Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights: Strategic Alliances to Advance Knowledge and Social Change

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Abstract

The Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights research project involves working collaboratively with community partners, both local and international. This article presents the research currently being conducted and some of the challenges in undertaking knowledge engagement between academia and the community with the project's Canadian, African, and Caribbean partners by means of participatory action research (PAR). Specifically, the article gives examples of the project's work and explores the following topics: work with Global South partners and marginalized communities; strategic alliances; knowledge production and mobilization; and methodologies that have contributed to successes or challenges. Knowledge engagement at the international level, with its variances in resources, power, and autonomy, increases the demands of such work and the need for sensitivity in reaching the goals of the project and those of all of its stakeholders.

Résumé

Le projet Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights implique le travaille en collaboration avec des partenaires communautaires, à la fois locaux et internationaux. Cet article présente les recherches actuellement menées et des défis à entreprendre

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l'engagement de connaissances entre le milieu universitaire et nos partenaires communautaires canadiens, africains et des Caraïbes. Le document donne des exemples de notre travail et explore les thèmes suivants : travailler avec les partenaires du Sud planétaire et les communautés marginalisées; les alliances stratégiques; la production de connaissances et son mobilisation; les défis de la recherche participative; ainsi que des méthodologies qui ont contribué à nos succès ou défis. L'engagement de connaissances au niveau international avec des écarts en matière de ressources, de pouvoir et d'autonomie contribue aux défis d'un tel travail et le besoin de sensibilité pour atteindre les objectifs du projet et l'ensemble de ses parties prenantes.

Mots clés

Personnes LGBT; Droits de la personne; Partenariats de recherche entre les universités et communautés; L'échange de connaissances; La mobilisation des connaissances

Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights is a community-academic partnership, based out of York University, that seeks to address the intersections between criminalization, colonialism, sexuality, and gender. Envisioning is a five-year project (2011–16) that brings together an international, interdisciplinary team to research, document, and analyze four interrelated areas of lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) human rights: 1) laws that criminalize people on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, focusing on the Commonwealth; 2) contemporary movements to remove laws that criminalize people on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, focusing on selected countries of the Commonwealth; 3) the interaction between international treaty body human rights mechanisms and LGBT rights initiatives, focusing on the United Nations (UN); and finally, as persecution leads to flight, 4) issues affecting LGBT people seeking asylum in Canada.

Our thesis is that laws that criminalize LGBT people, whether enforced or not, contribute to state and social sanctioning of heterosexism, homophobia, and cisgenderism that marginalizes and oppresses these communities. And secondly, documentation by Human Rights Watch indicates that Global South LGBT organizations suffer from isolation and a lack of resources and are particularly in need of documentation of human rights violations affecting LGBT people.

Homosexual acts are still criminalized in 78 countries, and punishable by death in five countries and parts of two others (Paoli Itaborahy & Zhu, 2014). Homosexuality continues to be criminalized in 77% of Commonwealth nations, as a result of laws created by British colonization (Baudh, 2008). The first law criminalizing homosexuality enacted by the British was developed in 1860 in India.

However, there is a growing resistance to criminalization, and part of our research has been to document how organizations seeking to advance LGBT rights have grown significantly and are working for decriminalization and social change. Our research focuses on cases that challenge the British colonial-era laws that have been initiated in India, the Caribbean, and Africa. For example, in 2009, the Delhi High Court in India struck down, on constitutional grounds, section 377 of the Penal Code, which criminalized "carnal intercourse against the order of nature." However, in 2013, the Supreme Court quashed the Delhi High Court ruling (see Orinam section 377:

http://orinam.net/377/), recriminalizing homosexuality. Following that, in April 2014, the Supreme Court agreed to hear a curative petition from the Naz Foundation (India) Trust and other petitioners that challenges its decision. The outcome of the Indian 377 challenge will have far-reaching implications for similar cases proceeding in the Caribbean, Africa, and elsewhere. As part of the Envisioning work, the project's principal investigator Nancy Nicol, in partnership with Naz Foundation (India) Trust, created a feature documentary on this history, *No Easy Walk to Freedom* (Nicol, 2014).

Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights brings together a strategic alliance of 31 partners in 11 countries (Canada, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Belize, Guyana, Botswana, Kenya, Uganda, India, United States, and the Netherlands). These partners are comprised of three main groups: leading international NGOs who work on advancing LGBT rights in international work such as at the UN; grassroots partners in the Global South who are in the forefront of LGBT rights organizing locally and nationally; and Canadian partners who work with diverse populations from South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean in the areas of HIV prevention, LGBT rights and awareness, settlement and integration services, and supports for LGBT newcomers.

Our research goal is to foster an integrated approach across the research partnership. "Learning from each other" is a guiding principle of our work together. We are committed to working collaboratively to develop research and resources that will support the work of partners in Canada, India, the Caribbean, and Africa at the local and national level. Further, we seek to foster knowledge and skills exchange internationally and to foster international collaboration that will strengthen the capacity of partners in Canada and in the Global South.

This article first explains our participatory action research approach and our guiding principles, and then focuses on our participatory video projects in Africa and the Caribbean and our research in Canada. Given space constraints, the article does not discuss research and documentary film work in India as well as the work of the Law and Human Rights Mechanisms Research Team.

Participatory action research

The Envisioning project is informed by participatory action research (PAR) and participatory video. PAR is derived from community-based participatory research (CBPR) and takes a decidedly proactive approach to research, not merely for the sake of knowledge development, but more importantly to apply community development theory to research that merges into practice by benefiting affected participants (St. Denis, 2004). This approach comes from the school of thought that research has the added responsibility of not only contributing to social knowledge, but also effecting social change (Lather, 1986). Key to PAR is the role of participants, as researchers are expected to engage in a process of knowledge exchange between themselves and community-based participants (Minkler, 2005). Therefore, practical reasoning at the community level and scientifically constructed knowledge at the academic level are equally developed, neither claiming superiority (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

In essence, PAR is a co-generative form of research in which community-based participants bring first-hand, on-the-ground knowledge and experience to the process,

while academic-based researchers bring specialized, scientific-based research skills in addressing social concerns (Greenwood & Levin, 2004). What eventually develops in PAR is a merging of both community-based and academic-based participants in a form of research that results in community action for the benefit of the community the research is based on (Reitsma-Street & Brown, 2004). When undertaken in an ethically responsible manner, this type of research can have a dialectically empowering effect in that knowledge exchanged, developed, and produced by the contributions of both community-based and academic-based participants contributes to enriching both research and community development (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2004). PAR has the potential of creating interventionist outcomes to issues (Rhodes, Hergenrather, Duncan, Ramsey, Yee, & Wilkin, 2007; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010), developing new community services (Clements-Nolle & Bachrach, 2008), and addressing public policies (Minkler, 2010).

Participatory video, pioneered by Snowden and Low at the National Film Board's Challenge for Change Program in 1969, emphasizes the direct involvement of participants in the creation of a video. Participatory video and storytelling techniques can be effective ways to encourage dialogue (Milne, Mitchell, de Lange, 2012; White, 2003) and to create work by and about LGBT experiences and community histories, and these techniques are particularly effective when working with marginalized communities (Access Alliance Multicultural Health & Community Services, 2010; Dankmeijer, 2008).

Methods

Envisioning implemented a multi-methods approach informed by participatory action research and participatory video that includes qualitative interviews, focus groups, and legal research, as well as documentary film and participatory video. The research methodologies and activities were developed through an extensive participatory process involving the academic and community partners of the Canada Research Team.

To develop the Envisioning partnerships, the principal investigator (PI) travelled extensively to meet with and learn more about the work of potential partners in the Global South, and to develop partnerships on the project. In Canada, the PI used her knowledge of and contact with LGBT community leaders and organizations to convene a series of meetings to discuss and develop the project. This critical stage laid the foundation for equitable participation and helped to ensure that the research goals articulated in the funding proposal were informed by both Canadian and international partners and inclusive of their perspectives. It also helped to ensure that the project goals would produce research outcomes that would be useful to the community partners.

For the Canada Research Team, the first major activity was a roundtable convened in Toronto in February 2012 to consult with service providers, LGBT groups, and refugee peer support groups. The meeting's purpose was to engage the broader community working with LGBT refugees in the project and to use the roundtable discussion to inform the subsequent interviews and focus groups. The roundtable is now being followed by qualitative interviews and focus groups with service providers in health, social services, and settlement and integration sectors who work with LGBT asylum seekers and refugees. We are also conducting interviews and focus groups with LGBT

asylum seekers and refugees to learn more about their first-hand experiences. Academic and community partners have both been involved in creating the focus group questions and protocols, and in facilitating the actual discussions. The community partners took the lead in organizing and leading the focus groups and interviews, engaging their clients and colleagues to participate.

With regard to Envisioning work with Global South partners, as a first step in developing exchange and dialogue across the research team, Envisioning along with partners ARC International and United & Strong (Saint Lucia) held a conference in Saint Lucia, which brought together 70 participants from the Caribbean, India, Africa, the USA, Canada, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific, and enhanced North-South and South-South collaboration between Envisioning academic members of the research team and community partners. The conference sessions focused on 1) documenting human rights violations, training in human rights documentation, and best practices in regional and international documentation and monitoring; 2) sharing and developing decriminalization and related strategies from across the Caribbean and with participants from India, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific; and 3) supporting regional and international work in relation to international human rights mechanisms. As part of the conference, Envisioning provided video training to members of United & Strong, who then documented the conference proceedings, which resulted in an educational video on best practices in documenting human rights violations affecting LGBT peoples.

Envisioning employs participatory video as one of the means by which the project conducts research and gathers data in our work with Global South partners. In keeping with PAR, ethical production of participatory video involves community participants in the research and videography. This results in community action for the benefit of the community and allows community participants to determine what is included and not, and how and where the video is used. In addition to documentation of human rights violations and social movement organizing, Envisioning partners utilize participatory video as a means of community building, outreach and public education.

Envisioning governance and guiding principles

Envisioning's governance structure is composed of an Executive Team and five research teams: Africa, Caribbean, India, Canada, and Law and Human Rights Mechanisms. To encourage equitable participation of academic and community participants, each research team is chaired by a community chair and an academic chair, who also serve on the Executive. The Executive Team directs and coordinates the overall research and strategic direction of the project, while the research teams are responsible for the core research/creative work of Envisioning. Funding is provided to support the participation of each partner community organization, as well as the community chair.

Underscoring the governance structure of the Envisioning project is a set of guiding principles and ethics (Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights, 2012) developed by the PI and the Executive Team of Envisioning. Our research is premised on the recognition that how identities/expressions and sexuality/gender are policed is entangled with issues of power and inequity inherent to colonialism. We recognize that imbalances of power can undermine initiatives from the Global North to involve

Global South partners in generating locally appropriate knowledge. Recognizing this, the Envisioning members are committed to:

- An integrated anti-oppression analysis that recognizes racism, heterosexism, and sexism, as well as class and other forms of oppression and exploitation in relation to gender and sexually diverse populations;
- A critical perspective on globalization and neoliberalism and the imposition of heteronormativity and cisgenderism on indigenous forms of same-gender eroticism and gender identities;
- Knowledge exchange in the form of learning from each other; and
- Knowledge mobilization to stimulate social action. (Envisioning, 2012, p. 1)

Putting these commitments into practice involves Envisioning members avoiding harm either to contributors and/or participants in all aspects of our research. Members of Envisioning must ensure fair and ethical treatment of team members and research participants, which includes but is not limited to informed consent, confidentiality where applicable, and avoidance of undue intrusions into the lives of research participants (Envisioning, 2012).

Participatory video project with Global South partners

The focus of our research with Global South partners is twofold: 1) documenting and analyzing the ways in which LGBT people are impacted by criminalization and discrimination, and 2) documenting and analyzing the social movement histories that are seeking to advance LGBT human rights.

During the first two years of the project (2011–2012), Envisioning established research and videography units with seven partners: Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD), Guyana; United and Strong, Saint Lucia; Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG), Jamaica; United Belize Advocacy Movement (UniBAM), Belize; Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana (LeGaBiBo), Botswana; Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya (GALCK), Kenya; and Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), Uganda.

The first stage of the work was the establishment of a research position and two videographer positions at each partner organization, funded through the Envisioning project and supported by training sessions at the partner organization in all aspects of qualitative research, interviewing techniques, participatory video, ethical considerations, and all aspects of video production. After the initial training by the PI and two York MFA film students, Envisioning adopted a peer-to-peer model for the video training, with subsequent training given by community videographers. The peer-to-peer training model fostered exchange of knowledge and experiences gained through the work between the different countries participating in the partnership. As the work developed, Envisioning training and conferences incorporated training in video editing, a team meeting to review the research, and a community screening of work-in-progress hosted by the local partner. The process thus has a ripple effect of outreach to the broader community.

Video interviews are transcribed and translated where necessary, and the data is shared across the research teams for the development of academic papers and reports based

on the research outcomes. Video outcomes have been used for community screenings, outreach, and public education, and have been disseminated by various means including the Internet.

In developing the Envisioning partnerships in the Global South and in order to share knowledge, resources, and research across differently placed partners, the project sought to develop partnerships with organizations that are at the forefront of advancing LGBT rights and challenging laws that criminalize people on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Although Envisioning partners in the Global South have years of organizing history, they exist under conditions of criminalization and experience high levels of persecution.

As a participatory research project, Envisioning seeks the equitable and full contribution by community-based partners to all aspects of the project. However, Envisioning partners in Africa and the Caribbean face particular challenges in participating fully. For example, they are denied the right to register their organizations and as a result face challenges in accessing funding or government supports that NGO status would give them. Envisioning Botswana partner LeGaBiBo is pursuing a constitutional challenge to the denial of its request for registration, which has been denied on the grounds that registration would be aiding and abetting in a criminal act.

Given these realities, some key questions the project faced in developing partnerships with Global South LGBT groups were as follows: How do we develop equitable partnerships with Global South LGBT groups in the context of clear and pressing structural inequities? How do we address barriers to equal participation when working with under-resourced Global South partners? How do we guard against imposing research goals that divert much-needed resources away from pressing local issues? And, how do we safeguard the security of the research team members and partners and deal with safety issues impacting members of the research project?

To respond to these issues, Envisioning recognized the need to integrate into the project a commitment to providing funding and support to developing the research capacity of grassroots LGBT Global South partners. Through discussions with partners, we decided to emphasize capacity enhancement in documenting human rights violations, qualitative research methodology, and participatory video. At the same time, our research intersects with different cultures and languages internationally and with immigrant communities nationally. The incorporation of community-based knowledge through working closely with partners who are best informed on local and country conditions contributes to our ability to undertake this work. Envisioning partners, who are leading LGBT human rights organizations in their countries, are best positioned to understand local conditions and to be cognizant of and vigilant about safety of all participants. This is critically important given the profound human rights violations and threats of violence that LGBT peoples face in countries where we are working.

Envisioning partners are working within a context of criminalization, prejudice, and scarce resources, and in some countries this is compounded by high levels of violence. In the face of these challenges, they have demonstrated profound resilience and courage. For example, Caribbean partner J-FLAG continually moves their office to

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safeguard their membership and maintain security. Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) has been working to advance LGBT rights in the context of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill (AHB), which was first introduced for debate in the Uganda parliament in 2009 and passed into law in December 2013. President Yoweri Museveni signed the bill into law on February 25, 2014.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act introduces life imprisonment for both men and women for same-sex sexual conduct, and seven years' imprisonment for "promotion" of homosexuality. The passage of the act has led to incidences of violence and an escalation in arrests, intimidation, and blackmail. The day following the passage of the act, a local newspaper, the *Red Pepper*, published the names of 200 "Top Homosexuals" with their pictures, thus further putting LGBT activists at risk. The criminalization of "promotion" threatens the very existence of any human rights organization that defends LGBT rights. In May 2014, SMUG published a report citing 162 human rights violations since the passage of the act.

Envisioning partners negotiate between constraints and political or societal openings to conduct their work as well as their participation in the Envisioning project. Prior to the passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, SMUG produced two participatory videos as part of the project: *The Law, Discrimination and the Future* and *Hope for the Future* (SMUG & Envisioning, 2013a, 2013b). The group also produced two community-based videos for local screenings during the second Pride Day in Kampala, in 2013, and the International Day Against Homophobia in the same year. Currently, Envisioning is working with SMUG and Envisioning researchers in Uganda and Kenya to document the impact of AHB. This will include documentation of human rights violations in Uganda as well as the experiences of Ugandans who have fled and are in refugee camps in Kenya.

Envisioning partners have used the video outcomes from the project for public education and community mobilizing, including community screenings. At present we have 18 community videos on the Envisioning website. As part of World Pride in Toronto, Envisioning joined with the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA) to exhibit 35 video portraits at the CLGA from June to October 2014. A number of themes can be identified throughout this body of work that speak to profound discrimination and violence: random violence in public places; police harassment, extortion, and custodial rape; "corrective rape" against lesbians; exclusion and violence perpetuated by friends, family, and community; Church- and state-fuelled hate; employment discrimination; and loss of access to health care. However, we also hear stories of resistance: stories of family, friends, strangers who have acted as allies; parents confronting homophobic school officials; organizations developing security plans to protect LGBT persons; positive media opening up discussion on homosexuality; and LGBT people joining legal suits "so that no one will have to go through what I have gone through."

At the international level, in partnership with ARC International, Envisioning partners from African and the Caribbean video-documented government and NGO regional seminars on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) issues in Paris, Brasilia, New York, Nairobi, Kathmandu, and Oslo leading up to the 2013 UNHRC session in

Geneva. The resulting video documentary entitled *The Time Has Come* (31 min.) premiered at the UNHRC Session in Geneva on June 4, 2013, with a second screening at the UN in September 2013 (ARC International & Envisioning, 2013).

Canada Research Team

Focusing on Canada, Envisioning is examining how the Canadian government is responding to LGBT asylum issues through its refugee and immigration laws and social services. Canada is among the few countries that accepts refugee claims on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. While limited to Toronto, this study will lend itself to applications in other jurisdictions. Toronto is Canada's primary immigrant and refugee destination, receiving two to three times as many immigrants as Montreal and Vancouver (Newbold & DeLuca, 2007). It is also known to be the primary destination for LGBT newcomers in Canada (Cooney, 2007). The Envisioning project is documenting the obstacles to safety, dignity, and human rights for LGBT refugees and will provide new knowledge on the status of LGBT asylum seekers.

Specific to refugees and asylum seekers, it is important to note that the criminalization of same-sex sexual activity directly impacts risk of persecution. Whether regularly enforced or not, such state-sanctioned laws create homophobic and transphobic environments that render LGBT people vulnerable to various forms of abuse, such as violence, exploitation, and extortion by both state and non-state actors. State protection is then compromised for victims of this kind of violence, in terms of seeking out and receiving protection. Conversely, the absence of criminalization or the repeal of such laws should not be assumed to mean there is no risk or threat of persecution, or that LGBT peoples can avail themselves of state protections. It is vitally important to recognize that legality represents but one component of a complex scenario in which risk of persecution may still exist. This has serious implications for refugee determination hearings (Millbank & Bruce-Jones, 2013), especially with the introduction of the designated countries of origin, or so-called safe countries list, and the significant shortening of hearing timelines adopted through the recent passage in 2012 of Bill C-31, the "Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act" (Government of Canada, 2012).

In recent years, immigrant and refugee serving agencies, along with LGBT and HIV/AIDS education and prevention groups in Canada have reported increasing numbers of LGBT refugees and immigrants seeking support. Research indicates that the trauma experienced by a large portion of LGBT refugees may not be well understood by institutions (Brotman & Lee, 2011; Cooney, 2007; Crumlish & O'Rourke, 2010; Lee & Brotman, 2011; Millbank, 2005; Morgan, 2006). Our current work is contributing to the development of knowledge in this burgeoning area of research. Further, the passage of Bill C-31 has raised concerns from LGBT and HIV/AIDS groups that the changes will negatively impact LGBT refugees coming to Canada. Our research has been documenting the particular impacts on LGBT asylum seekers.

With respect to Canada, diverse social service, LGBT, and immigrant-serving groups are responding to increasing numbers of LGBT asylum seekers. Academic and community-based researchers have identified gaps in knowledge about the specific health consequences of settlement for LGBT refugees and immigrants (Cooney, 2007;

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Council of Agencies Serving South Asians, 2010] LGBT asylum seekers do so under conditions of considerable distress: 45% of lesbians and 24% of gay men report having been exposed to physical and/or sexual violence and assault as part of their claims in Canada (Berg & Millbank, 2009). Research indicates that infringement on human rights can continue in less explicit forms as part of the refugee claim process and settlement, which can be re-traumatizing (Lee & Brotman, 2011). Our preliminary findings corroborate these results, which assists us in determining the implications for immigration/refugee policies and services.

As part of a participatory action research project, the Canada Research Team uses a collaborative approach in all research design and implementation. However, without a designated project coordinator, and with academic and community team members who have many other roles and duties, ensuring a timely execution of the research and a reasonable distribution of work can be a challenge. Clear communication about realistic timelines and workloads has been important, and has improved as team members have strengthened their relationships. In this regard, the length of the research project (five years) has been an important benefit by providing the time for team members to get to know each other and to build solid working relationships. In addition, the very process of partnership in determining a comfortable fit during research design can create challenges for both academic researchers and community partners. The former often seek consistency in data gathering methods (e.g., focus groups) whereas the latter may present sensitivities in which the commonly accepted method is not appropriate for all (e.g., doing some one-on-one interviews instead). The Canada Research Team has been able to successfully negotiate this issue through much discussion and informed compromises that take into account academic rigour as well as organizational and client needs.

Finally, professionally and ethically, Envisioning strives to establish mutually beneficial lateral goals in addition to the project's research goals. For example, community partners and researchers are eager for tools that can be practically applied in their service provision work, whereas academic researchers require much time and commitment from service providers to come to the stage of implications and recommendations post–data gathering and analyses to ensure verifiable conclusions. This has been a process in development, and one that we will continue to explore as we complete the final stages of the research. Simultaneously, Envisioning has contributed to other forms of engaged scholarship, such as panel discussion at conferences and Envisioning-hosted events.

Discussion

Conducting research of this nature has its challenges both at the governmental and community levels. First, what needs to be acknowledged is the power differential between the state (government) and the community (participants), the latter especially regarding human rights defenders in nations in which same-sex desires and acts, and variant gender identities and expressions are not tolerated. It needs to be emphasized that this work is being done in the context of ongoing human rights violations and difficult circumstances affecting the lives of participants in the research and partners of Envisioning. Although there is growing attention in international human rights work

to LGBT rights in recent years, Envisioning partners and team members, particularly those in the Global South, face violence and persecution on a daily basis.

While the Canada Research Team does not face some of the difficulties that its international partners face, it nevertheless has its difficulties. For example, the current legislative, funding, and political context has been a challenge for the community. At the same time that significant changes to the refugee determination system have been introduced through the previously mentioned Bill C-31 (Government of Canada, 2012), many levels of government are pursuing an "austerity agenda," and a number of federally funded settlement agencies in Ontario have experienced significant cuts to their budgets. In addition, there is a palpable "advocacy chill" in the non-profit sector, and many non-profits are concerned about the potential impact on their funding should they speak out (Mulé, 2011). Finally, immigrant and refugee serving agencies that specialize in providing services to LGBT clients have been historically underfunded (Smith, 2005). The result is that community partners are under-resourced, experiencing staff turnover, and dealing with an untested refugee hearing system that presents particular challenges for LGBT asylum seekers. While Envisioning financially supports community partners' participation, this support cannot meet the needs of an already under-resourced organization. This context has significant implication for the ability of the Envisioning partners to fully participate in carrying out the work of the project. The reality of knowledge engagement and project management, in the context of over-extended academics working with busy under-resourced community partners, calls for much patience and creativity in meeting the project's goals.

Whether it is work with participants in the Global South or those now living in Canada, engaged knowledge production through participatory action research with the objective of social change requires much sensitivity to power dynamics, ethics, resource distribution, ongoing support, and equitable knowledge exchange. Balancing all of these important components of PAR speaks to the very process of knowledge engagement. All participants have had to and continue to be cognizant of these crucial components in order to further the work of the Envisioning research project. Vigilance to this process is necessarily time-consuming, as inevitably differences between participants arise and need to be worked through. Yet the value of processing such discrepancies is the very nature of the work of PAR and engaged scholarship, for it is the knowledge exchanged between participants that furthers the research and its emancipatory goals.

Conclusion

The full participation of the community partners and researchers in the designing and implementation of the research and participatory video projects has enhanced the overall capacity of the Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights project to develop research that is sensitive to local, regional, and international conditions. Further, partners are strategically placed to bring research outcomes, including policy recommendations, to the attention of local administrations, national governments, and international bodies. Through partnerships at both a local and international level, the Envisioning project is successfully engaging community and academic partners together in the creation and distribution of vital knowledge about the experiences of

LGBT peoples and asylum seekers. Despite harsh conditions in the Global South and systemic challenges in the Global North, the careful navigations required of participatory action research have contributed to developing the capacities of both sides to continue creating knowledge that is making real change.

Participatory Videos

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Creating Local and Global Change: The Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights Project

What is this research about?

The Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights project is a community-academic research partnership with stakeholders in Canada and the Global South. Its partners work at local, national and international levels to look at:

- The lived experiences of LGBT people in selected Commonwealth countries, and for those seeking asylum in Canada.

- The impact of discrimination on their lives.

- The work of human rights leaders and community groups dealing with LGBT (including refugees) rights, supports, and services.

- The interaction between international human rights mechanisms and LGBT human rights initiatives.

However, there are challenges with working with LGBT partners in the Global South, including isolation, lack of resources, as well as threats of violence and persecution due to criminalization and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Envisioning seeks to address these inequities by providing resources and building capacity in research and documentation.

What you need to know:

Community-university research partnerships can enhance both the local and global capacities. All partners who participate have an active role in creating and applying new knowledge that is meaningful and creates real change.

What did the researchers do?

The Principal Investigator (PI) travelled to various countries to build partnerships with local groups and leaders for LGBT rights in Africa, the Caribbean and India and reached out to a network of community-based groups and social services agencies representing diverse communities in the Greater Toronto region. The project brought together 31 partners from 11 countries together, and developed the project research goals through a collaborative process.

An Executive Committee and five research teams (Africa, Caribbean, India, Canada, and Law and Human Rights Mechanisms) were formed as a governance structure for the project. Community partners are provided with funding to support their participation in the project and a Community Chair on each research team.

The Envisioning project uses a multi-methods approach, framing the research activities

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through Participatory Action Research. They use a wide range of tools including: qualitative interviews, focus groups, legal research, and documentary and participatory video.

What did the researchers find?

Participatory video with global south partners

Envisioning worked with community partners to build capacity in documenting human rights violations and to document the work of human rights defenders and LGBT organization, providing workshops in qualitative research, and equipment and training participatory video. So far, research and videographer units have been set up with seven community partners based in Africa and the Caribbean. Their work has resulted in a documentary called The Time Has Come, which premiered at the UN in Geneva in June 2013; and a series of video shorts on the lives and experiences of LGBT people in St Lucia, Guyana, Botswana, Kenya and Uganda. Envisioning has also brought international participants in the project together in regional conferences in the Caribbean and Africa, to create international dialogue on LGBT human rights.

Canada research team

The researchers are documenting and researching barriers for LGBT refugees. As an initial step they held a roundtable with LGBT service providers, and refugee support groups to engage others with the Envisioning project and to consult on needs and goals to inform the research project. Follow up interviews and focus groups are underway currently, to learn more about LGBT refugee experiences. The health impact of settlement barriers for LGBT refugees is also being explored.

How can you use this research?

Scholars doing research that has impact for both local and global communities may find this research useful. It offers important insights on the barriers and potential change that can come with community-university research that is global and that builds long term and ongoing networks.

About the Researchers

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