

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

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We should work towards making it possible to be gay exactly in the way you are gay, and to recognize that there are gays in all sectors of Norwegian society. There is no right or wrong way to be gay. There is only one thing that is wrong, and that is living a life you don't want to live.

An Interview with Karen Pinholt

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The Norwegian LGBT Association, Oslo, Norway

Karen Pinholt: My name is Karen Pinholt. I am the president, the elected leader of the board, and the executive director of *Landsforeningen for lesbiske, homofile, bifile og transpersoner -LLH* (The Norwegian LGBT Association). We do social work and create meeting places for the LGBT community all over the country: Choirs, parties, sporting activities, etc., most of which is done on a voluntary basis. At the same time, we do political advocacy for LGBT rights, both nationally and internationally, and some legal counseling for individuals who are in need. We have a wide range of activities.

Carlos Motta: What is the history of the organization?

KP: LLH is one of the oldest LGBT organizations in the world. It was founded in 1950 as *Det Norske Forbundet av 1948* (DNF48), a Norwegian branch of the Danish organization *Landsforeningen for Bøsser og Lesbiske, Forbundet af 1948* (F-48) founded in 1948. Since then, we have developed into what you see today: A national organization with 8 employees and 14 local branches in almost every part of the country.

CM: What was the kind of work done by the association in the 1950s?

KP: It was mostly social. We had one person who managed to be a very public person at a very early stage, and at that time the political fight was to decriminalize homosexuality.

CM: Is this organization a product of the founding of the gay and lesbian movement, or is it a different entity that works parallel to it?

KP: No. We are the organized part of the gay and lesbian movement in Norway, and we spring out of that. We have added the trans issue recently, within the last 3 or 4 years, but only the last year we did it properly.

CM: What is the foundational ideology of the association?

KP: That we are equal to everyone else and should have equal rights in every aspect of our lives.

CM: Can you define that notion of equality, as you understand it from within here?

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KP: Up to the middle of last year, when it was agreed that we should have full marriage rights, it was a legal question: To have equal rights under the law. Today we have put much of that legal fight behind us because those rights are there. The fight now is elsewhere. We aim at having not just legal equality, but also *real* equality in our everyday lives. Our main tool in that fight is to increase awareness and the competence in LGBT issues in the general population, but also with people who work with others professionally: Health workers, people working in schools and education, leaders in management, etc. Most often in Norwegian society, they would like to treat us equally, but there is a lack of competence on how to do it. This means they often just ignore us, and ignore the fact that we sometimes need some special considerations to be properly treated as equal.

CM: Can you give an example of a situation in which there should be some kind of proper treatment?

KP: We have many examples. Let's take an example from the school. A 15-year old boy knows he falls in love with other boys, and throughout his school time he is introduced to all sorts of concepts of society: Marriage, feelings and sexuality, how families form, how the economy of families works, etc. Nevertheless, he is never introduced to the fact that those could be gay families. In that way, his identity is not present in what he is taught at school, so he is outside society. He is someone else, something that we do not talk about. Many teachers want to do something about that, and want to teach about homosexuality, and what do they do? They take it aside and say: "Okay, that is an important theme, so we invite *LLH*, or someone else to talk about it." Or they say: "Yes, let's talk about abortion and suicide rates and how to avoid STDs and *homosexuality!*" Homosexuality is grouped with the other problems of sexuality and love, as opposed to having it as an integral part of the discussion about love, feelings and forming a family; because forming a family always concerns a man and a woman that have kids. Therefore, we are trying to make people in general understand that they have to see the *real* world, and not just their idea of the world.

CM: Is *LLH* a government organization?

KP: No.

CM: But is it a government-sponsored organization?

KP: Yes, certainly. This is very normal in Norway. We are an advocacy organization. The government does not give us very clear indications on what to do with that money, but we do get most of our funding from the government.

CM: The programs that are produced and implemented here reflect the position of the government with regard to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity?

KP: The fact that we get money reflects that we have a government that realizes that we are a minority that needs special attention, and that we need to have a functional organization to speak up for our rights; but that doesn't mean that they tell us what to think or what programs to implement. We apply for funding for particular projects that we want to do, and sometimes we get it, sometimes we don't. I am quite sure that if we had a very conservative government, it could risk our funding. But we do not feel that the government pressures our organization.

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For example, there is a project aimed at health workers: Doctors, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists and all sorts of people who work in the health sector. It entails developing tools to educate them and make them more competent regarding LGBT issues. We have advocated that that project meets the constant demand for knowledge and competence on this field. And that should not be done by us that has to be done by the government. Consequently, we have advocated that there ought to be government agencies doing that sort of work, because that is too big a job in Norway for a small organization like ours. So far, the government has not been listening to that, and we are actually worried that we might not have funding next year or the year after, or that we won't have funding for what we see as important and completely necessary work.

CM: Could you talk about the contrast between the legislative achievements in Norway, which seem to be far ahead from other countries, and the way people actually live their lives?

KP: I am a firm believer that having the laws makes us equal. The legal framework is a strong and important signal for Norwegian society. Without that as a backing, all the negative things that we experience out in the real world derive from the fact that we are not equal before the law. Now that we are equal before the law, it is very difficult for our opponents to say: "I have the right to treat you badly." Now they have to find other ways to make their arguments. Since we are equal before the law, they see that the society at large and the lawmakers recognize us as human beings with equal rights. That means that it is much more difficult to treat us badly, but that doesn't mean we are not treated badly. There are sub-communities in Norway where it is definitely not okay to be gay.

CM: That seems to be the official framework, but at the same time I understand that within communities, the Church, work places or in schools, there are often hostile situations that determine the way people handle their lives. Is that what you are trying to confront with the creation of these programs?

KP: Yes, exactly. We see that there are still many sub-communities in Norway; different conservative churches, both Christian and Muslim, with very bad opinions and attitudes toward LGBT people. We often hear about horrific stories. We also know that schools are very difficult places because there is a lot of bullying. At work many people hide who they are because they are afraid, and, of course, that does not change because we can suddenly get married. But the minute someone has the guts to stand up in the workplace, or the minute a teacher has the competence and the knowledge to say: "No, we are going to put an end to this in our school and in our classroom," then they are the ones with the backing of the law, and not the other way around. Nonetheless, we still have a lot of work to do. And we have found that the best way to confront that situation is with knowledge and awareness. Aggressive argumentation or advocacy doesn't help in the public opinion. What helps is increased knowledge, and also having positive examples out there.

CM: As the "official" face of the LGBT movement, what is your relationship to other forms of gay and lesbian thinking that resist or are critical of what is called "homonormativity"? I am referring to queer theorists and academics that have challenged identity categories and propose other ways of thinking about sexual diversity.

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KP: My agenda is to make sure that everyone who is LGBT can be that in exactly the way they want to be. You have the right as a person to define who you are and live that life, and others should not limit you. That also means that as an LGBT movement, I can't tell other people how to be gay or that they are being gay in a wrong way. The gay movement, in an attempt to find the gay identity, which is an important quest, has been moving on so fast that it has lost a lot of people. Some feel that being on the back of a truck in a Pride Parade wearing next to nothing and dancing to disco music is a normal way to be gay. Whereas others think that getting married and getting 2.3 kids, or whatever is the average, is a normal way to be gay, because you are supposed to be part of the gay culture. My objection is to both. I think that we should work towards making it possible to be gay exactly in the way you are gay, and to recognize that there are gays in all sectors of Norwegian society. There is no right or wrong way to be gay. There is only one thing that is wrong, and that is living a life you don't want to live.

CM: Has this been this organization's agenda since its inception, or has it changed according to who is directing it at the time? How has it changed under your mandate?

KP: I think with time it has been easier to promote the agenda that I am putting forward now: Saying that the LGBT community should be seen as a diverse population. The further you are from having equal rights, the more discriminated you are, the more there is a need to stick together and be the same and find your common points. Whereas now, when we are not in any way living in an oppressed society and most of us feel pretty much free, it is easier to accept and acknowledge that there are differences between us. We are not so hurt by it. I think that LGBT people who watch the Gay Pride parade and think: "This is frightening, I do not want to be associated with that because that is not me," are still insecure about whether it is okay to be gay *their way*. That is why it is important for me to tell them that it is okay to be gay their way, but it should also be okay to be gay in another way.

CM: There is an image out there that reproduces the idea of gay marriage (an other legal pillars) as exemplary of equality. This image is very successful strategically and politically, but it also might exclude identities that do not fit in those categories. You say that you are willing to accept all of them. But how do the programs support the legal framework and at the same time allow for those more diverse sexualities to come into being?

KP: I think there has been a misunderstanding in some parts of the LGBT movement on the marriage issue. The misunderstanding is that *all* of us have been fighting to get married. We have been fighting for the right to get married, which means that some people can get married if they want to, and others have the right to choose not to. Even the people who don't want to get married, who don't want to have kids, have now been given something: They have been given a choice they didn't have before. They can actually choose not to get married.

CM: I am interested in knowing more about the role of minority groups in your program. Can you speak about the recent addition of the letter 'T' for transgender to LGB? And, what is the role that immigrant and non-Norwegian citizens play within your program?

KP: We are definitely not where I want to be with regard to those two groups. Let's start with the 'T': It was included in our documents 3 or 4 years ago without much real effect. Nevertheless, in the last year we managed to get a little funding to have a project that we call "Gender Diversity," and it has been hugely successful. We have done many things in a short time. We started a

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network of trans people of different sorts, because that is not a homogenous group either, and we created a trans committee, which gives us input on policy issues. They are people with inside knowledge and competence in the field. We are slowly gaining knowledge on trans-related topics that we use in our discussions. We are on the right track, but we are not there yet.

CM: Why is it only happening now?

KP: I think it is because trans people have been even more stigmatized than LGBs. There has not been willingness from the organization and the gay and lesbian community to include the 'T.' There is the feeling that being associated to an even more stigmatized group might make your situation even worse. I think the 'T' can be added now in Norway because we don't feel so stigmatized anymore as lesbians and gays. Now we have the capacity inside ourselves to take it on. Yes, it is too bad that an even more stigmatized group should not have been included from the start.

CM: What about the situation of immigrants?

KP: Luckily, we have a gigantic group called *Queer World*. I say gigantic because there are more than 200 people from different ethnic minorities and backgrounds connected to it. *Queer World* and *LLH* work closely together, especially on policy issues. We get input from them on what our lobbying work on different policies should be. Right now our main focus is on asylum seekers.

LLH also does some international work such as development aid projects out in the world. We are obviously a *way-to-white* organization that is not 100% inclusive. It helps having *Queer World*, but it should not be necessary to have an organization on the side of the main one. But then again, I think we are on the right track now. We have one non-white member in our board, and I hope that will expand on the different positions, not just on the board but also out in the country after a while. We are getting there, but it is never enough, really.

CM: What are the specific problems that immigrant communities face, in relation to Norwegian society and within their own communities in terms of their sexual orientation and gender identity?

KP: The first part is something that we have discussed a fair bit lately. How do we make sure to include groups that face double discrimination, such as LGBT ethnic minorities? Being a mainstream Norwegian organization, how do we make sure that we do not have the same mechanisms that exclude ethnic, religious and cultural minorities? How can we make sure that we are truly an inclusive organization? And not just the organization because we are just the formalized, organized, part of the LGBT movement: We would like to make sure that in Norway the LGBT community at large is inclusive. As an organization, we have tried to take some steps towards that, but we are not there yet. One of the things we have been doing is to actively participate in the debate on refugees and asylum seekers, and also in the debate on Islamophobia. Such discriminatory speech is similar to the harsh words that we face in everyday life, and it should not be tolerated. By acknowledging that Islamophobia and homophobia are common things, that we are fighting similar battles, and by trying to side with other minorities, we are trying to be more inclusive.

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CM: It wouldn't surprise me if matters of sexual orientation and gender identity are secondary to the government in relation to refugees, since it is not the most "pressing" issue.

KP: We have tried to push the government to make sure that gay asylum seekers get the same kind of protection as any other asylum seeker. That is the fight we are having with the authorities. It is not a matter of whether sexual orientation and gender identity is secondary; it is a matter of seeing them as grounds for asylum on an equal footing with political views, and religious or ethnic identity.

CM: Is that not the case in Norway?

KP: If you look at the law, if you look at all the documents, you would say: Yes, it is recognized. But from the different decisions made on concrete cases of asylum seekers, we have seen that sexual identity is not recognized as a part of identity in the same way that religious identity is. Authorities think that sexual identity is just a matter of sexual acts that you can do anywhere or abstain from doing. They tell people to get back into the closet, to stay in the closet, or to be in the closet 100%, 24 hours a day, all of their lives. They are sending asylum seekers back to their country of origin telling them: "If you just don't tell at all, you can live a happy life."

We have some extreme examples: They are sending people back to Iraq, where we know there is a manhunt conducted against gay men. That is terrifying. The Norwegian immigration authorities do not recognize sexual identity as an integral part of your identity. This is terrible, because when you listen to the rest of the society speak about these issues in regards to school, health, marriage laws, etc.; it is clear that they accept sexual orientation is an integral part of your identity, and possibly one of the most deeply embedded parts of your identity.

I was once presented with a good example: Have all heterosexuals imagine for a moment what it would be like to pretend to be gay all the time, every day, every week, throughout their lives; to always lie to their families, their friends, in their workplace, etc. Then they would understand what this entails. They would know what it feels like not to be able to get married, to have kids, to come out, or even to love.

CM: They would not be able to live a full life in any way.

KP: Yes, they would never be able to live a full life. We would not be asking them to do that for a period of time, we would be asking them for a lifetime commitment to hiding who they are, the innermost part of who they are.

CM: What is the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in Norway, not if they are sent back but when they stay in this country? Do they face issues of racism and discrimination based on their ethnic origin?

KP: Sure. There are refugee camps or houses where new immigrants are placed with people of their own ethnicity or nationality. For a gay person who has been running away precisely from his or her own culture, that is just a horror. The authorities say that they are trying to avoid that, but we have examples of people escaping from those places, coming to us in Oslo and asking *Queer World* to help them find a place where they can live safely because they don't trust the Norwegian authorities, or they don't feel safe at the places where they have been situated.

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CM: I would like to ask you about Norwegian ethnic minorities, the Sami, which I suppose have full citizenship rights. What is the situation of LGBT Sami like?

KP: The Sami have a separate culture and also a different religion from the rest of the population. Throughout the Norwegian history, they have been discriminated against. This means that the Sami LGBT is another group that faces double discrimination, which obviously gives them some extra challenges. At the same time, the Sami culture embeds homophobic views. We just had a new report on Sami LGBT, which paints a rather bleak picture of growing up in Sami culture.

We don't have any material on the Sami yet –and this demonstrates that we are not truly inclusive. It is hard to find LGBT information on the Sami people in their own language. We are trying to rectify that now, and I think before the year is over, we will have our first brochure in Sami, and we are also hoping to get funding to have some information on the Web in Sami. We will see how far we get.

CM: I would like to move on to talk about HIV/AIDS. Could you talk about how *LLH* has dealt with HIV/AIDS from the crisis onwards and what is happening now?

KP: Once men who had sex with other men were identified as a risk group, *LLH* started getting funding for something that we called the “Health Committee.” The funding for this project grew larger, and the committee became an entity in itself. Last year, we decided that the Health Committee and *LLH* as such should split and become two separate entities. The Health Committee is now doing health work, reaching out to the LGBT community out there and promoting safe sex, whereas we are trying to do the advocacy work to make sure that the Norwegian HIV/AIDS policies include LGBT people in a good way. The transgender community is often left out, which is probably a big mistake since I think they could be considered another risk group. One of the things that we have been working against is the paragraph in Norwegian law that criminalizes HIV positive people for having sex.

CM: For having sex at all or for consciously exposing someone else to the virus?

KP: It does not criminalize HIV positive people for having sex, but it does put some responsibility on that person to make sure that they don't do anything to expose anyone else to the virus, and if they do, they are punishable with imprisonment. Of course they have a responsibility, but it is wrong to punish a sexual relationship, especially when the punishment goes to the weaker part. They have removed the responsibility completely from the HIV negative person within the couple. It is as if they were saying: “Just go and have sex, do whatever you want, don't protect yourself because HIV positive people are supposed to protect you from themselves. So don't worry.” That is a big problem.

CM: What is the debate around this at the moment?

KP: It was discussed in the last session of the Parliament and they changed the law a tiny little bit. Now you can, as an HIV negative person, consent to have a sexual relationship with some risk involved, if you are married.

CM: If you are married to an HIV positive person?

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KP: Yes. This is a very heteronormative way of seeing this because it presupposes that a committed relationship can only take between people who are married. This law is also aimed at making sure that HIV positive people can't have children. We have seen cases of people who had children and used that to get their former spouse punished for having sex with them. They say: "Obviously we had sex with no protection, look we had children from that." And HIV positive people are punished, even though they have been very open about being HIV positive.

CM: This increases the stigma against HIV positive in society?

KP: It does. An HIV negative person cannot say: "It is okay, I hear you, you are HIV positive. We can have sex without protection anyway." If an HIV negative person says that, and they go ahead and have sex, it is the HIV positive person who is punishable. That is the case still today.

CM: Is treatment for HIV/AIDS part of the welfare state health care plan? Is it free?

KP: I don't know if it is free, because it is a very expensive treatment, but at least it is subsidized to a very large extent. It is part of the State funded health care system.

CM: Let me change the subject again: Some of the people I have been talking to, especially some of the researchers, have expressed sometimes that they have some reservations about the way that *LLH* has used a narrative of tragedy, exacerbating the negative aspects of the gay experience, as opposed to something more hopeful, with the aim of finding money or sympathy. They say that it is a kind of homonormative behavior. How do you respond to that?

KP: This is a very important discussion that we need to have. I have to admit I am not ready to stop using the negative stories and the "victimization" of LGBT people; the focus on all the bad things that we have experienced. I really understand that it is not always healthy to use that sort of strategy, definitely not. I also agree with the researchers: This is a way of accepting that we cannot live up to heterosexuality and that we are victims that should be taken care of. Nevertheless, I am not completely convinced that we should throw this strategy overboard, and there are some reasons for that. First of all, because we *are* victims in so many instances, we actually are, and I am afraid that if we stop saying that, people will stop working on trying to make us equal. My best example of that taking place is my home country, Denmark, where there is no debate on equal opportunities between men and women because there is a general idea that we have that equality and therefore, we don't have to discuss it; we don't have to do anything actively to address that. If we stop saying that there are some problems out there, making us vulnerable, making us victims in different settings, we could also stop addressing these issues. The other reason is that it works to get funding, to get attention on our issues and to make sure that all sorts of authorities from priests, to schools, to politicians actually put our issues on the agenda. It has some effect. But I am not saying that it is not a discussion that we should have, and that we should use the victim strategy without having a critical eye on what it does to us as people, as a movement and as a community.

CM: When you have this conversation with your critics, what do they suggest?

KP: In school, we have a two-laid strategy, I would say, and I like it. We have the strategy for confronting gay bashing in school, bullying... We cannot ignore the fact that there is a big issue of bullying of LGBT students in Norwegian schools. The victim strategy focuses on that. But we

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also have the other leg: Making sure that LGBT issues are mainstreamed into the whole curriculum; making sure that when they discuss families, they introduce a diverse sort of family; when they talk about feelings and falling in love, they do not just talk about guys falling in love with girls and the other way around. They should expand on that and show the diverse reality that is out there, which is confronting heteronormativity in a different way. But we cannot just do one of these strategies; I believe we have to do both at this point.

CM: I spoke to Åse Rothing who told me that in the curriculum there is always an assumption that it is better not to be gay; but if you are, it is okay...

KP: She has been doing brilliant work. She is one of the few people that have tried to find other ways of expressing what we need without starting out with the “we-are-victims” statement.

CM: I want to ask you a question about the self-perception of the gay and lesbian movement in Norway in relation to the world. How do you see yourselves? Do you see yourselves as pioneer legislators?

KP: I think there is the perception that we are at the forefront, because we have the Marriage Act, which gives us completely equal rights. But at the same time, I think there is an awareness that not everything is all right, that not everything is fixed... I hope that there is the view that we are at the forefront and that we have the obligation to make sure that we help to push the agenda internationally.

CM: As a leader of the organization, do you have contact with other leaders globally? And do you share the kind of knowledge that you have produced here?

KP: Yes, but not to the extent I would like to. We do not have the capacity to be involved in a global organization for a long time, and we have only marginally been involved with organizations in northern Europe. We have chosen to do a few development aid projects in Kenya, Nepal and other region countries, but this is a matter of capacity. If we had the capacity, of course we would share our knowledge; but I think we have as much to learn from others about strategies, concrete projects, as they have to learn from us. I see that in many aspects we are definitely not in the forefront.