Collective care for gender liberation: a non-binary Central Asian perspective

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Abstract: Trans lives are often survival-focused and precarious, having to defend the basic right to exist. Every anti-trans law gives legal justification to deny our right to live with dignity. Multiply-marginalised trans people are often most affected with least say.

I write this piece in the light of the new draft law in Kyrgyzstan. It follows the growing anti-queer legislation (anti-propaganda law), aims to severely restrict trans rights according to TGEU. It would remove the last remaining channel for legal gender recognition, impose a comprehensive prohibition on gender-affirming treatments, with a limited exception for cases involving 'congenital anomalies'. The legislation would restrict actions intended to 'influence minors' self-perception of gender', effectively limiting certain mental health support and informational resources related to gender identity for transgender youth. I hope to discuss the basics of gender liberation and the need for collective care (and radical empathy) for the future lives of my people.

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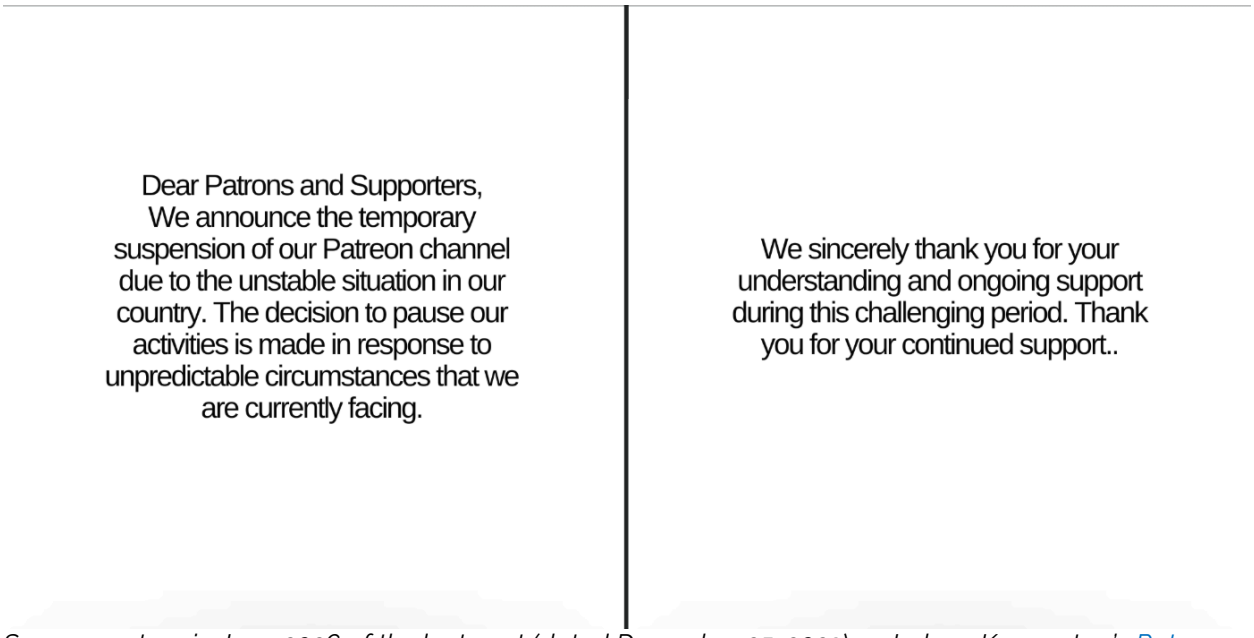

Screen capture in June 2026 of the last post (dated December 25, 2023) on Labrys Kyrgyzstan's Patreon

Gender liberation

In the current times of mass disillusionment with the global human rights system, wars, live-streamed genocides, and everyday normalised violence against marginalised people, we continue to seek solutions to structural problems and strive for a just world. This piece of writing discusses gender liberation and importance of collective care in our movements and groups.

A young girl facing bullying in her school, a queer minimum-wage worker struggling to afford zir hormone therapy, a man facing ableism and anti-fatness in accessing medical care, an agender NGO employee who barely holds back from swearing every time it is misgendered. Gender liberation recognises the existence of gender hegemony and various discrimination maintained by it, as well as its colonial roots and connections with white supremacy and capitalism. Gender liberation seeks to ruin domination in its varied and interconnected forms. Aside from binary cisgendered heteronormativity and patriarchy, ableism is a barrier to gender liberation, as are anti-fatness, racism, ageism and other forms of oppression. Gender liberation requires solidarity with other revolutionary movements, and it cannot be allowed to be used as a tool of domination against other marginalised groups (pinkwashing, homonationalism). We know that what does not directly affect us at the moment, firstly, affects someone else, but also is not guaranteed to leave us be later on.

Divisiveness of gender socialisation

Gender oppression influences us all to various degrees based on many factors, such as other axes of discrimination where we find ourselves. One of the challenges imposed by the oppressive system is dealing with internalised oppression: that is true for the oppressed and the oppressors.

We all experience gender socialisation into the binary gender system, with many similarities and some differences across the globe. Cisnormativity, compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy condition our collective understanding of gender and sexuality, as well as associated topics of expression, relationship-building and more. We are taught to assume that many experiences and expected traits - positive and negative alike - for any one of the two globally acknowledged genders is 'natural for them'. 'Women' are emotionally intelligent and submissive, 'men' are resilient and tough - exceptions to these might be tolerated but not accepted. People largely internalise this binary hierarchy and learn to navigate the world of gender according to it: what 'girls' and 'boys' should and should not feel/do/expect and what they must be to become 'women' and 'men'. Children closely observe people around them, find patterns in behaviours and attitudes, and replicate them. Playing allows them to practise what they have learnt from adults around them or other sources of information. With almost only the gender models limited to the women/men binary available, children might feel pressured to choose one of the examples they like to aspire towards. Some reject the limited choices on offer and embark on journeys to find fitting gender models outside of binary or denounce gender completely and accept their non-gendered or agender selves. Gender is socially constructed across various historical and cultural contexts, and queer genders have existed throughout the history of the whole world: in Africa, Asia, Pacific Islands, Europe, Turtle Island. Gender socialisation that happens in a hierarchical society is harmful to everyone, therefore to free future generations from it - we have to fight against cispatriarchy and for gender liberation for all!

The binary of sex is no more natural than the binary of gender, and similarly, enacts itself through violence and oppression against people who fail to fit it. Sex/gender binary must adapt from the beliefs that one's gender is defined by one's anatomy (and therefore, sex = gender, both binary) and sex is a 'biological fact' about the person and gender refers to social roles and expressions of the person (sex =/= gender, both binary) to understanding sex as a 'biological spectrum' and gender as 'performed'.

Collective care

While promoting gender liberation, it is necessary to prepare for a sustained effort. We as humans each need to take care of ourselves and be taken care of - our responsibility to ourselves is interconnected with our responsibility to others. Self-

care and collective care are therefore rooted in the same need, as taking care of others - of our community - is caring for ourselves. Because of this implicit understanding, for example, when I get sick I ask others for help, and I am happy to help others when they get sick. Unfortunately, the global understanding of 'self-care' has been largely co-opted by neoliberal capitalism to distance itself from politics and focus on an individualistic 'recovery/calming down' and involve consumption of material goods – '*buy* this gym membership, that wellness retreat, and several 'self-care' packages. Notions of social and collective care have been put aside in favor of individualised wellness, resilience and 'self-care' that can be actualised on a personal *independent* basis. Taking my last example: I hesitate to ask others for help, because I am 'supposed to' do it (whatever it might be: food preparation, cleaning, grocery shopping, standing up) on my own. Self-care cannot solve systemic issues that require an intersectional approach, and especially for people who experience one or multiple forms of marginalisation, individualistic self-care is not sustainable. Collective care takes up various forms, but many of them are challenging to commodify and are often not a one-time thing: instead, they need a long-term plan that can be maintained over time, with slowness and sustainability in mind. Collective care is crucial for gender liberation, which is also not a once-in-a-lifetime event but a long-term process of getting to a society without gender hierarchy. Care in general is often seen as a 'femme organisational skill' and thus can be underestimated or delegated to those who are assumed to be 'naturally inclined to be caring'. Those are notions that we must challenge and discuss how we can navigate the power imbalances (privileges and prejudices) in our organisations and movements to build collective care despite them. We have to care for everyday survival and beyond it, we have to care for growth.

Nonbinary care

From the nonbinary author of this piece, this section outlines several 'requests for help'. Nonbinary people are very diverse in their understanding of gender, expression of it and actions it takes to recognise it. One of the important aspects of gender affirming care for many nonbinary folks is socio-linguistic which includes the way we interact in interpersonal relationships, discuss gender and more. It is less known compared to medical gender affirming care - for instance, hormone therapy and surgeries - but plays a crucial role for inclusion and non-discrimination. The general discriminatory environment in Central Asian countries that, at its 'best', used to take on pathologising route towards trans and gender diverse people, now worsens with the first passage of new anti-trans draft bill in Kyrgyzstan. The path forward from here must centre voices of nonbinary and trans people, aim to protect existing safe spaces, support activist groups across Central Asia (for example in Kazakhstan) and build regional solidarity.