

International Day Against Homophobia: Between the Western Experience and the Reality of Gay Communities

The anti-homophobia discourse is being used for other oppressive ends too

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The 17th of May is the International Day against Homophobia, and it is being celebrated for the seventh consecutive year now. This initiative was started by a French gay activist in 2004: May 17 was chosen as a date after the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from the international classification of diseases on the 17th of May 1993.

The word homophobia means the rational fear or hatred of homosexuality and homosexuals. The word comes from homo, meaning gay, and phobia, or fear, in Latin. This term also denotes prejudice and intolerance against homosexuals.

It is noticeable that, lately, there has been an increase in events and in queer groups celebrating this day around the world, including the Arab world. And even though homophobia and its psychological and social dangers are clear and common, there is also a disregard of the importance of discussing its limitations as a framework for change. We know these limitations through our experiences in Al-Qaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society in the ten years that we have been working with the homosexual community specifically and the Palestinian community generally.

The campaign for the international day against homophobia has come as a natural progression for LGBT movements in the west, where gay movements began organizing as movements in the late 1960s. From the womb of different revolutions of that time, from the struggles of Black people in America, and the protests against the war on Vietnam, emerged the radical LGBT movements that called for comprehensive social transformation. But like many other movements of that era, and for reasons that we will not be able to discuss in this article, LGBT movements were contained, filtered and mitigated. And thus they changed from radical movements to liberal ones that call for accepting gay people within society, instead of changing society; from movements that understand the relationship between the different struggles, to movements that are removed from their surroundings, contained inside identity politics, working on improving the situation of gays and lesbians within the existing system.

To achieve their goals, these movements have relied on publicity as a strategy and tactic for the past forty years, and have worked on spreading this experience through international institutions and initiatives. And along these lines came the birth of the initiative "International Day against Homophobia." And so today, the western gay calendar includes two key events: International Gay Pride and International Day against Homophobia. The first calls for public pride in individual homosexuality, while the other calls for global events that demands respecting LGBT people around the world; the focus of International Day against Homophobia is that "... homophobia is the reason for shame and must be dismantled and fought publicly." And we can see the duality here between showing pride in homosexuality and describing homophobia as a shame.

Calling an essentially western initiative an “international day” no doubt imposes a western vision and experience that is limited for other queer movements around the world. This initiative therefore is part of a tendency to generalize western experiences as the most correct and the sole experiences for others to be measured against. This ignores the particularities of different regions and the right of groups around the world to determine their own paths of struggle and progress, based on their local histories and experiences that are usually fundamentally different from western ones. For this initiative presumes that all gay and lesbian groups rely on publicity as their strategy, and that homophobia—like homosexuality, are obvious and are openly discussed issues everywhere, as it also presumes that it is possible to define and dismantle homophobia as a single phenomenon that is isolated from all other social phenomena.

Moreover, this initiative, which is part of a bigger framework of the struggle against homophobia, also ignores the larger political and social contexts of homophobia, and erases from the discourse the existence and the function of institutions that are the basis of repression and gender and sexual discrimination. And if we want to impose this initiative on our Palestinian Arab context, it would fail to connect homophobia to the heart of the problem, which is the fact that we are a society that does not talk about sexuality in the general sense, and the fact that ours is a patriarchal society, one that looks down upon women and all that is feminine. Using the discourse of homophobia ignores all the above-mentioned issues, just like it ignores our relationship and our existence, as a queer community, as part of these social institutions. Because we too, as gays and lesbians, are a “product” of the same social heteronormative upbringing, and we are homophobic like the rest of our society. We see that the mobilization of this ideological and strategic framework leads to reducing our role as individuals and groups, as it also whitewashes the image of the repressive institution that is at the heart of sexual and gender discrimination.

During the past ten years of our work, we have noticed that the dominant discourse around homophobia—be it a gay response to a homophobic charge or a homophobic discourse trying to publicly fight homosexuality, falls within the same cycle; this cycle reinforces the same power relations and determines what is “gay” and what is “backward”. This divides society into two groups only, the same dual polarized categorization that we are fighting in our larger discourse on sexuality (man/women, feminine/masculine). There is the homophobe, then, who is now the “backward” Palestinian society that persecutes homosexuality and that must feel shame, and on the other hand there are the gays and lesbians that must feel proud, supported by allies and friends with a progressive human rights discourse, which is, unfortunately, a liberal discourse most of the times. There is no space in this polarization for more complex and less public expressions and statements; more importantly, this discourse pushes back any attempt to analyze homophobia deeply enough for the sake of dismantling it.

And the worst thing is that this discourse prevents the gay and queer community from taking an effective role in the general social agenda, because of the claim that our oppression is different and particular. This is a part of the liberal discourse that ignores the analysis of power relations and prefers to look at every issue on its own. And thus it deals with the gay issue apart from all other social issues, turning a blind eye to the fact that the gender and sexual struggle, which includes the gay struggle, is an integral part of a wider resistance agenda that is not “particular” or “different”.

And on the international level, because of the superficiality of the anti-homophobia discourse, because of the absence of a clear naming of oppressive institutions, and because of the centrality of the duality between those who accept homosexuality (“the good”) and those who reject it (“the bad”), we see people and groups who are from these oppressive institutions, taking advantage of the discourse and riding the wave of “fighting homophobia” for other reasons that are usually oppressive as well. This is because the existing duality in their speech goes hand in hand with their liberal discourse that divides the world into either with us or against us. So we see the use of this

discourse from the American Right to justify the occupation of Iraq, including institutions that are concerned about LGBT rights. Here the duality of the U.S, the west, and the civilized friends of gay people is being used against the Iraqi people and government (who are homophobic). And that gives the Americans the right to not respect the will of the Iraqi people or of the Iraqi gay community to determine their own paths of struggle. Instead the love of gayness and “democracy” is to be imposed on them, in a ready-made package, sent to them “from America with love.” Israel too uses this discourse in its attempt to whitewash its crimes in front of the whole world, to delegitimize the Palestinian cause and to diminish the support towards Palestinians. So this polarity is used between the open western Israel that is accepting of homosexuality and the Palestinian society that suffers from homophobia and that rejects and fights homosexuality in all its manifestations. And since Israel is “the only western country that is LGBT-friendly” (rhyming with “the only democratic country in the Middle East”) and that is surrounded by a sea of “homophobes”, then it has the right to break human laws and fight those “barbarians” that surround her. And so we see the apartheid wall pinkwashed and described as a wall to protect Israel from a “homophobic” attack. At the same time, calls are made for putting an end to the support of Palestinians, because they are not “LGBT-friendly”.

In the end, we emphasize the limitations of this discourse, and the danger of importing it without questioning, deconstructing and analyzing it. We see that fighting homophobia, despite its importance, cannot take place through dualities and dividing society into those who accept gay people and those who are homophobic. Similarly, this fight cannot take place through dissociating homophobia from violence against all other minorities and repressed groups. We believe in the interconnections among the struggles of all these groups, from the Palestinian struggle to the feminist struggle to the queer struggle. We believe that social change cannot happen through isolating ourselves from society and criticizing it from a gay bubble that does not mix with the rest of society. Instead, we believe in the cohesion of these struggles to break the foundations of oppressive economic patriarchal systems that do not accept diversity of any kind.

Haneen Maikey and Sami Shamali

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* Haneen Maikey is a queer activist and the director of Al-Qaws; Sami Shamali is a queer activist from Al-Qaws