

EVAP Ep. 23_ Kate Ferguson and Jess Gifkins

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SPEAKERS

Kate Ferguson, Jess Gifkins, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices On Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Center. This podcast features one on one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today, I'm joined by Dr. Kate Ferguson, Co Executive Director of Protection Approaches, and Dr. Jess Gifkins Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Manchester, and the Queering Atrocity Prevention Research Fellow at Protection Approaches. Thanks for joining me today.

K Kate Ferguson 01:04

Thanks for having us.

J Jess Gifkins 01:05

Thanks for having us. Great to be here.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:07

For those who aren't familiar with your work, could you give a little background on what Protection Approaches does and your unique approach to atrocity prevention?

K Kate Ferguson 01:17

Yeah, sure. First of all, thanks ever so much for inviting us on. I'm such a fan of this podcast. So I really looking forward to the conversation. I guess maybe I'll start with like, our mission is a charity. So we're a registered human rights charity here in the UK, and our mission is to help transform how identity based violence is understood. And in doing so, we will also help to transform how it is prevented. And so that is a lot of the way that our work is conceived, and then how we decide what it is that we do, and what we don't do. That's kind of our theory of change is really the emphasis is changing how the problem of identity based violence is sort of conceived, we don't necessarily put the whole burden on our small but brilliant team on the prevention, implementation bit. We define identity based violence as being any violence, physical or structural, that is motivated or legitimized by how the perpetrator conceives their victim's identity or an aspect of their identity. That might be how the perpetrator sees or interprets their religion or political belief, who they love, their gender, their race, their age, their disability, their profession, their class, their socio economic status, and so on. What is helpful for us, I think about having such an encompassing understanding of identity based violence is it's not a legal framework. And it is inherently inclusive. There aren't the boundaries of sort of who is and is not included in experiencing hate, based on how others see their identity. And so that includes hate crime, violent extremism, identity based mass violence. And then maybe what makes us a little bit different, or maybe what defines our approach, is that fundamental to Protection Approaches' view of this kind of violence, and we're certainly not the only ones to see this as a sort of lived experience throughout the world, identity based violence, to a greater or lesser extent, exists in every society and in all states. That is not the same as us drawing any kind of moral equivalence of experience or of responsibility, but it can be a really helpful starting point. You know, if all states for example, are both perpetrator and protector, then all states can, in fact do better. And I suppose like at its simplest, that is what Protection Approaches tries to do, you know, we look at the pathology of identity based violence. And we try and improve that understanding of where it comes from, how it manifests, how it can be prevented, and we begin that work domestically. In and with communities here in the UK, we work to improve UK contributions towards violence prevention abroad, and then we work with wonderful partners like the Global Centre towards a much more inclusive and intersectional or perhaps, you know, a more joined up approach to violence discrimination and inequity. I don't want to talk too long on the first answer, but given that we are on the podcast of the Global Centre, I wanted to just say something else most particularly about R2P because the Global Centre, of course, is like chiefly concerned with those crimes covered by the UN principle of the Responsibility to Protect on genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. And Protection Approaches has always, since the very beginning had a core program on mass atrocity prevention. But of course, not all mass atrocity crimes are identity based, even though they very often can be. And so I just want to say two things about maybe how our work intersects with that piece. First of all, is at our heart - and I'm not just saying this, because we're on your podcast Jaclyn - but we are a R2P organization. We have in our founding documents, an obligation to help strengthen the UK's contribution to the collective responsibility to protect people from atrocity crimes. And we've always, right from the very beginning, believed in that Responsibility to Protect as being a concept that can't only live in the rooms of the United Nations where it was born, but that it has to like be devolved through those composite parts of states and societies. And so Protection Approaches is part of our efforts to do that. And so that's kind of how we see the approach to identity based violence, R2P and atrocity prevention as intersecting, which, I think that's probably quite important in what makes us a little bit different. And then the second thing I want to say, because I'm mindful of what we might be talking about later on, and it's so wonderful that Jess can be part of this conversation, is that our approach to identity based violence, whether that is hate crime, here in the UK, or whether it's looking at what's happening in Ukraine, the prevention and

response of that kind of violence has to always be inclusive and intersectional. And that it has to be rooted in an understanding of past, present and potential power structures. And that's not a nice-to-have, yhat's not something that comes later, but fundamental to a safer, more sustainable, and fairer world. And so, inherently, our work is political. And that can be challenging, but power is politics and politics is power. So I think that is unapologetically part of our work.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 07:33

Thanks for that, Kate. So many things I want to pick up on what you said. But you know, I really appreciated in your definition there how you emphasize that identity is not just about who people are, but who they're perceived as by the perpetrator. I think so often, the emphasis is on your own identity, and not on what that identity means to someone else, and how that affects their behavior. So I really liked that. But you also, you know, talked about how this is relevant in every society and in every state. And I think one of the things that's unique about Protection Approaches, by contrast to many of the other organizations we look at, is that you're working in the UK, and really looking at UK approaches, both internationally and domestically. So what does inclusive and intersectional approaches in a country like the UK look like?

K

Kate Ferguson 08:43

Yeah, so that is a really good question. And I feel like the really honest answer is that we are trying to work that out. I think that inclusive and intersectional prevention isn't ever something that is achieved or done. It's something to be sort of strived towards. Something to be held accountable to, and to constantly adapt and you know, and kind of recognize. It isn't about an ambition towards consistency. And consistency, even and perhaps especially for those of us that work in human rights is incredibly hard to always achieve. You're always trying to make these compromises. So that's my kind of humble caveat. But one of the cornerstones of Protection Approaches right from the very, very beginning is that identity based violence prevention is not needed in some places some of the time, but everywhere all of the time. And we knew that it was going to be impossible for us to create a new organization committed to identity based violence prevention, or even that was only going to look at mass atrocity prevention without beginning that work at home. Even if, and so we founded Protection Approaches when 2014, some colleagues in the atrocity prevention sector thought we were absolutely mad. Then Brexit and Trump happened, and rapidly, everyone seemed to change their mind. I mean, I'm mostly being tongue-in-cheek there. But it was not that usual to talk about domestic responsibilities then. My Co Director and Co Founder, Andy Fern, comes from a background of community organizing. And so our domestic work and our understanding of domestic responsibility has always, right from the kind of earliest tiniest programs that we did, have the principles of community building at its heart. And one of the things that, I am of course, deeply biased, but what makes our work really special is that because we do so much work domestically, but we work within a global community of practice, we therefore are able to kind of like beg, borrow, steal, you know, draw on this global best practice, on what works in having inclusive approaches to difficult questions. And so that, without a doubt strengthens our work, I think. What that looks like in practice for us, you know, we work with, and alongside groups who are affected by hate crime or hate or discrimination, who might also at the same time be often at the front line of community response to division and discrimination. And also,

we work with kind of the local power structures. So what that might be local councils, city structures, the national government, sometimes we might act as convener, sometimes we act as bridge, nearly always though, we're working towards community led responses to hate and division, to kind of the prejudice and marginalization that comes first. And thinking about those ways in which we can break down barriers between those that are most likely to experience this kind of violence and discrimination or have done already, and the public officials who are either kind of charged in our language with a kind of responsibility to help protect them, or, slash and, might in fact be part of that violent structure. And so helping to kind of encourage whether it's other dialog, transparency, community relationships, or more actually proactive, protective schemes. And that always has to be inclusive. And that, in fact, seems like it should be easier to do in East London, rather than in Eastern DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo). But actually what we have really learned, and again, without drawing, any kind of sense of equivalence of experience or responsibility, many of the challenges are really often shared. I mean, and I remember Andy once had this fabulous conversation when we did a workshop in Goma a couple of years ago - the workshop was on something completely different, it was about sort of establishing risk frameworks on atrocity prevention or something - but Andy asked at the end, if we could have a special session on barriers to community led change, where Andy was essentially asking for advice on community responses to change that he then took back to the work we were doing in East London. And it was just a kind of really interesting challenge and conversation of peers that were working very, very difficult circumstances in different contexts. And of course, you know, East London for all its challenges is nothing compared to what's [happening in Goma and Ituri](#). And yet there's challenges in those dynamics of power, there's those parallels of mistrust were really, really prominent, and that is such an equalizer for our field. And that's often not how those conversations go across. So we're thinking in the UK not only how we can be inclusive within the sphere of work on the local level, but how we can be inclusive in a kind of global sense of knowledge exchange. But a big part of that work is assuming that we don't have the answers always. But nor is it stepping away. You know, the real sweet bit is a kind of symbiotic responsibility where we're able to kind of shoulder some responsibility in an area that we're actually quite good at while also, you know, being reinforced by those that are much more informed than us about another part of the puzzle. Like that's kind of how I think we can see have this wonderful messy movement that we're part of. And so what that means is that like, one of the great things about that way of working, is that the best ideas come from outside of the organization. And so, our work for example, with Eastern Southeast Asian community partners across the UK, since the beginning of the pandemic, in response to massive increases of anti Asian hate, came from conversations that we had with our community partners, who essentially were saying, you know, wherever they were in the country, they just desperately needed support and resource and some political spotlight to meet this very sharp uptick, in needs demand, anxiety and burden. And that's where our On Your Side Project came from. And so now Protection Approaches coordinates this 15-part national nationwide consortium that delivers the UK is only third party, hate crime reporting and support phone line to support Eastern Southeast Asian victims of hate. And 12 of those partners are community partners. And we only hold that convening until one of those partners can take it over. And it's a really fantastic kind of rich project. That wasn't our idea. And you know, we provide some of that support. And likewise, that's where the Queering Atrocity Prevention Program came out. So right it was Jess that came up with this idea that came to us. And now we are so privileged and lucky and excited by doing this very rich conversation. And it would be great for us to be able to say, yeah, we came up with it, but we didn't, the best ideas. And that's like, the bit about inclusive and intersectional working. It's not a burden on us as organizations is how our work like thrives and finds this kind of, you know, what is needed in a way that is much more exciting.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 17:00

Since you mentioned, the Queering Atrocity Prevention Report, I was wondering if you could share a little bit about where this program came from. I know you said it was Jess' idea, but maybe the two of you can talk about how it came about, and sort of the motivation for it.

J Jess Gifkins 17:16

Sure, I can start on that. I've, worked on the Responsibility to Protect as a researcher for a long time now. So it's about 15 years, and I did my PhD in the Asia Pacific R2P Center quite some time ago. And I think what we've seen, having worked in this field for a long time, we've seen increasingly intersectional conversations happening, particularly around ethnicity, around sort of postcolonial critiques and around questions of gender. And what we hadn't really seen was the intersection with queer identities. And so for me, it was having worked in this space for a long time. And then, in my personal life, my partner transitioned gender a few years ago, and through her experience, and our experience, as a couple, we became, you know, involved in and invested in trans politics in the UK, and became part of trans community in the UK. And it was the disconnect that I was seeing there between my sort of personal and professional worlds that we're seeing, you know, really quite an aggressive backlash against trans identities in the UK at the moment. And for those of us who work on the Responsibility to Protect, you know, and in genocide studies more broadly, like we understand that dehumanization is a core risk factor, and a core precursor to atrocity crimes. So yeah, it was the bringing together of these two different worlds for me, but not seeing that represented. I guess, I felt that colleagues or some colleagues, at least in the sort of R2P sphere weren't fully aware of what was happening against trans and queer communities and that kind of backlash. So that was the impetus for the project was to reconcile, I guess, the personal and professional.

K Kate Ferguson 19:34

And then in summer 2021, that kind of very rapid and catastrophic withdrawal of the US and the UK from Afghanistan, and then that seizure of power by the Taliban, I think it forced a new urgency. And we were then sort of writing the report in the shadow or as these sort of rapid evacuations were being organized by the global you know, LGBTQI rights community. But also as the atrocity prevention community was kind of reeling and a little bit, I think, or I felt this, so I can speak for myself, not for others, but like that the devastating decision making that summer, I think held up to all of us the extent to which mass atrocity prevention thinking, let alone LGBTQI-inclusive atrocity prevention thinking, continues to be absent from the most seismic foreign policy choices. Even by the state that claims to lend atrocity prevention the greatest attention and the greatest resource. And so there was something about that moment, a very long moment over that, you know, these awful months, where there was evidently a very particular needs and vulnerabilities to the LGBTQI community in Afghanistan that was absolutely not being talked about. That the global LGBT Rights Movement massively mobilized, without, I think, much solidarity, to be frank from others that could have stepped up and done things differently, at least initially. And then, you know, in terms of conversations from the atrocity prevention community, there was a kind of like shock and horror. And I really think that context was quite important for us. And then, of course, you know, just a year ago, then Russia invaded Ukraine, with President Putin using his homophobic and transphobic articulations of kind of sexually liberal and decadent West as part of his justification. And I would like to say

that one of our co-authors in that paper, Dean Cooper Cunningham, has taught me so much about that particular dynamic of the Russian regime's use of political homophobia and transphobia in foreign policy. And so you see this kind of triangulation. And absolutely, as Jess said, I think for our team, too, there's just been this growing dismay and frustration and concern. And anxiety, I think, at this encroachment of LGBTQI people's rights here in the UK, and especially on trans rights. This kind of unpicking and demonizing. It has helped, I think, frame us as an organization, think about the urgency of this work and the need for it. But also, it speaks to something that's fundamental Protection Approaches, way of seeing violence prevention, which is to seek a harmonization in the way that the UK approaches identity based violence prevention abroad, and identity based violence prevention at home. And I think in that case of Russia and Ukraine, and LGBTI rights, you can actually see really then that one example how the ethical commitment to protect people from violence because of who they are, and the national security interests relating to identity based narratives, violence, and exclusion, really come together. Right. And, you know, I don't want us to go off on a tangent, I absolutely do not want to disavow or ignore or dilute UK domestic responsibility for homegrown transphobia - we seem to be really quite excelling at that. But let's not ignore the fact that those Russian communications networks, and those Russian transnational hate based networks are deliberately exacerbating the trans rights row in the UK, because it's undermining the very heart of our democracy. And I don't know if that's why Nicola Sturgeon stepped down from the SNP, but there is a real question about how these hate based dialogues and communications are even being conceived by our national security services. Not to mention kind of where the rights based approach. So I really think it is a piece of work that began with a report, but we just seem to kind of be really at the beginning of a very multi dimensional conversation that we're very excited to be a little small part of, and very grateful to Jess for, you know, getting it going really.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 24:39

I really appreciate that perspective of what Kate just said that it's really just the beginning of a conversation. Because I agree, you know, what you're observing in the UK is very, unfortunately, very similar to what's happening here in the US across many states in terms of demonizing and restricting the rights of trans populations and LGBTQ population more broadly. But I think this paper, and this work really forced an important mind shift for a lot of people, in the atrocity prevention community. I think we all saw the restricting of space for this community and abuses against this community and saw that they were hate crimes, but didn't quite have that mental shift into thinking "Oh, this is actually an atrocity risk". And this work is really forcing a broader, more intersectional thinking about how the horrible things you're seeing against this community actually is, you know, leading to a certain path of atrocity crimes, atrocity risks, and should be taken seriously. So I'm wondering if you could share some of the recommendations that you came up with from the report?

J Jess Gifkins 26:09

Yeah, so we've got recommendations across a range of different areas. So from civil society, to national governments, to UN. I mean Kate might come in on some more of the detail, but the core principle here is about recognizing the unique risks that face LGBTQI+ people. And the relationship between persecution of queer people and atrocity crimes, which we know, you know, goes back as far as the Holocaust, but hasn't really like become a core part of this

literature and policy. So it's about recognizing those connections, but also, including LGBTQI+ people within the conversation and, you know, without, I guess, with any kind of early warning, you need a diversity of voices. And it's that diversity of voices that really, you know, brings in the different types of persecution or the different ways that persecution is playing out. But yeah Kate might like to come in on some more of the data, we do have a lot of recommendations at the end of the report.

K

Kate Ferguson 27:28

I really liked what you just said there, Jess, about any kind of early warning needs to have a diversity of voices. And I think actually, that's such a fundamental, that seems to us so obvious. And actually, it's still not, you know. And I think that really goes to kind of the heart of, perhaps from the atrocity prevention practice piece, which was the tiny, tiny bit that I was able to contribute to this very rich report that really was the work of all of the other authors. But the tiny, little geeky bit that I was sort of really looking at is that we reviewed, you know, 14 or 15 of those publicly available frameworks of analysis that are used by whether it's, you know, the US, the UN, the EU, NGOs, and so on, to assess whether atrocity risks are there or not. And not a single one mentioned LGBTQI+ people. Rather, that is their needs experience, vulnerabilities. I mean, most of them don't mention gender. And if they do, it's women and girls coupled together in the most productive and binary of ways that, you know, we all on this call find exhausting and counterproductive. And what was interesting for me, as we were doing this work, and, you know, we looked at some cases, as Jeff said from the Holocaust, or actually those years beforehand, you know, in the 30s, in the fact that it was those free spaces of sexual expression in Berlin and elsewhere that were the first to be assaulted and attacked. And I was thinking, well, hang on, I know that from my work on what happened in former Yugoslavia, you know, the kind of massive imposition of a very heteronormative masculine set of norms rules legislation came first, and was ignored. I remember, you know, being shown some letters that the Women's Networks in Zagreb had sent out to it was called something like the Women's Global Congress or something like that, one of those global feminist networks that existed in I guess, 80s and 90s. They sent out these kinds of requests for help, saying, you know, essentially we're being put back in the kitchen, abortion rights are being curtailed, divorce rights are being curtailed, like, this isn't good for anyone. And they were kind of, there was no response either from, you know, sort of the global feminist networks or anywhere. And I feel like that failure for us to really learn that is important. And that was one of the important pieces for me. The other is just more generally that thinking about the intersections between LGBTQI rights and peace and security. And I really urge everyone to have a look at the recent report by the UN Independent Expert on Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity that he presented to the General Assembly last autumn. And I think that that is such an important contribution to the conversation in the United Nations, because it is looking at those intersections and recognizing that within the UN system it is so siloed, it's so hard to talk about LGBTI rights anywhere in the UN. And so I think like that is our fundamental recommendation of let's think about what that looks like for us, depending on what table we sit at. And for us in the NGO sphere, I think one of the easiest things to do is just a mix up a little bit by who we chat to. And it's been so nice, being able to have conversations where, you know, we're hanging out much more with, you know, the organizations that are at the forefront of global LGBTI rights. And we're learning so much every day, not just about this particular program, but about different kinds of experiences of solidarity, network responses, how certain communities responded to say, what happened in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, that are applicable, you know, for all sorts of other circumstances. And at the same time, and this is absolutely not why we did this work or thought it was important. But we're also finding that the

language and tools and networks of atrocity prevention are, in fact, also useful for some of our partners in global LGBTQI rights. And that actually, that language is also sort of sometimes helpful in their advocacy. So sometimes reshaping the world isn't as radical as you think it is, sometimes it's just a conversation. And then the last thing I want to say, and this kind of goes back, I think, Jaclyn, to what you're saying at the beginning of that question of why I really think at least, this report helps us on the way to a conversation. And it certainly didn't start one because other people have been having this, it's just perhaps in a different space. And I don't know what you think about this. And maybe I don't know, I'm taking us on a tangent, I feel like the sphere and practice of mass atrocity prevention, and even to some extent, the academic experience and engagement with it has been born out of to a very great degree and understanding around genocide, and the paradigm of genocide, and the uniqueness of genocide. And I've rambled on in many other situations about where I find that limiting. But one of the things that I have really interrogated since we've started our Queering Atrocity Prevention Program, is some of the other bad consequences of this over emphasis on genocide. And so the fact that genocide only protects certain characteristics and not as means that is one reason why I think our sphere of practice has maybe been less good at focusing on the needs and vulnerabilities of others. And LGBTQI people are one of those. There are others, though, you know, whether that is age, whether that is gender, you know, there isn't, we are having a bit more of a kind of exciting and diverse conversation about gender now that has taken a while. I think, you know, thinking about the compounded threats faced by those that have or perceived to have disability in context of mass atrocity and mass violence remains just to kind of add on in some programming. You know, we're not really having a conversation with it. Whereas, you know, those of us that kind of have studied any experience of mass violence know that nearly always those that have disabilities or are perceived to have disabilities, face disproportionate targeting, whether that is you know, I won't give examples because then people will write into your podcast and say, I've got it wrong. But I feel that a more inclusive and intersectional approach to mass atrocity prevention, or violence prevention necessarily means complicating the experience of mass violence, including the experience of genocide. And that is quite a tricky one. But I feel that Queering Atrocity Prevention helps us do that a little bit.

J Jess Gifkins 35:24

One of the other...I mean, obviously agree with all of those things. And just thinking about one of the other recommendations that came out in the report, which I think was Kate's initiative, was thinking, really thinking about who is R2P for. And I guess the limitation in a lot of R2P practice and research so far is the assumption that you know, the civilians that we're talking about here are cisgender and heterosexual. And that's, I think that's been an implicit part of a lot of the debates and discussion on R2P. It's assuming a singular kind of image of what a civilian is, what other groups they might belong to. So I think, just recognizing the diversity that exists in civilians, whether that's across you know, gender and sexuality, whether it's across disability, as Kate mentioned, I think that's really digging into who R2P is for, is important.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 36:29

Yes, that's fantastic. I mean, one of the conversations we've been having much more lately, probably should have been having sooner, is unpacking what "populations" means. I mean, it's a useful word and useful language to distinguish, you know, we're not just talking about

civilians, we're talking about everyone within a country. But that also creates kind of a homogenous bloc, to some degree, that, in many ways, has been an easy heuristic almost for policymakers and others to kind of diminish the individuality of people within a society.

K

Kate Ferguson 37:15

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that also that then has corresponded with a sense of then what that violence against those populations looks like. And I think for example, the experience of queer populations in Egypt, for example, you know, we are not the only ones to have raised questions about whether that reaches the threshold of crimes against humanity, because it's so widespread and so systematic. But it doesn't look the same as mass atrocity crimes, you know, crimes against humanity, were those populations are targeted or in the same concentrated, like geographic area. And so I think that there really is a question about sort of how we conceive what this violence looks like. And then that is when sort of, you know, you get into the definitional game of how much does the definitions and thresholds of this violence matter? And, you know, we are not lawyers at Protection Approaches, so we are blessed with not having to necessarily engage too much with that, but I do recognize that that's important and pushing the boundaries, or perhaps not the boundaries, but the norms and assumptions that limit our conceptual definition of these crimes. I really do think it is important. Because exactly as you say, sort of that word "populations" needs to be interrogated. But it, I think, has drawn out in people's minds, assumptions of what that means. But then, as Jess said, you know, that we unapologetically have at the beginning of that paper, you know, we start with the premise, or the statement, that R2P is for LGBTQI populations. No one has come to us yet and disagreed with us on that. It doesn't mean we have the answers on what to do. But if you start with that, if you agree with that statement, then it is our job, who are in the business of R2P to think about how those responses and programs can be designed in a manner that are appropriately inclusive, and or distinct when need be.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 39:34

Thank you for joining us for this episode of Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention. If you enjoyed this episode, we encourage you to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud, or Spotify and we'd be grateful if you left us a review. For more information on the Global Centre's work on R2P mass atrocity prevention and populations at risk of mass atrocities visit our website at www.globalr2p.org, and connect with us on Twitter and Facebook at GCR2P.