Our April 21st [NYC Technology Salon focused on issues related to the LGBT ICT4D community](http://us1.campaign-archive1.com/?u=e4459b3b23139d81a6c335119&id=4a0b82c1a4&e=9e00676b40), including how [LGBTQI](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lgbtqi) issues are addressed in the context of stakeholders and ICT4D staff. We examined specific concerns that ICT4D practitioners who identify as LGBTQI have, as well as how LGBTQI stakeholders are (or are not) incorporated into ICT4D projects, programs and policies. Among the many issues covered in the Salon, the role of the Internet and mobile devices for both community building and surveillance/security concerns played a central part in much of the discussion.

To frame the discussion, participants were asked to think about how LGBTQI issues within ICT4D (and more broadly, development) are akin to gender. Mainstreaming gender in development starts with how organizations treat their own staff. Implementing programs, projects and policies with a focus on gender cannot happen if the implementers do not first understand how to treat staff, colleagues and those closest to them (i.e. family, friends). Likewise, without a proper understanding of LGBTQI colleagues and staff, programs that address LGBTQI stakeholders will be ineffective.

The lead discussants of the Salon were [Mala Kumar](http://malakumar.com), writer and former UN ICT4D staff, [Tania Lee](https://www.linkedin.com/in/tanialee15), current IRC ICT4D Program Officer, and [Robert Valadéz](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-valadez/), current UN ICT4D staff. [Linda Raftree](http://lindaraftree.com) moderated the discussion.

**Unpacking LGBTQI**

The first discussant pointed out how we as ICT4D/development practitioners think of the acronym LGBTQI, particularly the T and I – transgender and intersex. Often, development work focuses on the sexual identity portion of the acronym (the LGBQ), and not what is considered in Western countries as transgenderism.

As one participant said, the very label of “transgender” is hard to convey in many countries where “third gender” and “two-spirit gender” exist. These disagreements in terminology have – in Bangladesh and Nepal for example – resulted in creating conflict and division of interest within LGBTQI communities. In other countries, such as Thailand and parts of the Middle East, “transgenderism” can be considered more “normal” or societally acceptable than homosexuality. Across Africa, Latin America, North America and Europe, homosexuality is a better understood – albeit sometimes severely criminalized and socially rejected – concept than transgenderism.

One participant cited that in her previous first-hand work on services for lesbian, gay and bisexual people; often in North America, transgender communities are prioritized less in LGBTQI services. In many cases she saw in San Francisco, homeless youth would identify as anything in order to gain access to needed services. Only after the services were provided did the beneficiaries realize the consequences of self-reporting or incorrectly self-reporting.

*Security concerns within Unpacking LGBTQI*

For many people, the very notion of self-identifying as LGBTQI poses severe security risks. From a data collection standpoint, this results in large problems in accurate representation of populations. It also results in privacy concerns. As one discussant mentioned, development and ICT4D teams often do not have the technical capacity (i.e. statisticians, software engineers) to properly anonymize data and/or keep data on servers safe from hackers. On the other hand, the biggest threat to security may just be “your dad finding your phone and reading a text message,” as one person noted.

**Being an LGBTQI staff member in ICT4D**

Our second lead discussant spoke about being (and being perceived as) an LGBTQI staff member in ICT4D. She noted that many of the ICT4D hubs, labs, centers, etc. are in countries that are notoriously homophobic. Examples include Uganda (Kampala), Kenya (Nairobi), Nigeria (Abuja, Lagos), Kosovo and Ethiopia (Addis). This puts people who are interested in technology for development and are queer at a distinct disadvantage.

Some of the challenges she highlighted include that ICT4D attracts colleagues from around the world who are the most likely to be adept at computers and Internet usage, and therefore more likely to seek out and find information about other staff/colleagues online. If those who are searching are homophobic, finding "evidence" against colleagues can be both easy and easy to disseminate. Along those lines, ICT4D practitioners are encouraged (and sometimes necessitated) to blog, use social media, and keep an online presence. In fact, many people in ICT4D find posts and contracts this way. However, keeping online professional and personal presences completely separate is incredibly challenging. Since ICT4D practitioners are working with colleagues most likely to actually find colleagues online, queer ICT4D practitioners are presented with a unique dilemma.

ICT4D practitioners are arguably the set of people within development that are the best fitted to utilize technology *and* programmatic knowledge to self-advocate as LGBT staff and for LGBT stakeholder inclusion. However, how are queer ICT4D staff supposed to balance safety concerns and professional advancement limitations when dealing with homophobic staff? This issue is further compounded (especially in the UN, as one participant noted) by being awarded the commonly used project-based contracts, which give staff little to no job security, bargaining power or general protection when working overseas.

*Security concerns within being an LGBTQI staff in ICT4D*

A participant who works in North America for a Kenyan-based company said that none of her colleagues ever mentioned her orientation, even though they must have found her publicly viewable blog on gender and she is not able to easily disguise her orientation. She talked about always finding and connecting to the local queer community wherever she goes, often through the Internet, and tries to support local organizations working on LGBT issues. Still, she and several other participants and discussants emphasized their need to segment online personal and professional lives to remain safe.

Another participant mentioned his time working in Ethiopia. The staff from the center he worked with made openly hostile remarks about gays, which reinforced his need to stay closeted. He noticed that the ICT staff of the organization made a concerted effort to research people online, and that Facebook made it difficult, if not impossible, to keep personal and private lives separate.

Another person reiterated this point by saying that as a gay Latino man, and the first person in his family to go to university, grad school and work in a professional job, he is a role model to many people in his community. He wants to offer guidance and support, and used to do so with a public online presence. However, at his current internationally-focused job he feels the need to self-censor and has effectively limited talking about his public online presence, because he often interacts with high level officials who are hostile towards the LGBTQI community.

One discussant also echoed this idea, saying that she is becoming a voice for the queer South Asian community, which is important because much of LGBT media is very white. The tradeoff for becoming this voice is compromising her career in the field because she cannot accept a lot of posts because they do not offer adequate support and security.

**Intersectionality**

Several participants and discussants offered their own experiences on the various levels of hostility and danger involved with even being suspected as gay. One (female) participant began a relationship with a woman while working in a very conservative country, and recalled being terrified at being killed over the relationship. Local colleagues began to suspect, and eventually physically intervened by showing up at her house. This participant cited her “light skinned privilege” as one reason that she did not suffer serious consequences from her actions.

Another participant recounted his time with the US Peace Corps. After a year, he started coming out and dating people in host country. When one relationship went awry and he was turned into the police for being gay, nothing came of the charges. Meanwhile, he saw local gay men being thrown into – and sometimes dying in – jail for the same charges. He and some other participants noted their relative privilege in these situations because they are white. This participant said he felt that as a white male, he felt a sense of invincibility.

In contrast, a participant from an African country described his experience growing up and using ICTs as an escape because any physical indication he was gay would have landed him in jail, or worse. He had to learn how to change his mannerisms to be more masculine, had to learn how to disengage from social situations in real life, and live in the shadows.

One of the discussants echoed these concerns, saying that as a queer woman of color, everything is compounded. She was recruited for a position at a UN Agency in Kenya, but turned the post down because of the hostility towards gays and lesbians there. However, she noted that some queer people she has met – all white men from the States or Europe – have had overall positive experiences being gay with the UN.

**Perceived as Predators**

One person brought up the “predator” stereotype often associated with gay men. For this reason, he and his partner have had to turn down media opportunities where they could have served as role models for the gay community, especially poor, gay queer men of color, who are one of the most difficult socioeconomic classes to reach.

**Monitoring and baiting by the government**

One participant who grew up in Cameroon mentioned that queer communities in his country use the Internet cautiously, even though it’s the best resource to find other queer people. The reason for the caution is that government officials have been known to pose as queer people to bait real users for illegal gay activity.

Several other participants cited this same phenomenon in different forms. A recent article talked about Egypt using new online surveillance tactics to find LGBTQI people. Some believe that this type of surveillance will also happen in Nigeria, a notoriously hostile country towards LGBTQI persons and other places.

There was also discussion about what IP or technology is the safest for LGBTQI people. While the Internet can be monitored and traced back to a specific user, being able to connect from multiple access points and with varying levels of security creates a sense of anonymity that phones cannot provide. A person also generally carries phones, so if the government intercepts a message on either the originating or receiving device, implications of existing messages are immediate unless a user can convince the government the device was stolen or used by someone else. In contrast, phones are more easily disposable and in several countries do not require registration (or a registered SIM card) to a specific person.

In Ethiopia, the government has control over the phone networks and can in theory monitor these messages for LGBTQI activity. This poses a particular threat since there is already legal precedent for convictions of illegal activity based on text messages. In some countries, major telecom carriers are owned by a national government. In others, major telecom carries are national subsidiaries of an international company.

Another major concern raised relates back to privacy. Many major international development organizations do not have the capacity or ability to retain necessary software engineers, ICT architects and system operators, statisticians and other technology people to properly prevent Internet hacks and surveillance. In some cases, this work is illegal by national government policy, and thus also requires legal advocacy. The mere collection of data and information can therefore pose a security threat to staff and stakeholders – LGBTQI and allies, alike.

**The “queer divide”**

One discussant asked the group for data or anecdotal information related to the “queer divide.” A commonly understood problem in ICT4D work are divides – between genders, urban and rural, rich and poor, socially accepted and socially marginalized. There have also been studies to clearly demonstrate that people who are naturally extroverted and not shy benefit more from any given program or project. As such, is there any data to support a “queer divide” between those who are LGBTQI and those who are not, he wondered. As demonstrated in the above sections, many queer people are forced to disengage socially and retreat from “normal” society to stay safe.

**Success Stories, key organizations and resources**

Participants mentioned organizations and examples of more progressive policies for LGBTQI staff and stakeholders (this list is not comprehensive, nor does it suggest these organizations’ policies are foolproof), including:

* UN Women, UNICEF and LGBT *stakeholder* inclusion
* USAID staff training
* Peace Corps – Americans and local on-the-ground staff go through sensitivity trainings
* US Foreign Service provides comprehensive security for its staff
* [Ally Forney Center](http://www.aliforneycenter.org/) – good training, modeling and sensitivity activities
* [Sylvia Rivera Law Project](http://srlp.org/)
* [Virginia Anti-Violence Project](http://www.virginiaavp.org/)

We also compiled a list of resources on the topic [here](https://docs.google.com/document/d/169PgeB_DibtcpDqnN1t3ZcVbnr9Aipj2rDKLlD7KoiM/edit?usp=sharing).

**What can we do moving forward?**

* Engage relevant organizations, such as Out in Tech and Lesbians who Tech, with specific solutions, such as coding privacy protocols for online communities and helping grassroots organizations target ads to relevant stakeholders.
* Lobby smartphone manufacturers to increase privacy protections on mobile devices.
* Lobby US and other national governments to introduce “Right to be forgotten” law, which allows Internet users to wipe all records of themselves and personal activity.
* Support organizations and services that offer legal council to those in need.
* Demand better and more comprehensive protection for LGBTQI staff, consultants and interns in international organizations.

**Key Questions Moving Forward**

* In some countries, an African government owns telecom companies. In others, telecom companies are national subsidiaries of international corporations. In countries in which the government is actively or planning on actively surveying networks for LGBTQI activity, how does the type of telecom company factor in?
* What datasets do we need on LGBTQI people for better programming?
* How do we properly anonymize data collected? What are the standards of best practices?
* What policies need to be in place to better protect LGBTQI staff, consultants and interns? What kind of sensitizing activities, trainings and programming need to be done for local staff and less LGBTQI sensitive international staff in ICT4D organizations?
* How much capacity have ICT4D/international organizations lost as a result of their policies for LGBTQI staff and stakeholders?
* What are the roles and obligations of ICT4D/international organizations to their LGBTQI staff, now and in the future?
* What are the ICT4D and international development programmatic links with LGBT stakeholders and staff? How does LGBT stakeholders intersect with water? Public health? Nutrition? Food security? Governance and transparency? Human rights? Humanitarian crises? How does LGBT staff intersect with capacity? Trainings? Programming?
* How do we safely and responsibility increase visibility of LGBTQI people around the world?
* How do we engage tech companies that are pro-LGBTQI, including Google, to do more for those who cannot or do not engage with their services?
* What are the economic costs of homophobia, and does this provide a compelling enough case for countries to stop systemic LGBTQI-phobic behavior?
* How do we mainstream LGBTQI issues in bigger development conferences and discussions?