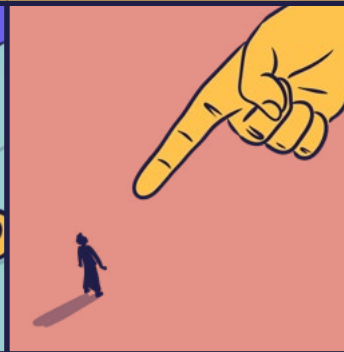
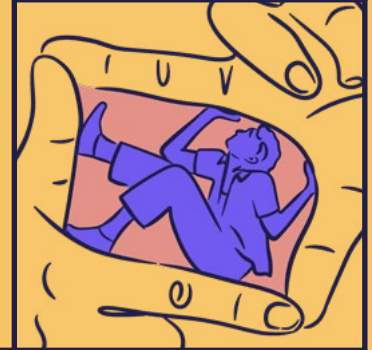
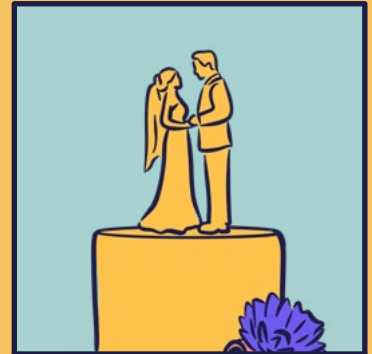


ALiGN

Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms

7 WAYS

GENDER NORMS SHAPE LGBTQI+ LIVES



INTRODUCTION

Do gender norms affect how people experience or express their sexuality and gender identity? Why are gender norms relevant to understanding the current rise in anti-LGBTQI+ politics globally? How are gender norms weaponised to fuel hate and discrimination, or positively shifted to support full equality?

This explainer outlines seven ways in which gender norms shape the lives of LGBTQI+ people.

It illustrates how gender norms influence daily lives, as well as the role they play in current political attacks against LGBTQI+ people. It provides a tool for those working to support gender equality more broadly, as well as for those who want to understand more about how to apply a gender norms lens to LGBTQI+ issues.

Gender norms are powerful forces shaping the lives of LGBTQI+ people across the world. They are the implicit informal rules most people accept and follow that determine how we are expected to behave in a given social context as a result of our gender. These norms serve as an invisible social scaffolding that helps maintain patriarchal power, and marginalises those who do not conform to gender expectations.

Patriarchal norms expose queer people to a heightened risk of discrimination and exclusion, because when LGBTQI+ people defy dominant gender norms, like how to dress or how to behave or who to love, the consequences are often isolating, violent or even deadly.

Norms are deeply embedded in societies and upheld and reinforced by institutions,

communities, and individuals.¹ But they are not static. Gender norms vary across cultures and between different groups of people, and they change over time. Acceptance of sexual and gender diversity often depends on shifting social norms and attitudes, as well as rights-based legal protections.² Significant progress in some countries demonstrates that such shifts are not only possible, but are already underway.

In this context, it is important to understand why LGBTQI+ rights and inclusion matter to gender equality, and why gender equality efforts must include people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics (referred to by the acronym SOGIESC). Gender norms are an analytical bridge that bring gender equality and LGBTQI+ inclusion issues together.

GLOSSARY

Cis/Cisgender: A person whose gender identity is consistent with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender identity: Each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth.

LGBTQI+: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex. The plus sign represents people with diverse SOGIESC who identify using other terms.

Non-binary (and/or genderqueer): A person whose gender identity does not align with the male/female binary.

Queer: A reclaimed term increasingly used as an umbrella term for people of all kinds of sexual and gender diversities, often refers to those challenging the sexual binary, or norms.

SOGIESC: Sexual orientation, gender identity & expression, & sex characteristics.

Trans/transgender: A person who identifies themselves in a different gender than the sex they were assigned at birth.

1 PRESSURES OF 'COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY'



Heterosexuality is a social expectation about how men and women should behave, relate and desire each other: that people of one gender should be sexually attracted to people of the other gender. More than a social norm, heterosexuality is a gender norm – people are taught that to be a ‘real’ man, you must like women, and to be a ‘real’ woman, you must like men.

As a dominant gender norm, heterosexuality is considered the default sexual orientation and will be assumed until expressed otherwise – what is termed ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ by scholars.³ This is exemplified by the societal pressure to ‘come out’ as gay or LGBTQI+, whereas there is no such corresponding need to ‘come out’ as straight. This implies that anyone who is not heterosexual is deviating from a social expectation and is breaking a norm – a norm referred to as ‘heteronormativity’.⁴

Heteronormativity is the belief that there are only two genders (man and woman) and that attraction between them is natural and superior to other relationships. It emphasises specific, binary gender roles and assumes that everyone’s gender identity is naturally aligned with their sex assigned at birth.⁵

These concepts are underpinned by the link between sexual activity and reproduction, meaning that same-sex relationships are seen as going against traditional expectations about having children. Compulsory heterosexuality is not just about sexual orientation, but is intrinsically tied to beliefs about gender roles, family structures and social ordering. Although gender norms are performed differently across cultures, heterosexuality is a deeply rooted norm that structures most societies.

KEY READING

‘Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence’

Rich, A. (1980) *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (4): 631–660

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2 QUEERNESS CHALLENGES PATRIARCHAL NORMS



All people navigate gender norms every day, and most of us will break some and uphold others. Breaking norms can come at a personal cost, whether it is violence, social exclusion, or family estrangement. For example, women trying to move into jobs considered ‘men’s work’ might face harassment and discrimination, or choosing not to marry might cause family arguments.

Queerness unsettles patriarchal norms by disrupting rigid gender binaries and sexual hierarchies on which patriarchy depends. Patriarchy upholds masculinity above femininity, nuclear families above diverse family units, and unpaid care work within a male-headed household model, all of which expect heterosexuality. But, around 10% of the world identifies as LGBTQI+, and this very fact upturns the idea that heterosexuality is the only ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ sexuality.⁶

LGBTQI+ people challenge gender norms simply by existing, whether intentionally or not,⁷ because heterosexuality is in itself a key gender norm structuring society. Breaking the heteronormative script around relationships is so disruptive because it creates space to question other norms or gendered roles in society. By challenging received ideas about family, gender identity, masculinity and femininity – about ways to be in the world – queerness presents an alternative, and in so doing weakens the invisible scaffolding (norms) holding up gender inequality and patriarchy today.

As with diverse sexual orientations, people with different gender identities also challenge the assumed patriarchal norm that everyone fits neatly into one of two fixed genders based on sex assigned at birth. Transgender, non-binary and genderqueer people face marginalisation because they do not conform to gendered expectations or fit comfortably into dominant social structures.

People’s willingness to deliberately break norms depends on their positionality and ability to challenge power relations. In environments with severe legal or social punishments, it can be too risky for people to express queerness. For LGBTQI+ people with relative privilege (e.g. along ethnic or class lines) it may be easier to escape social sanctions. Change happens when enough people openly challenge gender norms.⁸

KEY READING

Gender norms, LGBTQI issues and development: a topic guide

Browne, E. (2019) London: ALIGN/ODI Global

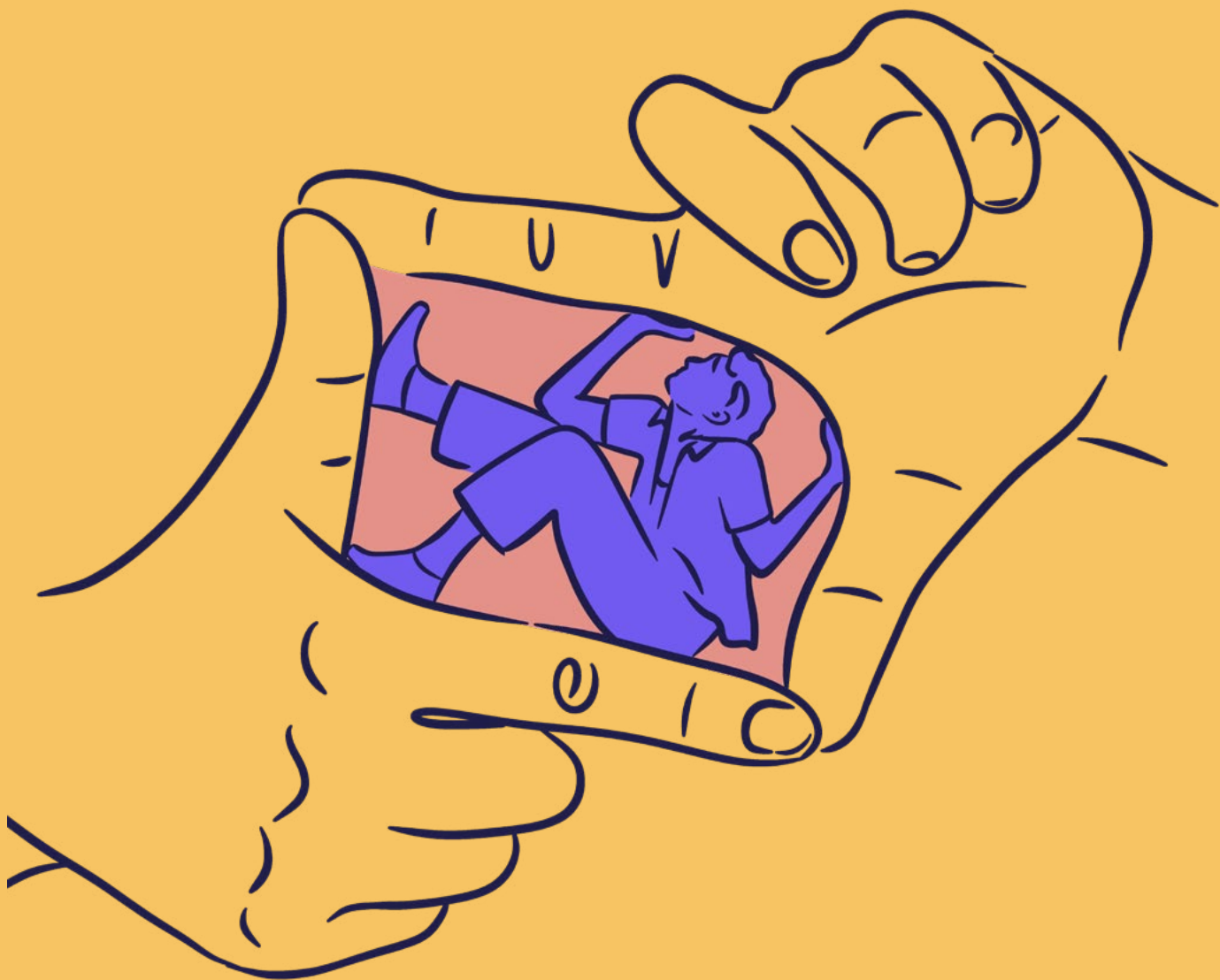
Gender, power and progress: how norms change

Harper, C., Marcus, R., George, R., et al. (2020) London: ALIGN/ODI Global

‘Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory’

Butler, J. (2020) in C. McCann, S. Kim and E. Ergun (eds) *Feminist theory reader: local and global perspectives* (5th edition), New York: Routledge, pp. 353–361

3 GENDERED EXPECTATIONS IN PUBLIC & PRIVATE



Gender norms operate differently in public and private spaces. For example, women might dress conservatively when they go to religious ceremonies but less conservatively at home; or men might express emotions better with their close family at home than with friends in public. This dynamic similarly shapes the lives of LGBTQI+ people.

In public, upholding gender norms by ‘passing’, or being perceived as straight or cisgender, can help to create a better life.⁹ In homophobic or transphobic contexts, being invisible or slipping under the radar can be a framework for survival. For example, people may try to ‘pass’ at school, to avoid being excluded or bullied by peers, or at work, to avoid being discriminated against for promotion, salary or types of jobs. While social shunning, intolerance or family estrangement does happen within the home, publicly breaking gender norms can result in greater risks of social sanctions, violence or discrimination. Lots of families and societies are more likely to ignore same-sex or gender non-conforming activity as long as it stays private or behind closed doors.^{10, 11} Within queer communities and safer private spaces, gender norms might be challenged completely, such as in drag shows and gay clubs.

Because LGBTQI+ people might intentionally stay hidden in order to survive, they can be invisible to policy and practice. This can be particularly significant in places where LGBTQI+ rights or non-discrimination legislation is weak, non-existent, or even persecutory – as in Uganda and the Gambia, where new laws criminalise same-sex activity. Increasingly, anti-LGBTQI+ legislation also includes bans on ‘LGBTQI+ propaganda’ which seek to eradicate queer experiences from the public sphere. This makes it even more difficult for gender norms to shift towards acceptance, or for organisations to openly serve LGBTQI+ communities, as they cannot identify themselves or advocate publicly, making it even harder to do and fund their vital work.

KEY READING

The twilight of equality? Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy

Duggan, L. (2004) Boston: Beacon Press

‘This is why we became activists’: violence against lesbian, bisexual and queer women and non-binary people.

Kilbride, E. (2023) Human Rights Watch Report

4 RISING BACKLASH & ANTI-LGBTQI+ POLITICS



Despite a broad historical arc towards greater acceptance of sexual and gender diversity globally, recent years have been marked by a retreat from rights-based and gender-inclusive policy. In fact, a surge of anti-LGBTQI+ laws and homophobic policy has emerged, from the US to Brazil, Ghana to Uganda, Russia to Kyrgyzstan. This wave of oppressive legislation is by no means organic, but financed by transnational gender-restrictive movements (largely based in the US, Europe and Russia) which explicitly aim to roll back progress on LGBTQI+ and women's rights – often termed the 'anti-gender backlash'.^{12, 13, 14}

Gender-restrictive campaigns seek to reverse gender equality gains and 'return' to an imagined national past organised around the nuclear patriarchal family and the 'natural' order of binary, sex-defined roles.¹⁵ Project 2025 in the US is a prime example of this ambition translated into policy. In a bid to sustain traditional gender norms and hierarchies, mainstream politics has turned to scapegoating LGBTQI+ communities and popularising anti-LGBTQI+ discourse to generate fear around the supposed challenge LGBTQI+ people pose to a patriarchal social order, portraying them as threats to traditional values.¹⁶ Because people in many countries already distrust queerness, it is easy to weaponise LGBTQI+ people, the idea of 'gender ideology' and LGBTQI+ rights issues to whip up moral panics around protecting children, family values, traditional culture and, in some places, resisting an imposition of 'Western values'.^{17, 18, 19}

Transgender lives, particularly those of trans women, have become highly politicised in recent years by anti-gender movements, especially in Europe and the US. These movements portray trans women as symbols of the collapse of traditional gender roles and social values, targeting them in campaigns framed around defending 'the family' or 'biological truth'. Trans women are often singled out in debates about bathrooms, sports, healthcare and education – not because of who they are, but because of what they represent in wider struggles over the direction of society. Some actors deliberately weaponise transgender issues to gain political support and, in doing so, stir fear and distrust, and try to legitimise discrimination. Gender norms are at the heart of these political battles because challenges to these norms – like those posed by trans people – are often seen as threats to established social orders and power structures.

KEY READING

Whose hands on our education? Identifying and countering gender-restrictive backlash

D'Angelo, S., Marcus, R., Khan, A. and Homonchuk, O. (2024) London: ALIGN/ODI Global

Facing the backlash: what is fuelling anti-feminist and anti-democratic forces?

Khan, A., Tant, E. and Harper, C. (2023) London: ALIGN/ODI Global

'Queering gender backlash'

Lewin, T. (2024) IDS Bulletin 55 (1)

5 DISCRIMINATION & VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBTQI+ PEOPLE



Violence against LGBTQI+ people is a form of gender-based violence, rooted in an impulse to enforce and maintain rigid gender norms and patriarchal power – the same norms that harm heterosexual, cisgender women and girls. LGBTQI+ people are therefore targeted not only for their identities, but for the challenge they represent to the dominant social order.

Gendered norms are built on rigid views of masculinity and femininity. When someone does not fit those expectations, because they are not heterosexual or do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, they can face violence that is wielded as a means to ‘correct’ or punish them for ‘breaking the rules’.^{20, 21} Lesbian, gay and bisexual people may face violence for not following heterosexual norms, while transgender people may be targeted for defying the binary idea of only two fixed genders.²² Discrimination can also therefore be understood as a means of social policing of an ‘other’, where intolerance and violence are perceived as legitimate forms of punishment. Today, the rise of anti-gender movements is correlated with a rise in violence, harassment and hate speech against LGBTQI+ people.²³

LGBTQI+ people can experience interpersonal violence from family members, friends or strangers, as well as structural forms of violence, like laws that do not protect them, disproportionate harassment from the police and justice sector, or lack of access to adequate or appropriate healthcare.²⁴ Both men and women can enable violence against LGBTQI+ people.²⁵ Violence is an extremely common experience for LGBTQI+ people; a 2018 systematic review analysing figures from 50 countries showed that the prevalence of physical violence against LGBTQI+ people ranged from 6% to 25% and sexual violence from 6% to 11%.²⁶

KEY READING

Ending violence against LGBTQI+ people: global evidence and emerging insights into what works

Ahlenback, V. (2022) London: Ending Violence Helpdesk

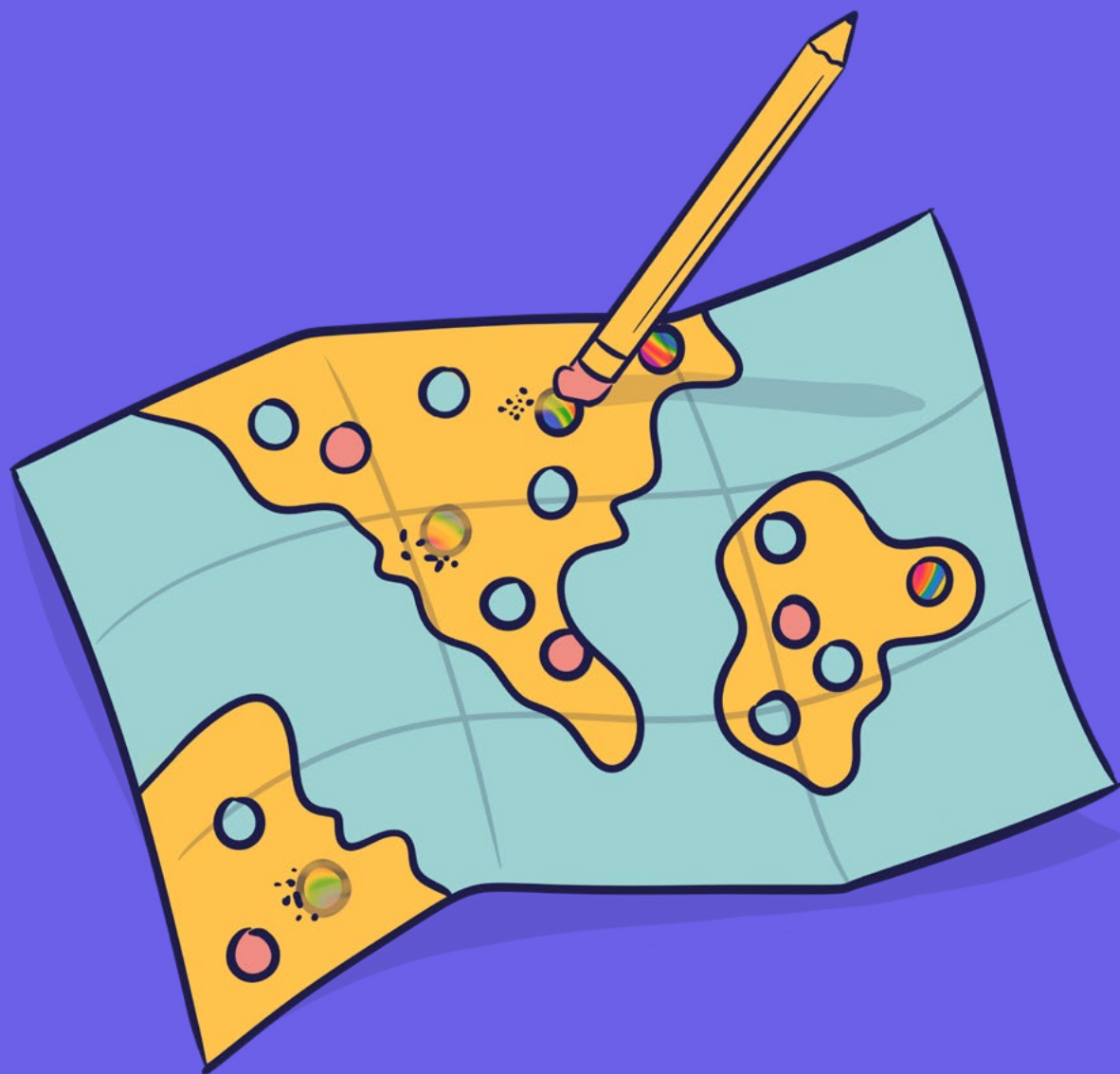
Predictors of attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women in 23 countries

Bettinsoli, M.L., Suppes, A. and Napier, J.L. (2020) *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 11(5): 697–708

Hostile landscapes: how do gender-restrictive actors contribute to violence against LGBTQI+ people?

Browne, E. (2024) London: ALIGN/ODI Global

6 ERASURE OF GENDER DIVERSITY & COLONISATION



The world has an enormous diversity of sexualities and gender identities and expressions, and, similarly, a diversity of gender norms – showing that they are not static.²⁷ There are many culturally specific sexual orientations and gender identities that challenge global explanations.^{28, 29} How gender norms shape LGBTQI+ people's lives depends on where they live and who they are.

The dominant Western idea that gender identity and sexual orientation are separate, binary and fixed has been imposed onto other places through colonisation, disrupting indigenous systems that were sometimes more accepting of diversity.^{30, 31, 32}

British rule, for example, imposed rigid binaries and heteronormative laws rooted in Victorian Christian morality. In India, colonial-era laws such as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalised 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature' and cast transgender communities as inherently 'criminal'. These laws embedded homophobia and transphobia into state structures. Although they have since been repealed or challenged, their legacies continue to shape societal attitudes and legal norms in both India and Pakistan after partition. Contemporary anti-gender movements are revitalising some aspects of colonial-era rigid attitudes to gender and sexuality. The complex histories of colonisation mean that anti-colonial arguments are invoked both to challenge inherited rigid hierarchies of gender and sexuality, and to oppose contemporary Western advocacy for LGBTQI+ rights.³³

Many scholars and activists are actively engaged in decolonising sexuality and gender discourse, and reclaiming local practices in all their diversity, in particular by showing how multiple gender identities and sexualities existed before (and after) colonisation. Many societies had, and still have, culturally specific gender-diverse identities: the *waria* in Indonesia, *khwaja sira* in Pakistan and *muxe* in Mexico, to name a few.³⁴ These identities have long held an accepted, if marginalised, place in society. Western binary identity categories are just one version of gender and sexual orientation norms, which can change.

KEY READING

'Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system'

Lugones, M. (2006) *Hypatia* 22 (1): 186–209

Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity

Madrigal-Borloz, V. (2023) Report of the United Nations Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity

Out of time: the queer politics of postcoloniality

Rao, R. (2020) New York: Oxford University Press

'Decolonising development work: a transfeminist perspective'

Weerawardhana, C. (2018) in C.L. Mason (ed.) *Routledge handbook of queer development studies*, London: Routledge, pp. 119–130

7 CHANGING NORMS & LGBTQI+ ACCEPTANCE



Norm change, whether organic or through deliberate interventions, can reshape the lives and conditions for LGBTQI+ people. There have been enormous gains in many countries over recent decades, although progress is uneven and not guaranteed, with regression co-existing with gains.³⁵ There has been a significant shift towards breaking down patriarchal gender norms in favour of freedom of expression, safety and stronger legal protections, benefiting all people, not just LGBTQI+ communities.

Legal changes such as decriminalising consensual same-sex activity, legalising same-sex marriage and legislating on anti-discrimination, have substantially improved lives. The past 20 years have been marked by progress. In 2005, 81 jurisdictions criminalised homosexuality, in 2025, that number has dropped to 64.³⁶

Dominica, Barbados, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Antigua and Barbuda have all recently overturned their British colonial laws against homosexuality. In 2006, South Africa legalised same-sex marriage as part of its political commitment to equal rights for all. Thailand was the latest country to legalise equal marriage in 2025. Activism has driven these advances alongside social norm change, with positive representation of LGBTQI+ people in the media, music, sports and politics, and the growth of LGBTQI+-friendly spaces and Pride marches around the world.

Feminist and LGBTQI+ movements have both helped to break down the gender norms that strictly define masculinity and femininity, and the social roles for men and women.³⁷ The very existence of the current anti-gender pushback against LGBTQI+ rights is a possible indication of how far we have come.³⁸

LGBTQI+ people who push or break gender norms are trailblazers for everyone who wants to break out of oppressive gender structures – they are reshaping what it means to be a man, woman, non-binary person or other gender. Although the specific issues are different, feminist movements and LGBTQI+ movements are fighting towards the same goal – resisting patriarchal norms and enabling an environment where people of all genders and sexual orientations can live freely and equally. Norm change towards acceptance of sexual diversity tends to go hand-in-hand with gender equality. Celebrating and protecting LGBTQI+ rights is one pathway to the greater goal of equality for all.

KEY READING

The global divide on homosexuality persists

Poushter, J. and Kent, N.O. (2020) Pew Research Center Report

10 ways to transform gender norms

ALIGN (2025) ALIGN info-booklet. London: ALIGN/ODI Global

Global resistance to anti-gender opposition: LGBTQI+ activism in Colombia, India, Kenya, Peru, and Serbia

Sardá-Chandiramani, A. and Abbas, H. (2023) Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice Report

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ABOUT ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on changing gender norms.

If you would like to know more about how to collaborate with ALIGN or support our work, please get in touch: align@odi.org.uk • www.alignplatform.org

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References: For access to the full reference list of cited work, please visit:
www.alignplatform.org/resources/explainer-7-ways-gender-norms-LGBTQI

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