

Arab LGBTQ Subjects: Trapped Between Universalism and Particularity?

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REBEKKA MUTH, MAY 11 2019

The so-called 'rainbow flag' incident in Egypt in September 2017 put the violation of LGBTQ[1] rights of countries in the Middle East and North Africa[2] back on the international agenda and created a massive outcry. After displaying a rainbow flag at a concert of the Lebanese band Mashrou Leila, a month-long crackdown with dozens arrested started in Egypt. Whereas Western Human Rights Organizations criticized President Al-Sisi for violating and abusing inherent human rights, he justified his means with preserving the culture and history based on the idea of "protecting Egypt from bad people" (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 41). LGBTQ individuals throughout the MENA region face oppression, marginalization and a hostile environment on a daily basis. Isolation, abuse, psychological terror, state-sponsored repression and anal examination are frequently mentioned words describing the situation of LGBTQ individuals there (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018a; Mesahat Foundation for Sexual and Gender Diversity, 2016). Same-sex conduct is penalized in all of these countries, except Jordan. Iran, Saudi-Arabia, Yemen, and Iraq criminalize it with the death penalty (Carrol & Mendos, 2017, pp. 37–40). According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2017), the number of people arrested under the law of 'habitual practice of debauchery'[3] increased dramatically in Egypt in recent years. In the period from October 2013 to March 2017, 232 people were arrested and prosecuted. The severe crackdown under the rule of president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi finally culminated in the 'rainbow flag' incident in 2017.

By contrast, LGBTQ rights have been gradually enshrined in national legislations and put on the agenda of the United Nations. In 2006, human rights experts drafted the Yogyakarta principles of sexual orientation and gender identity, which were supplemented by the Yogyakarta Principles plus 10 (YP+10) in 2017 emphasizing "the recognition of the distinct and intersectional grounds of gender expression and sex characteristics" (ARC International, 2018). The first principles were signified by deputies of 25 countries. 21 countries[4] were signatories to the YP+10 principles, none of them from the MENA region. Similar resolutions to the UN have also been opposed by many countries and have never been adopted by the General Assembly. Resistance to LGBTQ related issues on a global scale was inter alia propelled by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (Birdal, 2015, p. 124). In this respect, Picq and Thiel (2015, p. 14) point to a persistent split between more tolerant countries and more cultural conservative countries in global forums such as the UN. The diffusion and implementation of LGBTQ rights on an international level is mainly put forward by North American and European countries, which in turn creates pushbacks of non-Western states. They emphasize their local history and culture while questioning the supremacy of universal concepts of sexuality deriving from the West (Birdal, 2015, p. 124). The recent crackdown in Egypt, depicted in the beginning, illustrates one example of how these pushbacks can look like in the MENA region.

Considering the embeddedness of LGBTQ rights issues on a global scale, LGBTQ from the MENA region find themselves in an ambiguous position between alleged universal values stemming from the West and particular notions and concepts in their homelands. Therefore, this thesis aims at demonstrating the ambiguous situatedness of LGBTQ individuals in the MENA region and evaluates the way they cope with tensions between universalism and particularity. The analysis of universalized concepts and policies, inter alia promoted by Human Rights Watch (HRW), contribute to critically engage with the work of international organizations and its effects on local and transnational activism. For this purpose, I will analyze the homocolonialist outlook of the HRW campaign 'No Longer Alone' (2018b). Following Massad (2007), HRW is a part of the so called Gay International and acts as a distributor

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of Western concepts. The evaluation of the video campaign demonstrates the inscription of Western universal concepts that are being deployed and diffused in a colonial manner. In a second step, I will compare these characteristics to daily life experiences of LGBTQ subjects from Arabic speaking countries. This section carves out at which point the ambiguous situatedness becomes particularly evident – in most cases the adherence to Western coined terms such as ‘coming out’. The comparison is carried out through a qualitative content analysis of the reports ‘Audacity in Adversity’ (Human Rights Watch, 2018a) and ‘Stories about Homophobia and Transphobia from North Africa’ (Mesahat Foundation for Sexual and Gender Diversity, 2016). With regard to Birdal, I will in the end point to pan-Arabic LGBTQ movements, presenting one solution of how to deal with the ambiguity of Arab LGBTQ subjects. Despite the general utilization of the term MENA region and Arab LGBTQ individuals, I consider the Middle East and North Africa as a heterogenous, changeable construct rather than a homogenous, monolithic agent. This thesis aims to show general trajectories within the Arabic speaking countries but is aware of differences in terms of legal status, societal norms and state structures.

Bringing Sexuality into International Relations

Sexuality studies are quite new phenomena in the field of International Relations since Queer Theory is closely tied to post-structuralism which, for a long time, was refused in American mainstream political sciences (Picq & Thiel, 2015, p. 3). However, a body of literature evolved in recent years and found its way into IR debates. Considering the existing literature, a division between LGBTQ studies and Queer Theory appears. The latter refuses a clear referent object such as LGBTQ individuals, emphasizes the fundamental contingency of the term ‘queer’ and can be located in post-structuralist theory. The former assumes pre-given subjects, in this case LGBTQ individuals, that strive for equal human rights. This approach is tied to liberationist directions of sexuality studies with a clear focus on rights seeking subjects (Richter-Montpetit, 2018, pp. 222–223). Yet, the divide is not always as clear-cut as Picq and Thiel (2015, p. 2) demonstrate. They state that LGBTQ perspectives are an integral part of global politics and can not only serve as case studies with a liberationist background; they also contribute to IR theory making based on the foundations of Queer Theory. Generally, bringing sexuality studies into the field of International Relations aims to challenge heteropatriarchal and cissexist ontologies underlying IR. As part of critical theories of IR, sexuality studies are closely linked to postcolonial, ethnicity and feminist studies.

Besides the inflationary usage of ‘queer’ as an umbrella term for non-normative sexualities in recent years, the academic value of Queer Theory, and thus ‘queering’ certain issues, lies in its radical stance towards all norms as this quote, going back to Seidman, illustrates: “Queer is a verb, not an identity, and the aim is to ‘queer society’ by fully recognizing difference to the point of declaring war on all norms, all authorities” (Beasley, 2005, p. 173). Consequently, in the following, ‘queer’ is to be understood as an analytical category of IR. Rather than adding sexuality as a further component to hard IR issues, queer IR analyzes how international power structures are shaped by sexual norms and logics. The rejection of a clear referent object and the commitment to the radical contingency of the term ‘queer’ underlie this approach (Richter-Montpetit, 2018, p. 222). Whereas classical mainstream IR theories focus on the state, rather than the private, queer research emphasizes the personal realm (Picq & Thiel, 2015, p. 3). By challenging modes of power normalization of sexuality and gender and through the adherence to a contingent subject, Queer Theory goes beyond the normal and opens space to investigate normalized power relations on a broader scale – going beyond national borders but also going beyond the sexual. In other words, Queer Theory enables research about non-normativities that are not reduced to the homosexual but can be extended, for instance, to the Muslim terrorist as a non-normative heterosexual, yet perverted, figure (Richter-Montpetit, 2018, p. 225). Discussing Queer Theory in IR also brings up the question of case studies. For a long time, there was and still is a prevailing divide between the global North producing theory and the global South serving as case studies. Picq and Thiel (2015, p. 10) explicitly argue in favor of breaking through this divide by deriving and thinking theory from the case studies’ side. This is explicitly reflected in the purpose of writing their volume ‘Sexualities in world politics – how LGBTQ claims shape international relations’ (Picq & Thiel, 2015). The pluralistic framework of the book provides a broad range of different approaches towards LGBTQ issues and broadens the scope of sexualities studies in IR. The common angle of all chapters lies in the emphasis of LGBTQ politics between the universal and the particular (Picq & Thiel, 2015, p. 10).

Changing Perspectives – Approaches from a ‘Non-Western’ Standpoint

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From Gay International to Homonationalism

Josef Massad (2007) presented a groundbreaking critique and indictment of LGBTQ politics centered in the global North with his book 'Desiring Arabs'. His analysis stems from a postcolonial angle and the critique of the Western gay movement is based on a comparison to the missionary feminist movement that imposes Western norms and values in a colonial manner on countries in the global South. Massad argues that this missionary task in the case of the gay movement is inscribed in major gay and lesbian organizations such as ILGA[5] and IGLHRC[6], as well as other human rights NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch. He calls "these missionary tasks, the discourse that produces them, and the organizations that represent them [...] the Gay International" (Massad, 2007, p. 161). The Gay International assumes homosexuality as an ontological, universal category and derives its alleged legitimacy to rescue homosexuals, deprived of human rights and sexual freedom, from this claim. Moreover, Massad argues that the Gay International curbs and suppresses same-sex desires that do not comply with Western narratives. Moreover, it produces homosexuals in areas where they did not exist before. Following this argument, the Gay International destroys regional and ethnocentric notions of sexual identity by imposing its own binary narrative. Gay and lesbian organizations from the USA and Europe consider themselves as saviors of the oppressed Arab gays and aim to transform them into subjects who identify with Western terms of homosexuality, coming out and being gay (Massad, 2007, p. 163). The Occident-Orient binary of saviors versus victims without agency is maintained. Generally, Massad's work paved the way for critical research with regard to the entanglement of LGBTQ rights in the global North and many current scholars utilize his work as a starting point (see Birdal, 2015; Rahman, 2015; Rao, 2010, 2015). Yet, his concept did not remain without critique. On the one hand, Rahman (2015), whose theory will be examined further below, criticized him for attributing the possession of modernity solely to the West and for assuming cultural exclusivity between East and West. Rao (2010), on the other hand, challenged Massad's notion of Western imperialism as the single reason for LGBTQ struggles in non-Western countries.

Like Massad, Puar also affiliates with the critique of the lesbian and gay liberal rights discourse that reinforces the progressive West versus the traditional East dichotomy. She states that the acceptance of gays and lesbians became a tool by which progress and modernity of a country are measured. What Massad calls the Gay International, Puar defines as the "human rights industrial complex [...] that continues to proliferate Euro-American constructs of identity" (2013, p. 338). However, Puar's homonationalism concept does not solely concentrate on this realm. It encompasses a broader dimension of global LGBTQ politics. Homonationalism is a global phenomenon rather than individual state practice. In other words, it is an analytical category to analyze how ideologies of homonormativity are tied to nationalism and how the imposition of LGBTQ rights in non-Western countries works. Hence, it is about the "reorientation of the relationship between state, capitalism and sexuality" (Puar, 2013, p. 337). Puar sees homonationalism as an inherent facet of modernity by which homosexual bodies are privileged over others in terms of citizenship, protection and human rights. The category homonationalism evaluates how and why the characteristic to be LGBTQ friendly became desirable and henceforth an indicator of progress and modernity. The pinkwashing campaign of the Israeli government is one example of how homonationalism is deployed in practice. The case illustrates that practices of homonationalism and homonationalism itself have to be located in a broader global and historical context. The Israeli pinkwashing case, for instance, is situated in the historical context of settler colonialism, the protection of certain victim populations and the discourse of Islamophobia since 9/11. Israeli LGBTQ bodies became a symbol for progress and democracy whereas colonial settler politics as well as the violent occupation of Palestine pass unheeded (Puar, 2013, p. 338). Both approaches, the Gay International and homonationalism, were adopted by Momin Rahman who developed a new theory, resting on the key insights of the previous concepts (Rahman, 2014, p. 279).

Homocolonialism and Perspectives from the Middle East

Puar conceptualizes homonationalism as an analytical category with regard to policies of countries from or attached to the global North. Rahman acknowledges this but links his theory to countries and phenomena in the Arab world. The relation between the previous theories and his geographical and cultural connection becomes apparent in his definition of homocolonialism. He describes it as "the deployment of homonormative nationalism within a dialectic of respectability/otherness in a classic colonializing mode, directed at "traditional" Muslim cultures as homophobic non-Western "others" that need to be civilized or modernized but also constructing "home" Western normative queer

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identities" (Rahman, 2014, p. 279). The first reiterated component in this classification is the construction of "home" Western normative identities. Massad and Puar situate this process in the Gay International or the human rights industrial complex. Rahman joins this line by strongly criticizing the teleology of the international gay liberation movement and liberal human rights discourse (Rahman, 2015, p. 97). With respect to Western normative identities, Rahman introduces his key concept of Western exceptionalism. Western exceptionalism is a result of the triangulation of sexual politics between East and West, defining the East as opposing modernity and illustrating the West as the only region where LGBTQ rights can be fulfilled. LGBTQ rights are thus positioned at the climax of Western exceptionalism (Rahman, 2014, p. 279). In other words, Western exceptionalism is tied to the notion of traditional Muslim cultures as homophobic non-Western 'others'. The prioritization of the West is performed through the deployment of homonationalist practices, according to Puar's theory. By linking LGBTQ acceptance to modernity, the binary of Muslim cultures that have not yet achieved modernity is reinforced. The development of LGBTQ rights as markers of modernity and progress and the inevitably related question of 'how do you treat your homosexuals?' thus calls academia to reflect about absence and presence of LGBTQ rights (Rahman, 2014, p. 278). Furthermore, the West's legitimacy to challenge Muslim 'traditional' lifestyle is derived from the former's alleged superiority and exceptionalism with respect to LGBTQ rights. Rahman also remarks that not solely countries from the West benefit from Western exceptionalism and the triangulation process. Muslim governments may profit from this process as well by promoting a heteronational picture of their state by using homocolonialism as a tool against the West (Rahman, 2014, p. 283).

Besides the conceptualization of Western exceptionalism and homocolonialism, Rahman digs deeper into the origins of homophobia within Muslim cultures. He argues that current Muslim LGBTQ ontology is not merely produced through Western colonialization, it is rather shaped by Western examples, a globalized discourse and local histories (Rahman, 2015, p. 101). In this realm, he questions the modernization thesis as the only solution for Muslim homophobia. The modernization thesis allocates modernity only to the West and assumes that all modernization processes would lead to a Western understanding of sexual identity. Muslim cultures would just have to 'catch-up' with Western modernity. Rahman emphasizes a culturalist approach, which was fostered by sexuality studies in the social constructivist wave, to explain why Muslim homophobia and LGBTQ struggles in countries of the Middle East are more complex than reducing it to modernity. Firstly, there are different socioeconomic components of wealth, democratic governance, and secularization in the Middle East than in Western Europe or the USA. Secondly, the conditions for LGBTQ politics in the Middle East are fundamentally different from the gay liberation movement in the West in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the discourse about LGBTQ rights is already 'occupied' and politicized by Western states and NGOs. Finally, LGBTQ struggles in the Middle East are to be interpreted within the framework of Western exceptionalism and the global discourse of islamophobia (Rahman, 2015, pp. 95-96).

The above illustrated that homophobia and LGBTQ struggles in the Middle East cannot be merely explained by Western imperialism. They are a product of complex historical, societal and economic configurations on a global, regional and local level. Birdal enlarges this notion and elaborates on the tension between the particular and the universal. He asks how and when LGBTQ movements in the Middle East, or in his case in Turkey, can be successful. Birdal argues that universalizing and particularizing arguments are used by opponents and proponents of the international recognition of LGBTQ rights. Whereas certain fields such as economy, statecraft, science, and technology are recognized as universal and adoptable from the West, other domains such as culture, religion and family are emphasized in a particular way as important foundations for national identity constructions (Birdal, 2015, p. 128). Birdal illustrates this by analyzing the identity construction of the AKP in Turkey. Democracy is underlined in a universalist manner whereas tradition is treated in a particularistic conservative way. Following Rahman's theory of homocolonialism, Birdal argues that as long as LGBTQ politics act within the postcolonial discourse of Western superiority versus Eastern traditionalism, Western exceptionalism will be reproduced and LGBTQ movements will be subjected to the interpretation of state authorities and bound to political oppression. As a solution, he calls for 'counterhegemonic interventions' with a strategy of building alliances with antisystemic social movements (2015, p. 128). For this, the international LGBTQ movement can be an important resource. Yet, building alliances with local actors remains the crucial challenge. In the same manner, Rahman calls for localized experiences of transnational sexualities (2015, p. 101) and prioritizes local or transnational alliance building over the international level (2014, p. 281). Such transnational alliances could then result in "an understanding of cross-communal solidarity that allows for alliances without denying differences" (El-Tayeb, 2012, p. 90).

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To gradually approach the empirical analysis, I want to draw attention to Khalid's (2015) article. It analyzes gender and sexuality in the Arab spring and provides important geographical and theoretical connecting points for my work. Khalid states that gender and sexuality were crucial parts of the media discourse about the Arab spring, reiterating the picture of the civilized West and the backward East. The treatment of LGBTQ people particularly became an indicator for the East's backwardness (Khalid, 2015, p. 170). At the same time, LGBTQ movements played a major role in non-institutional activism in the Arab spring and one could speak about the Arab spring as a constituting moment for national and transnational LGBTQ movements (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 27). Khalid refers to two important fields that I will address in my empirical analysis. At first, she deeply criticizes the postcolonial discourse about peripheral groups in the Middle East such as LGBTQ individuals. As mentioned in the introduction, the marginalization of LGBTQ persons exacerbated in the years after the Arab spring and LGBTQ individuals face a severe opposition. This attracted human right activists and organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, calling for liberation and equal rights for LGBTQ individuals in the Arab World. Massad, Puar and Rahman criticize the Gay International particularly for this behavior. Therefore, I want to analyze the homocolonialist potential of the Human Rights Watch campaign 'No Longer Alone' which began in April 2018. Khalid further mentions the increased awareness of LGBTQ rights in the countries of the Middle East and the formation of local and transnational LGBTQ movements, demonstrating their agency through street protests or online campaigns (Khalid, 2015, pp. 172-174). In this context, I want to draw on Birdal's work by pointing out current trajectories of LGBTQ activism in the Middle East with particular regard to tensions that occur between the universal liberationist approach of the Gay International and particular notions of activism within the Arab world.

Empirical Analysis

Research Setting

As the major goal of this analysis is to question established norms of LGBTQ activism and to illustrate at which point this normalization becomes critical, I situate my work within Queer Theory which can be "any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations" (Browne & Nash, 2012, p. 4). The analysis of the video campaign in the first part requires some preliminary notes since visual arts are rarely used and theorized as empirical material in International Relations. Both Hansen (2011, 2015) and Bleiker (2015) point to a lack of methodological and theoretical approaches of pictorial issues in IR. This is, on the one hand, due to the remaining divide between qualitative and quantitative methods and, on the other hand, due to a deep critique of mix-method approaches, implying to give up fixed criteria to classify the world and thus sliding into an arbitrary judgement of the world and its phenomena (Bleiker, 2015, p. 875). Bleiker and Hansen try to fill this gap by providing a theoretical framework for the analysis of images and icons in global world politics. The methodological challenge arises from certain characteristics, inherent to images: they have the capacity to work internationally, and across mental and physical boundaries, they are open to interpretation with no definite answer, they work through emotions – a field that was kept to the private previously – and they are subjected to translation processes from images to words (Bleiker, 2015, p. 873). Furthermore, Bleiker classifies the visual analyses within his mixed-method framework, ranging from ethnography and semiotics to discourse analysis and experimental surveys, into three parts: 1) the production of the image, 2) the message of the image itself, 3) the perception of the audience. The subsequent analysis will focus on the first and the second part. Analyzing the third dimension – the personal perception of the image – exceeds the capacity of my research setting since fieldwork with recipients of the video would be required. However, by analyzing the Human Rights Watch report and the Mesahat short stories, based on a classical content analysis of written material, I try to cover the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in the Middle East from a textual rather than a visual point of view. Whereas Hansen (2015) especially focuses on certain icons such as the hooded man of Abu Ghraib or single images such as the Mohammad cartoon in the context of visual securitization (2011) in her analysis, the Human Rights Watch video will not be analyzed as a conglomeration of single images. Rather, the video as a whole is to be understood as a visual entity that works, like images, "in complex ways, criss-crossing a range of geographical and temporal boundaries" (Bleiker, 2015, p. 884).

Human Rights Watch campaign: 'No Longer Alone'

In April 2018, Human Rights Watch in cooperation with the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE)

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published the video campaign 'No Longer Alone', featuring LGBTQ activists from the Middle East and North Africa who describe "their journeys of self-acceptance" (Human Rights Watch, 2018b) to support and encourage fellow LGBTQ individuals from Arabic speaking countries in the MENA region. Generally, the video works in a prosaic way and no additional images are presented than the activists speaking. The focus on the activists themselves is also reflected in the way they are portrayed. Either their face and body or solely the body with a hidden face is shown and sometimes the shooting location, a room with a white sheet and some lamps is displayed. This mundane setting and the accompanying instrumental music emphasize the activists' words and stories. It highlights the characteristic of visual elements working through emotions. The arc of suspense of the video, starting by introducing the interviewees, then turning to hardships they faced which finally culminates in their liberation of being out, is furthermore supplemented with suitable music stressing either the hardships (1:20 – 3:15 min[7]), the positive outcome of their self-acceptance journey (3:16 – 5:07) or the encouragement of fellow LGBTQ persons in the Arab world (5:08 – 6:31). The neutral outlook of the video conveys the message that identifying with LGBTQ is nothing abnormal or special and thus supports the aim of the HRW campaign to "examine all that is possible beyond victimhood" (2018b).

Following Picq & Thiel (2015, p. 2) and Massad (2007, p. 161), Human Rights Watch plays, besides ILGA and IGLHRC, a major role as an international LGBTQ organization and can thus be considered as part of the Gay International, or in Puar's words, as part of the human rights industrial complex (2013, p. 338). Massad argues that the Gay International epitomizes the enlightened Occident and upholds the Occident – Orient dichotomy by drawing its legitimacy to rescue Arab LGBTQ individuals from the assumed universality of the concept of homosexuality. With the quote stated above to "examine all that is possible beyond victimhood", HRW reassures its goal as a Western enlightened organization to lift LGBTQ people from the Arab world out of victimhood. This post-colonial savior narrative which is commonly used in policies of Western countries (see Jungar & Peltonen, 2015) is inscribed in the production of the video. However, the savior narrative is not tied to the activists themselves but to HRW as a Western organization. In a more radical way, one could argue that the LGBTQ activists from the Arab world are utilized as an outreach tool for HRW in the video to impose its own notion of sexual identity based on the import/export model of a linear progressive narrative of coming out tied to modernization and democratization. In this liberal rights discourse, strongly linked to ideas of the first and second wave of sexuality studies, the treatment of LGBTQ persons in the Arab world becomes an indicator by which progress and modernity are measured and which HRW assumes as a threshold to self-acceptance and liberation. Euro-American constructs of identity, privileging identity politics, coming out and visibility (Puar, 2013, p. 338) continue to be multiplied by campaigns such as 'No Longer Alone'. Additionally, the video setting itself reinforces the Occident-Orient binary. Portraying the activists speaking in Arabic dialects, they are simultaneously translated into English using subtitles. This use of subtitles necessarily links LGBTQ issues to English-speaking/Western countries and puts the activists under supervision and control of Western organizations while it conveys the picture of locals speaking to and addressing the Arab world in the first place.

The elaboration on the production side of the video clearly demonstrates that HRW acts as part of the human rights industrial complex by deploying post-colonial savior narratives and by imposing a linear progressive narrative tied to Western experiences. In the following, I will elaborate in-depth on the inscribed Western characteristics by analyzing the construction of LGBTQ activists in the video. This examination refers to the second dimension of visual analysis, the image or in my case the video itself (Bleiker, 2015, p. 878). This aspect is especially focused on the questions of who is portrayed in the campaign and which characteristics are assigned to the LGBTQ subjects. The ascribed characteristics will later on be part of the comparison between the imposed universal Western narratives and the particular notions and daily-life experiences.

Looking at the individuals portrayed in the video, a heterogenous picture of LGBTQ activists from all over the MENA region with different backgrounds appears. Some of the portrayed are either public figures in the Middle East or living in the diaspora. Omar Sharif Jr. (0:20) is a famous actor from Egypt and he speaks only English in the video, Hamed Sinno (0:05) is the front singer of the popular Lebanese band Mashrou Leila and Hajar (2:55) is an activist from Morocco who lives in the Netherlands since her coming out. On contrast to this, some activists deliberately hide their faces and alter their voices since they fear to be recognized. This diverse picture underlines HRW's claim that "one must not be out in order to make change" (2018b). More background information about the activists are given in the accompanying report and in a description on HRW's website. Solely watching the video does not clarify who is portrayed and thus creates the picture of LGBTQ activists living in the MENA region without taking into account their

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various backgrounds. In a similar manner, the video contains a subtle hierarchy of the portrayed activists, emphasizing public figures over activists who have to remain hidden. The first six individuals in the video all show their faces and among them are the Egyptian actor and the famous Lebanese singer. The first person who is not fully recognizable appears after half a minute (0:31). The same structure can be found at the end of the video. The last person speaking in the video is the Lebanese singer Hamed Sinno (6:12 – 6:23) and in the very end only the faces of all ten activists who did not hide their faces or altered their voices are shown (6:23 – 6:32). The video and the report may acknowledge that one must not show his/her face to make change. However, generally highlighting persons who are publicly out in the beginning and in the end of video conveys a different message: the goal of coming out and presenting one's face to the public is assumed to be a collective feeling and process that is supposed to be equally shared by LGBTQ individuals in and outside the Arab world. Hence, one characteristic ascribed to LGBTQ activists in the Arabic speaking world is the emphasis of individuals who are publicly out, although exceptions exist. This reiterates the homocolonialist potential of Western human rights organizations imposing their norms and values since HRW states in the report that "activism is often most effective when it has a public face, one that the general population can relate to" (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 22). This narrative stands in sharp contrast to feelings, experiences and notions of LGBTQ activists from the MENA region who intentionally do not want to be publicly out (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 33) which will be referred to in the second part of the empirical analysis.

The assumption that the general population must relate to public faces or certain categories, as mentioned in the quote above, is also reflected in the second characteristic of assigning a sexual identity to the activists in the video. The video starts by introducing the individuals who also ascribe themselves a sexual identity (0:10 – 0:22). Dalia (0:14 -0:17), however, mentions that she does not like to categorize herself by her sexual orientation. Using these fixed identities in the beginning of the video simplifies the mechanism of identifying with the portrayed individuals and at the same time introduces the Western coined terms as markers of affiliation with the LGBTQ community. The terms are used as an outreach tool to obtain agency in the discourse of sexual rights and sexual identity. This is one of the major goals of HRW and shows anew its affiliation with the human rights industrial complex tied to homocolonialist strategies. Besides the imposition of Western categories, the utilization of Eurocentric notions to organize political struggle or activism discounts probable repercussions of authoritarian states in the MENA region as they may view persons who define themselves according to LGBTQ terms as obstacles to "culture, religion, and family as a foundation for national identity construction" (Birdal, 2015, p. 128).

The third ascribed dimension to LGBTQ activists in the video is the universalization of the coming out experience. The focus of the video lies on the personal experiences of the portrayed activists, especially at the time when they recognized that they were 'different' and during the period of 'coming out'. I conceptualize this Westernized coming out narrative as a deployment of homonationalism, functioning in a homocolonialist way through HRW as a multiplier of Western norms. The Western homonormative ideology of coming out is inscribed in the campaign and thus constructs "home Western normative queer identities" (Rahman, 2014, p. 279). At the same time, the Arabic speaking world is portrayed as homophobic and traditional because of the difficulties the activists faced or still face. Consequently, Western exceptionalism and the dialectic of otherness are upheld. Interestingly, homocolonialism and homonationalism are not utilized by a specific country such as the pinkwashing case of Israel (Puar, 2013, p. 338), but by a human rights organization operating within the framework of Western ideologies.

Coming out as an indicator for Western progressiveness has been broadly discussed in academia (see El Feki, 2014; El-Tayeb, 2012; Manalansan, 2003; Rexhepi, 2016) and those findings are also prevalent in the video. The storytelling of liberation and coming out follows "a developmental model that begins with an unliberated, 'prepolitical' homosexual practice and that culminates in a liberated, 'out', politicized 'modern', 'gay' subjectivity" (Manalansan, 2003, p. 478). This is particularly symbolized by the climax within the video, starting with stories about the unliberated homosexual practice and then turning to the liberated, modern gay subjectivity. The first phase is illustrated by quotes such as "I remember the moment perfectly. It was Halloween. It was the first time I wore my sister's skirt and my mum put make-up on me. I still remember that day, how happy I was and how comfortable I felt" (0:32 – 0:50) or "I found that [Facebook] group that had many Sudanese [lesbian] girls. I wrote "where are you people?" I realized that I was not alone in the world. There are many people like me and I was very happy. I think that night I didn't sleep" (0:57 – 1:19). The struggle and the hardships in between are embodied in statements such as "I felt like a freak of nature" (1:41 – 1:46) or "I was sent to the "Raqi" [a religious healer]. Sometimes he used to hit me,

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it hurt a lot. And he used to say “get out, get out” (2:35 – 2:45). With respect to this, the coming out experiences seem even more heroic and desirable. Khalid from Jordan narrates that after coming out to his schoolmates and initial disbeliefs they told him “I love you the way you are, I don’t care what you are” (4:13 – 4:26). Dalia talks about her father who “transformed from hateful to accepting and tolerant. [...] This itself was a miracle” (4:28 – 4:42). Omar even mentions his journey from thinking about suicide to his parents knowing and accepting him (5:08 – 5:15). All of these stories are built upon positive experiences and disguise the discourse about people who do not share the same experiences, who do not have the same possibilities of coming out or who deliberately do not want to ‘come out’ in Western terms. Coming out is portrayed as the crucial and only point of liberating oneself and thus “becomes a decontextualized fetish” (El-Tayeb, 2012, p. 89), an essentialist category tied to a Western progressive narrative to which everyone else, in and outside Europe, has to catch up. This tension between the Western coming-out narrative and (im)possible implementations in the MENA region will be discussed in the following section. Before this, I shortly want to point to the campaign’s title ‘No Longer Alone’ and its implications. Generally, an encouraging and supportive message lies within the title and reflects the campaign’s goal to send support and encouragement to LGBTQ individuals in the Arabic speaking world. However, the assumption to be ‘no longer alone’ implies that LGBTQ persons have previously lived alone and are now to be ‘saved’ and connected to the broad LGBTQ community by watching this video. The savior-narrative, mentioned in the beginning, and the dichotomy of the enlightened West and the traditional East is strengthened through the title and demonstrates a further example of how distinct otherness with regard to homocolonialism (Rahman, 2014, p. 279) is reiterated.

Altogether, three major characteristics are inscribed in the video, embodying Western universalist narratives: 1) hierarchies within LGBTQ activists, emphasizing public figures and faces, 2) ascription of fixed sexual identities and 3) coming out as the ultimate stage of the linear progressive narrative of modernization. My critique of the homocolonialist outlook of the video is not about denying the process of coming out to individuals from the Arab world. It rather aims at deconstructing the techniques of how homocolonialism is implemented in today’s human rights organizations.

Coming Out of the Closet?

The following part shifts the focus from the institutional to the personal level by analyzing the stance of LGBTQ individuals from the MENA region towards the assigned characteristics in the video. For this qualitative content analysis, I will refer to the accompanying HRW reports and the Mesahat short story booklet, both based on qualitative interviews with LGBTQ individuals from the Arab world. The accompanying HRW report contextualizes the video and provides background information about LGBTQ activism in the MENA region (2018a). The report contains interviews with people portrayed in the video as well as interviews from other activists in the MENA region working on LGBTQ rights issues. The short story booklet (2016) was published by Mesahat Foundation, together with the Bedayaa Organization for LGBTQI in the Nile Valley Area and Trans-Homos organization from Algeria on occasion of the international day against homophobia and transphobia 17 May 2016 and was part of the campaign ‘Together our Voice is Louder’. It portrays short stories of homo- and transphobia in Egypt, Sudan and Algeria to encourage local LGBTQ communities.

The first and second characteristic inscribed in the video play a rather minor role when shifting the focus from the institutional to the personal level. However, small differences are present and important to consider. Whereas the HRW video campaign clearly focuses on activists, public faces and figures, the Mesahat short stories explicitly emphasize the heterogenous background of LGBTQ people from different “racial, class, cultural and social affiliations” (2016, p. 2) and concentrates on ordinary people from gender minorities who talk about their personal experiences. A discrepancy is also present in the absence of any faces or public figures in the booklet. Contrary to the video, the booklet aims at not only talking about idealized coming out stories but to focus on daily life stories from marginalized groups without a definite happy end. The standpoint of the HRW report can be located between publicly recognized activism and daily life experiences. HRW mentions in the introduction of the report not “to gloss over the severe, pervasive human rights violations that affect LGBTQ people in most of the Middle East and North Africa” but to “capture the complexity of a movement that is opening doors for LGBTQ people in the region” (2018a, p. 3). Thus, compared to the video campaign, the report debilitates the homocolonialist potential of the HRW campaign ‘No Longer Alone’ because other, more complex insights and perspectives are offered. However, the purview of the

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report compared to the video remains unclear.

The second characteristic of the video campaign, the ascription of Western coined, fixed sexual identities, is used in both reports. The booklet uses the identity categories in every headline of the short stories, for example “I’m Emmy. A transgender women from Sudan” (2016, p. 21). The HRW report introduces all LGBTQ related terms in a short glossary in the beginning and utilizes the categories when introducing a direct quote of an activist for example “A gay Egyptian activist” or “Mala Badi, a Moroccan transgender activist” (2018a, p. 15). The usage of these identity categories in both reports, as well as in the video campaign, demonstrates today’s widespread utilization of these labels in local, transnational and international activism. As in the video campaign, the labels simplify the transfer of a clear message to the audience who might expect these labels behind the headlines. In present debates and work of LGBTQ rights activism the categories are used and operationalized in order to obtain agency by organizations and individuals. However, what remains unclear most of the time is the question whether the categories are present and relevant in daily life or only used as an outreach tool for the campaigns. To answer this question, fieldwork with LGBTQ individuals in the MENA region would be required.

The biggest discrepancy between the video and particular daily life experiences appears in the comparison of the third ascribed characteristic – coming out as the ultimate stage of liberation. The described experiences of coming out in the short story booklet and the HRW report, in most cases, contradict the romanticized and heroic picture of the video campaign. Several persons wrote that they hide their sexual identity: “The real violence is to live a hidden life [...] I do not really expose myself in public” (Mesahat Foundation for Sexual and Gender Diversity, 2016, p. 24) “I’m in the closet like most of the people around me” (2016, p. 27). Others stated that they were harassed because of their different outlook but they never came out: “I’m not publicly “out”, the only complaints that I get are due to my appearance.” (2016, p. 28).

I argue that the focal point of the ambiguous situatedness of LGBTQ subjects in the MENA region lies in the process of coming out. This is for two reasons. Firstly, as pointed out in the previous section, coming out is a Western shaped identity construction, necessarily linked to defining oneself according to Western coined terms of sexual identity. Secondly, identifying with these Western terms is frequently understood as betraying the own family and/or culture and opposes current normative structure in countries of the MENA region. Thus, coming out functions in a dual way: coming out of the closet in terms of revealing one’s sexual identity but also coming out of cultural, societal, family and state structures. The family plays a crucial role in the context of coming out and is often the first place where LGBTQ people suffer from psychological and physical abuse. Omar states “When my parents knew about my sexual orientation I suffered from all sorts of violence; verbal and physical cruelty” (Mesahat Foundation for Sexual and Gender Diversity, 2016, p. 9). Soha (p.3), Mona (p.4) Maryam (p.6) and Khalid (p.14), just to mention a few, experienced similar treatments. In Morocco the authorities are aware of those dynamics and abuse them to threaten LGBTQ individuals (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 22). Several other activists describe a difference between being out to an inner circle of friends and family or to the public. Khalid Abdel-Hadi from Jordan describes the stance of his family towards being out as follows: “It’s ok to be gay, but you don’t need to come out.” And he also narrates the story of a friend who was out to his family and then came out on social media whereafter his family reacted very negatively (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 22). An Iraqi activists is out to his friends but fears to be outed more publicly (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 18). In both reports, there are several people who are publicly out but their majority lives in the diaspora, either before they came out or as a consequence of their coming out experience. Elyes, a gay men from Algeria now living in France, states that things are different there than they used to be at home (Mesahat Foundation for Sexual and Gender Diversity, 2016, p. 26). Dalia Alfaghal is an Egyptian lesbian woman living in the United States and became famous when the Egyptian media picked up stories from her Facebook page about her sexual identity. She now uses this publicity to reach out to fellow LGBTQ individuals in Egypt but was only capable to cope with death threats and hate messages because she lives in a safe space (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 49). An activist from Yemen, who had to leave his country due to death threats after coming out online, depicts a similar situation by stating that “Coming out online has thus been an option more commonly taken up by people already living outside their home country” (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 48). In most of the cases, being publicly out in the MENA region also implicates to be subjected to oppression by the state authorities. An activist from Jordan “would like to go public and say whatever [he wants] but it will backfire more than it creates change” (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 50). In many countries of the MENA region LGBTQ activists thus work underground and try to keep their

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real identities separate from activism (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 32). Many concrete forms of activism are also kept private, aiming at creating safe spaces for LGBTQ individuals and raising awareness about LGBTQ issues in private and closed groups (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 30, 2018a, p. 31).

The varying stories demonstrate the multilayered dimensions of coming out in the Arabic speaking countries. Coming out is not only a matter of revealing one's sexual identity but also of dealing with repercussions from family, society and state. There are people from the MENA region who are publicly out but most of them left their home-countries and live in the diaspora now. Others face physical and psychological violence on a daily basis and only work underground. By emphasizing public figures and activists living in the diaspora, the HRW video did not portray a wrong reality of LGBTQ activism in the MENA region. Yet, it only depicts a very small range. The majority of coming out experiences in the empirical material demonstrates a different picture. The multifaceted outlook of the experiences illustrates the ambiguity of LGBTQ subjects between the assumed universal ideal of coming out and particular experiences in the MENA region. It also shows that issues of sexual identity in the MENA region must be analyzed in the context of a pre-politicized discourse by Western states and NGOs with an impact on societal and family figurations.

Towards New Directions – Pan-Arabic LGBTQ Activism

The above underlined the ambiguous positionality of LGBTQ subjects in the MENA region, explicitly demonstrated by the included 'coming-out' experiences. The homocolonialist outlook of the HRW video campaign weakens the authenticity of HRW to represent LGBTQ subjects from Arabic speaking countries. However, this does not necessarily imply a dead-end for LGBTQ activism in the region. Birdal (2015) points to successful activism in her analysis of the Gezi park protests in Turkey in 2013. He calls for 'counterhegemonic interventions' with a strategy of building alliances with anti-systemic social movements to lift LGBTQ politics out of the postcolonial discourse of Western superiority versus Eastern traditionalism (Birdal, 2015, p. 128). In the Gezi park protest, LGBTQ rights became part of a larger movement of oppositional parties and human rights activists against the ruling AKP party. Thereby "these protests increased the visibility of LGBTQs to an unprecedented extent and opened new venues for future alliances and the consolidation of old ones" (Birdal, 2015, p. 129). A constituting moment for a counterhegemonic intervention can also be found in the MENA region – the Arab uprisings in 2011. An Egyptian activist said about the impact of the Arab spring on LGBTQ activism: "The Arab Spring? It produced me." (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 15) and an activist from Morocco described how he gradually started to talk about being transgender during the Arab spring and to participate in demonstrations for gender equality. During the Arab spring, LGBTQ activism was not an isolated movement. It was part of a societal movement and a rebellion against Islam (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 15). Despite the backlashes we see today, the 2011 upheavals had a positive impact on alliance building and shifted the thinking of young people in gender and sexuality related topics. According to HRW, in 2001 there were almost no LGBTQ rights movements in any of the Arabic speaking countries but in 2017 there are plenty of transnational LGBTQ organizations operating in the whole region (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 26). The phase of alliance building during the upheavals enabled today's LGBTQ activism to cope with local repercussions of state authorities and family. Ahwaa, a regional online platform, explicitly focuses on safety for LGBTQ individuals and implemented a point system for participation in the online forum to increase thresholds for meet-ups that are commonly abused by police forces (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 33). The booklet of the Mesahat foundation in cooperation with two other LGBTQ organizations from Algeria and Sudan also symbolizes the transnational network of today's activists. The Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, founded in 2010 in Beirut, is another example of transnational alliance building. When in 2016 two Moroccan girls were arrested for kissing in the streets, 22 LGBTQ organizations signed a statement and eventually achieved their release (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 28). LGBTQ activism is not only reduced to fellow LGBTQ rights organizations but is part of a broader human rights and feminist movement, as one Moroccan activist says: "There are no pure LGBTQ activists, we all work for freedom of religion and other liberties" (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 36). However, LGBTQ organizations also have to handle setbacks, increased state surveillance and a rising number of arrests. Nowadays, most of the activists are not able to work as freely as they imagined when the upheavals started in 2011. One activist describes the current situation as follows: "the most important thing right now is preparedness, capacity building, and time to heal." (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 28).

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The empirical analysis demonstrated that the LGBTQ movement in the MENA region does not work in an ahistoric way, following a Western path of gay liberation and gender equality. Today's political circumstances, colonial heritage, societal and religious structures as well as international involvement play a crucial role in shaping today's activism. Thinking LGBTQ activism in a pan-Arabic way depicts one possible solution of coping with the ambiguity of LGBTQ individuals from the MENA region. They live in an indeterminate space between universal coming out expectations imposed in a homocolonialist manner through Western NGOs and particular expectations defined by family, society and state authorities. The HRW video represents coming out as the ultimate stage of liberation and thereby imposes an either/or thinking on LGBTQ individuals from the MENA region. Either conforming with universal Western ideals of sexual identity or staying within traditional Muslim cultures and thus losing any recognition within the international LGBTQ rights movement. This either/or thinking undermines the complexity of LGBTQ individuals in Arabic speaking countries and denies own agency in shaping local and transnational movements. The last part of the analysis illustrated that transnational movements emerged in the last decade and successfully started to build pan-Arabic alliances. As long as the LGBTQ movement in the Arab region acts under the umbrella of Western activists narrative it will be bound to external factors. The beginning of a pan-Arabic LGBTQ movement as a counterhegemonic intervention, however, resituates the LGBTQ struggle in the MENA region as part of a broader transnational movement. Thus, it has the capability to disperse the ambiguity of LGBTQ subjects between universalism and particularity.

Conclusion

The introduction illustrated a split regarding LGBTQ rights in a global context. Western concepts have tried to be implemented on a universal scale in global forums such as the UN. In this respect, concepts of sexuality stemming from the global North have been diffused by Western states and international organizations by deploying the ideas of homonationalism and homocolonialism. At the same time, resistance from non-Western countries, especially from the MENA region, is ubiquitous. They utilize the concept of Western exceptionalism for their purposes. While emphasizing their national history and cultural backgrounds, they oppose notions that solely developed in the West such as a liberal LGBTQ rights discourse. The content analysis of the two reports illustrated that the process of coming out, defining oneself according to Western coined sexual identities, is often the focal point where violence, abuse and oppression becomes apparent. As a consequence, many of the activists stated that they do not want to come out or, even if they would like to go public, they do not do this because they know that "it will backfire more than it creates change" (Human Rights Watch, 2018a, p. 50).

Discussions about whether coming out of the closet is a solely Westernized or a universal experience is also part of academic debates among LGBTQ activists from the Arab world. In the article 'shades of in/visibility: on coming out in Egypt' published in the online magazine madamasr, Lara El-Gibaly (2017) points to the highly controversial topic of coming out within the Egyptian LGBTQ community. Whereas some consider being out or posting LGBTQ related issues on social media an important way to keep LGBTQ issues visible, others state that coming out has no significance to them because the process they went through in Egypt is not reflected in this term. In a similar manner, Musa Shadeedi (2018) discusses the meaning of coming out in the MENA region in his article 'Globalizing the Closet: Is 'Coming Out' a Western concept?'. Both articles reflect the empirical findings: there is no collective feeling of coming out as a necessary way to express one's sexual identity in the Arab world. The two articles also point to another facet discussed in my empirical work. Pan-Arabic discourse and action on LGBTQ related issues are noticeable. Pan-Arabic movements and discussions allocate agency to Arab LGBTQ individuals and enable them to redefine their notions and concepts of sexuality. The discourse about LGBTQ rights is no longer solely occupied and dominated by Western states and NGOs but it is resituated in the MENA region. Pan-Arabic LGBTQ activism can thus be seen as a successful counterhegemonic intervention (Birdal, 2015). Transnational movements have the capability to relocate LGBTQ issues in a local rather than a global context and thereby emphasize the particularity of a respective region. Hence, thinking about global LGBTQ rights movements have to be rethought in terms of transnational LGBTQ movements. Today's LGBTQ struggles across the globe cannot be thought of without the pre-politicized and predominated discourse about LGBTQ issues from the Western hemisphere and, at the same time, the Westernized, universalized LGBTQ movement can serve as an inspiration. Supporting local queer movements instead of imposing Western standards, which is also proposed by Momin Rahman (2014, p. 281), empowers LGBTQ individuals from non-Western regions and gives agency back to them. Instead of finding

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themselves in an indeterminate space between universalism and particularity, they regain power to define the discourse about sexual identity in the Arab world themselves.

In this respect, the video campaign did not portray a wrong reality by focusing on coming out stories of public figures from the MENA region or LGBTQ individuals who do not live in this region anymore. However, it depicted activism in the MENA region in a very idealized and bloomy way. The campaign portrayed Westernized coming out stories from Arab LGBTQ individuals, rather than focusing on experiences and viewpoints from within the Arabic speaking countries. With regard to the depiction of persons living in the diaspora in the video, further research on the interaction between diaspora groups and their homelands would be a valuable supplement to my work. Questions of whether diaspora groups adopt Western narratives of sexual identities or help in creating transnational ways of activism could be part of additional research. Another possible research topic, attached to the last part of pan-Arabic activism, is to question the definition of activism. In my thesis, I argued from a classical Western viewpoint, speaking about activism in terms of social movements and non-governmental organizations. Asef Bayat (2013) queries whether social movement theories stemming from a Western perspective are applicable in the MENA region. He proposes the concept of social non-movements. Social non-movements refer to the “collective actions of noncollective actors” (Bayat, 2013, p. 15) and are carried out by groups of the subaltern through ordinary daily life actions. Considering state-sponsored oppression and marginalization in many countries of the MENA region, classical ways of speaking out are rarely possible. Thus, further research on how LGBTQ individuals propel change through ordinary daily life actions and, thereby creating links between Queer Theory and social movement theory, would be another facet to enlarge upon.

Notes

[1] For the purpose of this work, I will use the term LGBTQ as an acronym for all non-normative sexualities.

[2] In the following referred to as MENA region, or the Arabic speaking countries, comprising Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

[3] Law 10/1961: a gender neutral ‘morality law’ used since the 1990s to condemn same-sex conduct and to prosecute people whose sexual behavior does not comply with the societal norms in Egypt (Human Rights Watch (2018a)).

[4] Signifiers: 7 from Europe (Switzerland, Lithuania, Hungary, Germany, United Kingdom, Latvia, Sweden), 5 from Asia and Oceania (Australia, India, Thailand, Nepal, Indonesia), 5 from Africa (South Africa, Uganda, Botswana, Kenya, Zimbabwe), 4 from North- and South America (USA, Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica).

[5] International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association

[6] International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission today operating as OutRight Action International

[7] All video references refer to Human Rights Watch (2018b) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfsyppgPeMpw>

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