**Title:**

**Changing Contexts: From Criminal to Citizen**

**Abstract**

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical reflection on the profound changes regarding sexual minority rights in Britain and Ireland. It seeks to illustrate how recent legislative changes can impact the working lives of gay employees living and working in nonmetropolitan locales. The paper also aims to assess the role of LGBTQI movements, groups and networks, in facilitating voice and visibility, and advancing equality.

**Design/methodology/approach:**

Secondary Research was undertaken to assist in contextualising the empirical findings, within a literature review. The paper presents findings derived from a qualitative study, involving in-depth interviews with forty-four gay men in Britain and Ireland.

**Findings:**

LGBTQI movements and groups have played a crucial role in facilitating voice, and visibility for LGBTQI people in both Britain and Ireland. These movements have themselves, undergone change, moving from liberationist-queer-radical approaches to normalising-sexual citizenship-radical approaches. Significant legislative advances have taken place in the 2000s, and these have had a positive impact on gay workers. However, there is a continuing need for organisations to respond in ever more strategic, effective and inclusive ways, if the promise of sexual citizenship is to be realised by gay people in the workplace. Local, self-organised LGBT groups can play an important role in building sexual citizenship in nonmetropolitan locales.

**Originality and value**:

This paper’s value and contribution lies in its application of theoretical principles and models, most notably models of sexual citizenship (Weeks, 1998, 2000, 2016; Richardson, 2004, 2017; Plummer, 2003), in a specific historical, geographical and spatial context. The paper offers an insight into the lives of gay men who reside and work in nonmetropolitan locales; and highlights the emergence of subtle forms of gay resistance and radicalism, through self-organised groups.

**Keywords:** LGBTQI movements, Sexual Citizenship, Legislation, LGBT groups.

**Article classification:** Research Paper

**Introduction**

A reading of the histories of homosexuality reveals a centuries-old story, of persecution, abandonment, and exclusion – from family, workplace, and community – as described by Altman in his seminal book *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1972). Historically, the homosexual has also been considered (in law) a criminal, under the threat of arrest and imprisonment, if found to be engaging in same-sex relations (Weeks, 2016; Lewis, 2013).

It is only now, in what Giddens (1992) calls ‘late modern times’ that we hear a language of rights around sexualities (Plummer, 2006); where long silenced voices have become heard in unprecedented ways, through civil rights movements, inter/national lesbian and gay rights-based activists, trade unions, and collectives; voices which have called for homo-emancipation and liberation (Mailiepaard, 2014).

The 1990s saw the language of rights around sexualities, begin to coalesce around a call for *citizenship*, or more accurately for a *sexual citizenship* which embraced lesbian, gay and bisexuality (Richardson, 2017). The turn to a *sexual citizenship* model as a means to end exclusion, marginalisation and stigmatisation has come to dominate gay politics, and the language of citizenship has become increasingly popular in the media, in legislature, and latterly within the political mainstream in many countries (Chasin, 2000 in Richardson 2004; Plummer, 2003; Weeks, 2016). However, global economic, social and cultural divergences, call for contextualisation. While intimate and sexual citizenship are models and concepts that can *plausibly* offer a basic, fundamental and universalist ‘language of citizenship rights’, the term “rights”, in and of itself, can be distinctly problematic given its cultural, western, and individualistic bias (Plummer, 2003: 143). Furthermore, in considering discussions of intimate relationships and concomitant sexual citizenship rights in the orbit of the non-Western world, we are in the main, considering countries where the basic economic conditions of life might make such discussions seem like a cruel joke and an example of Western self-indulgence (ibid:118).

In adopting a cross-country perspective, this study addresses the lives of gay men, in the context of two legislatively progressive jurisdictions, Britain and Ireland, which have undergone fundamental, constitutional and legislative reforms in the area of LGBT equality (Rose, 1994; Weeks, 2016).

In choosing to locate this inquiry in the nonmetropolitan space, this paper hopes to address, in some small way, the long standing academic neglect of sexual minorities in the rural and small town environment (Bell & Binnie, 2004). The result of such historic neglect and metro-centric bias (Delamore, 2013) has been a tendency to understand LGBTQI identities as inherently urban identities (Kazyak, 2011).

As part of ‘broadening the lens’ of inquiry, this special issue edition of the Journal of Organizational Change Management seems especially open to discussions concerning the ‘historical progress of LGBT people and movements’; a progress which has demonstrated ‘how they fight to gain legal rights by adopting the goal of legitimisation of being LGBT in society’ (Aydin and Colgan, 2018).

In response, the literature review of this paper examines the role of historical and contemporary LGBTQI movements and groups in helping promote dignity, equality, and inclusion in Britain and Ireland. The Findings and Discussion section provides insights from fieldwork conducted in the West of Ireland and East of England, addressing two central research questions. Firstly, has recent sexual orientation equalities legislation (which national LGBTQI movements have helped realise) had an impact on the organisational experiences of gay male employees in nonmetropolitan Ireland and England? And secondly, what is the impact of *local* LGBTQI in the lives of gay men living and working in rural and small-town locales?

**LGBTQI movements: The Politics of Change (from ‘Queer’ to ‘Sexual Citizenship’)**

The Wolfenden Report of 1957, which argued that homosexuality should *not* be a crime and recommended a partial decriminalisation of same sex acts, can be considered an important historical milestone in modern Britain’s cultural (re) understanding of homosexuality. Following publication of the Report, the campaign to implement its recommendations gathered momentum. Movements such as *The Homosexual Law Reform Society* and the *Campaign for Homosexual Equality* sought to coordinate the efforts of gay activists and supporters to ensure pressure was maintained on government and that the campaign for legal reform was not allowed to fade away (British Library, 2017b). In 1967, same-sex acts were (partially) decriminalized in England and Wales (Scotland had to wait until 1981, Northern Ireland until 1982, and the Republic of Ireland until 1993).

The immediate ‘post- decriminalization’ years, saw the emergence, of an ever more confident and assertive Gay Rights movement in Britain, personified by the emergence of the *Gay Liberation Front* (Weeks, 2000; 2016). This movement built on the politics of identity to bring out sexual minorities as self-identified people demanding rights (Bell and Binnie, 2000). With “new slogans, lists of demands and rights, badges and marches, it raised public awareness of homosexuality in a way that simply had not happened before” (Plummer, 2006: 7).

Similar gay liberation movements began to emerge in Ireland during the 1970s, such as the *Sexual Liberation Movement* and the *Irish Gay Rights Movement.* High on the political agenda of the gay and lesbian liberation movements was to erase homo-negativity from society, in particular the notion that same-sex relations were abnormal and/or unnatural (D’Emilio and Freedman, 1997 in Richardson 2004: 395). Through their activities, such as publishing pamphlets, demonstrations, street protest, pickets, educational workshops, and public meetings (all tactics which were universally considered as quite revolutionary at the time) these early lesbian and gay liberation movements sought to end discrimination in employment, welfare and other aspects of social life; they challenged the presumption of heterosexuality in the public sphere through ‘coming out of the closet’; and claimed the right to public visibility (Richardson, 2004; Hines, 2013). The late 1980s and 1990s also saw LGBT workers campaign for self-organised groups and union structures to represent LGBT members within their unions (Colgan and McKearney, 2012: 361) – which saw LGBT rights issues enter many workplaces, often for the first time.

A number of the early liberation and campaigning movements were informed and influenced by queer theory – a theory which viewed “queer” as a political project; a coupling of sexual identity with a wide-reaching and radical emancipatory agenda (Penney, 2014: 3); a radical politics that sought to readdress the oppressions of gender, race and social class, imperialism and patriarchy (Hines, 2012:200); a politics that actively rejected traditional taxonomies of sexuality, gender and intimate lives (Plummer, 2006; Jagose, 1996). In turn, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, reactionary critics, in the right-wing press, and among some mainstream politicians, relentlessly, and aggressively, labelled queer politics and queer activists as counter-cultural, anti-family, subversive, and as a dangerous threat to society (see Tatchell (1983) for an account of the homophobic tactics used against him, in the Bermondsey by-election).

As Richardson (2004, 2017) chronicles, the 1990s saw the emergence of neoconservative gay male writers who began to advance an alternative to ‘queer radicalism’ - an ‘integrationist’ approach – which opined that most gay people felt no compelling need to alter the structures, and systems of society, rather they simply desired that they be allowed to become fully equal, integrated, citizens, under law. This is often referred to as a ‘politics of assimilation’, in so far as it emphasizes ‘wanting in’ to the mainstream (D’Emilio, 2000; Bell and Binnie, 2000).

By the mid-1990s, this new approach to achieving LGBTQI equality appeared to be in the ascendancy, perhaps more palatable to the political establishment, and as such gradually eclipsed the queer, gay liberation movements.

Bell and Binnie (2000) remind us, however, that the historical ‘queer phase’ encapsulated by the mass marches, agitations, revolutionary ideas, and gay liberation movements, should not be forgotten and erased from memory – rather it represented an invaluable and necessary protest phase, without which the rights agenda as we know it today could not have emerged. The unsettling, disruptive and radical nature of queer politics, as demonstrated by the early street movements, forced a reluctant society to at least hear (if not always acknowledge) the levels of prejudice, discrimination, hurt and pain felt by gay and lesbian people. Weeks acknowledges this in his seminal paper (1998), but makes a distinction between these two approaches, the strategies for subversion (‘the moment of transgression’) and the strategies for acceptance (the ‘moment of citizenship’) (2000: 28). As such, we can discern a perceived need for *both* transgression and citizenship in the fight for LGBTQI equality (Bell & Binnie, 2000: 29), with both approaches presented as radical.

With New Labour in government from 1997-2010, the period (and beyond) saw significant, and indeed transformative, legislative gains for LGBT communities (Weeks, 2007; 2016). The gay rights group, Stonewall, became a prominent partner in the 1990s and 2000s, advocating and working with politicians, convincing them, through debate and argument, of the need for greater citizenship rights for LGBT people (British Library, 2017b). This period also saw a new wave of organizational research focusing on a specific range of employment issues faced by LGBT people, including discrimination in the workplace (Colgan and Rumens, 2015:6). Such research was crucial in challenging the heterosexual bias in research on work and family life; and included salient work by Dunne (2000) highlighting the concept ‘double jeopardy’ (ibid:7) faced by lesbians in the workplace.

In Ireland, historically marked by a social conservatism, under influence of the Catholic Church (Inglis, 2005), the 1990s saw a re-positioning, whereby mainstream political parties increasingly embraced equality, often as the result of persuasive lobbying, of the body politic, by GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) which successfully argued that the Republican ideals of the founding fathers of the Irish state, as articulated in the 1916 Easter Rising proclamation, demanded equality for all citizens, regardless of sexuality (Rose, 1994).

Whether by appealing to the sentiment and embrace of a ‘true’ republican vision, as in Ireland; or whether through the discourses of Blair, Clegg or Cameron in Britain, we can discern a political narrative, in both countries, which seeks to “morally reframe” (Khazan, 2017) arguments for LGBT equality that appeals not only to liberal sentiment, but also to “the middle ground” of opinion, as well hoping to persuade socially conservative citizens that the ethical codes of the modern nation demand equality. This could be seen most clearly, in the speech of Prime Minister David Cameron in 2011, when he said:

*I don’t support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I’m a Conservative* (The Guardian, 2011)

Such a comment clearly illustrates the divergence in perception between the radicalism of the queer movement which may see same-sex marriage as problematic, as a form of “triumph” for hetero-patriarchy “where rights and responsibilities are bestowed on same-sex couples on the basis of adopting heterosexual convention” (Heaphy et al, 2013:2); and the radicalism of sexual citizenship whereby same-sex marriage is seen as a radical example, of equality and inclusion for gay people in a previously exclusionary, heterosexual institution.

There are a number of controversies, contradictions and ‘blind spots’ surrounding the concept of sexual citizenship, such as “an accommodation to heterosexual standards and the loss of distinctive differences, ways of being, and relational practices” (Taylor, 2011:583), de-politicisation, de-sexualisation, and assimilation (Cossman, 2007) and the dominance of western-centric ideology underpinning conceptualisations of sexual citizenship (Richardson, 2017). However, despite these, the emergence of the sexual citizen and of sexual citizenship as a concept represents a very new type of self- identification, and a very new type of ‘rights claiming’ in ‘western’ contexts, at least (Plummer, 2006:10).

In large measure through the efforts of the women’s and lesbian and gay movements, both historic and contemporary, queer and integrationist, gay people now inhabit a legal landscape which recognises a language of rights. Not only have the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland scrapped the old sexual offences laws, under which thousands of men were arrested and criminalised; gay people have now secured legislative protection against hate crimes, against discrimination and differential treatment in relation to housing, employment, welfare, and in provision of goods and services; they also have the right to civil partnership, and/or equal marriage (except in Northern Ireland), the right to foster and adopt children, and the right to serve in the military – advances unthinkable just two decades ago.

The concept of citizenship is however, broader than just the legal; and also calls on society, and organisations, to acknowledge the “right to be different, to re-value stigmatised identities and embrace hitherto marginalised lives” (Pakulski, 1997 in Richardson 2000: 121). As such the full promise of sexual citizenship is that it will deliver into the lives of LGBTQI people, forms of cultural, emotional, and social inclusion; and an end to the need for (homo) sexuality to inhabit the dark recesses of the “private sphere” (Robson and Kessler, 2008).

Sexual citizenship which delivers on its promise requires that dominant cultural narratives move from homo-negativity, or indeed mere tolerance, but rather towards an embracing, inclusive and representational celebration of sexual identity in all its manifestations and performances. Indeed, it is beholden on organisations to reflect on their role in building sexual citizenship through inclusive organisation cultures, and an end to attitudes which demean or stigmatise LGBTQI employees.

**Methodology**

The findings to be reported in later sections of this paper, are derived from a wider fieldwork study, conducted between 2012-2017, which involved an analysis of gay men, as sexual citizens, in both Britain and Ireland*.*

*Hermeneutic phenomenology* provided the philosophical underpinnings for this wider fieldwork study. Like phenomenology, *hermeneutic* *phenomenology* is concerned with human experience as it is lived (Laverty, 2003) with a particular emphasis on historicality, and context. Adopting this philosophical companion appeared consistent with assessing the LGBTQI experience in Ireland and Britain; as persons adjusting to a changed contextual environment where, rhetorically at least, their subjectivities are being re-cast.

The study adopted a qualitative research design and utilised qualitative data collection methods which is entirely consistent with a hermeneutic philosophical position (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018).

Given historical tendencies towards a metro-centric bias in researching gay lives (Delamore, 2013), the study took place outside large metropolitan centres of population. Forty-four men were interviewed; twenty-two in the West of Ireland and twenty-two in the East of England. Respondent recruitment relied on the support and help of local rural LGBT groups or networks, following which, forms of snowball sampling also occurred. All respondents conformed to the requirements of the study, which insisted that the men be eighteen years of age or over, self-identify as gay men, live, and if in employment, to work in the locale. The men came from a varied background with regard to occupation, age, class, income, and disability, although sadly, and reflecting a general lack of ethnic diversity in these rural areas, there was, despite efforts made, a distinct lack of visible ethnic minority men among participants interviewed.

Following Moustakas’s (1990) guidance on data collection and analysis, interviews (with the exception of one) were recorded and later transcribed. In using a form of life history interviews, Connell (2005) correctly asserts that, while they provide rich evidence and documentation of personal experience (in Annes and Redlin, 2012: 263), they also produce huge and overwhelming amounts of data with a consequent need for analysis through coding. In this regard, and following the tenets and principles of narrative data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 2002), transcribed interview texts were read, re-read, and text was broken down, following thematic categorisation techniques. Such steps, allowed for the themes and sub-themes to emerge, followed by interpretation, subsequent conceptual development, and refinement. The themes explored in this paper include the impact of legislation; and role of local rural LGBT groups, for respondents and their working lives.

**Findings and Discussion**

***The impact of legislation: Sexual Citizenship at work?***

An integral element of sexual citizenship concerns legislative equality, an end to criminalisation, and promotion of equal rights in aspects of life for LGBTQI people – key aspects and demands of the LGBTQI movements down through the years.

The men in both countries were convinced that the raft of anti-discrimination and equality legislation in both jurisdictions over recent years, has made a difference in their working lives as the testimony of this respondent illustrates:

They can’t treat us differently now, because of the laws. The laws, are there, and [we] cannot be discriminated against. You know. Absolutely not. All my colleagues know I’m gay. At work, absolutely. I’ve never heard any derogatory remark. They’d know better, you know. Basically as simple as that (**Health Care employee, Ireland**).

This statement perfectly describes a sense of new found confidence and empowerment as a *constitutional sexual citizen* of Ireland, and he implicitly makes a connection between his equalised legal status and his positive experiences in the workplace and within wider society

In Ireland, the legal framework for prohibiting discrimination improved significantly for gay people, with the introduction of the Employment Equality Act 1998 and the Equal Status Act 2000 which covered sexual orientation (CWOI 2009, O’Connell 2008). The United Kingdom introduced similar legislation in 2003, with the introduction of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations. Such legislation aimed to satisfy Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty, and highlights the pivotal role played by the European Union in the attainment of equal rights for gay people (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014). As a result, of these laws, it became unlawful, for the *first time*, to discriminate in employment, on grounds of sexual orientation (Colgan, 2011).

As such, a number of men saw examples, often for the first time, of their organisations taking proactive steps in promoting equality around sexual orientation. For some, the workplace culture around sexuality changed, and became what might be described, as a “gay-friendly organisation” in terms of policy and practice (Colgan, 2011). The men concurred that, at the most basic level, the impact of working in a gay-friendly environment can help make gay employees feel happier at work, foster greater engagement, and facilitate greater openness, with a consequent reduction in the need to adopt guarded and careful strategies around disclosure (Colgan et al, 2007:603).

Respondents emphasised the paramount importance of inclusive organisation cultures, considered vital if the gay employee is to feel they inhabit a secure, and safe, environment in which to ‘come out’ (if they so desire) and to self-identify as gay or lesbian or bisexual, without threat of penalty and detriment. Public recognition is important, as ‘the ability to be “out” and publicly visible is [….] crucial to the ability to claim rights’ (Richardson, 2000: 120).

In this study, twenty-seven men were fully ‘out’ at work, thirteen were ‘partially out’, and four ‘not out’ to anybody at work. A number of the ‘out’ and ‘partially out’ men, had felt able to ‘come out’ to co-workers, colleagues, and managers at work, in recent times such as this respondent:

I must admit, I mean a few years before, I was terrified I might have been outed at work, because a boyfriend I had, kissed me on the cheek in the town centre. I was so terrified of people seeing me, and knowing, but when I came out [after the employment legislation] nobody was bothered. So, yes, it’s interesting that that kind of fear within quite a short number of years had dissipated quite radically**. (Finance sector employee, England)**

Whilst not saying that employment equality legislation around sexuality was responsible for an immediate transformation of organisation culture, or indeed directly related to his coming out, this respondent along with and many other men, believed that when organisations respond to legislative changes in a proactive, and strategic manner, positive changes occur over time for them as gay employees.

Respondents cited a number of specific factors that made a difference to them, such as; organisations embedding anti-discrimination, sexual orientation legislation in staff handbooks, within HR policies, and publicising same, instigating positive actions such as, mandatory training on sexual orientation, sponsoring or otherwise supporting LGBTQI organisations, such as gay charities, or Gay Pride, an unequivocal response to harassment, and showing leadership in communicating the need for positive, non-stigmatising, organisation narratives around sexual diversity.

Such findings are consistent with work by Colgan (2006, 2011) and for respondents, in this study, such organisational responses, and initiatives, proved pivotal in helping build and sustain, a new, respectful, workplace climate around sexual orientation, with particular benefit to LGBTQI employees.

However some men cautioned that despite the presence of equality policies within their organisations, many co-workers, colleagues, and managers, remain uncomfortable with open discussions of sexual orientation in the workplace. Some testify to exclusionary traditional, religious and/or masculinist attitudes, which can pose barriers to inclusion, especially when such attitudes are expressed through stigmatising discourse, in organisations.

Respondents also commented upon a perceived gap between the lofty promises of equality policies and the practices they experienced on the ground in practice. The existence of a so-called “implementation gap”, whereby an organisation has written equality and diversity policies which are not meaningfully implemented (Creegan et al 2003) can render employment equality legislation meaningless to LGBTQI employees and workers. For this respondent the presence of employment equality legislation, and policies, did little to protect him from exclusion and ostracization at his workplace:

There would be about 500 people working there and some of them have been there maybe 500 years [laughs] You know, they’ve been there from the day dot. You know, one guy would have become very good friends with me, but the other guys have been very much, you know, don’t talk to him, you know, he’s gay. You wouldn’t hear them say it, but you just know because [for example] you’re in the canteen, the place would be full, and I’d sit on a table and a guy would come in and he would just basically look and see that, shit the only table available is that one there where I am, and so, they would go and sit on the edge of another table sooner than sit beside me (**Animal Processing factory, Ireland)**

2004 saw the passing into British law, of what Weeks refers to as “perhaps the most momentous change of all”, the Civil Partnership Act, which was followed by same-sex (equal) marriage in 2014. In Ireland, the Marriage Act 2015, allowed for same-sex marriage (Citizens Information, 2016) following endorsement by a national referendum. While perhaps not immediately obvious, this legislation has had implications for organisations and employees.

For some men, the main benefits of such legislation involved the practical benefits such as rights to employee occupational pension rights, and property inheritance rights.

Civil partnership, it’s great for us; as long as we have rights to leave each other whatever, and that we’re entitled to the occupational pension, that my partner pays a fortune into every month, as long as we have that there then we’re happy, you know, that’s, that a little bit of security for us, that’s enough for us (**Education** **sector employee, Ireland).**

For others, the advent of civil partnership and equal marriage went beyond transactional benefits – it signified an acknowledgement by the State, and society, that same-sex *couples* are worthy, and deserving of equality in all aspects of civil law. For many men, it signalled the arrival of an official, rhetorical ‘parity of esteem’ between straight and gay couples; a call which should be heeded by organisations, in practice as well as in policy.

However, a number of the men believe that while organisations are legally obliged to provide equality in access to pension rights, and so forth, they do not always respond to, and celebrate same-sex civil partnerships and marriages in the same way they do with opposite-sex marriages.

When one of the teachers, Miss Higgins, got married, there was a big announcement, and flowers were given at assembly in front of all the staff and students; but this didn’t happen when Tom, another teacher, got civil partnered, to his long-standing, male partner. There was no official school response, just individual colleagues gave cards and stuff **(Secondary school teacher, Ireland).**

Such examples of differential treatment in the face of new and novel legislation, raise questions as how organisations respond ‘on the ground’ to changing legal and social contexts, and illustrates the resilience of heteronormative organisation cultures, which recoil at celebrating sexual minority diversity.

***LGBTQI Groups and networks: helping drive change for sexual minority employees?***

Those men who worked in an organisation with an employee LGBTQI group, found the group to be a source of support. For a number of men, employee group networks deliver not only social, and networking, possibilities; they also help ‘capacity build’ organisation capabilities, knowledge and understanding, around sexual orientation, diversity and inclusion, through the strategic involvement of network members and executive champions, providing education and mentoring to wider organisation stakeholders. Such groups help promote visibility and voice for gay employees (Colgan and McKearney, 2012: 359).

Alongside employee groups, some men were also members of trade union LGBT networks. Employee networks and groups were generally only present for those men who worked in larger organisations, such as large private-sector employers, or in the public sector, for example local government. In fact, some men relied on union networks in the absence of employee groups in their organisations, or if they did not want to come out in their workplace. The testimony of these men reinforced the important role of LGBT union networks acting as “safe spaces” and allowing the development of group identity and support (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002).

For most of the men in this study though, working in SME’s (Small and Medium Enterprises), or as self-employed, farmers, labourers, or independent retailers, the option of an organisation or even a union network was not readily available. Here, the presence of local, community, non-workplace, non-union, groups was of significant importance for respondents.

There were a number of LGBT groups in the fieldwork study areas, most had been recently established, and constituted a new feature on the LGBTQI landscape in these rural and small town areas. Many members regularly travelled quite long distances to attend the weekly meetings, but found them of great benefit:

Oh, Yeah the impact has been huge. Because you just go in and you meet others who are living and working in the same area with same types of issues….and it helps get me through the week…I am not out at work, not out at home so this weekly get together is a life line for me. **(Civil Service employee, Ireland)**

The local groups attracted people from a wide variety of ages, genders, backgrounds, and occupations - business people, teachers, labourers, health care workers, IT professionals, accountants, actuaries, social workers, farmers, construction workers, writers, musicians, and even an Anglican priest.

For quite a number of the men, coming out within the group, led to their coming out back in the workplace – a necessary prelude to the emergence of the reflexive agent - the sexual citizen (Weeks, 1998; Richardson, 2004; Plummer, 2003).

While helping people cope with the social isolation their surroundings can entail, these local LGBT groups go beyond personal, and individual support; they act as strategic, developmental change agents; building identity, sexual citizens, and sexual citizenship in the space of the rural. For example, local groups in both countries have provided journalistic pieces in local newspapers, have organised group dinners in local restaurants, had occasional discos in local bars, advertised the group in local workplaces, and held fundraising events in local premises. They have taken part in discussions and debates on local radio. They have set-up information stalls in local libraries during community citizen’s week. The groups were considered radical, by virtue of their very presence in the rural and small-town environment, and as such were seen as by many as ‘active change agents’ in promoting LGBT visibility and inclusion within the wider community.

The groups provide collective solidarity, for example, in a highly unusual turn (which attracted national television coverage) one LGBT group in Ireland took part in the annual local Saint Patrick’s Day parade, marching behind a rainbow flag:

Our very existence, our very presence tells the local people that there are LGBT people living and working here, amongst them…that we are not some strange species up in Dublin…..and that we are not going to hide ourselves away in a corner, that we can hold our fundraiser table quiz in a local pub and not hidden away in our premises; and that we can go out to the local disco or the local restaurant as a group……I think that tells people we are not afraid and ashamed…..the group offers that power in numbers; safety in numbers feeling. **(LGBT Group member, Ireland)**

As such, we can see the value of such local groups in quietly, but radically, challenging heteronormative constructions of space; helping to end silence, increase voice, visibility; and asserting the right of sexual minorities to live and work openly in nonmetropolitan locales.

**Conclusion**

The factors considered responsible for changes in social attitudes, and legislation around sexual orientation, by the men in this study, include: the feminist and civil rights movements; gay liberation activists, such as Peter Tatchell (UK), and David Norris (Ireland); a demise in the moral authority of the churches; greater diversity within society; economic prosperity; international travel; new stories, voices; greater representations within the media, literature and theatre, and presence of ‘out’ role models in all areas of society – in media, politics, business, organisations.

For respondents, different approaches LGBTQI movements have taken in the fight for equality, such as discussed in the literature review of this paper are of interest, but in general, ideological debates concerning the merits and limitations of queer *versus* citizenship models, appear secondary to pragmatic realities about the need for groups to help deliver positive changes for LGBTQI people, at a practical and local level. However, tensions did emerge between what might be called the ‘blenders’ (assimilators) and the (queer) ‘radicals’ in one English group, tensions which centred on the annual regional Gay Pride. ‘Blenders’ in the group sought to erase the word *Gay* from Gay Pride and thereby promote a ‘family-friendly’ event, which would be ‘open to all’, a ‘community event’ with an emphasis on diversity and harmony. For the ‘radicals’ in the group, many of whom remembered the street demonstrations of the past of the 1970s and 1980s, such erasing and de-coupling of *Gay* from *Pride*, symbolises the de-identification and de-politicization of Gay Pride events nationally. Pride becoming less gay, less political, and more carnival; promoted and marketed as a ‘party’ which celebrates generic diversity and community. In these developments, a number of the men discern a subtle *re-silencing* of gay sexual identity, certainly in so far as it alludes to an active, subversive and questioning sexual identity, which seeks to interrogate, and problematize patriarchal, masculinist, heterosexist norms and highlight the continuing dominance of heteronormativity within society.

 Nonetheless, the presence of local LGBTQI groups are welcome and especially pertinent for LGBTQI citizens living and working in nonmetropolitan locales, where the lack of LGBTQI infrastructure poses distinct challenges in meeting other gay and queer people, and where traditional, and heteronormative cultures can dominate and alienate.

As equal sexual citizens under law, gay people in the Ireland and Britain, can now be conceptualised as newly liberated, *constitutional citizens,* but their social and cultural citizenship remains constrained and curtailed on a number of levels, due to residual stigma, and heteronormative attitudes, within society and in organisations, causing people to self-censor, and remain closeted.

Despite many advancements, inconsistencies remain, such as lack of unequivocal political support, continuing heteronormative dominance, everyday homophobia, hate speech, online vitriol, and increasing oppression of gay people in many countries, often motivated by religious extremism, right-wing nationalism and totalitarian regimes. In organisations, heteronormative and homophobic cultures continue to stigmatise gay employees (Preston & D’Augelli, 2013) preventing many from coming out. And so, while the gains need to be acknowledged and celebrated, the fact that prejudice and bigotry continues to exist, must also be acknowledged (Cossman, 2007:335; Ozturk & Ozbilgin, 2015).

Furthermore, in assessing the potency and transformative power of their newly acquired sexual citizenship rights, some questions emerge. If legislation has transformed the landscape for gay men and women, have organisations always followed *in practice*? Has the turn to a model of sexual citizenship truly delivered homo-emancipation for these men? And do we need to re-value, and re-energise LGBTQI movements and groups, in all their forms and diversity, as a way to promote further change, at global, national and local levels, and across all intersectional dimensions of diversity.

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