

# The New Now: Working Together for Social Change

## Executive Summary & Recommendations For Discussion

The recent victories related to the rights of LGBT people have been astounding. The success on LGBT issues, especially marriage equality, is often attributed to a coordinated, unwavering, laser-sharp focus on changing policy at both the state and federal levels. So it is interesting that a different approach is also evolving where LGBT advocates and organizations are working to address multiple and overlapping issues, such as immigrant rights, worker issues, and criminalization. The move towards understanding and creating strategies that reflect an intersectional approach is increasingly seen as the new frontier of LGBT rights.

**The New Now: Working Together for Social Change** report examines how two states are building power on LGBT issues by integrating a larger set of concerns into their approach. As opposed to focusing only on a single issue, this method broadens the vision and tactics used for making change by examining how different issues intersect and interact.

### FRAMING

The term “intersectionality” was introduced 25 years ago by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw,<sup>1</sup> and had its origins in the experiences and writing of other feminists of color who were making sense of their own lived experience through an analysis of their overlapping identities: person of color, woman, queer, working class, and so on.<sup>2</sup> The term has gained currency since it was first coined, and is now widely used to describe the interdependent

and compounding ways in which systems of discrimination and disadvantage operate, particularly for people with multiple marginalized identities.

In the LGBT community, this framework addresses how different forms of systemic inequality work together and the experience of marginalization at multiple levels (i.e. exclusion from family, their community, the wider society, and the state’s laws

<sup>1</sup> Crenshaw, K. (1989), “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: pp.139-167.

<sup>2</sup> Lorde, A. (1980). “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 114-123.

and policies). An intersectional approach acknowledges the ways that experiences of oppression vary depending on particular combinations of identity and context. For example, a working class, queer woman of color will find herself excluded in different (and more) ways, compared to the experience of a white queer woman of wealth and/or a straight, middle class, man of color. It pushes us not to fragment people’s experience of injustice into single issues, and instead look at the whole person. In other words, it views campaigns as important tactics, but sees them in a larger context.

Putting an intersectional approach into practice relies on three underlying principles: values, alignment, and augmentation.

- **VALUES:** Advocates using an intersectional approach begin from a value proposition that understanding the ways multiple issues intersect and overlap helps them more fully understand social problems, shape agendas, and create a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts. This value pushes advocates to prioritize listening to, analyzing, and understanding the experiences of people at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, and in turn develop additional core values that unify advocates. These values are the foundation for creating alliances that extend beyond the campaigns and coalitions necessary for practical wins.

- **ALIGNMENT:** The shared values and relationships that are built in this process generate a perspective and practice where individuals and groups start to align in both formal and informal ways. They do not necessarily do the same work or focus on the same issues, but they work together in ways that foster trust and reinforce their alignment of values and perspectives. In other words, collective work creates an infrastructure that supports groups aligning behind a common vision for a just society and building “power to affect broader change” beyond what any single organization could achieve on its own.<sup>3</sup>

- **AUGMENTATION:** Rather than narrowing advocates’ perspectives, the intersectional approach allows multiple advocates and organizations to augment each other’s analyses and strategies. To be clear, the intersectional approach is not a way to say every issue is equal, but it layers multiple levels of analysis and multiple issues to better reflect the realities of people’s lives. By looking widely at the ways different issues interact, this augmentation helps advocates avoid unintended consequences that single issue approaches can create.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>For an excellent discussion of alliances for social change, see Pastor, Ito, and Ortiz (2010). *Connecting at the Crossroads: Alliance Building and Social Change in Tough Times*. USC Program for Environmental & Regional Equity. Available at <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/connectingcrossroads/>

<sup>4</sup>For examples of the pitfalls of single-issue approaches, see *A Primer on Intersectionality*. African American Policy Forum. Available at <http://www.aapf.org/publications/>

## FINDINGS

*The New Now* looks at two states to demonstrate what it means in practice to work together and jointly weave a net of shared success. In New Mexico, a group of advocates have formed deep relationships and long-standing partnerships between LGBT, reproductive justice, and immigrant rights groups. In Ohio, a statewide LGBT organization is in the early stages of bringing an intersectional lens into its organizing as part of a long-term intention to build alliances with other progressive groups.

The case examples in *The New Now* show contrasting points in the process of creating an intersectional approach and building strong, deep alliances. The selection of New Mexico was based on work that queer women of color had done for over a decade to build power and a set of values that have become the norm across a variety of organizations. While LGBT and non-LGBT groups remain focused on their particular issues, they also view them through an intersectional lens that results in alliances where groups support each other's campaigns based on a shared vision for justice and equity, rather than a transactional interest in future support for their own issues. Ohio was selected both because of recent investments in the state that focus more broadly on anti-discrimination and because it appeared to be at the beginning of the alliance-building journey. Their use of the language of intersectionality is aspirational and could have a significant impact on the way activists frame and seek LGBT rights.

Three main practices emerged from groups using an intersectional approach in New Mexico and Ohio.

1. **Personal history and relationships matter.** As with all organizing, relationship-building is a key component. Interviewees reported that the relationships they had (and/or were building) took time to develop. The time invested in learning about issues and deepening shared strategy builds trust between diverse groups of advocates. Some relationships are very tight and some less close; but overall, they created a base that was central to helping the circles to expand—based on shared core values—in both Ohio and New Mexico.

“It’s about relationships and being present for other people’s stuff, and putting energy into things that matter for other organizations; also letting other people tell you and not assuming or projecting what is important and what you can do to help.”—ADVOCATE FROM NEW MEXICO

**2. Intersectional process → movement-building practices.** The values that develop in the intersectional approach are reflected in what happens on the ground. In New Mexico, airing and working through disagreements is an important value and practice. In order to unite a diverse LGBT community in Ohio, activists are working through the intersections of race, class, gender, and gender identity as a core perspective and value. These practices help groups see their actions as a balance between short-term wins and long-term goals, and make strategic decisions about how to advance issues and provide support for taking risks.

“Consensus building, transparency, decision-making together, time for hard conversations ... Dollars can help but food is really important, good facilitation with an anti-oppression analysis and framework, calling each other out in a gentle and compassionate way.”

—ADVOCATE FROM NEW MEXICO

**3. Structures at all levels support broader change.** The intersectional approach offers space for people to build a strong sense of what is needed for lasting change. Developing the approach takes work and support, and organizations have played a key role in making sure there is an infrastructure that allows the work to continue. Locally, activist groups have strong horizontal alliances with the help of anchor organizations. In addition, local groups maintain and draw upon relationships they have with national organizations in their issue area. When they work well, infrastructure locally and nationally can weave together horizontal and vertical support structures that are mutually reinforcing.

“Some Ohio interviewees noted organizations go through booms and busts in funding, depending on the electoral cycle. Despite those concerns, one respondent said, “We have been chosen as a state where everybody from the outside wants something to happen ... and it feels really great.” —ADVOCATE FROM OHIO

The New Mexico and Ohio stories illustrate what it means from an LGBT perspective to take the theory of intersectionality and put it into practice. The New Mexicans we interviewed have been building their intersectional alliance for more than a decade, and are now in a position to reap the benefits of their work. By contrast, the Ohioans are in the initial stages of trying to articulate and spread an intersectional perspective within their base of activists for LGBT rights. They are starting to create a culture of LGBT work where organizing at the intersections is the norm.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

### SUPPORT ALLIANCE BUILDING WITH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

We are seeing a dramatic shift in emphasis towards greater collaboration between groups, as a way to build power. Doing this well, especially given the diversity in the LGBT community, requires working across different issue divides, especially on issues such as race, immigration status, gender, and class. Leaders can be encouraged to integrate an intersectional approach through training, facilitated opportunities to convene, and support for working together in ways that go beyond traditional single-issue frameworks.

### IDENTIFY COORDINATING ORGANIZATIONS

In our two case examples, we saw organizations take up the role of holding groups together, with leaders who focused on crafting shared values, bridge building, and tangible results. To play this role well, these anchor groups need to create trust with others in the community, both within and across issue areas, and support the success of all.

### EMBRACE PATIENCE AND A LONG-TERM VISION

Organizations and funders need to plan for change efforts in time spans of five to ten years, rather than the two to three years of many single-issue campaign efforts. Already evidenced by the support of marriage equality, long-term investments can build relationships that are integral to alliances for change. And more time may be needed when using an intersectional approach with the aim of expanding the base of people involved.

### INVEST IN LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Women of color have been central to developing the theory and strategies that make an intersectional approach a reality for on-the-ground organizing in the two states. There is ongoing need to listen to, promote the visibility of, and support the organizational leadership of people of color, especially women of color, in the LGBT movement. Similarly, the transgender activists we spoke to (all of whom were white) often expressed an analysis that was striking in its intersection with issues of race and class oppression.

### TAKE RISKS

The organizational allies and funders who invested in New Mexico's young queer women of color early on could not have predicted that fifteen years later these women would serve as a center of gravity for progressive alliance building in New Mexico. In a similar vein, organizations and funders in Ohio could support a roundtable of LGBT leaders of color to convene and step outside of their daily work. As one Ohio-based queer woman of color said, it should not be "about building a campaign, it's about building something sustainable."

