Why we have a new policy on LGBTI sex work

Blog, Sex Work

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“Educate yourself.” That is one of the very first things that anyone who wants to get involved in activism is advised to do.

Before diving into organising activities or plotting advocacy strategies, it is essential to understand the experiences and elevate the voices of the communities you are cooperating with. And this wisdom is just as crucial for those who are experienced activists as it is for new allies. Sometimes, we in the LGBTI movement need to follow our own advice.

As I sat down to write this blog about ILGA-Europe’s brand new policy on LGBTI sex workers, I found an old notebook from 2013. This was the year of the **first workshop on LGBTI sex workers** at ILGA-Europe’s Annual Conference in Zagreb. I was reminded that there was quite a lot of trepidation around opening up the topic for discussion. *How would our member organisations react? Would there be a lot of heated discussions?*

To our great surprise, the reaction of most people attending this workshop was one of genuine interest – people in the movement wanted to know more about the lived experiences of LGBTI sex workers, and especially wanted to learn about what could be done to ensure their voices were heard.

Ever since then, the workshops organised with LGBTI sex workers every year at ILGA-Europe conferences have been constructive, engaging and empowering spaces. And yet… the nervousness around ILGA-Europe taking on the issue of sex work did linger on. **So, as an organisation, we embarked on journey to educate ourselves**.

Firstly, **we needed to learn**. (This included researching what existing human rights instruments protected the rights of sex workers and learning from human rights NGOs like Amnesty International that already adopted policy positions on the human rights of sex workers.) Also, **we wanted to engage** (stepping up our cooperation with LGBTI sex workers activists to ensure we understood their experiences better and enabled greater participation at ILGA-Europe’s events.) Above all, **we worked on creating space** to elevate the voices of LGBTI sex workers, so that our policy would reflect the demands of sex workers themselves.

In short, **this is not “Day 1” of ILGA-Europe’s engagement** on the issue. But we do hope that this policy will bring us to the next step in our thinking and our conversation, including:

- How can we be strong allies in calling for decriminalisation of sex work – where are there possible alliances to facilitate and strengthen? Where can we contribute to raising awareness amongst politicians and other NGOs?
- How can we enable greater inclusion of LGBTI sex workers and activists within LGBTI communities and organisations?
- How can we collectively take on bigger structural inequalities, including by looking more seriously at socio-economic inequalities within LGBTI communities?

Now, I could tell you that the main success of this five-year long learning process is that we have a solid organisational policy on the human rights of LGBTI sex workers. Of course that is an extremely positive thing, no doubt!

But, if you ask me, the most important part of this journey towards adopting this policy is the following: **we had to confront some uncomfortable realities about the LGBTI movement**.

We had to start acknowledging the **power dynamics** which do play a role in the trepidation around explicitly taking on the issue of LGBTI sex workers. We did have to name to the fact that political priorities of most organisations reflect the needs of more privileged groups within the communities, and that, as a result, the needs of sex workers rarely feature high on the movement's political agenda. We did have to be start being honest in recognising that, in our attempts to reach out to the "mainstream", we often push aside issues seen as controversial and which might complicate our alliance building with other groups.

We have also been reminded of how easy it is to remove important parts of our history by sidelining the crucial role of sex workers, at Stonewall for example. And the **LGBTI movement cannot afford to become complacent about our own shared history** – as the poet Maya Angelou (who wrote frankly about her own experiences as a sex worker) once said – *the more you know of your history, the more liberated you are*.

So, as ILGA-Europe publish our new policy position on LGBTI sex workers, I want to say a **heartfelt thank you to all the LGBTI sex workers' activists** who kept pushing us throughout the years. Thank you for asking hard questions and challenging deep-seated privileges. Thank you for your patience and your willingness to share your stories. Thank you for the courage to stand up in a large room of LGBTI activists to remind us that it was not okay for some within the LGBTI communities in Europe to still be criminalised.

Our priority remains to support the LGBTI movement and the most under-privileged parts of it and to ensure that all barriers leading to social exclusion are removed. We have learned a lot as an organisation over the past five years, and look forward to continuing to do so together.