

Framing Visibility: Coming Out and the International LGBT Spectrum of Progress

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In 2007, Meem was launched as a little lesbian support group in Lebanon. At the time, and after 4 years of trying to organize alongside a majority of gay men within the framework of LGBT public advocacy, we had understood that in order to create a strong and empowered movement, we were to create a safe space to ourselves as women first. We had also understood that for women to feel safe enough to explore, share, and experience their relationships with their sexuality, confidentiality and anonymity had to be key elements in our organizing. We wanted our members to benefit from support and services without the fear of being legally and socially “outed.”

Total secrecy would have turned Meem into a static bubble. There had to be a way, an intricate way, to reach out to the queers that we hadn’t reached out to. Some of the ways Meem did this was through writing.

We’ve published a collection of true stories – our stories – “to introduce Lebanese society to the real stories of real people whose voices had gone unheard for hundreds of years” and “whose sexualities have been mocked, dismissed, denied, oppressed, distorted, and forced into hiding” (Bareed Mista3jil 1). These stories are all anonymous. “We did not sign the stories with any names, nicknames, or initials because we wanted to guard the safety and confidentiality of the brave people who told their stories” (Bareed Mista3jil 8).

Every Monday, a new issue of our weekly online Arab magazine, Bekhsoos, comes out with a minimum of 10 Arabic, English and French articles and illustrations, edited, designed, uploaded and published by the editorial team, and written by contributors from Meem, across the Arab world, and beyond.

While we were growing in numbers, over 350 members today, and while we were becoming more vocal, and hence more visible, we were continuously taking all the necessary precautions to safeguard our identities so that we wouldn’t put each other or ourselves at risk.

Nevertheless, through Meem, we sought to explore and address multi-layered forms of discrimination that we faced as women first, and as lesbians second. As more queer women and transgendered persons joined the group, we became more aware of how the patriarchal system subtly and aggressively gendered our behaviors through its many social, legal and medical apparatuses. We realized that this system regulated and oppressed not only us, the queers of this country, but any marginal group that didn’t conform to its standards. We understood that if a system didn’t respect and protect migrant workers from abuse, and if a system didn’t provide proper health care plan for its citizens, should our focus really be only on gay rights advocacy in Lebanon? Wouldn’t that be a narrow approach? We realized that we were up against a system

that seeped into the crux of our society and that couldn't be disentangled from forms of racism, sexism, ageism, and other isms.

At the same time, while we were aware of those larger frameworks of oppression, what was immediately needed, for us as queer women and transgendered persons at least, was a grassroots initiative that addressed the social, legal and medical discrimination that we faced on a daily basis. At the heart of our struggle, three years ago, was a need to be able to come to a space that provided constant support for us and a space through which we could carry out initiatives that made the lives of queer women and transgender persons better.

At the time and even today, we are often accused of wanting to take the movement "back into the closet."

At the crux of what I want to tackle in this panel is a shared international understanding of "visibility" and "coming out" as signs of progress in LGBT movements across the world.

"Coming out" is often perceived as a standard validation of one's identity, a milestone. It is another step to fulfill, one that legitimizes our sexual/gender identity, our sense of pride, our very own life as a queer or transgender person in this bedroom, this toilet, this office, this classroom, this building, this institution, this street, this neighborhood, this city, this country, this region, this world. Coming out – in its original sense – is linked to our visibility as a queer or transgender person. When I come out, whether I am aware of it or not, wherever I happen to be in the world, I am actually locating myself and ascribing to an internationally recognized LGBT spectrum of progress.

What I want to ask is: Had our visibility at Meem been constructed differently, had we tagged our foreheads with the words "lesbian", "queer" or "transgender" and went on national TV shows and discussed our own sexualities and genders, our own struggles, had we publically linked our first and last names to our sexual identities, had we exposed our faces as "leaders of the LGBT movement," would we have been able to be as effective in our community and movement building as we have been so far? Would coming out, in the most mainstreamed sense of the word, have served our movement as much as removing ourselves from "the discourse of coming out" did?

Meem rejects the binary between the closet and coming out – just like we reject gender and sexual binaries.

In Meem, we're **ambiguously** visible. This ambiguity becomes anti-productive to our movements when we situate our politics within an International (Read "Western") framework of coming out / visibility. When we, LGBTs, locate ourselves within the spectrum of progress that the (predominantly) Western coming out discourse promotes, when we wear masks in pride parades, when we turn "National Coming Out Day" – which originated as a yearly event in 1988 in West Hollywood, California – into "International Coming Out Day" and then on our gay blogs come out with nicknames, we are locating ourselves within a foreign framework that links visibility closely to pride. Hence, this type of semi-coming out, or false-coming-out, looks rather awkward, isn't empowering, and as playful as it may seem sometimes, we still come off as those less

empowered, those more victimized, at the lesser end of the LGBT international spectrum of progress.

Meem rejects the binary between the closet and coming out – just like we reject gender and sexual binaries. We operate in the grey areas. We are obsessed with writing, producing knowledge, archiving, and we do it all under nicknames or first names. We constantly build up different public platforms so that progressive and sex positive discussions on sexual and bodily rights are reaching people who are outside of our usual communities. There's obviously an ambiguous space that comes with this kind of visibility, and we take that ambiguity, that space, to our advantage. We negotiate this ambiguity of spaces and identities according to our own sense of surroundings and judgment. You might see some of us discussing sexual and bodily rights in unlikely mainstream platforms. You might see some of us in the streets protesting against sexual harassment. You might come across our activists giving workshops on gender to men and women of all ages. How constructive to our movements would it be if we branded all of these actions as "projects by Meem," all of these activists as "members of Meem," and all of these projects as "LGBT projects?"

LGBT visibility, if you ask me, in its mainstream sense, cannot be adapted as is, but has to be played with, refined, and attuned through strategies that respond to our very own contexts, strategies that locate us at the heart of our many struggles.

- Contributed by Lynn on behalf of Meem at the ILGA Women's Pre-Conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil