

# ALiGN

**Advancing Learning and  
Innovation on Gender Norms**



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## **Gender norms, LGBTQI issues and development: a topic guide**

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## Executive summary

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights have become an important topic of discussion in the development sector in recent years. Moving from the provision of HIV and AIDS care for the disproportionate number of LGBT people affected, through to same-sex marriage legalisation, the landscape has shifted to promote an LGBTI-inclusive approach in many areas. This is supported by a series of international and national human rights provisions affirming all people's rights to non-discrimination, freedom of expression and freedom from violence. In some contexts, these changes have been possible due to shifts in social norms towards greater tolerance and acceptance of LGBTQI<sup>1</sup> people. Norm change has largely been the result of long-term and increasingly visible and vibrant activist engagement, drawing on strategies such as media coverage, peer interventions, ally-building and institutional training. This guide reviews some of the literature on the norm changes that are leading to greater acceptance of and less discrimination towards LGBTQI people, focusing on low-income countries in the global South.

Nearly every social science discipline has a body of theory about norms (Vaitla et al., 2017). This paper takes a queer theory approach. Queer theorists have worked on sexuality, gender and norms, examining the underlying heteronormative<sup>2</sup> assumptions that inform much gender analysis. The insights from queer theory encourage a broad view of gender and sexuality as flexible, ever-shifting, and not linearly related to biology. Beyond and alongside LGBTI inclusion, queer-informed perspectives try to establish new ways of doing development and new ways of changing institutions to move beyond upholding heterosexuality as the global norm for sexuality. Despite sustained engagement by academics, activists and advocates on using queer theory to inform development for at least 20 years, queerness has still not gained traction within the mainstream development sector (Mason, 2018).

A queer-informed approach to development is important for several reasons. First, as Jolly (2011) argues, thinking about heteronormativity can help us understand how heterosexual norms structure access to resources. People who fall outside heteronormative relationship structures or gender identification, for example, can struggle to access the capital, income, health care, housing or social protection they need. Second, understanding how the gender system privileges masculinity and heterosexuality can help development practitioners better tackle inequalities (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). Sexuality is deeply woven into the structure of all societies and is part of the fabric of inequalities, which we need to understand in order to work towards social justice (Pereira, 2009). Finally, deconstructing and avoiding heteronormativity not only helps meet the specific needs of and supports LGBTQI people, but it also frees everyone from gendered constraints. Using heteronormativity and queer insights can help development practitioners to be more effective, reach more people in better ways, and challenge underlying inequalities in social structures.

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<sup>1</sup> **LGBTQI:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex. This is an internationally recognised term that describes a wide range of sexualities and genders. We do not intend to use this restrictively, but rather as an umbrella term to indicate the vast array of sexualities and genders that exist in the world. See [Aims of this guide and a note on terminology for more detail](#).

<sup>2</sup> **Heteronormativity:** A set of lifestyle norms, practices and institutions that: (1) promote binary alignment of biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles; (2) assume heterosexuality as a fundamental and natural norm; and (3) privilege monogamous, committed relationships and reproductive sex above all other sexual practices. Heteronormativity is discussed in detail in the [Queer theory and gender norms](#) section below.

### Queer theory and gender norms

Queer theory scholars suggest that gender is fluid, flexible and subject to change – not rooted in an essential male or female (binary) gender identity. They also suggest that structures and institutions within society work to normalise, naturalise, support and privilege heterosexuality above other forms of sexuality. Taken together, these ideas show that the binary gender system is a heterosexist one, which privileges masculinity and straightness over femininity and queerness (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). These arguments based in queer theory have been examined by development researchers and occasionally in development projects, but do not appear to have substantially changed the approach of any major development actors (Mason, 2018). The gender and development discourse continues to focus on cisgender,<sup>3</sup> heterosexual women, and upholding the gender binary (Weerawardhana, 2018). LGBTI-focused interventions are usually based on human rights principles, which can be problematic from a queer perspective. In order to claim rights, people also have to claim an identity. For most people, this means self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex. This can further marginalise those who either cannot or do not want to identify with those categories.

Queer theory shows that LGBTQI people are often considered to break or transgress gender norms. For example, gay men are sometimes seen as gender deviants if they are perceived as feminine or effeminate, or perform a ‘woman’s role’ during sex. Breaking gender norms is often perceived as a threat, which can be punished through social sanctions (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). The very real implications of transgressing norms include violence, homelessness, exclusion from work and from health care (Eldis, n.d.). However, some groups of LGBTQI people uphold different versions of gender norms, which fall outside the traditional male–female binary. For example, the *hijras* of India, who are a ‘third gender’ group, have an accepted cultural place and traditional gender norms of their own (Puri, 2010). A queer theory perspective shows that gender norms are varied, and that LGBTQI people can both uphold and transgress those norms.

Where queer sexual orientation and gender identities do transgress gender norms, the literature shows that violence is a common response, ranging from verbal harassment and bullying to physical fights and even sexual violence and murder (Smith, 2018). Rejection of LGBTQI youth by their families, and broader social exclusion, is common, especially in contexts where homosexuality is considered a sin or against tradition (such as Jamaica) (ibid.). LGBTQI people may find themselves excluded from school, unable to access decent employment, and politically ignored. Access to appropriate health care can be difficult for LGBTQI people due to a lack of services sympathetic to their needs and to fear of being discriminated against by service providers (Eldis, n.d.). LGBTQI youth, ethnic or religious minorities and other excluded groups are especially vulnerable as they may not have sufficient economic or social resources to be resilient.

### Evidence on norm change

In this context, norm change usually refers to where societies have become more tolerant and accepting of LGBTQI behaviours, practices, gender expression and identity.<sup>4</sup> Few interventions for

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<sup>3</sup> **Cisgender:** A person whose gender identity and gender expression match the sex they were assigned at birth and the social expectations related to their gender. It is the opposite of transgender.

<sup>4</sup> **Gender expression:** Refers to the way in which an individual outwardly presents their gender, typically through the way one chooses to dress, speak or generally conduct themselves socially. The way an individual expresses their gender is not always indicative of their gender identity.

LGBTQI people in developing countries frame their results in terms of norm change, although norm change is often implicit in anti-discrimination or service provider training interventions. For the most part, gender norms change gradually over time, and it can be hard to identify what exactly has prompted subtle shifts (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013). The literature suggests that a multi-pronged approach is most likely to effect change (Vaitla et al., 2017) – supporting LGBTQI people with their immediate needs such as counselling and health care, while at the same time addressing discriminatory attitudes of others *and* the social institutions which support discrimination (such as school policies).

International agreements such as the Yogyakarta Principles and the United Nations (UN) anti-discrimination resolutions have provided the human rights framework for norm change for equality of LGBTQI people. Activists have drawn on these principles to argue for national legislative change, or for LGBTI rights advocacy through the legal system. Changes in legislation are often, though not always, the end outcome of a long process of gradual social acceptance for a new norm, such as in the case of India's decriminalisation of homosexuality (Singh, 2016). The global literature generally suggests that legal changes alone are not enough to bring about norm change, but are a necessary component of broader strategies.

Rights-based activists have achieved norm change through framing, awareness-raising, providing training and developing allies. Framing issues in locally relevant terms – whether those are rights or cultural traditions – has been successful in encouraging policy-makers to consider LGBTQI topics. Raising visibility and establishing contact between LGBTQI people and others has helped change attitudes towards LGBTQI people (West and Hewstone, 2012). Training public service providers, such as the police, teachers, and health care staff, has been successful in improving service provision and changing individuals' attitudes, which may lead to wider norm change. In schools in the global North, peer group mentoring has been successfully used to develop heterosexual allies and champions for change who can intervene in cases of harassment (Wernick et al., 2013).

It is important to note that in some countries in the global South, people see LGBT rights as a Western cultural imposition – for example, in Malawi and Uganda (Mwakasungula, 2013). Nigeria, Gambia and Burkina Faso have recently strengthened legislation against homosexuality, on the basis that it is 'foreign' to their culture. This must be understood in the context of post-colonialism (Gosine, 2015), where LGBT rights are seen as foreign, Western values, and the enforcement of acceptance as an assault on national sovereignty (Ibrahim, 2015).

### **Aims of this guide and a note on terminology**

This topic guide is primarily intended for policy-makers and practitioners who may not be familiar with a queer theory approach to norms. It provides an overview of some important ideas and ways of thinking about how gendered social norms affect LGBTQI people in developing countries, moving the discussion beyond a rights-based approach to be more inclusive of all kinds of non-normative sexualities and genders. The guide aims to summarise the main theoretical points of a queer

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**Gender identity:** A person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body, which may involve, if freely chosen, modifications of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means.

approach to gender norms, to identify the key issues and challenges affecting LGBTQI people, and to provide some examples of where norm change has happened.

This topic guide uses the acronym LGBTQI to describe a group of people who practise a broad spectrum of non-heterosexual sexual behaviours, and non-cisgender gender expression and identities. Occasionally, LGBT or LGBTI is used (without the 'Q'), which refers specifically to the discourse of sexualities and genders as concrete identities, often described with reference to international human rights. Queer sexualities and genders are often positioned in opposition to the LGBTI discourse and sometimes should be separated out, not merged. It is also important to note that LGBTI discussion conflates sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual) with gender identity (transgender and intersex<sup>5</sup>), although these issues are separate and distinct. Where possible, this guide disaggregates discussions by gender and orientation, in order to highlight the different experiences and subjectivities contained within the acronym. However, this guide does not include asexual or aromantic categories, as there is not enough literature on these specific subjectivities in literature from the Global South. See Annex 1 for detailed definitions.

Similarly, important work from feminists and queer scholars of colour has highlighted the need for thorough intersectional analysis. This guide recognises the heterogeneous experiences of LGBTQI people of different ethnicity, religion, class, age, ability and geographical location. Where possible, these social indicators of exclusion and inclusion are detailed in the text. As a rule, the literature on LGBTQI people in the Global South tends to only identify ethnicity and class as additional axes of life experiences, and, to a lesser extent, age. No studies were found which include ability.

## 1. Methodology

This topic guide is based on a review of studies of gender norms, queerness, LGBTQI people's experiences, youth, and development. The author conducted searches for literature in English on these topics, using keywords including 'norms', 'norm change', 'transgression', 'gender', 'LGBT', 'queer', 'sexuality', 'youth' and 'heteronormativity'. The author also reviewed resource lists collated by Eldis ([www.eldis.org/keyissues/heteronormativity](http://www.eldis.org/keyissues/heteronormativity)) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) ([www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/ids-sexuality-and-development-programme/](http://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/ids-sexuality-and-development-programme/)). As there is a dearth of literature looking specifically at the nexus of norm change around sexuality and gender identity and how they affect LGBTQI people in developing countries, we have drawn evidence from a variety of contexts and age groups, in order to present a holistic viewpoint of what might work for norm change.

On some topics, evidence is weak or based on a single study. Much of the evidence on LGBTQI youth comes from the USA or other Northern countries, making it difficult to draw conclusions on what might be relevant for other, lower-income developing countries. 'Queer' as a term to describe

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<sup>5</sup> **Transgender:** An umbrella term used to describe people with a wide range of identities, including transsexual people, people who identify as third gender, and others whose appearance and characteristics are perceived as gender atypical and whose sense of their own gender is different to the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Intersex:** Intersex people are born with physical or biological sex characteristics (including sexual anatomy, reproductive organs and/or chromosomal patterns) that do not fit the traditional definitions of male or female. These characteristics may be apparent at birth or emerge later in life, often at puberty.

sexuality is not commonly used outside the global North, and so practices which might be described as queer may not be locally known or written about in this way. This guide takes a broad understanding of terms and includes evidence on a variety of non-heterosexual, non-straight and non-cisgender practices and identities.

## 2. Queer theory and gender norms

ALIGN defines social norms as:

***... the implicit, informal rules that most people accept and abide by. Social norms are influenced by belief systems, the economic context, and sometimes by perceived rewards and sanctions for adhering to (or not complying with) prevailing norms. Norms are embedded in formal and informal institutions and produced and reproduced through social interaction. (ALIGN website, [www.alignplatform.org/FAQ](http://www.alignplatform.org/FAQ))***

ALIGN defines gender norms as ‘a sub-set of social norms that describe how people of a particular gender (and often age) are expected to behave, in a given social context’ (ibid.). Gender norms often reinforce inequalities between genders, and tightly constrain actions and behaviours. Gender norms are usually thought of in terms of male/female, or masculine/feminine binaries.

The ALIGN community explores the ways in which gender norms can be harmful and discriminatory, and how they can be changed. Social norm theory helps explain why people behave in the ways they do, and puts the focus on communities (Vaitla et al., 2017) and the interplay between community-level and individual behaviour. Social norms are thought of in terms of group dynamics or community beliefs, including beliefs about what others in the community expect a person to do (Mackie et al., 2015). For this reason, individual education or behaviour change may not be enough to change a social practice (ibid.); social expectations have to change as well. Looking at development through a focus on norms helps identify barriers and motivations for change at the community and societal levels.

### How does queer theory discuss gender norms?

Queer theory scholars have developed theories which suggest that gender is fluid, flexible and subject to change. Judith Butler’s work is key to this understanding. She argues that gender is performative – meaning that the performance of gender is what makes gender exist (Butler, 2002). People bring gender into being through gender acts. Such acts are not necessarily deliberate or consciously chosen, but are the repetitive practices that perpetually reproduce gender – for example, wearing make-up, trousers or skirts, or calling people ‘he’ or ‘she’. Butler suggests that gender does not come from a rooted identity somewhere inside us, but that it only exists through our actions, and the actions of others in society towards us. ‘Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed’ (Butler, 1988: 527). This might be thought of as ‘doing gender’ (rather than ‘being’ a gender). Doing gender can be described as ‘the interactional process of crafting gender identities that are then presumed to reflect and naturally derive from biology’ (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009: 442). Gender is performed in relation to gender norms – either in

line with them or transgressing them, or somewhere in between. The relationship to a gender norm is what makes the subject intelligible – either as a conformer or a transgressor.

Queer scholars reject the idea of a stable gender identity. Butler contends that the ‘doing’ and the performance of gender is what constitutes the identity of a given subject. The idea of having a central essential identity is just an illusion, created by our performances of gender. For Butler, gender is not a real ‘thing’, but purely a social construction. This means that gender identity and gender differences are beliefs, compelled and supported by social sanctions. Butler’s idea that gender is a social construction means that gender can shift, is open to contestation, and is not tied to ‘material bodily facts’. A key part of queer theorising is delinking gender, sex and sexuality (Lind, 2009) by showing that these elements do not have a linear relationship to each other based on biology. Perhaps the example easiest to understand is trans people, who are living a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth. This disrupts the expectation that gender comes from biology (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). Another example is a group of lesbian sex workers in Bangladesh, who perform transactional heterosexual sex, but express a lesbian sexuality through their everyday living arrangements, dress code and lifestyle, and see no conflict between the two (Karim, 2018).

Queer theory also suggests that ‘biological sex’ is discursively constructed, rather than an absolute reality based in biology or nature. This moves beyond the feminist view that sex is biological and gender is social (Felluga, 2011). Theorists have suggested that the way we view gender, gender roles and gender norms dictates the way we view bodies, not the other way around. For Butler, the linguistic (discursive) norms we apply to talk about sex, sex organs and the body themselves create the idea of bodily sex (ibid.). Some theorists thus argue that the idea of male and female bodies with definitively different organs, hormones and chromosomes is an understanding that we have created through language and through the social meanings we inscribe on the body. The way we understand bodies and give them meaning is through the lens of the prevailing culture, time and language. As Zimman (2014: 17) argues:

***... bodies are social objects that receive their meaning in the same ways as other cultural signifiers: not from their own inherent properties, but from an always emerging complex web of social meanings and contexts. The ‘femaleness’ or ‘maleness’ of a body part is not natural but imbued with meaning by the discourse of social actors.***

In practice, this can be seen through many scientific studies showing that the boundaries between ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies are much more blurred than usually thought. Intersex people have bodies that defy easy categorisation as male or female (Zimman, 2014). And in psychology, as Richards et al. (2016) observe, the overlap between ‘men’ and ‘women’ is always greater than any difference between them.

These ideas lead towards an understanding of gender, sex and sexuality that is not binary or identity-based. To move these ideas into the development sector, the goal is not just about LGBT inclusion in development, but about fundamentally changing the precepts of development to operate with a much wider understanding of gender and sexuality, including removing heteronormativity.

### **Heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the development sector**

Like most social programmes, organisations, and actions in wider society, activities in the development sector tend to assume that most people are heterosexual (Puri, 2010). The structures and institutions within development and society also work to normalise, naturalise, support and privilege heterosexuality above other forms of sexuality. Together, these assumptions and institutions are called heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity operates on the assumption that there are only two sexes, which are binary opposites (Eldis, n.d.), and privileges the interaction between these two 'opposite sexes' as the best form of sexuality. Similarly, cisnormativity is the assumption and upholding of cisgender as the norm (or normal) way of life. As Schilt and Westbrook (2009) argue, the binary gender system is a heterosexist one, which privileges masculinity and straightness over femininity and queerness. Development actors have usually assumed that the subjects of development are heterosexual and cisgender, but have recently begun to break down this assumption (Gosine, 2015).

Thinking about heteronormativity can help us understand how heterosexual norms structure access to resources (Jolly, 2011), through a process which excludes many people. Development interventions organised around families and households often conceive these as consisting of a male head of household, monogamous opposite-sex couple, their children, and perhaps the couple's parents (ibid.). Similarly, reproductive health interventions almost exclusively focus on cisgender women, overlooking the specific needs of transwomen, transmen, and non-binary people. In a study in Cuba, lesbian and bisexual women said that preventive sexual and reproductive health care failed to account for their same-sex relationships, meaning that the care they received was inadequate and sometimes unhelpful (Browne, 2018). Heteronormativity theory helps us to examine these issues and understand how heterosexual norms – especially around gender and the family – structure both society and development interventions.

As well as excluding LGBTQI people, heteronormativity imposes a restrictive, ethnocentric model of sexuality onto all peoples. Studies have shown, for example, that the criminalisation of homosexual acts was largely introduced by British and French colonial powers in the territories they controlled, and that legacy has largely gone unchallenged. Along with legal frameworks, social norms repressed indigenous and alternative sexualities, forcing people to conform to a particular cis-heteronormative lifestyle (Weerawardhana, 2018). As Gosine (2015) argues, the current form of heteronormativity worldwide is specifically tied to colonial rule and contemporary geopolitical arrangements. This model of heteronormativity does not only affect LGBTQI people, but can also stigmatise sexuality between women and men (Jolly, 2011). For example, under certain circumstances and in certain contexts, sex before marriage, polyamorous relationships, interracial relationships and sex work have been construed as 'problems' under conservative interpretations of heteronormativity (ibid.).

There has been a great deal of attention to gender and development over the past few decades, but the discourse continues to focus on cisgender and heterosexual women, given the understanding of gender as a cisnormative binary (Weerawardhana, 2018). There has been very little critical reflection within development institutions about how heteronormativity might shape policy or how policy might uphold heteronormativity (Eldis, n.d.). Queer theorists have been making these arguments for some

time, but do not appear to have gained traction, with few if any development actors changing their approach (Mason, 2018).

The imperatives of policy, which needs to target large groups of people based on identifiable characteristics, mean that it can be hard to bring queer insights into development. Additionally, the gender binary continues to have social meaning for most people – LGBTQI people included – as it structures many economic, social and political opportunities, and can give meaning to personal identities. The challenge for development practitioners is to acknowledge and utilise insights from queer theory to improve gender norms for all people, while working within the practical constraints of development interventions.

### **LGBT rights and queer theory**

LGBT rights have become increasingly visible and acknowledged worldwide, often due to LGBTI activism (Eldis, n.d.). There has been a shift towards LGBTI inclusion, both within societies and within the development sector, recognising LGBTI people as a marginalised group in need of support and protection. While sexuality and gender identity used to be considered private issues, they are now part of mainstream development agendas. Development interventions for LGBT people (notably, usually only LGBT, not queer or intersex) are often rights-focused or health-focused, drawing on narratives around inclusion, sameness, equality, anti-discrimination and, recently, the aim of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to 'leave no one behind'. However, this version of LGBTI issues is not rooted in insights from queer theory; indeed, queer theorists have raised many complexities about taking a rights-based approach.

Many queer scholars caution against an identity-based rights activism, suggesting that an uncritical identity politics can be unhelpful and sometimes even counterproductive (Gosine, 2015). In order to be recognised, one has to assume an identity which is recognisable. For most people, this means self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, but this can be an essentialising identity category that restricts freedoms. The rights-based framework relies on identity politics and minority rights models, using frameworks and terms that originated in the global North, tied to particular manifestations of neoliberal capitalist economies (ibid.). For people who do not define themselves in relation to a gender binary or in LGBTI terms, they may find their identities erased, misrepresented and misunderstood (Lind, 2009). People who fall outside the internationally recognised categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex can thus be invalidated. Those who do identify with these categories often have to fit themselves into stereotypical ideas of what LGBTI means in order to be socially and politically recognised as such.

For example, in Bangladesh, a group of female sex workers who had personal relationships with women and transactional relationships with men had a debate about the term 'lesbian', deciding in the end to call themselves *shomopremi*, meaning 'to love the same' (Karim, 2018). They chose to emphasise the love aspect of their relationships rather than the sexual, following more general norms in Bangladesh, which de-emphasise women's sexuality (ibid.). A second group of sex workers chose to use the English term 'lesbian' because it benefited them materially through international recognisability and attachment to LGBT groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and funding (ibid.). Their internal organisational documentation in Bangla language used a different word to describe themselves (*nari-premi*; women-loving women). This example shows that people may use strategic essentialism to claim a lesbian identity when it benefits them, even though they may not

hold that identity as a central part of their being. It also highlights the power and influence that global North development language and models have over ordinary people's lives. We do not yet know what the repercussions might be of narrowing genders and sexualities into a single specific framework and language, but queer theorists suggest this could be a dangerous path.

The normalisation of LGBTI categories as rights-bearing citizen identities risks further marginalising people who do not identify with any of those categories. For example, the legalisation of a third gender category in India may have improved the status of *hijras*, but potentially discriminated against transgender women (Gosine, 2015). Trans women stated that they did not want to be renamed 'other', like the *hijras*, and that the new category undermined their own campaigns for equal recognition as women and not as a separate category (ibid.). It may prove difficult to balance the needs of policy-makers and development actors to have specific, clearly identifiable groups of people to work with, against the queer rejection of identity labels. Practical ways around this problem might include: decolonising the language of sexuality and gender work to include more local nomenclatures; working with self-identified community groups rather than looking to fund 'LGBT' groups; increasing the use of gender-neutral language throughout the development sector; and encouraging the engagement of local leaders on 'sexuality issues' rather than 'LGBT issues'.

### 3. Gender norms and LGBTQI people

There are a large number of different constellations of genders and sexualities that transgress traditional gender norms. These range from lesbian, gay and bisexual, to queer, trans and non-binary. A person's gender identity, expression and sexual orientation do not necessarily follow a linear pattern; a person could identify their gender as non-binary and their orientation as being attracted to men. Another person might be a transgender woman attracted to men, making her heterosexual. A third person might be cisgender and pansexual, meaning they are attracted to people regardless of gender or sex. Drawing from classic gender and development insights, if we know that women should not be treated as an essentialised, homogenous group of beings, we should not do the same for LGBTQI people, or people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI).

There are considerable differences in how people live and how they are treated by others across the spectrum of genders and sexualities. As Schilt and Westbrook (2009) argue, power is allocated through one's position in the sexual and gender hierarchy. Lind (2009) argues that lesbian women are largely invisible to development actors, as they are perceived to be non-mothers, therefore not targeted by reproductive health interventions and social policy, and not facing particular health risks. In Cuba, lesbian and bisexual women who wanted reproductive assistance were unable to acquire it, as they were not considered a priority over heterosexual couples (Browne, 2018). Their unmet needs not only show direct discrimination against LGBTQI people, but also a lack of understanding and ability to consider reproductive needs beyond normative heterosexuality.

On the other hand, gay men's bodies are highly visible through pathologising them as hypersexual potential HIV carriers (Lind, 2009). Within the development sector, men who have sex with men (MSM) have been the main queer group receiving attention, potentially at the expense of lesbians, bisexual women, trans\* people, and other queer-identified and gender nonconforming people (Armisen, 2016). Armisen's review of LGBT groups in West Africa found that gay men continue to take the lead in organising while expecting LBT women to take subordinate roles, and even disapprove of effeminacy

in other gay men (ibid.). Women with non-normative sexualities may find themselves more restricted than men with non-normative sexualities by general patriarchal norms surrounding dress, mobility and freedoms.

LGBTQI people are often seen as gender transgressors or gender deviants by other members of society ('deviant' meaning any behaviour that threatens the norm or challenges established power) (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013: 18). Gender and sexuality are both separate and interlinked (Pereira, 2009). For example, one has to have a gender to be able to identify as heterosexual or homosexual. Heterosexuality is both a gendered relationship and a sexual orientation, as it orders domestic life (for example, the gendered division of labour) (Pereira, 2009). Due to the connections between gender and sexuality, sometimes LGB people can be seen as not being 'real men' or 'real women' due to being attracted to someone of the same sex. Gay men are often seen as gender deviants, described as feminine or effeminate, or performing a 'woman's role' during sex. Synthesised literature on heterosexual adolescent boys in Jamaica shows that their construction of masculinity generally relies on aggression and homophobia (Smith, 2018). For them, being labelled as gay marks a 'failed masculinity' (ibid.).

### **Consequences of breaking gender norms**

Breaking gender norms is often perceived as a threat, which can be punished through social sanctions (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). The very real implications of transgressing norms include violence, homelessness, exclusion from work and from health care (Eldis, n.d.). Gender transgressors are easily marked in society, and very often subjected to intense scrutiny, community gossip, and often verbal or physical violence.

#### *Violence*

Homophobic violence exists everywhere and affects all people perceived to be sexually different, regardless of class, age, ethnicity or gender. Globally, violence motivated by homophobia and transphobia is the third highest category of hate crime, after race and religion (Smith, 2018). Many men who have sex with men, gay men, and bisexual men are subject to violent homophobic attacks, usually perpetrated by other men. The global literature shows strong correlations between masculine gender role stress and violence against women and gay men. When men who value rigid traditional gender roles find themselves unable to fulfil these roles or when a situation requires them to be 'unmanly', they experience stress, which often results in violence aimed at controlling people perceived to be feminine (Baugher and Gazmararian, 2015).<sup>6</sup> In Brazil, a study (conducted in 10 cities) of men who have sex with men shows a high rate of experiences of sexual violence (16%), determined mostly by homophobic prejudice (Sabidó et al., 2015). A South African study conducted in a Northern Cape school shows that young men use homophobic violence to assert themselves as masculine men. Openly gay boys reported name-calling, being picked on, being judged, and verbal harassment (McArthur, 2015). The wider literature suggests that homophobic violence against males is mostly about policing masculinity and upholding traditional masculine norms (Baugher and Gazmararian, 2015).

In some contexts, lesbians may be at high risk of 'corrective rape', which is understood as 'the rape of women (by men) perceived to be not heterosexual, to "cure" them of their sexual orientation' (Smith, 2018). A lesbian in Zimbabwe recounted her story (Rosenbloom, 1996, cited in Jolly, 2000: 80–81):

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<sup>6</sup> Violence against trans women is discussed in the section on 'third genders' below.

***[My girlfriend and I] are always on the run because my parents are against what I am. When they found out that I was a lesbian, they tried to force me to find a boyfriend ... In the end they forced an old man on me. They locked me in a room and brought him every day to rape me, so I would fall pregnant and be forced to marry him.***

In Quito, Ecuador, two lesbian activists were raped in their apartment after appearing on television to talk about LGBT rights (Lind, 2009). That same study highlighted that acts of violence against gay men and *travestis* in Ecuador take place in public settings, but most reports of violence against lesbians have been in their homes, or in institutionalised settings.

State institutions may also be perpetrators of violence. A group of lesbian sex workers in Bangladesh described how they were put into 'rehabilitation' centres, where lesbian acts were considered 'deviant' and thus heavily punished with isolation, verbal and physical abuse, and flogging by wardens (Karim, 2018). In Jamaica, LGBTQI youth stated that they do not go to the police to report incidents of violence because of fear that there would be a homophobic response (25%) or that the police would not be helpful (40%) (Smith, 2018). Their reluctance is based on previous experiences of poor responses from the police, judiciary and other security forces in Jamaica, which holds true across much of the literature from other country contexts. As Dorey (2016) notes, when reporting crimes, lesbian and bisexual women are likely to be taken less seriously than (perceived) heterosexual women.

#### *Family relationships*

Many LGBTQI people are rejected by their families. The effects can be devastating, especially for young LGBTQI people, who are usually more dependent, economically and emotionally, on their family. They may experience homelessness, poverty, increased risk of abuse, health difficulties and other negative outcomes as a result. Globally, UNESCO reports that 51% of LGBTI youth have experienced prejudice and inequality within their families (Smith, 2018). In West Africa (as in many other parts of the world), bullying by family members is likely to be the first homophobic experience LGBTQI young people face (Armisen, 2016). Bullying and rejection by family can lead to homelessness; in Jamaica, Plan International reports that 40% of young homeless people are LGBT (Middleton-Lee, 2015). In Jamaica, which has been 'characterized as one of the most homophobic and transphobic societies globally' (Smith, 2018: 250), there is a divide between rich and poor families with LGBTQI children. The more affluent families were more likely to be tolerant of LGBTQI children, although not usually fully accepting.

#### *School*

School can be a significant setting for marginalisation of and discrimination against LGBTQI youth, but it can also be a productive space for interventions and shaping new norms (Wernick et al., 2013). Homophobic bullying at school often results in poor attendance, dropout and poor academic achievement due to feeling unsafe and uncomfortable (UNESCO, 2012). Bullying (as a punishment for perceived sexual difference) is usually perpetrated by other students rather than teachers, and more often by boys than girls (ibid.). It can also affect students who are not LGBTQI – for instance, by the use of homophobic slurs, reproducing a culture of normalised homophobia.

In the global North, LGBTQI students are more likely to be excluded from school. One reason is that experiences of bullying may lead them to use violence (in self-defence), or to truancy, which results in disciplinary action (Snapp et al., 2015). This kind of discipline may unfairly punish LGBTQI students instead of supporting them and dealing with the bullying (ibid.). They may become identified as 'problem' students. When schools fail to intervene or support LGBTQI students, those students can find it difficult to complete school or to do well. Increasingly, efforts to challenge gender-based

violence in schools include a discussion of homophobic bullying. Access to school may be particularly difficult for transgender students, if uniform and toilet facilities do not accommodate their specific needs (UNESCO, 2012). Gender nonconforming students are likely to be disproportionately punished for dress code violations (Snapp et al., 2015).

### *Health care*

Gender nonconforming people and sexual minorities often find it difficult to access the health care they need. This is sometimes because of a lack of expertise from medical professionals who may not have been trained on trans health issues or sexual orientation (Eldis, n.d.). At other times, they may face outright discrimination and encounter service providers who refuse to treat LGBTQI people. People may fear encountering discrimination or even violence at medical centres, and so choose not to attend for regular check-ups.

Health care professionals may not be predisposed to providing appropriate or sympathetic care for LGBTQI people, or even to adopting a 'do no harm' approach. In India, for example, 'conversion therapy for homosexuals' continues to be part of ordinary clinical practice (Singh, 2016). Lind (2009) describes a study in Ecuador, which found that many lesbians had been forced to undergo electric shock conversion therapy. Queer women in West Africa were reported to avoid seeking health care as much as possible, due to fears of discrimination (Armisen, 2016). In India, many *hijras* have high rates of HIV and other sexually transmitted illnesses (Kalra, 2012). They do not often seek help from medical professionals, due to discrimination (perceived and real) and a perceived lack of knowledge among health professionals about their specific needs (ibid.). LGBTQI people in Jamaica report a hostile environment for accessing health care, describing apparently unnecessary medical or psychological testing, inappropriate enquiries about their sexual orientation, and poorer quality of care (Smith, 2018). Reports of discrimination from health service providers are extremely common across the literature, across all countries and regions.

For intersex people, it has been common for doctors or parents to 'correct' their child's genitalia in order to fit them into the gender binary (Middleton-Lee, 2015). In some countries, there are the beginnings of a discussion on allowing intersex children to grow up intersex and let them decide their gender and sexuality for themselves.<sup>7</sup> Malta, for example, was one of the first countries to enact legislation (in 2015)<sup>8</sup> to protect intersex children from non-consensual surgery (OutRight Action International, 2018).

One of the most common concerns in the literature, and in discussions with activists, is the lack of development programming that supports LGBTQI people into employment and to develop skills or education. Dorey (2016) describes the various forms that discrimination can take, such as insecure employment, lack of access to common land, and refusal of loans. Where gender norms discriminate against women and women's work, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and gender nonconforming women are likely to experience double discrimination. They may be directly discriminated against (for example, by people not wanting to buy goods from them) or indirectly (for example, by not having a father or husband willing to act as a guarantor). IDS has published studies on the links between sexuality and poverty as part of its Sexuality and Development programme.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Genital autonomy website, 'Intersex' ([www.genitalautonomy.org/intersex/](http://www.genitalautonomy.org/intersex/))

<sup>8</sup> The 2015 Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act provides for any resident of Malta to change their gender based on their own self-determination and without the need for medical certification or intervention.

<sup>9</sup> [www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/ids-sexuality-and-development-programme/](http://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/ids-sexuality-and-development-programme/)

LGBTQI people do not automatically challenge gender norms on a personal level; indeed, some people may enforce strict gender norms and ideas of how to 'do LGBT' correctly (Eldis, n.d.). Within a group of lesbian sex workers in Bangladesh, for example, couples followed a heterosexual husband and wife model, with the 'wives' sometimes expected to be monogamous, stay at home and no longer do sex work (Karim, 2018). They framed their sexual identities through performance of respectable heterosexual, middle-class relations (ibid.). Where queer people uphold heterosexual social and family institutions, this is called homonormativity (Duggan, 2002).

### Marriage and reproduction

Same-sex marriage is a hot topic of debate in many contemporary societies, including several developing countries. With regard to gender norms, marriage can be considered a fairly traditional, heteronormative institution. While legalising same-sex marriage is considered a gain for LGBT rights, bringing greater equality in terms of material benefits such as inheritance rights and hospital visitation privileges (Bernstein and Taylor, 2013), queer scholars have tended to see the desire to be married as conservative (Croce, 2015), as marriage typically upholds traditional gender norms and heteronormative institutions. Although many same-sex couples do not engage in traditionally gendered actions, such as the household division of labour, for example, the institution of marriage itself conforms to a heteronormative ideal. Joining the institution of marriage could therefore lead LGBTQI people to uphold traditional gender norms (Garwood, 2016). It is worth noting that discussions of same-sex marriage have largely taken place within liberal democratic systems and have not considered forms of marriage beyond a loosely Christian, global Northern, monogamous form.

Reproduction has always been central to the development and state-building project, through producing new citizens and workers, and maintaining social reproduction of cultural and national values (Lind, 2010). LGBTQI people are not considered normatively, by the state, as having biological reproductive potential in the same way that heterosexual people are. As (perceived) non-reproducers, LGBTQI people fall somewhere outside the normative discourses of reproduction and citizenship, making them 'useless' to the nation-state. In the Balkan region, where birth rates are falling, the fear of a population crisis is a common argument against LGBT rights, on the basis that LGBTQI people will not reproduce (Swimelar, 2016). The combination of invisibility to social policy and exclusion from national identity, through their relationship to gender norms, is a potent mix.

### Third genders

The existence of many localised versions of 'third gender' people highlights just how unsatisfactory binary categories of gender are. However, models of binary and unequal gender are currently dominant throughout the world, perhaps due to the Western colonial legacy, or simply because non-binary societies are fewer and less powerful. Third genders in the anthropological literature almost always refer to people assigned male at birth. There are no common examples of accepted third genders for people assigned female at birth.

The *hijras* of India are one of the most well-known examples – assigned male at birth, but presenting with many feminine qualities (Puri, 2010). *Hijras* have explicitly rejected global Northern constructs of transgenderism or definitions as trans women or gay men, claiming the position of 'third gender' (*trithiya panthi* or *trithiya prakriti*) (Kalra, 2012). They have a specific cultural role as they are endowed with the power to bless fertility on newlyweds and to bless newborns; many *hijras* earn a living by performing rituals at weddings and births (Puri, 2010). Despite this special position, they continue to be stigmatised, marginalised and subjected to violence and abuse (Kalra, 2012). Puri (2010) describes the persistent discrimination experienced by *hijras*, including police violence, lack of civil protection and interpersonal violence from landlords, who may evict *hijras* on the basis of gender.

In Mexico, the *muxe* (also assigned male at birth) identify as a third gender. They dress in indigenous female clothes and work in traditional female occupations, like sewing and hairdressing (McGee, 2018). They claim a particular Zapotec indigenous identity, which cultural position affords them some protection from the homophobic violence witnessed in the rest of Mexico (ibid.). Like *hijras*, *muxe* are considered to bring good luck. In Thailand, *kathoey*s also identify as somewhere in between male and female:

***I was born as a man, but never felt comfortable living as a male, wearing men's clothing and conforming to male gender roles. That did not mean I wanted to be a woman, but rather somewhere in between male and female. I am transgender, or 'kathoey' in Thai. We do not see ourselves as men and our gender identity is separate from our sexual orientation. As a transgender person I may dress in women's clothing but that does not mean I am attracted to men. But there is a common misconception that equates transgenders with gay men or lesbians. (UNESCO, 2012: 24)***

Brazilian *travestis*, another well-known example of third gender people, have actively resisted the assimilation of their identities under the Anglicised term 'transgender', preferring to fight for recognition as *travestis* (Maria Silva and Jose Ornat, 2015). *Travestis* are often considered the most vulnerable group in the Brazilian queer community, as they experience extreme violence and aggression and are most likely to suffer a violent death (ibid.).

Among the LGBTQI community, trans and gender nonconforming people face the worst poverty and discrimination when it comes to employment (Armisen, 2016). Although *hijras* have a cultural place as givers of blessings at weddings and births, they are not entitled to own property, marry or obtain a passport (Kalra, 2012). The same study shows that as Indian social structures change, demand for their traditional role is dwindling, and with few other options, *hijras* are increasingly turning to sex work and begging as a means to make money.

The strong anthropological literature on *hijras*, *muxe* and other third genders shows that a male/female model of gender is insufficient to describe realities in different parts of the world. Third gender groups have consistently rejected global North labels for their gender identities, preferring to use their own terms. As such, an 'LGBT rights' framework does not really apply (McGee, 2018). Although third gender people may be considered as transgressing gender norms of masculinity and femininity, in many cases their unique gender identity has local cultural significance and some degree of acceptance. In these cases, they are not transgressors, but are simply fulfilling the gender norms attached to that identity.

### **Active/passive**

In much of Latin America, men's masculinity is determined not by the gender of their sexual partner, but by the role each takes (McGee, 2018). In sex between two people with penises, the person who does the penetrating is considered 'the man' (active) and thus not considered to be homosexual. The person who is penetrated is taking a culturally feminine (passive) role, and may be considered homosexual (Kalra, 2012). The masculinity of the active partner is not affected by who he has sex with, unless he becomes the person who is penetrated (McGee, 2018). This model is quite different to the global Northern idea of essential sexual and gender identity determined by choice of sexual partner. Instead, gender is performed through sexual role preference. Gender norms are upheld by one partner taking a traditionally masculine role and one a traditionally feminine role, and norms are not transgressed unless the roles are reversed.

### Non-binary and genderqueer

These are umbrella terms for people who self-identify as neither or both male and female, or different genders at different times, or who contest the idea of there being only two genders (Richards et al., 2016). Research on those who identify as non-binary is very thin (ibid.). Estimates of population size vary from around 3% of all society (Netherlands and Belgium) to 40% of trans people (Scotland)(ibid.). The number of people identifying as non-binary is likely to be much higher than that reflected in the literature, especially as the category becomes more recognised and understood, making it safer to identify as such (ibid.). People who identify this way tend not to conform with traditional gender norms, and may reject them entirely (Budge et al., 2018).

### Summary

This brief overview of some iterations of genders and sexualities shows that there are infinite possibilities for relations with gender norms. A central dynamic for LGBTQI people is whether they conform to or transgress norms – remembering that gender norms are different in every place and for every gender. This dynamic is important to keep in mind when working with LGBTQI people and in development practice more generally, as it helps explain behaviour and choices, and social responses to LGBTQI people. Transgressing norms is a powerful occurrence, which often leads to social stigma, exclusion and violence.

Transgressing norms may also be a matter of relative privilege. Marginalised ethnic groups, poor people, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups who already experience discrimination may not want to invite a further source of discrimination by drawing attention to any transgression of gender norms (Berkowitz, 2009). However, people identified as LGBTQI by others in their society may be seen as inherent norm transgressors, and may not be able to combat this view even if they conform as best they can. Within the limits of normative politics, LGBTQI people who are understood as ‘deviant’ have little hope of challenging this status in any meaningful way; they may only be able to improve their secondary status as ‘different’ (Lind, 2010). The implication for development practice is that support for LGBTQI people at the individual level is necessary but not sufficient; a deeper approach is needed, which tries to change gender and social norms such that LGBTQI people are not regarded as transgressors.

It is worth repeating that some LGBTQI people (such as the *hijras*) are actually upholding local gender norms, and that some people deliberately want to be seen as transgressors, often in order to make a point about the restrictive nature of gender norms. LGBTQI people experience gender norms in more ways than simply conforming and transgressing, and these have multiple and complicated effects. Transgression is not inherently negative; in fact, it is often where change comes from.

## 4. What drives norm change around sexual orientation and gender identity?

This section highlights examples of where social and gender norms have changed to be more inclusive of and combat discrimination against LGBTQI people, and what kinds of interventions support such changes. For the most part, gender norms change gradually over time, and it can be difficult to identify what exactly has prompted subtle shifts (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013). Few interventions for LGBTQI people in developing countries frame their results in terms of norm change, although this might be implicit in their approaches.

This paper concludes that a multi-pronged approach is most likely to effect change. Both top-down changes (such as laws and policies that promote equal rights for LGBTI people) and bottom-up campaigning (such as peer-to-peer education) have been effective. However, there is no linear process of norm change; some norms may become more relaxed with time, while others may become more entrenched. For example, legal changes may create a more tolerant environment for homosexuality at the same time as violence against LGBTQI people increases, as Swimelar's study (2016) in Bosnia showed.

### **Rights-based activism**

Local activists usually play a key role in securing any changes in norms. Programmes should try to support existing LGBTQI rights organisations and activists where possible, integrating norm change approaches with locally relevant ideas. For example, in Malawi, homosexuality is criminalised, and society remains homophobic, but a small number of activists are speaking out in support of LGBT rights (Mwakasungula, 2013). One of their successful actions was to hold a media workshop, where activists briefed journalists on LGBT issues. Days later, newspapers carried stories about LGBT rights, framed as debates and opening up questions, rather than condemning homosexuality as would previously have been the case (ibid.).

### **Framing**

Persuading people and societies to change what they do – and what they expect others should do – is a difficult and long-term endeavour. One method used by activists is to frame LGBTQI issues in terms that have local salience or are less controversial. In Barbados, for example, Murray (2012) suggests that the most effective approach by sexual rights advocates was to embed the principles of human rights discourse into local practices based on similar principles. He argues that the fundamental principles of human rights (the equal dignity and worth of all people) could be framed and presented in culturally resonant terms. Likewise, Bosnian activists have specifically used the human rights framing to raise issues that affect LGBTQI people, as that is less controversial than directly challenging local frames of morality and religion (Swimelar, 2016).

Where governments and people in power are resistant to LGBTI rights, a gently persuasive approach may work best. In Malawi, public and open criticism of the government's stance on LGBT rights resulted in a backlash and crackdown (Mwakasungula, 2013). Mwakasungula, a civil rights activist, suggests that it may be more effective to discuss behind closed doors what scientific evidence says, and how LGBT issues intersect with the HIV epidemic and other policy priorities (ibid.). Framing the issues that affect LGBTQI people as part of a holistic response to HIV and AIDS could avoid the more difficult clashes with religious and moralistic anti-LGBTQI stances.

In certain settings, in response to resistance to a perceived Northern agenda pushing LGBTQI rights, some of the literature recommends framing issues in terms of blanket human rights rather than identities (GIZ, 2013). This allows collaboration with broader human rights movements and has shown promise in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (ibid.).

### **Training for institutions on the issues affecting LGBTQI people**

Public services play a key role in responding to the specific immediate and long-term needs of LGBTQI people. Schools, health care services, and the legal and judiciary systems need to understand LGBTQI issues in order to provide appropriate and supportive services. The literature suggests that these services are often inadequate and sometimes discriminatory, and that they can be improved by training and sensitisation for staff members. Attitudinal change of individuals can lead to better services, which can contribute to a wider culture of understanding and acceptance.

In Bosnia, LGBTQI people reported feeling unsafe reporting gender-based violence to the police, and that police officers were unfamiliar with the issues facing LGBTQI people (Swimelar, 2016). A local NGO received permission to train police officers on hate crimes and other relevant issues, which has now transitioned into their permanent police training programme and is being rolled out across the country (ibid.). Although some police officers admit to being homophobic, they understand that protection of all citizens is part of their job; as already noted, this has been framed as adherence to human rights and public service. In Jamaica, police officers have also received training and sensitisation in an attempt to shift opinions and change police treatment of LGBTQI people (Dorey, 2016).

Teacher training can be a useful way to equip teachers with the resources and skills to tackle homophobic bullying (UNESCO, 2012). Teachers are in a strong position to role model good behaviour and intervene to deal with bad behaviour, contributing to a climate of normalising tolerance for LGBTQI students. The Blue Diamond Society in Nepal offered teacher training on SOGI issues, including violence, to support the national curriculum on sexual and gender diversity (UNESCO, 2016). They reached more than 600 teachers, but it is unclear what impact this has had on reducing homophobic bullying in the classroom. South Africa has published a guide for teachers on preventing homophobic violence in schools, designed as in-service training (Department of Basic Education, 2016). Most training on LGBTQI issues is optional and provided in-service instead of as a core component of teacher training (UNESCO, 2016). There are few evaluations or studies on how effective training interventions are in reducing homophobic bullying (UNESCO, 2016), but training is commonly regarded as a necessary step.

The literature also strongly suggests that health care providers need to be trained and sensitised in the kinds of health issues facing LGBTQI people (Dorey, 2016). In Cameroon, for example, a specialised health service for LGBTQI people started by conducting discussion forums and training sessions with its staff, to overcome negative attitudes (ibid.). They also held some public sessions in the community to change attitudes. This has helped to make LGBTQI people feel more comfortable in approaching services. In Jamaica, training sessions were delivered to staff identified by regional health authorities as needing 'support to challenge their attitudes'. Staff were also asked to help sensitise co-workers. The training resulted in significant changes in attitudes and understanding (OutRight Action International, 2018).

### **Developing allies and champions**

An ally is a person with privilege and power, who is not the object of discrimination but can interrupt oppressive systems and stand up for social justice (Wernick et al., 2013). Allyhood in relation to LGBTQI people has mostly been discussed theoretically. The literature has identified some motivations for allies: personal connections and empathy for individuals; moral or other value-based reasons; and self-interest for collective liberation (ibid.).

Peer intervention can be more effective than adult intervention for youth issues, especially in schools (UNESCO, 2012). Youth-led awareness-raising appears to be an effective method to develop LGBTQI allies and reduce bullying, and potentially to establish equality and inclusion as social norms. In India, for example, a gay-straight alliance project in a school received national recognition for leadership, awareness-raising and creating empathy (UNESCO, 2016). They used Facebook to post encouraging messages about LGBTI issues, hosted a complaints box in the school, and provided new literature in the library. Participants report an improved LGBTI-accepting school environment, and more supportive, open conversations. Plan International has also implemented a programme for adolescent boys to become agents of change for gender equality in Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala

and Honduras (Middleton-Lee, 2015). The programme includes a strong emphasis on changing norms around homophobia, mostly focusing on the relationship between homophobia and hegemonic masculinity, and norms around being a 'real man'. Boys participated in training workshops and then led workshops with their peers; 'before and after' assessments found significant changes in participants' attitudes to homosexuality. Changes in attitudes were also reported in Swaziland and Lesotho as a result of participatory theatre interventions focused on increasing understanding of LGBT stigma (Logie et al., 2018). Responses of communities to the skits demonstrating stigma against LGBT people showed increased understanding, increased empathy, and self-reflection on personal biases. Another theatre-based intervention in South Africa helped young people – LGBT and straight – to explore their own understandings of heterosexism<sup>10</sup> and heteronormativity through six weeks of acting out relevant situations and seeking ways to improve or intervene (Francis, 2013). This study highlights that, while young people were quick to criticise structures of oppression, they were more reluctant to explore and challenge their own internal biases and prejudices. This suggests that interventions need to support both individuals and communities in order to create change.

## Law

Changing the law is often a central aim for LGBTQI activists. Recent years have seen sweeping changes in national legislation around LGBTI and sexuality rights across the world. In Latin America and the Caribbean, and in the South Asia region, many countries are liberalising previously repressive regimes, and instating new policies and laws supporting LGBTI rights, to varying degrees (Eldis, n.d.).

There is no binding international covenant on protection against discrimination on the basis of SOGI (UNICEF, 2014), as this is supposed to be protected under existing anti-discrimination covenants. However, there have been international calls to action and agreements in principle about LGBT rights, which often form the basis for national campaigns. Among the most important are the following:

- **2017 (November):** Adoption of the Yogyakarta Principles plus 10 (YP+10): Additional Principles and State Obligations on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics to Complement the Yogyakarta Principles.
- **2016 (November):** Appointment of the first UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender.
- **2016 (June): United Nations Resolution A/HRC/RES/32/2.** Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- **2015 (August): Sustainable Development Goals.** Limited inclusion of people of 'other status' in the non-discrimination section, Paragraph 19 of the outcome document.
- **2013 (July): United Nations 'Free and Equal' Campaign.** A global UN public information campaign aimed at promoting equal rights and fair treatment of LGBTI people.
- **2006 Yogyakarta Principles.** A set of international principles relating to sexual orientation and gender identity; a universal guide to human rights, which affirms binding international legal standards with which all states must comply.

The international community is able to bring some pressure to bear on states to adopt human rights and LGBTI rights legislation. When Slovenia and Croatia joined the European Union (EU), for example, decriminalisation of homosexuality and anti-discrimination legislation were made a condition of acceptance (Swimelar, 2016). Transnational pressures like EU accession conditionality can support legal change, which might lead to norm change, partly because the benefits of joining the EU

<sup>10</sup> **Heterosexism:** A term to describe all forms of discrimination against people who encompass lesbian, gay or bisexual sexual orientations. It is more inclusive than the term 'homophobia'.

outweigh the social costs of acknowledging LGBTI issues, and partly through a ‘social learning’ process of persuasion and argumentation (ibid.).

In another example from Latin America, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled in 2018 that same-sex marriages should be recognised – a ruling that applies to countries which have signed the American Convention on Human Rights (BBC News, 2018). Those countries are now expected to change their national laws to comply with the ruling. Importantly, whether a new norm rapidly takes hold or not also depends on how compatible it is with local traditions, national identity and domestic norms (Swimelar, 2016). A bloc of African nations is increasingly resisting legalising LGBTI rights, and has aligned with conservative Christian groups from the global North, creating a powerful international lobby resisting the pro-LGBTQI rights work of other international organisations (Ibrahim, 2015).

At the national level, activists have used some of the pre-existing non-discrimination principles embedded in international and national laws to advocate for LGBTI rights. Rights to work, freedom of speech, and freedom from violence, which have already been guaranteed, can be deployed to protect LGBTQI people, without needing to create new laws or change existing ones. This approach can be considered non-confrontational. It was used in Kenya recently, when some local NGOs working on LGBT rights were denied official registration and brought a legal case against the government, which they won on grounds of freedom of association (ibid.). The High Court held that, although homosexual acts were prohibited, LGBTI people should be allowed to form organisations, which also implies recognition of LGBTI groups as a vulnerable minority (ibid.). In this way, activists used existing laws to create the legal space for their activities, and possibly laying the foundations for the beginnings of norm change.

Achieving a change in national law is often a ‘rubber-stamp’ exercise, legitimising a practice that has already become socially acceptable. In India in 2014, for example, the government legally recognised a third gender category, ‘Others’ – reflecting the long-standing history and cultural position of the *hijras* (Gosine, 2015). In Nepal, the government granted equal rights to diverse SOGI citizens in 2007, with the 2015 Constitution prohibiting discrimination by the state or public (GIZ, 2013; OutRight Action International, 2018). This was a result of long-term local campaigning.

One view of norm change suggests that ‘the law should approximate popular views’, otherwise the enforcement and legitimacy of the law can be called into question (Bicchieri and Mercier, 2014: 7). Changes in the law can support and encourage new practices, but not always instigate them (see case study box on India). On the other hand, legal changes are sometimes progressive acts which themselves bring about norm change, even if not entirely supported by a majority of the population. For example, Botswana amended its Employment Act in 2010 to make it illegal for employers to dismiss people based on their sexual orientation, which is one of a number of small and gradual changes towards LGBT rights even though there is not yet widespread support (OutRight Action International, 2018). Legal cases can bring greater visibility and public discussion around issues affecting LGBTQI people, which can lead to norm change.

### From decriminalisation to recriminalisation and back again in India

Like many post-colonial contexts, India retained a British law from 1860 which criminalised 'intercourse against the order of nature' (mostly meaning male homosexuality) (Singh, 2016). This statute was overturned in 2009 by the Delhi High Court – a victory for queer activists who had targeted this particular item of law (ibid.). However, homosexual acts were recriminalised in 2013 by the Supreme Court (Tonini, 2018), partly in response to a petition from Christian, Muslim and Hindu groups (CNN, 2018). Yet in September 2018, the Supreme Court overturned its own decision, and again decriminalised homosexual acts – a decision that was met with much celebrating by campaigners (Safi, 2018). The intervening period since 2013 had seen a great deal of activist campaigning and mounting legal pressure. An unconnected court case in August 2017 ruled that every citizen has a fundamental right to privacy – a decision which five judges said meant that the 2013 recriminalisation was wrong, based on the interpretation that sexual orientation is a matter of privacy (ibid.).

This case study highlights that norm change must come either through or with agreement from the general population, and probably in conjunction with depathologisation and social and religious acceptance, as laws alone cannot generally force people to change their attitudes. Singh (2016) suggests that between 2009 and 2013, although the law in India changed, social norms did not, and people continued to see homosexuality as an illness, with the medical establishment continuing to regard it as a curable condition. The positive legal change in 2018 seems to be a result of consistent campaigning and awareness-raising, a legal framing of homosexuality as natural and inherent to pre-colonial Indian culture (Dhillon, 2018), and of course the legal precedent of right to privacy. This example shows that legal change is just one part of a complex system of norm change.

### Increasing visibility of LGBTQI people

Many activist and development campaigns are predicated on the idea that increased visibility of LGBTQI people will lead to increased social acceptance. However, visibility can have mixed results, as it can also increase stigma or vulnerability to gender-based violence, for example.

Armisen's study of West African groups involved in lobbying on LGBTQI issues quotes an activist in Nigeria who highlights the importance of social relationships and positive contact with stigmatised people: 'As we become more visible to the people we love, it's harder to hate us. It will be harder to listen when public officials come out and speak rubbish, because you know the one you have in your house is not like that' (Armisen, 2016: 15). In Jamaica, West and Hewstone (2012) measured attitudes of university students who had had casual social interactions with gay men, and their prejudices against them. Their study found that people who had had interactions with gay men reported more positive attitudes towards them. Similarly, in Swaziland, Lesotho and South Africa, interventions using theatre to promote more positive attitudes to LGBT people led to changed attitudes and awareness of LGBT people and the issues they face (Logie et al., 2018; Francis, 2013). These studies indicate that intergroup contact can be effective in reducing prejudice, although to scale up they would need to be paired with many other norm change approaches. Similarly, as Wernick et al. (2013) found, anti-bullying strategies can create meaningful relationships between straight/cisgender

people and LGBTQI people to create empathy, and the desire to directly intervene if witnessing harassment.

However, increased visibility can also cause a backlash. For example, at the Queer Sarajevo Festival art event in 2008, participants were violently attacked (Swimelar, 2016). The police did not prevent the attack, and the media response was not to condemn the attackers but to publish the names of the participants (ibid.). In West Africa, interventions for men who have sex with men have strong potential to further stigmatise this group by associating them with HIV (Armisen, 2016). In Bangladesh, Karim's (2018) study of heteronormativity found that men's groups aimed for visibility as a strategy to promote sexual rights, while women's groups tended to keep a lower profile, fearing a backlash and potential threats to the safety of their members. Strategic invisibility and the private space of the home had helped protect women's group members (ibid.).

### **Backlash**

Scholars have widely noted resistance to LGBTI rights in the global South taking the form of resistance to Western imperialism. Resistance should be understood in the context of colonialism, not just 'cultural' homophobia (Gosine, 2015). Many countries have resisted the 'gay rights agenda' on the grounds of national sovereignty and anti-imperialism (Murray, 2012: 46). Exhortations to change laws or become more tolerant of homosexuality are often interpreted as Northern nations imposing their power on poor countries against their will (ibid.). Threats of sanctions or withdrawing international aid unless LGBTI rights are acknowledged have had the effect of entrenching resistance, as sanctions are seen as a form of foreign imperial control (Mwakasungula, 2013). As Mwakasungula explains, during the trial of two men in Malawi who had held an illegal same-sex engagement ceremony, homosexuality was described as foreign, alien, and against local Christian and Islamic religions (ibid.). As Swimelar (2016) argues in relation to Bosnia, resistance to 'foreign' norms can be a way for states to claim greater legitimacy and authority.

In West Africa, Armisen's study (2016) found some examples of increasing homophobia at the political and policy levels. For example, Nigeria recently instated a law prohibiting same-sex marriage and homosexual acts, which would incur stringent jail terms. Gambia and Burkina Faso have also recently introduced new anti-homosexuality laws. Most of these national laws target men engaging in same-sex acts; few mention women engaged in same-sex sexual practices or transgender people. In Malawi, for example, while same-sex relationships between women had been assumed to be non-existent, such relationships were criminalised in 2010 – ironically framed as a move towards 'gender equality' (punishing women in same-sex relationships equally with men in same-sex relationships) (Mwakasungula, 2013). In many countries, there remains strong resistance to LGBTI rights at the highest levels, meaning that achieving change requires long-term campaigning and advocacy to secure even gradual change.

Conservative religious attitudes can be a significant challenge to changing norms towards greater acceptance of LGBTQI people and to realising their rights. For example, as Logie et al. (2018) highlight, after experiencing a sensitisation theatre exercise, audience members in Swaziland and Lesotho expressed hesitation about accepting LGBT people, as they saw this as in conflict with Bible teachings. They wanted all people to be happy but found a tension with their religious beliefs. In Malawi, where church leaders have a strong community presence and considerable influence in government (Mwakasungula, 2013), they have advocated against LGBT rights and homosexuality on the basis of morality. Religious and traditional leaders have appeared on television to denounce homosexuality, ensuring their message reaches a large audience (ibid.). On the other hand, some

church ministers have advocated for tolerance and inclusion (while still condemning homosexuality as a sin), which can have a powerful influence on norm change at the community level.

## 5. Conclusions

Although much of the evidence on norm change towards greater acceptance of and support for LGBTQI people comes from the global North, there is a growing body of evidence from Southern countries and regions, which suggests that discourses of equality have taken hold in many places.

Nationally and internationally, activism remains the most important source of influencing norm change. The clearest example of where change has occurred is in the legal sphere. Campaigns for legalisation of same-sex marriage and recognition of varied gender identities have been successful in a number of developing countries – usually the result of long-term activism and gradual change towards social acceptance. The case of India’s recriminalisation of homosexual acts shows the importance of achieving at least some degree of social acceptance before a law can be implemented (Singh, 2016). Development actors have recommended focusing aid and support through NGOs, human rights defenders, community organisations and human rights coalitions (GIZ, 2013). These groups have the most expertise in understanding local needs and contexts. To draw on insights from queer theory, support should also be directed to self-identified activist groups as well as those using LGBTI rights terminology. Alongside activism, international and national law remain important tools for establishing norms of equality, diversity and acceptance for all forms of sexuality and gender, which many states already subscribe to.

Overall, the literature reviewed in this paper shows increasing attention to the challenges facing LGBTQI people in developing countries, mostly focusing on the human rights-based approach. Some interventions show promise for creating norm change towards more inclusive, tolerant and supportive societies. Norm change is not often acknowledged as a goal, although it is often inherent or underlying the intervention logic. Usually, interventions, approaches and campaigns draw on a discourse of human rights that advocates for inclusion of LGBTQI people into existing structures rather than a systemic change that might challenge the gender binary. While this is an important first step, a queer approach would also push to deconstruct heteronormativity by challenging an identity-based approach and allowing for wider expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity.

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Previously, Evie was a Research Fellow at [GSDRC](#), providing a bridge between academic experts and donor agencies and government policy departments, delivering rapid response research services for DFID, AusAID and the EC. Evie has worked as a research consultant in international development since 2011, supporting policy-oriented research with ODI, IDS, the World Bank and International Alert, among others.

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## Annex 1: Definitions

Term	Definition	Source
Bisexual	A person who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction to persons of the same and a different sex or gender.	Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration (ORAM)(2016: 11)
Cisgender	A person whose gender identity and gender expression match the sex they were assigned at birth and the social expectations related to their gender.	LGBTnet <a href="http://www.lgbtnet.dk/why-lgbt/glossary">www.lgbtnet.dk/why-lgbt/glossary</a>
Cisnormativity	Refers to the practices and institutions that legitimise and privilege those who are comfortable in the gender belonging to the sex assigned to them at birth. On the other hand, this norm systematically disadvantages and marginalises all persons whose gender identity and expression do not meet social expectations.	LGBTnet <a href="http://www.lgbtnet.dk/why-lgbt/glossary">www.lgbtnet.dk/why-lgbt/glossary</a>
Gay	A person who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction only or primarily to persons of the same sex or gender. The term historically referred primarily to men but is used today by people of all genders as a self-descriptor.	ORAM(2016: 15)
Gender expression	Refers to the way in which an individual outwardly presents their gender, typically through the way one chooses to dress, speak, or generally conduct themselves socially. The way an individual expresses their gender is not always indicative of their gender identity.	World Health Organization (WHO)(2016)
Gender identity	A person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body, which may involve, if freely chosen, modifications of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means.	Yogyakarta Principles (2007: 8)
Hate crime	Offences that are motivated by hate or by bias against a particular group of people. This could be based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, age or disability.	LGBT Denmark et al. (2012: 8)
Heteronormativity	A set of lifestyle norms, practices, and institutions that: promote binary alignment of biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles; assume heterosexuality as a fundamental and natural norm; and privilege monogamous, committed relationships and reproductive sex above all other sexual practices.	UC Davis LGBTQIA Resource Center <a href="https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary">https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary</a>
Heterosexual	A person who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction only or primarily to persons of a different sex or gender; usually refers to women who are attracted to men and men who are attracted to women (only or primarily).	ORAM(2016: 17)

Heterosexism	A term to describe all forms of discrimination against people who encompass lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual orientations. It is more inclusive than the term 'homophobia'.	WHO (2016)
Homosexual	A person who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction only or primarily to persons of the same sex or gender. Many members of the sexual and gender-diverse community consider the term offensive and stigmatising because of its clinical history and its associations with criminalisation and pathologisation.	ORAM (2016: 17)
Homophobia	A range of antagonistic attitudes and feelings toward people who identify or are perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Homophobia may take the form of antipathy, contempt or prejudice, and may be expressed through words or actions. In the case of states or institutions, it may take the form of discriminatory laws or policies.	ORAM (2016: 17)
Intersex people	Intersex people are born with physical or biological sex characteristics (including sexual anatomy, reproductive organs and/or chromosomal patterns) that do not fit the traditional definitions of male or female. These characteristics may be apparent at birth or emerge later in life, often at puberty.	WHO (2016)
Lesbian	A woman who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction only or primarily to other women.	ORAM (2016: 18)
LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender)	A collective term for people who are attracted to people of the same gender, people with gender identities that differ from the sex assigned at birth, and people with non-binary identities. The term is inclusive of groups and identities, and encompasses sexual orientation and expression, as well as gender identity and expression. In some cases, LGBT can be a problematic category as it lumps women, men and transgender people together, even though the issues they face are sometimes drastically different. However, LGBT exists as a collective concept that is used for political, social and economic organising in many parts of the world.	Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (2007: 48)
LGBTI	An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex. It sometimes includes additional letters to refer to other orientations and identities, such as 'Q' for queer/questioning, 'A' for asexual or aromantic, or the plus symbol (LGBT+). Specific identities are usually added in order to intentionally include and raise awareness of those identities. The 'plus' is usually used to indicate inclusion and awareness of all other diverse expressions and identities, without trying to name and categorise them all; it sometimes includes straight allies.	ORAM (2016: 18)
Non-binary	Identifying as either having a gender which is in-between or beyond the two categories 'man' and 'woman', as fluctuating between 'man' and 'woman', or as having no gender, either permanently or some of the time.	LGBT foundation <a href="https://lgbt.foundation/who-we-help/trans-">https://lgbt.foundation/who-we-help/trans-</a>

		<a href="#">people/non-binary</a>
Men who have sex with men	Term used in HIV/AIDS prevention, rarely in other activist circles. It was coined for prevention purposes where the identity of a person does not matter – only the sexual practice.	LGBT Denmark et al. (2012: 9)
Queer	An umbrella term commonly used to define lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other people and institutions on the margins of mainstream culture. Historically, the term has been used to denigrate sexual and gender minorities, but more recently it has been reclaimed by these groups and is increasingly used as an expression of pride and to reject narrow reductive labels. Queer can be a convenient, inclusive term when referring to issues and experiences affecting the many groups subsumed under this umbrella. Because it is still used to demean lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, those who do not identify as queer are urged to use the term with caution, or not at all.	WHO (2016)
Sexual minorities	Refers to groups whose sexual orientation is not strictly heterosexual, or whose sexuality is not exclusively expressed through heterosexual relations. Those who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual are the most readily identifiable sexual minority groups; however, the term can include anyone who engages in same-sex sexual relations, even if they may identify as heterosexual.	LGBT Denmark et al. (2012: 9)
Sexual orientation	A person's physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction towards other people. Sexual orientation is distinct from gender identity. Sexual orientation comprises three elements: sexual attraction, sexual behaviour and sexual identity. Sexual orientation is most often defined as heterosexuality to identify those who are attracted to individuals of a different sex from themselves, and homosexuality to identify those who are attracted to individuals of the same sex as themselves.	WHO (2016)
Sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI)	Often used in the form 'diverse SOGI' as a catch-all term to describe non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people.	
Third gender	An umbrella term for a gender other than man or woman. Third gender can refer to being both a man and a woman, neither, or any other gender identity or role. Some societies legally recognise three or more genders.	ORAM (2016: 21)
Transgender (sometimes shortened to 'trans')	An umbrella term used to describe people with a wide range of identities –including transsexual people, people who identify as third gender, and others whose appearance and characteristics are perceived as gender atypical and whose sense of their own gender is different to the sex they were assigned at birth.	WHO (2016)

Trans man or boy	Trans men identify as men but were assigned female when they were born. Variant: FTM (female-to-male).	WHO (2016)
Trans woman or girl	Trans women identify as women but were assigned male when they were born. Variant: MTF (male-to-female).	WHO (2016)
Transphobia	Negative cultural and personal beliefs, opinions, attitudes and behaviors based on prejudice, disgust, fear and/or hatred of trans people or against variations of gender identity and gender expression. Institutional transphobia manifests itself through legal sanctions, pathologisation and absence of or inadequate mechanisms to counter violence and discrimination.	LGBT Denmark et al. (2012: 9)