominant model, which has generated this systemic crisis, has three attributes, as pointed out earlier: it is neoliberal, ethnocentric and, moreover, heteronormative. Three characteristics that intersect in the lives, bodies and desires of people and communities around the planet. Traditionally, the institutions and NGOs in our area have tackled issues related to social, economic, cultural and gender inequality. But most of them have not tackled issues of sexual and gender diversity. They have not incorporated heteronormativity and its consequences in their analyses and work strategies in association with economic, cultural and social concerns.

Heteronormativity is an ideological code that represents relationships of power by which sexuality and gender are normalized and regulated in our culture. It not only implies anti-homosexual prejudice, but also entails issues of race, class or sexual practices. Idealized heterosexual relationships (couple, for love, with

children, etc.) are institutionalized, permeating social, legal, cultural and economic structures that exclude people with non-normative sexualities or genders.

We need to take a deeper look at why this issue has generally been left out of the corporation agendas in Spain. For decades feminist theories have tried to liberate sexuality from the private realm and shift it to the public and political spheres. But it is still considered to have nothing to do with politics, with the public realm, with building citizenship and democracy. In the area of Cooperation it continues to be silenced, a question that remains unasked. Sexual and gender diversity is excluded from the processes of social change and transformation, and people of different sexual identities and genders are not recognized as active participants in the political process.

Traditionally, Cooperation approaches sexuality from a standpoint of limitations or shortcomings, and as a problem. For example, projects connected with women's reproductive health – limiting sexuality to reproduction – and with sexually-transmitted diseases such as HIV-AIDS – thus identifying sexuality with the risks of engaging in sexual practices.

Our society has advanced in the development of social and legal policies surrounding LGBTI rights. However, we should point out that it has been from a normative perspective, integrating them into the dominant system, excluding non-normative bodies and desires. The LGBTI model is characteristic of liberal democracies and fails to not break away from heteronormativity or from its implicit male/female or heterosexual-homosexual binaries. Hence, the images we see come from a North, where human rights related to sexual and gender diversity are respected (although the reality is quite another) and from a South where these rights are systematically violated (which is not entirely true either).

The media and social networks tend to present the countries of the South, in general, and certain countries in Africa and the Middle East in particular as “primitive”, while the liberal democracies of the North are presented as a place where these rights are guaranteed. The countries of the South are presented as places where freely expressing one's sexual diversity is dangerous. Therefore, from a neocolonial logic, proposals for Cooperation are developed around ethnocentric and normative projects of sexual and gender diversity. In short, a type of cooperation that conforms to a dominant model of living and enjoying sexual and gender diversity.

In contrast with this model, alternative homegrown initiatives emerge from the South. Much like many postcolonial studies, the initiatives stress, among other matters, the need to take local conditions into account as well as the social and cultural diversity of each place.

If Cooperation policies want to bolster the rights of individuals and peoples rather than reproduce new forms of colonialism, our focus must view sexuality based on people's desires. We must pay attention to different contexts and types of organisation, working together with people to build their own options regarding bodies and relationships. A challenge faced by people in the North

and the South is to have the rights associated with enjoying the desired sexual preference or gender without these rights being considered second class or rights that can take a back seat to other priorities.

We can work on cooperation from non-normative sexual and gender diversity as a form of resistance to and organisation of the dominant model and as a factor for social change, linking strategies, struggles and challenges between people and organisations of the North and the South, paying attention to the circumstances and forms of organisation of each specific reality.

This perspective poses challenges at different levels:

- Inside social organisations: what are the models of organisation, participation in decision-making, dialogues and inclusive proposals, etc.
- Forging alliances: envisage proposals and carry out actions together with organisations actively concerned with issues of sexual and gender diversity. Building mutual understandings that strengthen people and organisations working with issues of sexual and gender diversity as political stakeholders.
- In the projects carried out: through specific processes on sexual and gender diversity, and through processes in which this diversity is integrated in a transversal way.
- Influencing public policy, in both the North and the South.

In short, it is a matter of finding a way for everybody to enjoy life and live in dignity, to come up with non-normative development alternatives: neither neoliberal, nor ethnocentric nor heteronormative. It seems that in the area of Cooperation institutions and NGDOs have excluded, perhaps with no ill intent, certain groups of people or dimensions.

3. Mutual understanding of desires: shared challenges

If we want to take part in this dance, we need to weave a web of understanding between people, organisations and institutions of the North and the South. Sexual and gender diversity is a shared challenge that carries risks.

A range of experiences in the North and the South have come from organisations that have been incorporating diversity into their processes for a long time, either through specific actions, or transversely. From Latin America come ideas and postcolonial proposals that bring new ways of understanding lesbofeminism and incorporate sexual and gender diversity in organisational processes. In Europe we are finding spaces which are opening up to the proposals of solidarity – from Cooperation, incorporating diversity into the regulations of public institutions or organisations that work on joint projects with organisations in the South, dialogue between queerness and the Muslim community, or from the Palestine context and LGBTI.

These are not the only experiences but they are an example of the steps being taken to raise the political profile of groups of sexual and gender diversity,

groups that can play a role in devising and implementing alternative processes for Development.

Sexual and gender diversity is on the agendas of international development organisations. As we have already mentioned, based on the dominant model it is used as a new neocolonial argument, reinforcing the idea of a primitive South that needs intervention from the North through normative projects of cooperation. Some governments of the South also take part in this dynamic by implementing aesthetic policies such as pinkwashing or homonationalism. Far from social and cultural customs or beliefs, these strategies do not result in alternative human rights proposals. Sexual and gender diversity can even be used as part of international legitimisation campaigns, as seen in Israel, which claims that people of different sexual and gender orientations are protected and respected, while in Palestine they are annihilated.

Cooperation that wishes to continue down alternative roads will find in non-normative sexual and gender diversity a way to add depth to their ideas and proposals and construct more human models for development.

A complicated road indeed. But no one said that learning new dances was simple or that desire was easy. Let us dialogue, listen, unlearn, identify prejudices, open ourselves up to common ground. Let the music begin.

4. Further reading

Various authors: (2014) *LURRERATUZ. Aterrizando los deseos olvidados. La perspectiva de género y de diversidad sexual en la Cooperación al Desarrollo, la Educación para la Ciudadanía Global y la promoción y defensa de los derechos humanos de las personas inmigrantes y refugiadas*. Ed. Nahia.

Various authors: (2013) *Los deseos olvidados. La perspectiva de género y de diversidad sexual en la Cooperación al Desarrollo, la Educación para la Ciudadanía Global y la promoción y defensa de los derechos humanos de las personas inmigrantes y refugiadas*. Ed. Nahia.

COLL-PLANAS, Gerard: (2013) *Dibujando el género*. Ed. Egales.

Various authors: (2015) *Diversidad sexual e identidad de género* en Revista GALDE nº 10.

www.galde.eu.

FAUSTO STERLING, Anne (2006): *Cuerpos sexuados*. Ed. Melusina.

JOLLY, Susie (2000): *What use is queer theory to development?* Queering Development. Seminar Series – Session 3: 3rd February 2000. Discussion Paper. Ed. Institute of Development Studies. Sussex University, UK.

www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/jollytalk.pdf

LYNCH, Andrea (2009): *Sexuality and the Development Industry workshop report*. Published by the Institute of Development Studies. Sussex University, UK.

<http://www.ids.ac.uk/index.cfm?objectid=5DD69A20-D415-4CEF-261DFCFB9B017CCF>

MISSÉ, Miquel y COLL-PLANAS, Gerard (eds.)(2010): *El género desordenado: críticas en torno a la patologización de la transexualidad*. Ed. Egales.

SEGUER, Lucía (2014): “De la normatividad queer en la construcción de la nación a la resistencia política queer: un debate en la relación Israel-Palestina” en *Universitas humanística*, nº 78, p. 261-280.

<http://www.redalyc.org/html/791/79131632012/index.html>