

# 'Sexuality is the right to choose what gender you are'

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# Background

- Qualitative research into conceptualisation of gender & sexuality within two SE Asian development organisations
  - Involved:
    - ARCSHS, La Trobe University (Prof. Gary Dowsett, Dr Nicola Henry)
    - IDS, UK (Stephen Wood)
    - Two organisations:
      - A: National branch of an international network; SRH focus. Working with young men and women, men who have sex with men (MSM), sex workers, and trans\* women; *and*
      - B: Urban-based LNGO; focus on community mobilisation to address issues of sexuality and poverty for lesbians, bisexual women and trans\* men (not trans\* women)

# Background



- Gender & sexuality intimately entwined:

‘The social construction and significance of one can rarely be understood without considering the other’

(Rahman and Jackson, 2010: 5)

- Examples:
  - Sexual violence against men (both during times of conflict & of ‘peace’)
  - Stigma & discrimination against sex workers (often by other women)
  - Trans\* people being predominantly understood through an LGBTIQ lens

# Background

- Tendency within international development to:
  - Treat 'gender' and 'sexuality' as separate
  - Approach both through 'categorical thinking' (Connell, 2012)
    - Gender usually understood as applying to women (but not trans\* women?)
    - Sexuality usually understood as applying to non-heterosexual people (plus trans\* people; intersex usually not acknowledged)



# Methods

- Analysis of 20 key documents that organisations identified as influencing their conceptualisation of gender & sexuality
- Participatory workshops with relevant program staff members (one workshop per organisation; 5 staff from Org. A, 4 from Org. B)
- Key informant interviews (4)
- Workshop at ACFID/University Network conference
- Research ethics approval granted by La Trobe University

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Research Focus Area)*

# Findings



- Man/woman dichotomy was the fundamental organising principle of gender & sexuality work

‘[Organisation A] had a consultation a month ago, [the] discussion included accept[ance of] LGBT issues as long as they do not cross-dress.’

‘[a] lesbian sex worker [I worked with] dressed like a girl so she was a girl, not a lesbian. I’d call her a girl because she dresses like a girl. Her partner was a lesbian because was very masculine.’ (Org. A)

# Examples

- Trans\* people only understood in relation to sex assigned at birth:

‘Trans men are part of [the] sexuality axis ... when they identify themselves as men – first thing [we] do is respect them and their decisions ... She thinks she is a man – she is a man. [we] will still work with him, because he was born female.’

(Workshop, Org. B)

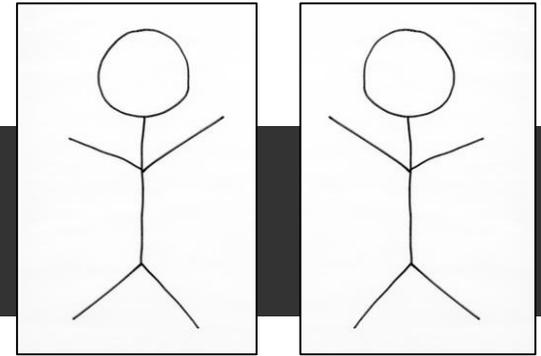
# Examples



- 'GBV' only understood when the perpetrator could be constructed male (*violent*), whatever their lived identity:

'... people assume that if there is a lesbian couple that the butch is the perpetrator [of GBV] because they are the man identity; but in most of these relationships the femme does [violence]...

the bi-femme one is basically taking on the role of a man in the house because ... she is taking on the role of the breadwinner ... even though she is a bi-femme.'



- [Facilitator draws an image of two stick figures] OK; so the one that has economic power beats the other one. Is that GBV?

‘We don’t know if they are man or woman ...

We are asking more details—what is the identity—so we can classify whether this is gender-based violence or what kind of violence is its form.

Does one act as more masculine, or more feminine?

Who goes to the gym more?’

# Examples

- Definitions of gender in internationally-developed curriculum used by Org. A:

Gender: differences in the social roles ...  
expect[ed] from males and females ... (p.36)

socially or culturally defined ideas about masculinity  
(male roles, attributes, and behaviours) and femininity  
(female roles, attributes, and behaviours) (p.77)

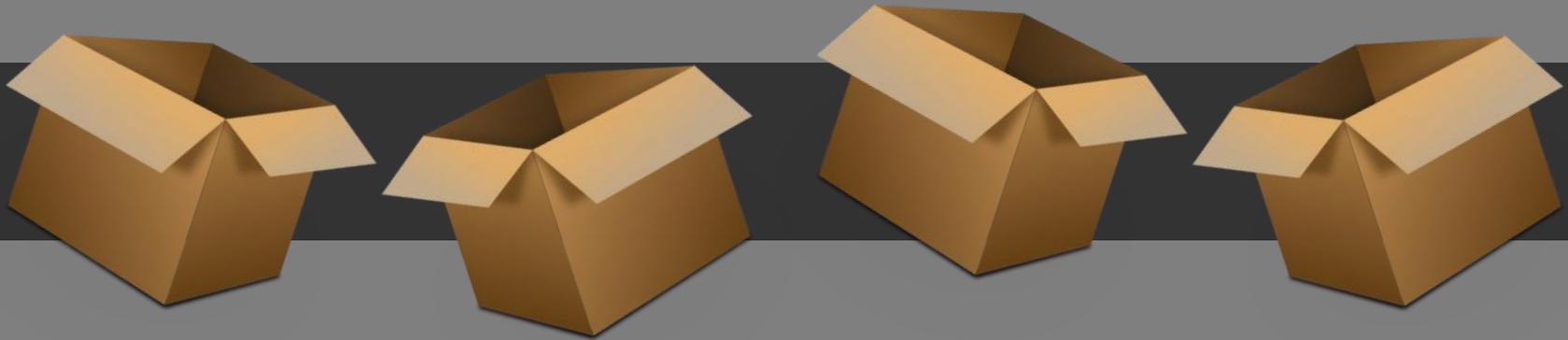
# And so what?



- Categorical thinking:
  - Creates false image of homogeneity within men/women categories, which in turn:
    - Overwrites intersecting power dynamics, e.g., race; disability; SES...
    - Ignores role of sexual norms in marginalising people *within* the categories of male/female (e.g., sex workers)
  - Human bodies not easily dichotomised
  - Leaves trans\* people forever 'othered'
  - 'gender is named, but actually women are spoken about' (Connell, 2012)

# The challenge...

- How can we:
  - Find better ways of acknowledging, and addressing, the cultural & historical systems of norms, expectations, value judgements & power relationships that regulate human interactions?
  - Focus on intersecting personal, social, structural judgements of worth (and lack of), *not* on existence of differences in bodies?
  - Avoid unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes (all men perpetrators, all women victims, all lesbians butch, all trans\* men really women...)?



‘...power and conflict all disappear behind bland talk of  
‘gender’ ... [and] the possibility of orderly tools ...  
through which profoundly internalised beliefs and solidly  
entrenched structures are miraculously supposed to dissolve  
and be transformed’

(Smyth 2010, 144-5)