



# When Thinking Straight Is Detrimental to Health

by Mira Alexis P. Ofreneo



**We** live in a world that thinks straight, most of time. Human beings are assumed to be just male and female, and the point of existence is for males and females to find each other and experience romantic and erotic bliss. Thus, everything in the world—clothes, public toilets, movies, identities, human rights, health services, love songs, shoes, family, socialisation processes, magazines, laws—is designed with the heterosexual male and the heterosexual female in mind.

Some people have already realised the enormous mistake of the sex/gender/orientation binaries. But because of the pervasiveness and almost invisible quality of structural forms of violence, which is what heteronormativity is, it is sometimes too easy to forget that there are other people in this world who are neither straight male nor straight female.

The point of this paper is to illustrate how thinking straight within the dominant feminist discourses on health and violence can be hazardous to the health of the non-normative others or queers. The “Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),” the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),” and the “Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)” have mainstreamed, that is, made relevant and acceptable to the heteronormative world, key feminist issues including reproductive health and violence against women. This is all well and

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good. My thesis, however, is that these dominant feminist discourses or feminisms in practice that seek to break the sex/gender hierarchy sadly continue to make invisible the sexual minorities/the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) communities, inadvertently maintaining the very sex/gender order they seek to break.

I do not question the utility of these human rights instruments in promoting particular aspects of gender equality, especially in its material forms. I think our feminist mothers and grandmothers have given us a world far better than the one to which they were born. But there is the realisation that the world was/is worse than what we had thought it to be and that the sex/gender order

was/is more enduring than what we had imagined it to be. My critique of these feminist discourses is how they remain heteronormative, and, as such, heterosexist.

### **My own version of queer**

I do not self-identify as queer, having lived in a historical and cultural context where a queer identity was not yet accessible. Similar to previous conceptions of sexuality from the North (homosexual, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual), it arrived in middle- and upper-class Manila first through academia, with gender theorist Judith Butler, then through gay subculture with “Queer as Folk,” and then popular culture with “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” the last two being television shows.

I speak from a position of “being” a lesbian-identified bisexual or a bisexual-identified lesbian based on a construction of my desires, intimacies, and politics. I see myself as part of

world as abnormal. As such, it is harder to forget that this world is not all straight.

My version of queer may not fit the specific meaning it invokes for other queer activists and queer theorists, particularly those who personally adhere to a “queer” identity or who reject any form of identification. I do not wish to enter the debate between queer theory (which seeks to destabilise identities) and queer politics (which affirms identity), or make a litany of the different versions of queer. From my standpoint, to think queer is to challenge the heterosexist norm and to create a sex/gender-inclusive framework by which to live. In other words, to think queer is to remind people not to think straight all the time.

### **Queering the sex/gender discourse: When whom we love/lust divides us**

Until today, basic gender-sensitivity training (GST) as often taught in the Philippines emphasises the difference between sex and gender, and the existence of a sex/gender order that privileges males/men and disempowers females/women. Rarely does it talk of sexual orientation or sexuality as integral to this order of privileging. And when a question on gays or the third sex is raised, it is evaded and the questioner is referred to advanced GST (the material existence of which I am uncertain).

Whether this evasion of sexuality is unconscious repression, conscious sublimation, political strategy, personal restraint, and so forth, it is still a common response among

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the larger queer community in the broad sense. I use “queer” to mean a specific standpoint from sexual identity politics that questions heteronormativity and imagines a happy, peaceful, sex/gender-full world. My own personal meaning to queer is a position of marginalisation that allows one to see the normative



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Phenomenologically, the transgender experience of oppression is omnipresent—having to fill up forms with only male and female boxes, to choose between male and female restrooms, to carry a male or female identity, to select between a male or female self. Imagine not finding yourself anywhere. Not in the official statistics. Not in the legal statutes. But perhaps in a list of abnormalities. Unlike homosexuality that was delisted from the official list of disorders in the early seventies, transgenderism remains a “Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

Oversimplified, the sex hierarchy appears as:

**MALES/** > **FEMALES/** > **ALL OTHERS/**  
**MEN** > **WOMEN** > **QUEERS**

The first two components of the above equation comprise the basis of our advocacies for gender equality,  $M > F$  toward  $M = F$ . When the existence of other sexes is not even recognised, clearly, queers will be the most marginalised health-wise.

*The sex-gender continuum.* In a gender continuum, we have masculine, feminine, androgynous, butch, femme, top, bottom, transgender, and a variety of gender performances. Admittedly, many of these gender constructions retain the sex/gender binary. But for purposes of illustration, they will suffice. Combining sex and gender, we produce multiple combinations—masculine males, feminine males, androgynous males, masculine females, feminine females,

mainstream feminists. Post-modern feminist thought has already established (biological) sex as a continuum, (social/psychological/cultural) gender as a continuum, and sexual orientation as a continuum. It has even blurred the sex/gender/orientation divide. But I feel that mainstream feminisms in practice retain the binaries of sex/gender/orientation maintaining the hegemony of the heterosexual norm.

A continuum implies infinite possibilities or multiple ways of being. But as part of the human tendency to simplify and create order, we use discrete labels that denote separate categories of existence that then determine identities and lifestyles.

*The sex continuum.* In a sex continuum, we have males, females, intersexed, transgenders, and transsexuals, in diverse forms and degrees. Feminists speak of male domination and female subordination. But do we recognise the marginalisation of the “other” sexes? Do we admit our own position of power as females over transgenders?



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androgynous females, and so on. Within these momentarily established categories of sex/gender, we identify layers of marginalisation. Though a male/man generally holds power over a female/woman, there are power relations among men themselves based on deviation from socially-prescribed gender.

Oversimplified, the sex/gender hierarchy for men appears as:

MASCULINE MALES > FEMININE/ ALL OTHER MALES/ QUEERS

Correspondingly, there exist power relations among women as well. And although this may first appear as a predominantly cultural form of marginalisation, it has material consequences. Tomboys as compared to feminine women, for instance, experience greater discrimination at work and at school, and less attention from health services. They often have a harder time during visits to gynaecologists or during medical check-ups that relate to reproductive health, or else they just suffer in silence when they have reproductive health-related ailments. Do we as feminine women admit our own

position of power over masculine women and all “others”?

Oversimplified, the sex/gender hierarchy for women appears as:

FEMININE/ FEMALES > MASCULINE/ ALL OTHER FEMALES = QUEERS

Further oversimplified, the sex/gender hierarchy appears as:

GENDER NORMATIVE > GENDER DEVIANT MEN & WOMEN/ TRANSGENERS/ QUEERS

*The sex-gender-orientation continuum.* The final queering of the feminist sex/gender discourse is the sexual orientation continuum of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality. Again, these constructions are extremely constricted and made to appear discrete as opposed to an infinite scale which is what a continuum is. The current limits of constructions of sexuality are still based on the sex/gender binary, of eroticising same-sex (homo) and opposite-sex (hetero) and both (bi). That is why there is a strong rejection of such essentialising constructions by queer theory. However, queer activism has utilised these discrete identities as the basis of political activism. My own position is that only after recognising the diversity of sex/gender/orientation can people transcend the categories and eventually queer their

constructions. For purposes of illustration, the hetero-bi-homo classification will suffice.

Oversimplified, the sex/gender/sexual hierarchy appears as:



The final location of power differentials lies in whom we love and lust. Among women and women feminists alike, the objects of our affection establish an invisible divide that is subjectively and materially experienced. Heterosexual women do not have to worry as much about getting public support for their intimate relationship, joint child custody, or emergency health care for their romantic partner. Heterosexual women do not have to go through a process of wondering if they are abnormal and getting confused as to who they really are and can be. Heterosexual women do not have to fear losing their jobs, their community, their friends, their parental rights, their family, or their lives because of the sex of the object of their love.

Certainly, the matrix of power hierarchies is not confined to sex, gender, and sexuality alone. Feminists have long recognised the power relations that arise from our embodied and material existence, in particular, that which is determined by class, race, and age. But to continue to acknowledge gender inequality alongside economic disparity without

any explicit reference to power differentials arising from sexuality is to inadvertently support heteronormativity and, consequently, reinforce the socioeconomic and cultural status quo. Just as we recognise the plight of poor women as compared to the privileges of women from the middle- and upper-classes, we must acknowledge the difference between the experiences of an underprivileged heterosexual woman and an economically-disadvantaged lesbian. To not mention sexuality in the dominant sex/gender discourses is to keep it invisible and render it inconsequential and insignificant.

**Hazardous to queer health**

When one forgets or takes for granted that belonging to the heterosexual norm means sharing that position of power often ascribed to men, straight thinking can lead to the further marginalisation of the sexually most marginalised.

If CEDAW is to be inclusive of non-heterosexual or queer women, “calls for abolishing existing laws, regulations, customs and practices that discriminate against women” should include instruments that discriminate specifically against non-heterosexual women. Lesbianism is still criminalised in many countries, particularly in the regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. For instance, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) reports that lesbianism remains punishable by death in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, among Asian countries.



If Beijing is to truly promote the rights of all women, heterosexual or otherwise, “to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence,” actions should ensure that non-heterosexual women are targeted in sexual health programmes and anti-violence agendas. If it is framed in a heterosexist context, which is the subtle or perhaps blatant implication of the line “equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction...” that follows the statement above, sexual health and sexual rights remain exclusive to heterosexual women.

Given that CEDAW and the BPFA are instruments directed to women, they do not include the issues of non-

greater need for inclusiveness in the mainstream feminist discourses. Are we even aware of the range of issues affecting transgenders at the personal, social, legal, and medical levels?

Transgenders are denied access to basic social services, employment, education, even entry to public places. They suffer tremendously from hate crimes, including violence perpetuated by law enforcers. An ILGA report described how a male-to-female transsexual in India was brutally assaulted by male police officers after being raped by ten men in the streets. The United States National Gay and Lesbian Task Force reported that 40% of police-initiated violence target transgenders. With their very identity and legal status in question, transgenders face more complex legal issues including matters affecting their ability to form loving relationships and nurture children. They are unable to access competent medical services and, worst, may be diagnosed as mentally ill.

The MDGs have recognised that meaningful and sustainable development rests on ensuring equality between men and women. But the Goals’ failure to include equal rights for LGBTIQs into the development agenda raises the question of whose development and what kind.

Will we protect LGBTIQs from “gender-based” violence? Will we ensure equality and non-discrimination against LGBTIQs? Will we eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against LGBTIQs? The inclusion of queer communities into the development agenda depends on our

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heterosexual men and transgenders. As the world pursues the MDGs, the continued framing of the mainstream gender equality discourse as between men and women will keep transgenders out of the picture. And even if the concept of woman is made to include male-to-female transsexuals, it will not respond to the

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willingness to confront the systematic discrimination sexual minorities experience everyday.

### **An example of straight thinking: Same-sex intimate violence**

As an example of the heterosexist framing of mainstream feminist discourses on health and violence, I examine the literature on domestic violence or DV. Women's movements worldwide have politicised the issue of DV for the past three decades. And by the Beijing Conference, the United Nations (UN) stated that all member countries reported the existence of DV. Lenore Walker, known for her work for victims of DV, then concluded that DV has become a public human rights issue and a recognised legal, social, and psychological problem.

But by defining DV as a crime against women within the spectrum of violence against women or VAW, women's movements consequently recognised only male-to-female violence and left behind the parallel issue of partner violence in gay and lesbian relationships (not to mention female-to-male violence).<sup>1</sup> The few

studies examining the prevalence of same-sex intimate violence, although derived from small non-random samples, indicate that intimate violence in same-sex relationships is as severe as heterosexual DV.

A summary of the (heterosexual) DV literature concludes that at least 25% of heterosexual women are battered by their male partners. The research on gay and lesbian intimate violence indicates equal or greater prevalence rates; with some studies reporting physical violence to be as high as 60% in lesbian couples and 47% in gay couples. The shocking truth is that one out of every four same-sex couples experiences intimate violence.

The idea that DV is fundamental to men's power over women in society precludes the possibility that women can perpetuate violence or that men can be subject to violence. And despite its prevalence and severity, same-sex intimate violence has remained a largely unrecognised social problem. Reports of DV incidents involve mostly men battering their wives or girlfriends; DV laws do not explicitly protect or may even clearly exclude gays and lesbians; and domestic violence resources, such as organisations, shelters, agencies, and services are primarily directed towards battered women in heterosexual relationships. Law enforcers, medical personnel, mental health professionals, and social service workers fail to give adequate support to gay and lesbian couples dealing with intimate violence.

With the mainstream feminist discourse on gender-based violence excluding the possibility of male



victims and female perpetrators of intimate violence, gay and lesbian couples have generally been excluded from intervention efforts.

### How to think queer

We live in a world that thinks straight, most of time. And the challenge I pose to feminists and non-feminists alike is to continually question and rethink our very conceptions of the world, of our selves and each other, of so-called women's issues and concerns, of our personal agendas, political activisms, and ideas of social change.

What kind of social transformation do we desire? Is our imagined world inclusive of all human beings? When we think of sexual health and sexual rights, whose health and whose rights are we really thinking of?

To think queer then is to be able to see the world from the vantage point of the most marginalised peoples in terms of sex, gender, sexual orientation, and sexual identity. It is to recognise our own positions of power within a web of hierarchies that



does not stop with patriarchy or sexism. It is to see the intricate link between different forms of homogenisation and essentialism.

It is about time we remind the world we are not all straight here. ☺

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#### *Endnote:*

<sup>1</sup> A possible exception is the *Anti-Violence against Women and Children Act of the Philippines*, which defines violence only in terms of the gender of its victims (women) and can be interpreted to cover violence committed against women in same-sex relationships.