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Did you know?

- Approximately 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ.
- It is estimated that 5,000 unaccompanied youth in the U.S. die each year as a result of assault, illness, or suicide.
- 849 high school students reported being kicked out by their parents in the last 12 months.
- Homeless teens are more likely to become homeless adults.

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Intersectional Equality

Organizer **Karma Chavez** explains the importance of recognizing and including multiple identities and realities in the fight for true, comprehensive equality.

EQUALITY MARYLAND ANNOUNCED on June 30 that it was considering cutting significantly or stopping its daily operations. The reason? Despite all the work that the organization says it has accomplished, it reports that “funding from individuals and major donor sources dropped significantly after securing marriage equality,” which Maryland has had since 2012. While this fact may surprise some readers, many queer and trans people of color and poor and disabled queers and allies are anything but shocked.

The gay and lesbian movement’s limiting of “equality” to the issue of marriage (and before that open military service and hate crime protections) has had devastating impacts on many members of the LGBTQ community for a long time. In 2010, journalist Lisa Dettmer talked to several leaders of LGBTQ organizations who served the

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community on issues ranging from health to low-income housing for people with AIDS to youth homelessness. They all reported difficulty securing funding from foundations and individuals who only wanted to support the issue of gay marriage, at the same time that states were cutting their funding. Many closed their doors. The lesson? Single-issue politics informed by the agendas and needs of the most privileged are not just narrow; they actually have negative material consequences for the most oppressed among us.

Many radical queer activists like the collective Against Equality have tried to draw attention to problems with the mainstream gay and lesbian movement’s definition of equality. That definition centers the experiences and needs of those who suffer oppression primarily based on their sexual orientation, ignores the needs of those marginalized

in multiple ways (race, class, gender identity, ability, education and citizenship status), and sidelines how capitalism oppresses all people regardless of sexual orientation.

In short, the mainstream gay and lesbian rights movement has fed us an anti-intersectional definition of equality. Intersectionality has become a buzzword, but it means more than just saying facets of identity like race, class, gender and sexuality are important. Intersectionality, as introduced by women-of-color feminists in the ‘60s and ‘70s, is the idea that the interlocking nature of oppression (but also privilege) impacts how we view the world and how the world lets us exist. When we craft a political agenda based only on one form of oppression (sexual orientation) while minimizing other forms of oppression and privilege, we bolster our own privilege, and reinforce the structural disadvantage others suffer.

Several statements released by queer and trans people around the country after the Supreme Court decision on marriage made this point. The local groups, Young Gifted and Black and Freedom Inc., issued a statement to clarify their position after supporters of marriage equality attacked some of YGB’s leaders in heated exchanges on social media for refusing to celebrate the decision. YGB’s and FI’s position does not go as far as some others, but they offer insight into what it means to lead an intersectional movement through the lens of queer and trans Black people. One way they offer is to broaden definitions of family.

They write, “Based on our experiences in Black communities we know that grandparents, neighbors, even whole communities are often doing the work of family, including getting food on the table, taking care of elders as they age, caring for ill loved ones, putting kids to bed at night, helping with their homework, and just generally keeping things together. We also know as queer folk



that people in a variety of relationships, whether romantic or not, including those who are single, in polyamorous relationships, in families with nonresidential stepparents, or in families with loved ones who are incarcerated, in communally raised families, in communities of friendship, and those in the foster system, continue to experience discrimination...”

An intersectional approach to equality considers these factors in creating a political agenda, recognizing that state-sanctioned marriage disregards people who exist in alternative families, and may reinforce their marginalization. In fact, already there is talk in Wisconsin about ending domestic partner benefits now that marriage is legal, a move that has happened elsewhere. Ending domestic partnerships could be devastating for disabled people who cannot marry because they

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would lose their government benefits, but who may currently enjoy rights like hospital visitation as registered domestic partners. Moreover, state and federal governments have often passed policies that punish women of color on welfare and promote heterosexual marriage as an antidote to declining

state support. Strengthening the institution of marriage may further marginalize those also disadvantaged based on gender and sexuality, rendering their families less legitimate and more open to scrutiny.

These are the kinds of insight that taking an intersectional approach to gender and sexual liberation provide. Local groups like YGB, FI, and Alianza Latina are doing it on the ground. One key takeaway is this: We cannot simply reduce struggles to one aspect of identity and imagine that we are in the service of values like justice or equality. ■



KARMA CHAVEZ is a Madison-based writer and activist. She is a member of the radical queer collective Against Equality, an organizer for LGBT Books to Prisoners, and a host of the radio program, “A Public Affair” on WORT.




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