What We Learned at Europe's Largest Online LGBTI Conference

Blog, ILGA-Europe Annual Conference

> Evelyne Paradis, Executive Director of ILGA-Europe reflects on the annual Gathering, the online version of Europe and Central Asia's LGBTI conference, and what it affirmed for the movement at this time of momentous change.

It's already been a month since our second Gathering Online (oh, how I hope it will be our last!) and I've had a bit of space to reflect on the incredibly interesting, thought provoking and forward-thinking discussion we had during that week. There was so much to be explored under the theme of this year's Gathering Online, 'The Power of Us' in these times of profound change. Here are messages that emerged from these rich conversations.

Accepting change as a fact of life is empowering

We began The Gathering with a virtual version of our Queer Ed keynote speech, which has been an opening staple of the conference for many years. The format was an online conversation between myself and the wonderful Natia Gvianishvili, who has been actively engaged with local, regional and international LGBTI and feminist movements for over a decade now. As a person who's actually raised her consciousness around the fact that navigating change is a constant part of life, Natia was the perfect person to begin exploring the complexity of navigating change as people, as communities, as organisations.

The way Natia told us of her own journey — from life and activism in her native Georgia, to where she is now, currently residing and working in Sweden — provided many insights of just how multifaceted and complex change can be. Her story is just one story, but one that illustrates so vividly that change happens all the time, small and big, and on multiple levels, for us as individuals, for our communities, our loved ones, our countries. Natia's story is also a very empowering one. Yes, transformation is often hard, yet Natia so eloquently talked about the many ways in which she's learned about her own strengths through it.

We need more of those stories to be told. What I took from our conversation is that, by being more explicit and deliberate about sharing our complex relationship with change, it becomes easier for all of us to find our own compasses when navigating a constantly changing world. The more we learn to be okay with that fact, the easier it becomes for us as individuals and collectively, to no longer be taken by surprise when big changes happen, or at least not to the same extent. Also, if I am more comfortable with change myself, it is going to be easier for me to be there for other people.

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There is a renewed commitment to solidarity and collective courage

A message that came through loud and clear across the five days of The Gathering — through panels, workshops and self-organised spaces — was a strong collective commitment to saying that it is essential that all of us stand

with one another, and act in support of each other. Solidarity is essential to make sure we withstand efforts to rollback on what we've gained and to sew seeds of division between us, but it's also a crucial condition to creating the world that we want.

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I was really heartened to hear again and again that everyone is on the same page in this respect. And perhaps even more heartened to observe that we were finding ways to meaningfully talk about why it's so often still difficult to act in solidarity with each other in reality, despite our intentions.

Mirka Makuchowska from KPH in Poland spoke very poignantly about us moving into creating "brave spaces," of being able to talk about hard things with honesty, compassion and care. Thinking back to The Gathering, it feels as it was the beginning of our collective brave space, one in which we got to naming the things that make us vulnerable, as individuals and as communities, as movements and organisations, in a way that was calm, collected and thoughtful.

What emerged from this is that, throughout the Gathering sessions, we went beyond the surface of simply saying we need to work together, and then saying it's difficult. We were explicit about what we need to be working on if we're collectively serious about doing this together within the movement and across the movements.

During the mid-week panel on rallying around our common purpose, Mirka also reminded us that, "If you're in a place where you have to defend yourself, it's going to be very hard to be open to hearing from others". This is very true. We must recognise that, in our movement to really be able to be there for others, to reach out to others and support them, you need to be in a good place yourself.

We also talked about how solidarity is about mutually respectful relationships, between individuals, between communities, between organisations, between different sectors. Not only must there be trust that others are not there to harm you, but also that they are there to hear and listen to you, that whatever you bring will be valued.

We must help open doors… and keep them open

One thing that really stood out for me came from Ilaria Todde of E*LC, who said that being an ally is not just opening the door for people, it's about making sure that you're there to keep the door open. That extra bit of keeping the door open is an image that we don't hear enough. Being an ally is not just about making the connections, it's also about being there when the person can't be there. It's about saying, "I'm going to be there to help you get there. But I'm also going to be there to help you hold this space, because I can."

Cross-movement solidarity is important, to take on structural inequalities

What brings different groups and organisations together as allies? This was another recurring question during the week. We've answered by saying shared values, shared perspectives, or in the words of EU Commission anti-racism coordinator, Michaela Moua, a shared belief believe in human rights and equality for everyone. We also named a shared experience of structural inequalities, which is both what most of our movements have in common and what is perhaps the most significant challenge to cross-movement solidarity.

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Indeed, none of our allyship and solidarity happens in a vacuum. It all happens in a society where there are a lot of structures that influence how we relate to each other. We have different advantages over each other, we have different access to resources and privileges, and there are profound structural inequalities that very often we have no control over and yet which deeply influence how we are able to relate to each other. As Freek Spinnenwijn, Director of FEANTSA, which works on homelessness and housing exclusion, asked, where do you begin building coalitions with others when you're made to feel like the issue you work on is dismissed as less important? In this context, how do you come to the table with an equal voice?

These are things that get in the way of many of us working together more, whether it's person-to-person, organisation-to-organisation, movement with movement. The world is pitching us as working against each other, competing against each other, and it's not always easy to see that, or to see a way through and out of that. Cross-movement allyship can't work without being honest about the challenges, and without being ready to take on these complicated discussions with each other.

It is my great hope that next year, we pick up these conversations — and many more that took place during our Gathering Online — in person once more for the ILGA-Europe annual conference in Sofia. **In the meantime, I will leave you with this thought, which has arisen for me from The Gathering:**

The world is in a state of extreme flux, and while this is a challenge for all of us, it is also an opportunity. It is helping re-centre us as a movement to the essence of solidarity, and as a result we're moving away from differences, from the things that threaten to divide us. So, let us restate our shared values and goals, our commitment to working together and to be there for each other, as people, as activists and organisations, and let us form new bonds with other movements with the goal of equality for all firmly in mind. Let us do it mindfully, with real intent to ask questions, name difficulties, and explore common ground with courage and honesty, so that we can continue on our journey towards a more equal, fair and just world for everyone.