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HOSTILE LANDSCAPES

HOW DO GENDER-RESTRICTIVE ACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBTQI+ PEOPLE?

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ALiGN

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Acronyms

GBV	Gender-based violence
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex. The plus sign represents people with diverse SOGIESC who identify using other terms.
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SOGI/SOGIESC	Sexual orientation and gender identity/sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VAWG	Violence against women and girls

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Glossary

Agency – the capacity to undertake purposeful action and pursue goals (BMGF, n.d.).

Cisgender – A person whose gender identity is consistent with their sex assigned at birth.

Gender binary – The system of dividing gender into only two distinct categories – man and woman.

Gender expression – A person's way of communicating culturally defined traits of masculinity or femininity (or both, neither or another gender) externally through physical appearance (e.g. through the use of clothing, accessories, hairstyles and cosmetics), mannerisms, ways of speaking and behavioural patterns in interactions with others (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020).

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.

Gender ideology – A term coined by anti-gender actors to refer to feminist and queer theories of gender as a social construct. Anti-gender actors use this term to suggest there is a coordinated effort by gender studies and queer, trans and feminist movements to impose an ideology and 'LGBTQI+ values' on the heterosexual majority. (Tudor, 2021; Amery and Mondon, 2024).

Gender norms – The informal 'rules' in society that define socially acceptable behaviour, roles, appearance and gender expression based on a person's (perceived) sex or gender.

Heteronormativity – The assumption or belief that heterosexuality is the norm, and that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual – with the structure of society organised on this basis. (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020).

Patriarchy – A structure of power relations that refers to a system of gendered oppression that does not benefit all men, but still favours male dominance in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property and assets. Patriarchy shapes gender norms and supports the authority of gatekeepers who maintain norms.

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

Trans/transgender – A person who identifies themselves in a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth. Some transgender people are binary, with their gender identity being the opposite to that assigned at birth, while others may identify as non-binary trans masculine, non-binary trans feminine, or in other ways. Transgender is sometimes used as a broader umbrella term, including those whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth, but whose gender expression is at variance with social norms or who otherwise challenge gender norms in their behaviour (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020).

Trans man – A transgender person assigned female at birth but whose gender identity is male.

Trans woman – A transgender person assigned male at birth but whose gender identity is female.

1 Introduction

Alarm bells are sounding throughout LGBTQI+ and feminist communities. The rise of global 'anti-gender', or 'gender-restrictive', movements over the past few years has provoked deep concern and fear among those who defend and advance sexuality- and gender-related rights. Despite the United Nations' (UN) recognition of LGBTQI+ rights as human rights (Madrigal-Borloz, 2023), and corresponding national recognitions in some countries, LGBTQI+ lives are at high risk as gender-restrictive actors stir new waves of homophobic and transphobic persecution and prejudice that directly and indirectly result in violence.

Recent research and news reports have begun to make the connection between gender-restrictive movements and increased violence against LGBTQI+ people, ranging across all world regions (e.g. GATE, 2023; Reuters, 2024; Washington Post, 2024).

In some contexts, new repressive legislation and policies signal that discrimination, and potential violence, is acceptable. In West Africa, for instance, activists report a climate of fear and insecurity amid increasing restrictions on freedom of association and expression (Kojoué, 2022). Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), has noted that the anti-homosexuality bill passed in Ghana in 2024 'will exacerbate fear and hatred, could incite violence against fellow Ghanaian citizens, and will negatively impact on free speech, freedom of movement and freedom of association' (Reuters, 2024). The International Planned Parenthood Federation Africa Region directly linked a knife attack on Ugandan LGBTQI+ activist Steven Kabuye to the Anti-Homosexuality Act passed in 2023, saying that 'such regressive legislation breeds discrimination and violence' (IPPFAR, 2024). Legal changes that roll back protections pave the way for violence to happen, even if they do not directly permit violence.

Non-state gender-restrictive actors also create the conditions for violence, without necessarily calling for it directly. In Georgia, for example, ultraconservative Levan Vasadze, who has known links to the leading gender-restrictive group World Congress of Families, protested ahead of the 2019 Tbilisi Pride march, vowing to stop the march from taking place (Shameem, 2021). He said, and it is worth reviewing his actual words:

> We'll establish people's squadrons. [...] Among the crowd gathered here there are a lot of individuals with military experience, a lot of athletes, rugby players, and wrestlers ... We shall not allow the 'propagandists of perversion' to carry out a march here ... We will tie their hands with belts and take them away.
> *(Democracy and Freedom Watch, 2019)*

Although Vasadze asked the crowd not to resort to physical violence, this type of hate speech is clearly promoting and inciting a violent approach.

Whether or not gender-restrictive actors take responsibility for violence, some recent direct attacks on LGBTQI+ people are clearly linked to the rise of gender-restrictive politics. Documented examples include:

- At the 2016 Organization of American States General Assembly in the Dominican Republic, trans activists were followed to the bathroom by anti-rights groups (Shameem, 2021: 161). If they used a gender-neutral bathroom or one in accordance with their gender identity, they were harassed, to the extent that the organisation had to revise its guidelines for civil society participation.
- In Eastern Europe, hate crimes appear to have increased, and new homophobic vigilante groups have formed (Edenborg, 2023: 42).
- In the United Kingdom (UK), often perceived as a crucible of anti-gender politics, especially against trans women, officially recorded hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation significantly increased from 14,161 reported in 2018 to 25,639 in 2022. In 2023 they fell slightly overall, but reported crimes against trans people rose slightly (Home Office, 2023).

There are numerous other examples of increased violence against LGBTQI+ people in recent years, but there is not yet sufficient research to establish whether this violence is linked to gender-restrictive movements. This report contributes some evidence towards this suggestion, by bringing together literature on gender-restrictive movements with that on violence against LGBTQI+ people, and complementing this with empirical data from interviews with LGBTQI+ activists and policy-makers.

1.1 Key terms

Anti-gender/gender-restrictive

Scholars and activists use the terms ‘anti-gender’ or ‘gender-restrictive’ to describe well-funded, transnational networks of actors who variously oppose equality, women’s rights, LGBTQI+ rights and rights for other minoritised groups (GATE, 2024). These actors specifically target LGBTQI+ rights; they oppose sexual and reproductive health and rights, especially for women and especially abortion; and they oppose same-sex marriage and sex workers’ rights (GATE, 2024). Each context has specific iterations of the issues, but actors tend to coalesce around these themes. Gender-restrictive actors are often characterised as conservative, faith-based and/or authoritarian. Some researchers are starting to favour the term ‘gender-restrictive’ over ‘anti-gender’, as the former better captures the common feature of groups operating in disparate contexts and politics: the attempt to enforce a hierarchical, patriarchal gender system. This report uses the definition by the Global Philanthropy Project and Elevate Children Funders Group, outlined in Box 1.

Chapter 2 provides a more detailed discussion of gender-restrictive movements and their opposition to LGBTQI+ rights.

Box 1: Definition of gender-restrictive politics

‘A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender. It has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.’ (Martínez et al., 2021: 14)

Gender norms

Gender norms are the informal 'rules' in society that define socially acceptable behaviour, roles, appearance and gender expression for people based on their (perceived) sex or gender. Dominant, patriarchal gender norms tend to reinforce binary ideas of sex and gender (i.e. male/female and masculine/feminine), the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality, and gender inequality. LGBTQI+ people are often considered to transgress gender norms, as they are perceived to deviate from acceptable gendered behaviour, roles and expression. This perceived transgression can expose them to violence, with gender-based violence (GBV) against LGBTQI+ people operating as a way to assert patriarchal gender norms and discipline gender and sexual identities (Harper et al., 2020; 2022).

Gender-restrictive actors and movements uphold patriarchal gender norms and oppress those who challenge them (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020; Chenoweth and Marks, 2022). Denying LGBTQI+ rights and defending heteronormativity through rigid and binary gender norms is central to gender-restrictive politics, meaning that sexuality is a core issue (Lewin, 2024), and gender-restrictive and anti-homosexuality ideas go hand-in-hand (Paternotte, 2023).

Gender-based violence

Although the term GBV is often used to describe violence against cisgender, heterosexual women, UN definitions recognise that homophobic and transphobic violence can be forms of GBV, rooted in unequal gender norms (Graaff, 2021).[1] This report understands GBV to include all violence that occurs because of gender identity or a perceived transgression of gender norms, whether targeted at men, women or non-binary people. Although LGBTQI+ activists do not always use the term GBV (see Section 5.1), this report uses it to emphasise how violence against LGBTQI+ people is often a response to perceived transgressions of gender norms. The report draws on analyses that suggest much GBV has a logic of control: it aims to assert patriarchal gender norms and maintain a patriarchal structure in society – whereby power and resources are unevenly distributed in favour of (heterosexual, cisgender) men. This is also the goal of gender-restrictive movements. Chapter 3 discusses debates around the term GBV in more detail and reviews literature on how GBV affects LGBTQI+ communities.

1.2 Methods

This report is based on a literature review and key informant interviews conducted in January and February 2024. A literature search identified recent academic and grey literature on gender-restrictive actors, GBV and violence against LGBTQI+ people.

Fourteen interviews were conducted with people who work for LGBTQI+ rights, including activists and policymakers who face gender-restrictive politics and GBV. Interviewees were identified from the literature and from ALIGN's networks. Most interviews were conducted online over video calls (three were conducted in person).

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[1] However, not all violence against LGBTQI+ people is GBV, just as how not all violence against women and girls is GBV. It can be motivated by other markers of identity, such as ethnicity, religion or class, or relate to violent crime.

Four of the interviewees were from Africa (South Africa, and a regional network in West Africa), four from Latin America and the Caribbean (Jamaica, Colombia and Argentina), and two from South Asia (Afghanistan, India) and one Canadian-Indian.

Three further interviews were conducted with people based in Europe, since gender-restrictive networks largely originate in Europe, Russia and the United States (US), and have wide influence on the rest of the world as well as at home (Shameem, 2021). Two interviews were with policy-makers based in Brussels, of whom one is Latin American, and one with a trans activist in the UK.

While not representative, the interviews provide a valuable snapshot of specific case studies that offer insight into the particularities of how LGBTQI+ activists navigate gender-restrictive activity.

Most of the interviewees were willing to speak freely about their identities and organisations, but the report anonymises interviewees and provides a pseudonym to protect their identities. The countries they come from are identified as this informs their perspectives. The West African respondents were part of a network spanning the region, so they are identified as such rather than giving a country location. Annex 2 provides a list of interview respondents by pseudonym and country/region.

1.3 About this report

Violence against LGBTQI+ people is often understood to occur because of their perceived disruption of gender norms. Violence is exerted to punish and control those that are perceived to challenge the gendered status quo, in order to maintain patriarchal power and heteronormative structures within societies.
This report contributes to emerging evidence that shows how gender-restrictive movements create environments that facilitate, legitimise and increase GBV against LGBTQI+ people, as well as directly incite violence. As well as examining how gender-restrictive actors legitimise GBV, the report highlights activist strategies of resistance.

The findings contribute to showing how gender-restrictive politics have concrete negative impacts on LGBTQI+ people. The analysis suggests that gender-restrictive battles over gender norms are not just about repression and hatred of LGBTQI+ people, but about power and control over the shape of societies. Violence is sometimes a means to this end.

The report does not aim to provide a comprehensive global mapping of activist resistance (for further resources on resistance, see Annex 1). Rather, it is a scoping paper that moves towards identifying how gender-restrictive actors could be fuelling GBV against LGBTQI+ communities, and the promising resistance strategies that could be more fully evidenced in future research. The interviews provide insights into specific case studies and examples of particular experiences of violence and resistance strategies. The report aims to support activists in thinking through what might work in their context. It also points funders, decision-makers and academic researchers towards areas of work that need investment and/or further research.

Researchers are making considerable efforts to identify what works to counteract gender-restrictive actors, and it is hoped that this report will contribute to emerging evidence from different countries, to help activists and their allies take steps towards effective resistance.[2]

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 reviews the literature on gender-restrictive actors, their activities and their opposition to LGBTQI+ rights.
- Chapter 3 focuses on GBV related to LGBTQI+ people. The chapter reviews literature on violence against LGBTQI+ people, and discusses whether hate speech, such as some of the political rhetoric employed by gender-restrictive actors, contributes to environments that legitimise GBV against sexual and gender minorities.
- Chapter 4 begins to map the connections between gender-restrictive movements and GBV against LGBTQI+ people. This chapter draws on both literature as well as empirical findings from the interviews.
- Chapter 5, based primarily on the interview data, discusses strategies that LGBTQI+ activists and their allies have used to resist gender-restrictive actors and GBV.

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[2] For examples of research projects that identify strategies to counteract gender-restrictive movements, see the RESIST project (https://theresistproject.eu/); Countering Backlash (https://counteringbacklash.org/); and Transnational 'Anti-Gender' Movements and Resistance: Narratives and Interventions (www.lse.ac.uk/gender/research/AHRC/AHRC-home).

2 The rise of gender-restrictive movements

Scholars, activists and human rights practitioners, among others, have observed 'anti-gender' or 'gender-restrictive' politics emerging over the past decade. Gender-restrictive movements comprise a large variety of actors: the political right-wing, including the far right; conservative religious groups; private donors; civil society; and state actors. The particular form of gender-restrictive activity depends on which issues are most important in a given context and time. However, on a broad level, ALIGN summarises their aims as follows:

> Anti-gender movements ... seek to roll back pro-gender equality and LGBTI+ rights legislation or prevent it being enacted, and to (re)-instate the patriarchal social norms that they perceive as being under threat.
>
> *(Marcus, 2024)*

There is a rapidly increasing set of literature on gender-restrictive movements, as scholars and activists respond to the urgent political turn. Literature has often focused at the policy level (e.g. Corrêa, 2018; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023), drawing out how gender-restrictive actors have pushed back against international norms on gender equality at the UN and other high-level forums (e.g. Sanders, 2018; Goetz, 2020; Krizsán and Roggeband, 2021; Holmes, 2024). There are also recent reports on who gender-restrictive actors are and how they are connected, especially through funding streams (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020; Datta, 2021; Shameem, 2021), as well as civil society literature on gender-restrictive impacts and resistance among LGBTQI+ communities (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020; Denkovski et al., 2021; GATE et al., 2021; GATE, 2023; Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023).

This chapter draws on some of this literature to outline the history of anti-gender movements; explore the use and politics of the language of 'anti-gender' and 'gender-restrictive' in more depth (building on the brief definitions in Section 1.1); and consider the relationship between gender-restrictive politics and LGBTQI+ rights.

2.1 Anti-gender and gender-restrictive terminology

'Anti-gender' is a term used by scholars and activists to describe a contemporary turn in transnational politics that promotes the idea that biological sex is the 'natural' order while gender is an 'ideology' (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020). The term 'gender ideology' was coined by the Vatican in the 1990s as a rhetorical device to counter feminist and queer efforts to insert more expansive understandings of sex and gender into UN spaces and international policy documents (Corrêa, 2018; Lewin, 2021). Anti-gender actors refer to 'gender ideology' to mean the academic theory that gender is a social construct, particularly the work of Judith Butler (e.g. Butler, 2006; 2021). They use the term to suggest, inaccurately, that gender studies and queer, trans and feminist movements are making a singular, coordinated effort to impose an ideology and 'LGBTQI+ values' on the heterosexual majority (Tudor, 2021; Amery and Mondon, 2024). Anti-gender actors spread misinformation and fear around the idea of gender as a social construct, equating it with a strategy to indoctrinate children and destroy the 'traditional family' (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023; GATE, 2024). Anti-gender movements do not usually refer to themselves as such, but typically call themselves 'pro-life', 'pro-family', or protectors of 'family values' or 'traditional values' (McEwen, 2020).

The language describing gender-restrictive actors varies considerably across contexts, depending on which issues local movements engage with and their political and economic constituencies. 'Anti-gender' does not seem to have clear resonance among LGBTQI+ activists in countries outside Europe and the US, where the term is in quite common usage (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023). In Burkina Faso, Ghana and Senegal, a mixed-methods study found that the concept of 'gender ideology' was poorly understood among activists and even among anti-gender actors (Kojoué, 2022). A case study in Ghana shows that actors tend to position themselves as against the 'LGBT agenda' rather than against 'gender ideology' (Martínez et al., 2021). However, Kojoué (2022) also concludes that anti-gender activity is very visible in West Africa and relates to the transnational anti-gender discourse, meaning that the impacts are clear even if the terminology is not. A thorough review of worldwide LGBTQI+ resistance to anti-gender movements showed that activists most often chose the words 'fundamentalists' (24%) or 'religious fundamentalists' (9%) to best describe the opposition in their contexts (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023). The authors of the review also note that activists used a number of political terms, most often 'conservative', and suggest a dual religious-political nature of the opposition. It is possible that Global North funders and academics are driving the discourse towards an 'anti-gender' framing that does not travel to other contexts, where other terms have more currency depending on the specific concerns of LGBTQI+ movements and the opposition (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023).

Several different sets of scholarship have challenged what exactly is meant by 'anti-gender', interrogating the movements to show that 'gender' is leveraged to mean many different things. David Paternotte, Sonia Corrêa and others, describe the anti-gender discourse as an empty signifier, or hydra with many heads: a discourse that can mean anything, depending on how actors choose to weaponise 'gender' to fit their own political ends (Paternotte, 2023).

Beyond a backlash to the steady progression of rights, gender-restrictive campaigns might be considered a dangerously effective political tool adopted by 'actors who have understood the symbolic value of gender' (Paternotte, 2023: 95). Other scholars have called anti-gender a 'symbolic glue' that can hold together disparate fears and actors despite their differences (Kováts and Põim, 2015). Intersectional analysis notes that gender itself is made up of many constituent parts, including sexuality, ethnicity, class, economics and colonial histories (Loken and Hagen, 2022; Lewin, 2024). Gender-restrictive actors therefore mobilise numerous different symbolic fears and flashpoints depending on circumstances, weaponising the concept of 'gender'.

As highlighted in Section 1.1, because of contextual differences and the disparate nature of anti-gender actors, some research is instead beginning to use the term 'gender-restrictive'. For instance, drawing on analyses of LGBTQI+ issues in West Africa, Kojoué (2022) uses 'gender restrictive' to identify actors that recognise only two genders and heterosexuality, but who are not opposed to 'gender ideology' per se. 'Gender-restrictive' gives a clearer sense of the ideas driving these actors without relying on a particular interpretation of 'gender ideology', and reflects the sense in the literature that 'anti-gender' does not adequately describe those who oppose LGBTQI+ rights in Global South countries.

2.2 Gender-restrictive politics and LGBTQI+ rights

Anti-gender politics has been growing for some time; while the recent explosion is particularly alarming, there has been a steady resistance to expanding frameworks of gender and sexuality for decades.

Within LGBTQI+ rights discussions, the current moment of gender-restrictive politics tends to be framed by scholars and activists as part of a longer-term opposition and oppression of LGBTQI+ lives, rather than as a backlash (McEwen, 2020; Paternotte, 2020; Lewin, 2024). 'Anti-gender' mobilisation could be conceptualised as a surge in the longer-term contestation between a successful social movement (for LGBTQI+ rights) and countermovement (anti-gender) (Corredor, 2019). It might be useful to imagine 'anti-gender' as a new banner that unites a number of old enemies of LGBTQI+ people (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020) or as an analytical category rather than a description of actors (Kojoué, 2022). It is the transnational and organised nature of the current movements, which bloomed in the 2010s (Paternotte, 2023), that distinguishes them from previous waves of homophobia (GATE, 2024).

LGBTQI+ rights are a critical battleground in gender-restrictive politics. Queer and intersectional scholarship has made important contributions by pointing out the centrality of heteronormativity to gender-restrictive politics. The patriarchal system holds a heteronormative, binary view of gender, which gender-restrictive actors seek to maintain by enforcing heterosexuality and gender inequality between men and women. Gender-restrictive actors seek to reassert the 'natural family' or nuclear family of a married heterosexual couple raising biological children (McEwen, 2020). This effort to assert 'traditional family values' upholds patriarchal systems that directly oppress diverse sexualities and gender identities due to their perceived transgression of and threat to traditional gender norms (McEwen, 2020; Woolf and Dwyer, 2020; Lewin, 2024). Denying LGBTQI+ rights is a core platform for many gender-restrictive actors.

Beyond oppressing people because they are different, scholarship on gender-restrictive actors shows that attempts to deny LGBTQI+ rights are a political struggle to gain control over the shape of society. International relations scholars have described LGBTQI+ rights as a symbolic figuration that can be used in state-making practices to set national boundaries and ideas of sovereignty, particularly by excluding queer people from the nation (Muñoz, 1999; Reddy, 2002; Puar, 2007; Edenborg, 2023). Tessa Lewin argues that the current anti-gender and gender-restrictive landscape suggests that 'the visible restriction of gender and sexuality is a central feature of attempts to secure and maintain political power' (Lewin, 2024: 141). Gender-restrictive actors have been able to weaponise the spectre of 'gender ideology' as a tool to achieve specific political goals (Corredor, 2019). Following this review of the literature on gender-restrictive movements and their relationship to LGBTQI+ rights, Chapter 3 turns to the other key body of literature for this report – that on violence against LGBTQI+ people – before bringing the two topics together in Chapter 4.

3 Understanding gender-based violence against LGBTQI+ people

Before turning to the relationship between gender-restrictive movements and GBV against LGBTQI+ people, this chapter introduces some concepts for analysing gender-based violence. It reviews literature on violence against LGBTQI+ people, arguing that it is important to recognise the significance of gender and gender norms for understanding why LGBTQI+ people are targeted by violence. GBV is analysed as part of a logic of control that punishes those who break gender norms, as a means to assert patriarchy in society. The chapter also describes how hate speech can directly incite violence and create an enabling environment that normalises violence.

3.1 What is gender-based violence?

Box 2: Definitions of violence

- Violence against women and girls (VAWG), according to the UN, is 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'. VAWG includes not only physical and sexual violence, but also controlling behaviour, emotional and psychological abuse, verbal threats, and open humiliation.
- Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private.
- Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) refers to any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships.

Source: IPPF (2022).

VAWG has long been a feminist focus, making its way into UN conventions through the 1990s (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020). Many queer and gender activists and researchers have criticised VAWG strategies and policies for treating 'women' as a homogenous group and not considering intersecting identities. VAWG services and policies frequently exclude lesbian, bisexual and transgender women (Jung Thapa, 2015; Ahlenback, 2022), tending to assume that the women they serve are cisgender and heterosexual (Loken and Hagen, 2022).

The discourse of GBV emerged as a response to critiques of the narrow focus on VAWG, and a call to broaden the definition to include everyone who experiences violence because of their gender (Graaff, 2021). The GBV discourse highlights gender norms and power relations as a cause of violence. For instance, the Arcus Foundation (2019: 9) describes GBV as 'the umbrella term that describes violence that occurs as a result of the unequal power relationships and the normative role expectations associated with each gender in a specific society'. It has been further extended under the initialism SGBV, which highlights the particular intersection of sexual violence and GBV. While SGBV includes violence against people of all genders and sexualities, 'SGBV' is commonly understood to be more inclusive of LGBTQI+ people than GBV discourses. This is because of the use of sexual violence as a way to punish or 'correct' people who defy gender norms because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression (Arcus Foundation, 2019; Ahlenback, 2022). There is some slippage between the terms, with commentators noting they are often used interchangeably, particularly GBV and SGBV, although they have different meanings (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020; IPPF, 2022).

GBV research and services should in principle include all violence (including sexual violence) that occurs because of gender identity and breaking gender norms, whether targeted at men, women or non-binary people. The definition of GBV in Box 2 comes from the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee GBV Guidelines and is commonly understood to include violence against gender non-conforming individuals, LGBTQI+ people, and men and boys (Graaff, 2021).

This report uses GBV as the conceptual frame rather than SGBV, in a deliberate choice to emphasise the *gendered* aspects of violence against LGBTQI+ people. GBV is also used to make it clear that the link between violence against LGBTQI+ people and gender-restrictive actors is about the power dynamic of contesting or upholding gender norms, in addition to being about sexual orientation in and of itself.

GBV can include:

- verbal and online harassment or abuse
- sexist bullying and intimidation or humiliation
- unwanted touching and sexual advances
- predatory/sexualised staring and indecent exposure
- homophobic or transphobic attacks
- aggravated assault and stalking
- threats of rape, violence and/or destitution
- coercive control
- sexual assault and rape
- femicide or murder. (Harper et al., 2022)

It should be noted that not all violence against LGBTQI+ people is gender-based. LGBTQI+ people face structural and physical violence because of ethnicity, caste, class, age, disability, refugee status and other factors. Sometimes they are victims of violent crime or conflict unrelated to LGBTQI+ identity. This report focuses on forms of violence that *are* motivated by sexuality and gender.

3.2 Types and prevalence of violence against LGBTQI+ people

Definitions from the UN bodies explicitly recognise that homophobic and transphobic violence can be forms of GBV, rooted in unequal gender norms (Graaff, 2021). For example, violence against trans people is often motivated by their gender identity and disruption of gender norms, and should clearly be included within GBV policy and programming.

However, violence against LGBTQI+ people is often treated as a separate, homogenous category and not included in GBV policy and practice (Kilbride, 2023). Violence against LBTQ+ women tends to be categorised as a subset of broader LGBTQI+ rights violations rather than considered as GBV or VAWG in and of itself (Kilbride, 2023). GBTQI+ men are even more excluded from programming, support services and advocacy around GBV. Some support services may now be more inclusive of men, but LGBTQI+ survivors of violence are frequently regarded as a distinct category, beyond men and women survivors (Loken and Hagen, 2022). In reality these categories overlap and coexist, as many LGBTQI+ people identify as women or men (Loken and Hagen, 2022).

Violence against LGBTQI+ people takes many forms: physical, sexual, online, threat, blackmail, harassment, conversion practices, and structural forms of violence including criminalisation of queer lives, racism, exclusion, erasure of LGBTQI+ history and silence on sexual diversity in health and education.[3] Backlash or resistance to progressive change may take the form of physical violence, coercion, bullying, harassment and hate speech, in person and online (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020). It can come from family members, friends, teachers, community members, peers and institutions (Ahlenback, 2022). Arrest, detainment and imprisonment are also forms of violence, and the police and other state actors are frequently the perpetrators of violence against LGBTQI+ people, not protectors (Arcus Foundation, 2019; Samuels et al., 2021). Evidence shows that LGBTQI+ people across the world, of all classes, ethnicities and genders, face violence or the threat of violence because of who they are (Ahlenback, 2022).

Data and reporting

Statistics on violence against LGBTQI+ people are notoriously unreliable, due to chronic under-reporting and lack of state interest and investment in recognising the problem and tracking data (Mkhize et al., 2010; Arcus Foundation, 2019; FRA, 2024). Evidence is particularly scarce outside the US and Europe. The governments of Botswana, Kenya, Uganda and Malawi do not collect data on violence against LGBTQI+ people at all, for example (Arcus Foundation, 2019). Queer people may not want to identify themselves as queer in the records, or to police officials (Schweppe and Perry, 2022). Some countries – for example, Ireland and Botswana (Arcus Foundation, 2019; Schweppe and Perry, 2022) – do not have the requisite legislation to class an incident as a hate crime or motivated by a specific. As a result, there are no globally comparable statistics showing the scale of violence against LGBTQI+ people, but thematic and regional reports show high levels of violence – for example, a gay couple being attacked on a London bus and three gay women being killed in an arson attack in Argentina (BBC, 2019; Mohan, 2019; Ahlenback, 2022; Barber, 2024; Euractiv, 2024). This section presents a few examples of reporting on violence to give an overview of trends.

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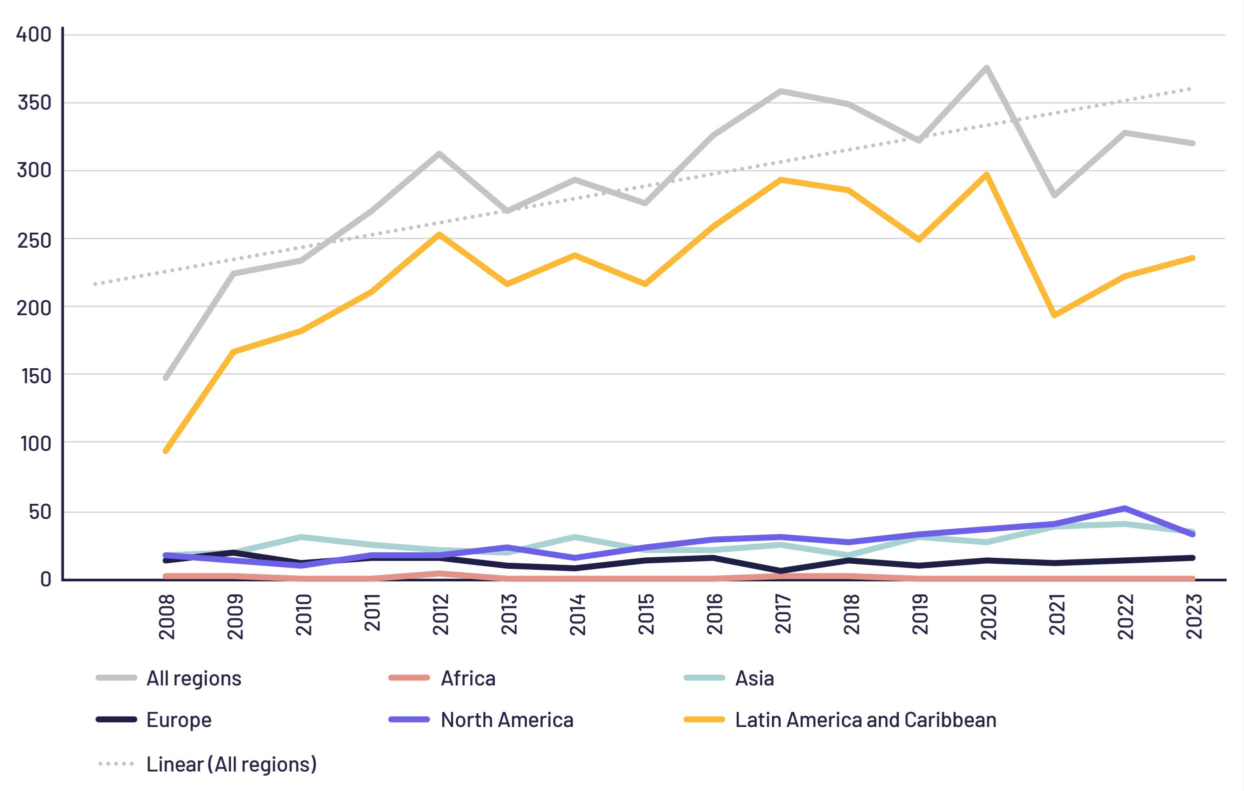
[3] For information about criminalisation, see the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's world map on criminalisation of consensual same-sex sexual acts (ILGA, 2024). At the time of writing, 131 UN member states do not criminalise same-sex sexual acts, 60 criminalise by law, and 2 criminalise de facto.

Much reporting is conducted by small civil society initiatives. The Trans Murder Monitoring project collects data from news reports, partner organisations and individuals submitting reports. The numbers of murders reported are far below the actual number of homicides, since most go unreported or are not registered as being motivated by transphobia. Murders are not equivalent to other forms of GBV, but Figure 1 provides a working indication of overall trends.

Figure 1: Murders of trans people by region and year

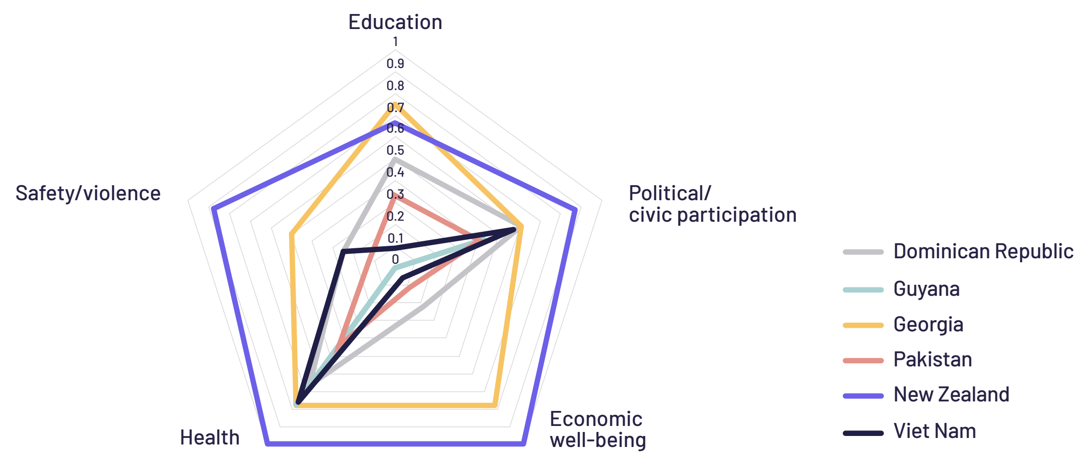


Source: https://transrespect.org/en/research/tmm/

The trend is largely driven by reporting in Latin America and the Caribbean. Brazil and Mexico stand out as countries with high levels of trans murders, mainly of trans women. The Philippines and Thailand have the most cases in Asia, and Turkey in Europe. There are higher reports in countries with strong trans rights movements, which are better connected to researchers and police, and more likely to receive appropriate support from the authorities. The dip in 2021 is assumed to be due to limited reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall trend shows a slow increase in numbers of homicides reported.

The UN Development Programme has recently begun a pilot programme to monitor LGBTI inclusion, which includes tracking personal safety and violence (Badgett, 2024). Its indicators include medical and conversion therapy; hate crime legislation and incitement to violence; violence related to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC); asylum protection; and access to justice. Figure 2 shows the factors monitored in the programme's six pilot countries where safety is consistently low for LGBTI people (in comparison to health, for example, which has higher levels of inclusion across all six countries).

Figure 2: UN Development Programme's inclusion monitoring pilot



Source: Badgett (2024: 20).

Finally, academic research has shown that violence against LGBTQI+ people is high. A systematic review in 2018 shows high prevalence of physical and sexual violence, particularly among transgender people (Blondeel et al., 2018). It covered 74 studies conducted between 1995 and 2014, including 50 countries (although 27 articles were about the US). The review found that, in studies where all sexual and gender minorities were analysed as one population, the prevalence of physical violence ranged from 6% to 25% and sexual violence from 6% to 11%. For transgender people the prevalence ranged from 12% to 68% for physical violence and 7% to 49% for sexual violence. The authors conclude that there is a high prevalence of violence against LGBTQI+ people, motivated by a perceived defiance of gender stereotypes and gender norms.

In 2021, academics conducted a survey of 3,798 people who self-identified as a sexual and/or gender minority, living in Botswana, eSwatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Müller et al., 2021). Their results showed that 56% of participants had experienced some form of violence in their lifetime. In the year previous to the survey, 29% of participants had experienced some form of violence; 25% had experienced physical violence and 19% sexual violence. Trans women had experienced the highest levels of violence: three in four transgender women (73%) had experienced any form of violence in their lifetime and almost half (45%) in the past year. Of participants who had experienced violence in their lifetime, 70% believed that it had been motivated by their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

In a study interviewing female sex workers, men who have sex with men, and transgender women in Barbados, El Salvador, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago, researchers found that nearly all participants reported experiencing emotional violence and three-quarters reported physical violence (Evens et al., 2019). Economic violence was reported by more than three-quarters of transgender women and female sex workers and nearly two-thirds of men who have sex with men. Sadly, GBV was so pervasive that many respondents perceived it as a regular part of their daily lives and not a violation of their human rights.

The review shows agreement in the literature that there is high prevalence of violence against LGBTQI+ people, even though poor reporting and monitoring is assumed to underestimate the rates. It also suggests a higher prevalence among trans people. Much of the research reviewed acknowledges the role of gender norms in perpetuating violence.

3.3 How does hate speech lead to violence?

The UN defines hate speech as 'any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language' about members of a minoritised group (UNESCO, 2023). Studies on hate speech are helpful in showing how discriminatory speech against particular groups can lead to violence against them. To analyse gender-restrictive movements' contribution to violence against LGBTQI+ people, it is important to understand how homophobic and transphobic public statements, media discourse and rhetoric create a climate of hostility, since these are key tools of gender-restrictive movements. While violence against LGBTQI+ people is included within GBV, it is useful to understand it as violence based on prejudice as well as gender (Arcus Foundation, 2019). This helps underscore the specificity of the underlying cultural and political motivations of violence against LGBTQI+ persons (Arcus Foundation, 2019).

Psychological research has examined the links between audience exposure to hate speech and violence for decades, showing robustly that there is a clear pathway from one to the other (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020). The steps tested empirically include how hate speech leads to avoidance of the victimised group, followed by discrimination against them and finally violence (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020). This might be conceptualised as a continuum of hate, where seemingly minor harassment can be a precursor to more serious crime or have the capacity to escalate (Schweppe and Perry, 2022). It has also been called a pyramid of hate, whereby lower-level acts of bias, harassment or biased attitudes support and normalise discrimination and violence (Anti-Defamation League, 2021). Pejorative public statements can desensitise people to derogatory language and normalise a culture of discrimination and prejudice (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020). Further, publicly expressed hate speech can act as a signal of a new norm that allows people to express negative views that they previously kept private (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020). Reddy (2002) suggests that homophobic hate speech can both incite violence towards queer people and be considered a form of gendered violence in itself. Homophobia can lead directly to physical assault, but also contribute to a climate of fear and disgust, which Mkhize et al. (2010) describe as like living in a war zone under constant attack.

3.4 Gender norms and gender-based violence against LGBQTI+ people

Analysis suggests GBV against LGBQTI+ people is not only about homophobic and transphobic hate: it also operates as a system of control over the structure of society. Violence can be used to signal inclusion and exclusion and to discipline acceptable gender and sexual identities. The ambition to regulate gender and sexuality corresponds directly with gender-restrictive actors' goals to structure societies in a patriarchal way.

Violence against LGBTQI+ people can be driven by harmful gender norms that produce rigid views of masculinity and femininity (Samuels et al., 2021), and legitimise violence as a form of punishment (Harper et al., 2020). Homophobic violence is often underpinned by perceived breaches of gender norms, or 'incorrect' expressions of masculinity or femininity (Browne, 2019; Anderson, 2020; Bettinsoli et al., 2020). Violence targeting sexual minorities can occur because they fail to uphold the gender norm of heterosexuality, and violence targeting gender minorities can occur because they transgress the social norm of two fixed genders (Loken and Hagen, 2022). Homophobic (or transphobic) violence is thus a tool used to reinforce and uphold patriarchal gender norms (Pharr, 1997).

Different LGBTQI+ people face different likelihoods and forms of violence, with some research showing a link between greater deviance from social norms and a higher likelihood of experiencing violence (Samuels et al., 2021). Of LGBTQI+ people, transgender people are commonly reported to face the greatest risk of violence, as described in Section 3.2 (Loken and Hagen, 2022), because their gender expression usually makes them highly visible. More than the internal sense of gender identity or sexual orientation, the external presentation of such has a strong impact on the likelihood of being targeted by violence (Kilbride, 2023).

Research shows that masculinity is a particular driver of violence. Globally, men are more likely than women to commit violence against LGBTQI+ people, and gay men are more likely than lesbian women to face disapproval from other men, although there are variations between countries and groups (Bettinsoli et al., 2020). Situations where men feel their masculinity is threatened can result in violence against women and sexual minorities as a way to affirm masculine heterosexuality (Gqola, 2007; Vincent et al., 2011; Baugher and Gazmararian, 2015). In a patriarchal system, masculinity is favoured above femininity, and people expressing unacceptable femininity (gay men, trans women) are liable to be exposed to violence as a way to assert patriarchal gender norms (Hale and Ojeda, 2018). This line of analysis suggests that homophobic and transphobic violence is not only triggered by hatred and fear of people who are different from the perceived norm, but operates as a way to assert masculine superiority and discipline gender identities.

At the societal level, disciplining gender identities through GBV can be a form of statecraft, used to regulate the fabric of society. Loken and Hagen (2022) argue that recognising some forms of violence against LGBTQI+ people as GBV broadens the frameworks for understanding how GBV works as part of a deeper project to shape gender. Their empirical research focuses narrowly on GBV in armed conflict in Colombia, but their theoretical approach shows more broadly how GBV against LGBTQI+ people is used to exert authority over the structure of society and reinforce patriarchal gendered norms as part of an organised logic of controlling and regulating 'correct' gender and sexuality. GBV against LGBTQI+ people may not always or only be about hatred, but about asserting power and 'belongingness' over others (Schweppe and Perry, 2022). Identity-based hate crime has a ripple effect: violence against one LGBTQI+ person sends a message to the rest of the community that they are equally at risk. It is a symbolic crime that communicates otherness (Schweppe and Perry, 2022). This broader view – that violence against LGBTQI+ people signals control over the structure of society – maps directly onto gender-restrictive movements' ambitions to reinforce and further entrench patriarchal structures across societies.

The concepts discussed in this chapter highlight that GBV against LGBTQI+ people is facilitated by a climate of discrimination, negative attitudes and public hate speech. The continuum of hate framing is helpful to understand that low-level instances of harassment can normalise violence and lead to more serious crimes. The analysis of GBV as a form of asserting patriarchal gender norms and regulating gender and sexual identities leads to an understanding of GBV as a system of control over the shape of societies. Using the analytical lens described here, the next chapter begins to draw the links between gender-restrictive actors and GBV against LGBTQI+ people.

4 Gender-restrictive actors and gender-based violence

The literature on gender-restrictive movements, as outlined in Chapter 2, analyses gender-restrictive actors' emergence, their specific activities and how they operate. However, it misses an analysis of if, and how, their activity relates to GBV. This chapter starts to map out this relationship, with a focus on violence against LGBTQI+ people, by drawing on both literature and, in the final section, empirical data from interviews.

4.1 Links to nationalist and conservative religious groups

Scholarship has shown that gender-restrictive movements can unite a number of unlikely groups, from different political positions and socioeconomic perspectives, and may feature internal tensions and rivalries (Goetz, 2020; Paternotte, 2020). The disparate nature of gender-restrictive groups means that they can call on different constituencies for support, making their reach very wide for creating the conditions for violence. Of importance to this report's focus on violence is the overlap of gender-restrictive actors with violent nationalist and far-right groups, and conservative religious actors who do not shy away from inciting violence against LGBTQI+ people. Previous literature has shown links between these groups and gender-restrictive movements, but not if and how gender-restrictive worldviews contribute to calls for violence.

Research indicates that gender-restrictive groups often draw on religious philosophies, and conservative religious actors have a robust presence in gender-restrictive movements. Christian Catholic and Evangelical churches, in particular, have played an influential role in promoting anti-gender rhetoric (Corredor, 2019). In Latin America, Evangelical Protestant churches have recently surged in growth and are often mentioned as gender-restrictive actors (Corrêa, 2018), for example in preventing an attempt at legalising same-sex marriage in Cuba (which was later passed) (Browne, 2023). In Ghana in March 2021, Christian clerics organised a day of prayer against homosexuality (Kojoué, 2022). And Ghanaian leaders of different faiths (Christian, Muslim and traditional) unite together under the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values to argue for gender-restrictive legislation in Ghana and the rest of Africa (Nketiah, 2019). The literature also notes that some Islamic and Jewish denominations present gender-restrictive ideas, sometimes working together with Christian allies (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). For example, Turkish and Iranian Islamic organisations seem to have gender-restrictive influence in Senegal (Kojoué, 2022). Conservative religious actors are long-time opponents of LGBTQI+ rights and are known in some places to perpetrate or enable violence against LGBTQI+ people (Arcus Foundation, 2019; Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez, 2022).

In some contexts, gender-restrictive actors are allied with populist, authoritarian or nationalist groups, or hold these views themselves (Martínez et al., 2021). Some gender-restrictive actors share goals with far and extreme right-wing groups. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) argue that anti-gender discourse is populist, framing gender-restrictive actors as warriors for justice who are defending ordinary people against corrupt global elites. They show that this enables alliances with far-right and ultraconservative groups, who provide the mass mobilisation needed to gain political power. Links are seen, for example, through participation in demonstrations together, such as when neo-Nazis joined a 2023 anti-trans rally in Melbourne organised by Posie Parker (Amery and Mondon, 2024). Links are also visible when politicians hold multiple roles. For instance, the former Spanish minister and Member of the European Parliament Jaime Mayor Oreja also founded two major transnational anti-gender organisations, the One of Us Federation and the Political Network for Values (Paternotte, 2023); and the Chief Executive Officer of HazteOir, Álvaro Zulueta, is reportedly a member of Mexican far-right group El Yunque (Shameem, 2021: 79). The overlap of gender-restrictive actors with political groups shows how anti-gender discourse is part of an effort to seize or retain control over society (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). Politicians have taken up gender-restrictive rhetoric if and when it seems strategic and might result in increased electoral support (Paternotte, 2023). In this way, gender politics can be co-opted to help politicians retain power.

Gender-restrictive groups often draw on nationalist and racist discourses, particularly around the othering of LGBTQI+ people as a threat to the nation (Amery and Mondon, 2024). Gender-restrictive rhetoric sometimes argues that LGBTQI+ people destabilise the heterosexual family unit (Tudor, 2021) and that LGBTQI+ rights could lead to population decline (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). McEwen and Narayanaswamy (2023) show how some African countries have adopted an anti-LGBTQI+ message as part of a pro-natalist stance to resist a perceived effort by the West to exert population control policies. In this discourse, same-sex relations and abortion are described as part of Western efforts to limit population growth on the African continent.

Some research has directly connected nationalist-leaning gender-restrictive politics with violence against LGBTQI+ people. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) provide examples of violent protests in Poland, directly attributing neo-Nazi attacks at Białystok's 2019 Equality March to instigation by Jarosław Kaczyński, the anti-gender leader of the Law and Justice party. In Brazil, former President Jair Bolsonaro's attacks on rights for sexual minorities paralleled an increase in violent attacks on LGBTQI+ people, with the reported death toll tripling in recent years (teleSUR, 2019). In a survey conducted before and after Bolsonaro's election campaign in 2018, 92% of respondents said that violence against LGBTQI+ people increased after his election (Ahlenback, 2022: 13). Evidence is beginning to show that gender-restrictive politics, through overlaps with nationalist, far-right and conservative religious groups, has led to increased violence against LGBTQI+ people.

4.2 Narratives of threat and victimhood

Scholarship has unpicked some examples of how gender-restrictive actors operate, particularly highlighting their ability to manipulate and twist discourses. Control of the narrative is highly important to gender-restrictive strategies: this is a battle of rhetoric fought in the media and through public opinion. Gender-restrictive actors have been very effective at using fear, scarcity and moral panic arguments to create a misleading narrative of 'traditional values' being under attack. They often use military metaphors of threat, attack and defence, which point towards deliberate narrative constructions of arenas where violence is legitimised. Such narratives encourage fear and anxiety, which are known to lead to prejudice and violence (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020).

Of particular importance is the way that gender-restrictive actors have been effective at recasting themselves as heroic 'victims' defending 'traditional values' (Graff et al., 2019; Tudor, 2021). Scholarship has shown how gender-restrictive groups use moral panics to stir fear that their 'way of life' is under threat. Igniting moral panics is an efficient tool to mobilise disparate constituencies (Paternotte, 2023), and they also often empower the state to pass laws to address the 'problem' (Reddy, 2002). For LGBTQI+ issues, moral panics are often framed around the 'corruption' of children into homosexuality, implications of paedophilia, population decline due to the perceived lack of reproductive potential of same-sex couples, or same-sex relations going against the 'natural order' or 'God's will'. In the case of some Global South countries, LGBTQI+ people are portrayed as neo-imperialist products of the West with no local roots or relevance.

In some countries, gender-restrictive actors have exploited deeper fears about neocolonialism and cultural imperialism by framing 'gender ideology', homosexuality and LGBTQI+ rights as foreign constructs, with gender-restrictive actors themselves positioned as the victims of Western imperialism (McEwen, 2020). Korolczuk and Graff (2018) memorably analyse how some actors see 'gender' as a foreign imposition, or 'Ebola from Brussels'. Their research looks at Poland, where the 'us and them' narrative translates into populist rhetoric, but the idea of gender as 'foreign' is also seen in other countries along the European border and in Global South countries. This kind of easy-to-understand narrative creates moral panic and frames gender-restrictive actors as 'good' protectors against 'evil' foreign agendas (Martínez et al., 2021).

Gender-restrictive actors have also been able to connect 'gender ideology' to context-specific threats to society or the nation to inspire fear and protectionism, which they then exploit for political power. In some Eastern European and Latin American states, for example, anti-gender actors have conflated 'gender ideology' with communism to tap into anxieties related to histories of communist rule in these regions (McEwen, 2020).

While gender-restrictive actors claim that they are responding to a threat to society, several scholars have argued that anti-gender activity can more accurately be understood as a response to a threat to patriarchal power and privilege (Lewin, 2024). As Corredor (2019: 629) writes:

> [G]ender ideology has become a placeholder for social, economic, and political struggles that conservatives can leverage for political gain while thwarting feminist and LGBTQI+ policies that threaten their power and privilege.

Corredor (2019) suggests that the Vatican sees 'gender ideology' as a fundamental threat to its worldview and, thus, power. The sense that patriarchal power is under attack has led gender-restrictive actors to weaponise the concept of 'gender' as a means to maintain the status quo and political control.

Scholars have also analysed how gender-restrictive actors have been extremely successful in co-opting human rights language and crafting a new narrative that misuses it, which Lewin calls 'discourse capture' (Graff et al., 2019; Lewin, 2021; Martínez et al., 2021). Some gender-restrictive actors have co-opted UN language to claim legitimacy, for example crafting alternative declarations of rights that emphasise the protection of the family, like the anti-abortion Geneva Consensus Declaration (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). Others have been able to re-signify certain rights, like the right to life of foetuses, and claim that others are under attack (e.g. the right to family, free speech and religious freedom) (Edenborg, 2023). For example, those promoting trans exclusion and oppression often leverage the concept of free speech to defend their right to do so, arguing that their right to free speech is threatened when they are denied a platform (Amery and Mondon, 2024). Gender-restrictive actors have also appropriated emancipatory language from post/decolonial studies and queer movements to frame themselves as victims seeking 'freedom' from oppressive 'gender ideology' (Tudor, 2021). As Sonia Corrêa suggests:

> What we are witnessing is the continuation of a longstanding war against the legitimacy of human rights, now waged in entirely novel terms. While in the past conservatives abhorred human rights, now they are disputing their meanings.
>
> *(Sonia Corrêa in Murray, 2022: 3250)*

It is important to understand how the narratives of victimhood and threat discussed in this section work, as this helps explain why gender-restrictive actors seek to claim control through gender hierarchies and patriarchal gender norms: because they see themselves as under attack and needing to regain power. These narratives make it clear that gender-restrictive activity is not just aimed at oppressing people because they are different, but also at claiming power and control within broader society, using gender discourse as a vehicle.

Turning rights concepts inside-out to use them for oppressive, restrictive purposes is a fundamental misappropriation of the human rights framework that states human rights are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible.

4.3 Colonial logics

Colonial and decolonial frames are increasingly used for analysing gender-restrictive movements. This review points to an emerging understanding that gender-restrictive actors replicate colonial logics in their efforts to control acceptable forms of gender and sexuality. Further, the activists interviewed relied heavily on narratives of colonisation and decolonisation as part of discourses of resistance (see Section 5.2).

As already mentioned in Section 4.2, gender-restrictive actors have capitalised on pre-existing fears and histories in Global South countries of neocolonialism and cultural imposition to stir opposition to LGBTQI+ rights (Corredor, 2019). They have been able to co-opt the language of anti-colonialism to frame LGBTQI+ people and rights as foreign imports, creating suspicion and fear (McEwen, 2020; Martínez et al., 2021; GATE, 2023). In Sri Lanka, for example, activists that support LGBTQI+ rights have been vilified as importing 'a western lack of morals' and corrupting an 'authentic' Sri Lankan culture (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020: 19). Gender-restrictive groups typically promote a view that LGBTQI+ rights and women's rights are Western constructs that violate national sovereignty and cultural beliefs (Khan, Tant and Harper, 2023). One policy-maker interviewed for this present report said that this is one area in which gender-restrictive actors have been extremely effective; in fact, have nearly won (Chris, Belgium).

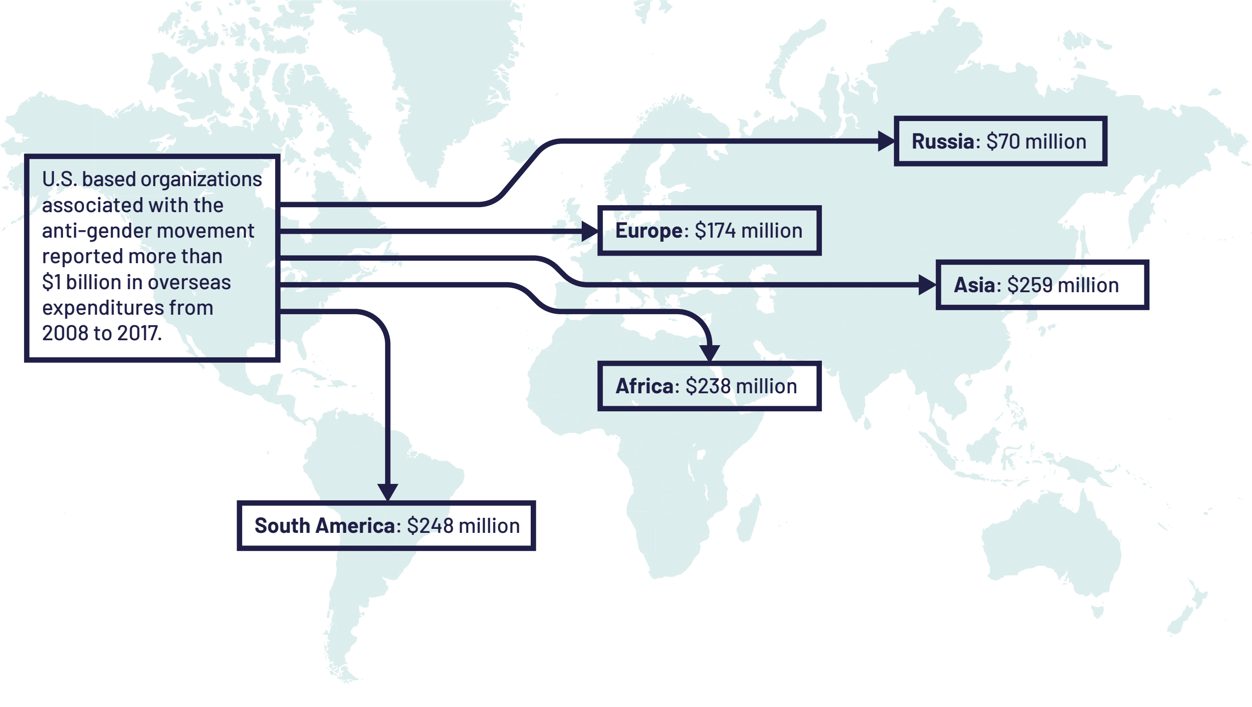
However, when gender-restrictive actors claim an anti-colonial position, this is a deliberate tactic that appropriates and picks out certain anti-colonial concepts for gender-restrictive purposes while not otherwise usually engaging in decolonial or anti-racist politics (Lewin, 2021). This positioning also obscures the fact that gender-restrictive movements are very well-connected and funded internationally, deliberately and carefully steered by actors with huge power and influence, especially flowing from Europe, Russia and the US to other regions (Datta, 2021). For example, in South Africa, the issues highlighted by the anti-gender movement ('protecting children', 'freedom of thought and speech', 'fairness in sport', 'women's rights/sex-based rights' and 'science vs emotions') appear to have been transplanted directly from the UK and US and do not reflect the local concerns around religion and what they refer to as 'African values' (GATE, 2023). The anti-trans orange bus created by Spanish organisation CitizenGo travelled across Mexico, Colombia and Chile to stir anti-gender feeling, and France's opposition to gender-neutral language has spread to Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina (Murray, 2022). International connections and discourses, which have the deliberate aim of influencing and spreading a gender-restrictive worldview, are themselves a form of neocolonialism.

Funding streams are an obvious transnational link and potential form of neocolonial influence, and one where researchers have been able to produce robust evidence. There is a clear pathway from organisations in the US, Europe and Russia funding gender-restrictive actors in the Global South. The Global Philanthropy Project estimates that US anti-gender organisations have disbursed at least $1 billion into other countries (see Figure 3), with $986 million of that coming solely from the Christian Broadcasting Network, presumably to support media outlets (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020). The Catholic Tradition, Family, and Property network, headquartered in Poland, has funded affiliated organisations in South Africa and Brazil (Datta, 2021). Two Russian individuals are responsible for all Russian anti-gender organisations and funding in Europe: Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev (Datta, 2021). Malofeev has also created the International Agency for Sovereign Development, which intends to fund African economic development through business partnerships that reflect his political stance and bypass Western sanctions (Datta, 2021).

> International connections and discourses, which have the deliberate aim of influencing and spreading a gender-restrictive worldview, are themselves a form of neocolonialism. "

At the same time, while the transnational nature of gender-restrictive activity has emerged as a notable point in the literature (Paternotte, 2023), it might be simplistic to assume that gender-restrictive politics is always exported from North to South. Sonia Corrêa argues that anti-gender politics is transnational in *origin* because of the Vatican's extensive networks, and that anti-gender activity erupted in Europe and Latin America at the same time (Murray, 2022). And some organisations originated in Global South countries, like the Tradition, Family and Property Network that started in Brazil (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023)

Figure 3: US funding of international anti-gender movements


U.S. based organizations associated with the anti-gender movement reported more than $1 billion in overseas expenditures from 2008 to 2017.
Russia: $70 million
Europe: $174 million
Asia: $259 million
Africa: $238 million
South America: $248 million

Source: Global Philanthropy Project (2020: 8).

Ironically, the 'traditional' culture that gender-restrictive actors want to protect is sometimes itself based on violent colonial impositions (Martínez et al., 2021). One view held by activists and scholars is that binary gender categories, heterosexuality and patriarchal gender norms were violently imposed on colonised populations by European, particularly Christian, colonisers (Lugones, 2006; Tudor, 2021). Colonial-era penal systems tried to enforce a strict heterosexuality and binary gender on cultures that did not necessarily conform to these logics (GATE, 2024). Indigenous sexualities and genders were forced, usually violently, into European frameworks (Weerawardhana, 2018; Madrigal-Borloz, 2023). The nuclear, or 'natural', family that gender-restrictive movements want to 'protect' is also a colonial invention (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). Decolonial scholars have shown, for example, that the nuclear family was used as a colonising tool in South Africa to oppress and eradicate indigenous kinship structures, replacing them with a model of European white patriarchy with men at the head of a nuclear household (McEwen, 2020).

These colonial logics of violently enforced binary gender and heterosexuality are directly replicated by gender-restrictive actors. Whether actors are from colonising or colonised countries, a narrow patriarchal view of gender and sexuality draws on violent colonial frameworks (GATE, 2024), as well as a range of global religious and cultural frames, to assert a gender binary to uphold norms of inequality. The network of transnational connections shows that gender-restrictive movements are as entangled in colonial logics as they claim feminist human rights movements are. But contemporary gender-restrictive movements do not acknowledge that they reinforce colonial logics. Instead, they claim the language of anti-colonialism, distorting history (McEwen, 2020). Feminist and LGBTQI+ activists are left with a deep need to reclaim the narrative.

4.4 Interview findings on gender-restrictive movements and GBV

The literature discussed in this chapter so far highlights gender-restrictive movements' potential connections with violence, focusing on their links with nationalist and far-right movements, and their promotion of narratives meant to ignite fear: fear of society being under attack and rights being under threat. Yet, there is little empirical research on whether or how gender-restrictive activities concretely increase real or perceived violence against those most at risk: LGBTQI+ people.

The empirical data of this study, though limited to illustrative case study examples, suggests that increases in gender-restrictive rhetoric have led to increases in violence against LGBTQI+ people. Three activists from a regional queer network in West Africa described an increase in targeted violence:

> We have gone from [pro-rights] marches to attacks … things have become more and more intense. There is a certain structuring of this discourse, of these struggles today, that wasn't there a few years ago. We feel that there is work being done, there is really work being done today to oppose the rights of women and LGBT people.
>
> *(Kadi, West Africa)*

Another respondent said there have clearly been increases in different types of violence linked to gender-restrictive rhetoric:

> Oh, definitely … that was in [our] research … I believe it was like 80% of community members had experienced some sort of experience or witnessed some sort of violence in the past year … And this was also being further fed by the rhetoric on national radio in the conversations and public discourse … I mean definitely there is a connection between the conversations, the rhetoric that's happening, the calls to.. There are Imams in Ghana who said if you have gay people in your village, burn them or chase them out. Yeah, [we are] absolutely seeing increased cases of violence and increased threats of violence.
>
> *(Mariam, West Africa)*

Other activists similarly linked an increase in violence to the rhetoric and public discourse in their countries. While violence against LGBTQI+ people is a longstanding concern for activists, the interviews show a shift in activists' narratives about the causes of violence. Interviewees pointed to the instigation of violence by publicly visible gender-restrictive actors, and referred to fear, repression and harassment created by public anti-LGBTQI+ discourses in politics and media.

In Colombia, activist Gabriela was clear that anti-gender rhetoric has enabled increased levels of violence:

> We can say that these ideas like anti-gender, such as gender ideology, caused moral panics in society, right? So, this also intensifies attacks of symbolic violence or physical violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals and women[4] … I think that they do create an atmosphere, I mean, anti-gender movements create an atmosphere in which these violences can increase. Yes, I think that's real.

---

[4] The A in LGBTQIA+ stands for asexual.

These examples suggest that anti-gender and gender-restrictive rhetoric has a role in legitimising and enabling the conditions for violence against LGBTQI+ people, similar to the role of hate speech (see Section 3.3). Groups may not directly incite violence (although some do), but activists believed that gender-restrictive actors have stirred public debate sufficiently to have changed the conditions, allowing violence to thrive.

One European respondent chillingly described Poland's 'LGBT-free' zones as having 'unleashed some of the darker demons inside local people' because they create impunity for harassment of LGBTQI+ communities (Chris, Belgium). Publicly expressed hate speech can be a signal that allows people to express negative views that they previously kept private, as it introduces prejudiced ideas based on harmful gender norms into mainstream public discussion (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020).

A notable exception is the interview with Diane, an activist from Jamaica, who reported that, in her opinion, violence against LGBTQI+ people has significantly reduced over the past 10 years. She credited visibility, public LGBTQI+ role models, social norms change and attitudinal change as the reasons for a reduction in violence. However, a recent survey of 962 Jamaicans from all over the country suggests that anti-LGBTQI+ violence is still high: 83% of respondents said that one of the key issues facing LGBT persons in Jamaica is violence due to prejudice and discrimination; 54% reported that they knew someone from the LGBT community who died violently or was killed in the last 12 months due to their sexual orientation or gender expression (Baker, et al., 2023). Diane speaks from an informed perspective that may reflect current discussions among activists, but the wider research evidence suggests that violence has not reduced significantly.

While it is still difficult to trace a clear pathway from gender-restrictive politics to direct violence against LGBTQI+ people, the interview findings do point to the creation of an enabling environment for violence. Activists in West Africa reported 'living in constant fear' of being denounced as homosexual and losing their livelihoods, homes and lives (Kojoué, 2022). Opposing decriminalisation of same-sex relations or same-sex marriage laws, removing comprehensive sexuality education from schools and protesting Pride marches are all attempts to impose structural violence. Empirical research in Kenya shows that negative representation of LGBTQI+ people in the media, and by politicians and religious leaders, results in increased hostility and discrimination among the public (George et al., 2021). The continuum of hate framework (see Section 3.3) suggests that such an enabling environment will facilitate and legitimise violence. Drawing the literature together with the respondents' assertions suggests that a public gender-restrictive discourse creates an environment in which violence against LGBTQI+ people is encouraged, facilitated and met with impunity.

From this perspective, any actions that resist gender-restrictive politics are likely to also reduce violence against LGBTQI+ people. The next chapter discusses strategies that LGBTQI+ activists use to do so.

5 Strategies of resistance

The literature on resisting gender-restrictive politics is a new field, in early stages of development. Recent research is beginning to collate potential resistance strategies; some resources with in-depth discussion are outlined in Annex 1.

There is already significant literature on general strategies used by LGBTQI+ activists to advance rights. The strategies discussed in this chapter, drawn from interviews with LGBTQI+ activists and policymakers, focus as tightly as possible on countering gender-restrictive politics to reduce GBV. For example, this section does not cover in any depth community building, visibility or Pride marches, except where interviewees specifically linked these to resisting gender-restrictive politics or reducing GBV.

While not a comprehensive mapping, the data suggests promising areas of focus for LGBTQI+ activists and their supporters in building resistance. Of course, each country's history and politics are different, so some strategies may work better in some contexts than others. It is always important to consider the local context, in order to develop and tailor approaches that speak to local concerns, histories and politics, and that address and engage with local gender norms. Section 5.9 focuses on work specifically concerned with norm change, but it is worth noting that all strategies can contribute, either directly or indirectly, to challenging the patriarchal gender norms perpetuated by gender-restrictive actors.

5.1 Allyship and building alliances

Allyship with other human rights actors emerged as a critical strategy from all the interviews and throughout the literature. Because LGBTQI+ people are a small percentage of any population, the movements need allies to show concrete actions of solidarity. LGBTQI+ issues may be perceived as minority issues that are not important enough to most people, so if other voices and movements speak up, it may raise the profile and importance of LGBTQI+ rights.

Activists reported some good examples of allyship and solidarity with other movements; however, most of them felt that they did not have good connections with other rights-based activists. The general feeling from the interviews could be characterised as:

> LGBTQI+ activists turn up for other causes; but other causes don't turn up for us.
> *(Kadi, West Africa)*

In many places, LGBTQI+ issues are seen as too politically sensitive for other actors to want to be involved, which could be a result of gender-restrictive activity to politicise LGBTQI+ issues and stir controversy.

The following sub-sections draw out the key issues related to allyship across rights-based movements as reported in the interviews.

Feminist movements

Historically and politically, LGBTQI+ rights movements are closely connected with feminist movements: many LGBTQI+ activists identify themselves as feminists, and feminism is coherent with achieving equality for LGBQTI+ people (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023).

Alliances with feminist social movements often coalesce around a particular issue or policy moment, where there is agreement across dividing lines. In South Africa, the Jacob Zuma rape trial in 2006 and the violent rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana in 2019 were two occasions when LGBTQI+ activists, feminists and activists against GBV were able to work together. 'Khwezi', the pseudonym for the complainant in the Zuma trial, identified herself as lesbian, and the campaign to support her was largely driven by activists with strong experience of the overlap between homophobia and sexual violence; many black lesbian women were involved (Mkhize et al., 2010). With reference to these cases, one respondent said:

> When it's needed, when there's a shared emergency, organisations do tend to collaborate. It doesn't make the tensions go away, but I think people are willing to compromise enough to get something done.
> *(Rohan, South Africa)*

Finding the right strategic moment or shared issue could be the starting point for an alliance.

Despite the historical relationship, there was strong feeling among the respondents in West Africa, Colombia, Argentina and Europe that feminist movements are no longer reliable allies for LGBTQI+ people, due to the issue of trans inclusion. While the dividing lines are different in each context, trans rights and inclusion of trans women in feminism appears to carry a resonance across globally connected movements (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023). Gender-restrictive movements have exploited internal tensions and undermined feminist movements by casting trans people, especially trans women, as a threat to women's rights. Interviewees directly attributed divisions among feminist movements to the actions of anti-gender groups. Juana, in Argentina, and Gabriela, in Colombia, both said that some parts of the feminist movements in their countries drew on anti-gender debates in Spain that resulted in feminists taking a stance against the inclusion of trans women.

But, more positively, the analysis also shows occasions where solidarity between activists has been possible. Respondents who knew the Argentinian context said that the feminist movement is, on the whole, inclusive of trans people. Silvia, a trans Argentinian woman, pointed to the International Women's Day events on 8 March, which include trans women explicitly. And Juana commented that young and working-class Argentinian feminists are more supportive of trans rights than older feminists and academic feminists. She said that grassroots movements have reclaimed an intersectional feminism that protects trans women: 'Those queer people are embraced, welcome, and you don't separate my trans sisters from myself'. Further, Noor, an Afghan trans woman, who had spent time in Pakistan as an LGBTQI+ refugee, highlighted that trans and non-binary identities were socially more accepted than lesbian, gay and bisexual identities, which she said were perceived as a Western concept.

The message from the sample of LGBTQI+ activist respondents was that feminist movements must be trans inclusive if they are not already. This uncompromising stance may be a hindrance to developing alliances (Chris, Belgium), but 'trans rights are human rights' is a bottom line for many LGBTQI+ activists and the onus is on feminist movements to accommodate this position.

The gender-based violence prevention sector

Historically, the sector concerned with gender-related and sexual violence worked primarily under the banner of ending violence against women and girls. The international trajectory of this work has since shifted towards more inclusive discourses about GBV that include violence against LGBTQI+ people (Graaff, 2021). There are a few positive examples of work bringing together GBV strategies and LGBTQI+ inclusion:

- Australia and South Africa recognise LGBTQI+ people as priority groups within wider violence prevention strategies (Ahlenback, 2022).
- The Asia Regional Network on SOGIE and GBV, created in 2020, is a knowledge exchange platform for advocates to improve evidence, strategies, and interventions (Ahlenback, 2022).
- The UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women funds a number of anti-VAWG programmes that actively include queer women (Ahlenback, 2022).
- Colombia Diversa, a national non-governmental organisation promoting LGBQTI+ rights, understands violence against the community as a form of GBV (Loken and Hagen, 2022).

Despite these conceptual moves and good practices, on the whole, GBV policy and programming continue to focus on cisgender heterosexual women, and fail to account for gendered violence against other people (George et al., 2021). VAWG is usually treated as a discrete, homogenous category that excludes LBTQI+ women. Advocacy around VAWG rarely draws on the experiences of LBTQI+ women (Mkhize et al., 2010). Gay, bisexual, trans and queer men are even more excluded from support services and programming. Violence against LGBTQI+ people tends to be considered as a violation of LGBTQI+ rights rather than GBV (Kilbride, 2023).

Even the activists interviewed were sometimes unsure what GBV meant. They all reported violence against LGBTQI+ people but did not always present it as GBV. Generally, respondents understood GBV to mean violence against cisgender, heterosexual women, in line with findings from the literature (Graaff, 2021). Some people felt ‘SGBV’ was more inclusive, with reference to international and national political discourses, but that services and prevention strategies on the ground still excluded LGBTQI+ people. Popular understandings of GBV retain a focus on VAWG, which means that respondents working on violence against LGBTQI+ people find both discourses frustrating to work with.

The disconnect between GBV prevention and LGBTQI+ social movements means there is a wide gap where there should be allyship. Gender-restrictive actors actively widen this gap by claiming that inclusive violence prevention disenfranchises cisgender, heterosexual women by reducing the support available to them. What that debate actually does is reduce support available to LGBTQI+ survivors of violence.

A West African activist said that the specifics of LGBTQI+ rights are too politically sensitive for other movements to want to engage:

> What is striking and disappointing, it's seeing that organisations that fight against GBV don't want to involve themselves with the LGBT question. They refuse to associate with LGBT people to fight GBV, because of their own prejudices, because of their privilege that they don't want to lose.
> *(Estelle, West Africa)*

These respondents recognised that LGBTQI+ people suffer the same patriarchal and gendered violence as heterosexual and cisgender women, but that the movements and organisations responding to this violence are separated, with many of those working with heterosexual and cisgender women implicitly or explicitly excluding LGBTQI+ people from their services.

One way in which these movements could connect is for GBV prevention and support services to be more inclusive of LGBTQI+ people. There is little funding directed towards preventing GBV against LGBTQI+ people, and donors could release more funds to support this specifically (Ahlenback, 2022). But there was caution among the interviewees against tokenistic queer inclusion in order to attract funding and doubt that the quality of provision would be truly adequate and specific. To avoid tokenism, it is important that LGBTQI+ people are involved in developing and providing inclusive services, and that homophobic and transphobic prejudice within the GBV prevention sector is addressed.

Influential leaders

Powerful leaders can be excellent allies, particularly those who can influence the legal and policy sphere to legislate against GBV. At the international level, Felipe (Belgium) identified powerful allies within the UN system:

> The creation and the continuity of the mandate of the Independent Expert on SOGI, for example.
> I think that that's a collective victory over the anti-gender opposition.

In Jamaica, some politicians have put out statements supporting LGBTQI+ people, which has gone some way to changing the public narrative (Diane, Jamaica). Largely, though, work with Jamaican politicians happens behind closed doors. Diane framed this work as strategic, part of the slow building of change by working with allies behind the scenes. Effective change does not have to be public facing. Another interviewee said they have some allies within the administration, who informally warn LGBTQI+ activists when policy-makers are discussing a specific issue so that they can prepare their response. Local governments or civil servants may be less subject to political party pressures or the scrutiny of national media; a trans activist in the UK said she had a good relationship with her local council, where she has consulted and discussed trans issues very productively (Clare, UK). Box 3 shows an example of how allies in positions of power can act to support trans people.

Since governments change, individual champions and allies might move on. It is therefore important to build sustainable communities and a broad base of support for LGBTQI+ rights and against GBV that will withstand a change in formal politics (Juana, Argentina), as gender-restrictive actors can also be frequently present within governments.

Box 3: ‘There are people who are ready to support us’: an example of allyship in a Benin court

Estelle shared a story from her work supporting LGBTQI+ rights activism in West Africa:

> In Benin, there were some trans women who took to court some people who had been physically violent towards them. These people thought that in front of the judge, the fact that the aggrieved were trans women would dominate the sentencing. But they were surprised when the judge asked: ‘What happened?’ And when they finished talking about the facts he said: ‘But why did you hit this person?’ One said: ‘But it’s not a woman, it’s a man’. The judge replied: ‘But it’s not for that reason that I am here. Whether they are a man or a woman, you don’t have the right to hit them’. Here is your sentence. And afterwards, the judge – still during the session – asked the person: ‘Are you a woman or a man?’ The person responded that she is a woman, and the judge addressed her as such until the end of the process.
>
> This is to say that sometimes it is necessary to go to battle, not all the time, but when the occasion is there, take advantage of it and see up to what point people will support us.
>
> There are people who are ready to support us if we are able to identify them and find opportunities to get them to join our fight.

Given that gender-restrictive rhetoric often mobilises religion it may seem counter-intuitive that activists have had support from religious leaders. However, religiosity does not necessarily equate to support for gender-restrictive ideas, and faith-based progressive actors can be powerful allies (Martínez et al., 2021). There is some evidence from violence against women programmes that faith and community leaders can exert strong influence towards norm change. For example, the Global Interfaith Network for People of All Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions, based in South Africa, advocates for LGBTQI+ rights from a faith-based position (Ahlenback, 2022). In Tanzania, Tonga and South Africa, LGBTQI+ activists mention connecting with churches as a way to build solidarity (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020: 22). Mariam, a respondent in West Africa, spoke about LGBTQI+ organisations training religious leaders to talk sensitively about gender and sexuality. She said that having a cadre of religious and traditional leaders using their influence to promote protection, and denounce hate and violence, has been effective at the community level to mitigate gender-restrictive impacts. She specifically noted that religious and traditional leaders may not have had policy influence but were working to create norms change and social support for LGBTQI+ people, which is a different form of protection from gender-restrictive activity.

5.2 Decolonise

The interviews indicated that activists, particularly in the Global South, are thinking about gender-restrictive movements and the violence they inspire in colonial and decolonial terms. Respondents sometimes framed the current moment of gender-restrictive politics against LGBTQI+ people as a form of neocolonialism, or even just straightforward colonial violence.

The most important strategy mentioned by people focusing on decolonising discourses was to recover indigenous and local sexualities and gender identities. Documented evidence of pre-colonial queer subjectivities is critical to the counterargument that sexual diversity has always existed and is not a Western import.

Some places have good archival evidence from colonial officials of local practices that do not conform to heterosexuality and binary gender (Rohan, South Africa). Kadi, in West Africa, has been able to use that evidence to communicate productively with local religious leaders:

> There are these documentations that have existed and when we have the opportunity to meet with religious leaders, sometimes it goes well, because it's something that exists in our culture. It [queerness] was here far before the colonists arrived … it forms part of our small victories to be able to have these conversations and for people to say: 'Ah yes, it's true. Even in my family, in my village, there is a person like this or like that.' So you see? It is not something that has been imported.

Kadi highlights 'small victories' from being able to show people that queerness has always existed within her societies. Shreya, an Indian Canadian, also referenced local religion as evidence of pre-colonial acceptance of queerness, citing the gender fluidity of Hindu gods. The findings here are in line with other research; for example, in Canada, the US, Mexico, Kenya and Indonesia, there are LBQ+ women's organisations working to reclaim and reinvigorate indigenous sexuality and gender that exceed the binary imposed by colonisers (Kilbride, 2023: 45).

Archival recovery work is highly important to provide the evidence base for a decolonial strategy. If gender-restrictive actors say that queerness is a foreign (Western) import, evidence of local forms of queerness directly counters this point. This work is important because it deeply contests the basis of gender-restrictive movements that claim to defend 'traditional values' by showing that those values are not traditional, but in fact colonial. There is a wealth of evidence from academic research and local knowledge of indigenous forms of gender and sexuality; the challenge is translating that evidence into narrative and policy change (Madrigal-Borloz, 2023).

> We are part of the community. We've always been there, we've always existed. And [showing this] in local languages, doing so in local contexts is, I think, an important strategy.
> *(Mariam, West Africa)*

The second part of activists' discussion of colonialism was to reframe gender-restrictive movements as colonial violence. For some activists, there is a clear link between the laws that European colonisers imposed during their rule and the ways in which norms related to sexuality and gender are currently policed – both by legal frameworks and by gender-restrictive movements. As part of contemporary queer organising, South African respondent Rohan highlighted the importance of remembering that current frameworks on gender and sexuality come directly from British colonial law, which is sometimes forgotten in the 'African values' debate. Shreya, speaking about South Asia, said the current moment of repression and violence towards LGBTQI+ people directly replicates the British 'sexual civilising' mission:

> I definitely find that a lot of the current violence against queer South Asian folks, regardless of where it's coming from, it very much reflects the violence that colonisers perpetuated against South Asians back in the colonial era to repress queerness.

For Shreya, the colonial harms inflicted by British military conquest are mirrored in current violence that seeks to impose rigid frameworks of gender and sexuality. She resists those framings from an intersectional, decolonial and anti-racist perspective. Reframing gender-restrictive movements as a form of neocolonialism, supporting colonial frameworks of sexuality and gender, could be effective for LGBTQI+ activists.

The interviewees offered a few other strategies that might contribute towards a decolonial approach to challenging gender-restrictive politics:

- South–South learning should be prioritised.
- Knowledge of pre-colonial or indigenous sexualities and genders can be expanded and popularised; disseminating this knowledge in local languages will help to widen the discussion beyond an academic or activist discourse.
- Global majority advocates should be sought out as the main speakers on the issues instead of those from the Global North.
- Global South-led legal changes towards LGBTQI+ rights protection should be highlighted. Positive examples that demonstrate a local legal approach could be much more powerful tools than Global North-led international human rights agendas.
- Securing long-term, unconditional funding for local activists to use as they see fit. Grassroots LGBTQI+ organisations know what is needed and what will work. In practice this may mean donors providing no-strings-attached funding to small groups proposing radical queer alternatives that do not correspond with donors' priorities.
- Any programmes working with LGBTQI+ people need to have meaningful representation at all levels.

> We're on the ground, we know what works, we know what's culturally relevant.
> *(Diane, Jamaica)*

However, decolonising strategies must be carefully navigated. It is crucial not to romanticise indigeneity or pre-colonial cultures, which were not always respectful of queer lives (Madrigal-Borloz, 2023). Kojoué (2022) notes that some West African actors recognise that queerness has always existed and is not a foreign import, but this does not stop them from viewing LGBTQI+ people as deviant. Too much emphasis on conceptualising gender-restrictive actors as colonisers from the Global North would overlook the role of local actors and cultures. Gender-restrictive actors are embedded in Global South countries as well, drawing on 'local values' that clearly resonate with national populations. It is important to engage with local variants of gender-restrictive activity and understand their local roots as well as foreign influences. Otherwise, decolonial activism could potentially backfire – for example, if current governments respond by establishing new postcolonial laws against same-sex relations (see Section 5.5). Decolonisation is not always progressive; for example, Narendra Modi uses decolonisation to assert right-wing nationalism in India (Dhingra, 2023). It is a complex endeavour to unlink gender, sexuality and LGBTQI+ rights from colonialism in a way that protects lives. Silvia, a trans activist in Argentina, articulated a way forward:

> Recovering an agenda for LGBTQI+ people who are also part of indigenous communities is a political stance that not only acknowledges the past but also the present reality where indigenous individuals recognise themselves as part of the LGBTQI+ community. Therefore, both historically and in the present, rejecting the narrative of LGBTQI+ rights as a colonial imposition is deeply rooted in our perspective.

As Silvia suggests, it is important that decolonial efforts are led and guided by local LGBTQI+ people as this will ensure that approaches genuinely embed local perspectives on sexuality and gender, in balance with international human rights principles.

5.3 Survival and well-being

> To be able to resist, you have to be alive.
> *(Mariam, West Africa)*

Fighting gender-restrictive politics is exhausting. Burnout is rife (GATE, 2023). In situations of extreme oppression, simply surviving is a form of resistance (Kojoué, 2022; Lewin, 2024). Some might see this as a defensive retreat, but it does not mean the opposition has won. Taking care of the community is a vital piece of work to enable resistance (Juana, Argentina). A queer response to oppression and attack might include radical healing and compassion for the self and community.

The literature identifies an emerging trend of critical self-care, where activists respond to the crisis by holding space for emotional well-being (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020; Hodgeson et al., 2021). This helps avoid burnout and develop resilience. To stay alive, to care for each other, is a radical act (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020). But activists need resources to practice care, which are likely to be unequally distributed along intersectional lines of inequality, with those most marginalised having the least access to the resources needed.

Interviewees reported basic material needs as critical for supporting their ongoing work: safe spaces; community support mechanisms; healthcare; jobs; safe places to live. Providing basic services and community care is the first line of action for many LGBTQI+ community groups, and they are often the only sources of support for LGBTQI+ people, who may be turned away from mainstream services. In emergency and humanitarian conflicts, basic needs become even more urgent. The respondents from Afghanistan emphasised the absolutely critical need to evacuate LGBTQI+ people, whose lives are under immediate threat from the Taliban. It is hard to over-emphasise the violence that LGBTQI+ Afghans face and the urgency with which they, and other people in humanitarian crisis, need international support.

Gender-restrictive politics thrive on insecurity and fear. Ensuring that people's basic needs are met might counter the spread of violence inspired by gender-restrictive politics by creating community resilience and making it less easy to exploit tensions and divisions.

Activists often find speaking to older activists or activists from other countries important for maintaining their emotional well-being and hope. Juana, in Argentina, said that as an older person she has younger activists coming to her to seek reassurance that they, too, will survive. She noted, 'it is not forever. It's not. No, it will end, and we will have opportunities to stop surviving and to thrive again.'

5.4 Research and information

Good strategies need good information. For one, improving reporting on violent incidents is important for creating the statistical data needed to evidence the extent of violence. In most places, there is poor documentation of violence against LGBTQI+ people due to the lack of redress, discriminatory attitudes of service providers, lack of trust in the police, and legal structures based on patriarchal norms that do not recognise such violence. A study on reporting on violence against LGBTQI+ people in Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Uganda concluded that data collection is of high importance both to respond immediately, to inform community organisations' strategies and to make the case for increased funding and support (Arcus Foundation, 2019).

Information is vital for preparing proactive strategies. Academic researchers can support activists by working with them in collaboration to develop evidence, although it is important that research agendas are led by local activists. One respondent recommended that activists use quiet moments to research gender-restrictive actors, in order to understand their funding, motivations and connections, and develop ways to delegitimise and defund them. Proactive planning in relatively quiet moments can provide a protective layer that will minimise the effect of gender-restrictive politics (Mariam, West Africa). Activists may also be able to anticipate specific incidents. For example, two respondents reported underground channels with law enforcement, who have alerted activists about impending incidents, even to the extent of forewarning LGBTQI+ people who are about to be arrested. Information-sharing channels may help to prevent violence. To balance this, it is vital that policy-makers and powerbrokers listen to LGBTQI+ movements. This is not always easy for activists to influence; for instance, the Afghan respondents were working proactively for LGBTQI+ rights before and after the Taliban took over in 2021 but received very little response from governments to their awareness-raising activities and petitions. Allies can help LGBTQI+ voices be heard by amplifying their messages to media, policy influencers and legislators.

5.5 Legal protections

Decriminalisation of same-sex sexual acts and relationships, recognition of trans identities and other legal protections are critical steps in ending violence against LGBTQI+ people. If a country criminalises same-sex relations and trans identities, then there is no recourse to the law for LGBTQI+ survivors of GBV and other forms of violence (Graaff, 2021; Samuels et al., 2021). Further, criminalisation means that many LGBTQI+ activists and organisations operate in a legal grey area. Some countries, including Nigeria, Kenya, Pakistan and Indonesia, do not allow LGBTQI+ organisations to be legally registered, while others make it very difficult to register (Ogbeche, 2023). In contrast, gender-restrictive actors are often working within the law, and sometimes within government administrations. This often creates a structural, legal inequality between LGBTQI+ organisations and gender-restrictive actors, putting LGBTQI+ organisers in a precarious position. To rebalance the power, work is needed at the level of policy and the law, to ensure that national legal frameworks support the rights of LGBTQI+ people and prohibit hate speech and violence against them.

The respondents had divided opinions on whether it is more effective to campaign for legal change irrespective of societal opinion, or to try to create societal approval for LGBTQI+ people before advocating for legal change (for some case studies, see Browne, 2019). The answer is likely to be context-specific. However, it is unlikely that the decriminalisation of same-sex relations will decrease violence in and of itself; it also needs to be accompanied by work to shift norms towards wider tolerance and acceptance (Ahlenback, 2022). For example, after the decriminalisation of consensual adult same-sex sexual relationships in India, queer women were still structurally discriminated against by state officials if they chose to live with a female partner, through police interrogation and court orders to return to natal families (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023).

Some interviewees argued that, in the face of gender-restrictive politics, the threat to LGBTQI+ people is too urgent to wait for norm change to happen; they need to use political and legal power to protect human rights (Felipe, Belgium). In the end, said Felipe, this is a power struggle, and the law can play a key role in pushing for social justice. He gave an example:

> The gender identity law in Argentina, which was the first one in the world to be based on self-determination, was passed without any protest, uprising, anything. There was no public debate, nothing. If it was discussed today, the influence of anti-gender movements coming from Europe, coming from the UK, would [make it] impossible for that law to be passed. Many people complain now, saying, 'Oh, we approved this law, but no one fully understood what it meant'. Well, sometimes to protect progress you need to be able to get good normative frameworks first and then help society to adapt to those frameworks.

Felipe's recommendation was to seize any opportunity to create the legal framework to protect LGBTQI+ rights, before it becomes impossible.

Notably, none of the interviewees discussed trying to frame gender-restrictive rhetoric within legal definitions of hate speech. It may be that the interviewees' countries do not have requisite hate speech legislation, or that they felt this would not be an effective or viable strategy.

5.6 LGBTQI+ rights are human rights

Activists are critically dependent on the international human rights framework and asserting LGBTQI+ rights within that framework. The UN Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, Victor Madrigal-Borloz, states in his official report that criminalisation and discrimination against LGBTQI+ people is a violation of human rights (Madrigal-Borloz, 2023).

The advocacy slogans 'LGBTQI+ rights are human rights' and 'trans rights are human rights' reflect the positioning that LGBTQI+ individuals are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as everyone else. It also emphasises that LGBTQI+ rights are not a special category of rights, but are already protected under most countries' national and international obligations for freedom from violence, dignity, health, education, work and so on. Of course, each country has its own legislation, and there are tensions in the countries that criminalise same-sex relations. For example, Ghanaian law criminalises sexual relations between men, but not homosexuality as an identity, and the country has also signed international treaties that urge recognition of LGBT rights (Martínez et al., 2021).

In the context of gender-restrictive attacks on LGBTQI+ rights, some of the interviewees reframed the issues away from 'political' or 'sensitive' topics around gender and sexuality and towards concepts of personhood, equality and humanity, which are less controversial. This moves away from LGBTQI+ rights as a minority issue and towards a framing of 'equality for all' under existing human rights agreements. In Jamaica, an LGBTQI+ rights organisation has opted to use the language of equality and respect for all as its advocacy strategy, which it has found much more effective than LGBTQI+ rights language (Diane, Jamaica). It also works on a wide variety of social issues, like homelessness, being sure to take an LGBTQI+ inclusive approach in this work.

In one very extreme example, Ahmad, from Afghanistan, told us how, after the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, his organisation had submitted a list to the British government of LGBTQI+ Afghans for evacuation. The UK refused. In the chaos of crisis, many Afghans, LGBTQI+ and otherwise, were refused international support. At the same time, a UK charity evacuated several hundred cats and dogs from Afghanistan, an event that caused an international furore (Graham-Harrison and Gentleman, 2022). From Ahmad's perspective, this came across as dehumanising:

> The Western societies gave precedence to animals over LGBT people ... Because Western societies need to give LGBT people the same dignity and respect. We're not asking for more rights than the animals. We're asking for the same rights as the animals.
> *(Ahmad, Afghanistan)*

Ahmad's use of a rights-based language highlights the usefulness of the human rights framework for activists. In this instance, it enabled Ahmad to point to the inconsistency in the British response to the crisis in Afghanistan, by exposing how animal rights appeared to be prioritised over human rights.

Another tactic in this category is to point out that protecting LGBTQI+ rights protects rights for all people. As Estelle (West Africa) put it:

> LGBT people and LGBT organisations are still isolated in the human rights landscape, very isolated, and yet the values and principles that LGBT organisations defend benefit all of society: freedom of association, freedom of expression, the right to free movement, the right to be who we are.

This strategy again connects LGBTQI+ rights to wider issues of equality and justice, showing that they are not a minority concern but, rather, that upholding LGBTQI+ rights upholds rights for all.

However, using the language of equality and respect for all instead of LGBTQI+ specific language, will not work in all circumstances. A respondent from Latin America pointed out that LGBTQI+ movements in her region are mature and unapologetic, and they do not usually need to use subtle or disguised language to talk about LGBTQI+ rights (Juana, Argentina). They do, however, have strong intersectional progressive movements, where issues of gender and sexuality are often considered in broad human rights terms alongside ethnicity, class and economic inequality.

5.7 Critical thinking

The interviews suggested a current of activism that goes beyond awareness raising, to fostering critical thinking among the audience. A particular tactic of gender-restrictive actors is to spread disinformation to stir fear, so activists encourage others to question and analyse what they have heard. Kadi described it as having conversations with people who are there to learn.

On the particular issue of trans women's inclusion in feminist and women's movements, interviewees emphasised the need for people to educate themselves. There is a wealth of accurate information produced by trans people and researchers, which can be used to counter misinformation (e.g. GATE et al., 2021). Understanding why gender-restrictive attacks on trans people are based on inaccurate information is a valuable step forward. For feminist groups, Chris (Belgium), suggested that it is important to understand the history and origins of anti-trans sentiment, and to analyse what anti-trans groups say, so that feminists are fully aware of the stance that they are aligning themselves with when they advocate trans exclusion.

5.8 Media

There is a large body of research on how gender-restrictive and pro-LGBTQI+ social movements use the media. This section highlights some of the main media-related strategies the activists interviewed have used to successfully challenge gender-restrictive actors and GBV. Increased positive and sympathetic coverage of LGBTQI+ issues in national media and social media was widely felt to be an effective strategy to counter gender-restrictive rhetoric, although activists were circumspect about their ability to achieve this.

Training for journalists on LGBTQI+ rights has been effective in increasing positive representation. Making connections directly with sympathetic journalists and media outlets can generate positive visibility and empathy (Kojoué, 2022; Laintersección.net, 2023). In Vietnam, LGBT organisations trained journalists on trans people's rights and saw a positive effect, with news coverage of LGBT people becoming more sensitive and objective (Ahlenback, 2022: 26). The interviewees described training journalists on language and training religious leaders on content to discuss on the radio. Especially in the case of support for trans people, it can be effective to have cisgender allies be visible advocates (Clare, UK).

Social media requires different kinds of engagement than broadcast media. Homophobic and transphobic content is widespread online, and gender-restrictive activists often use social media to spread misinformation (GATE, 2023). In response to online violence, Tanzanian activists retain control over their online media presence by not allowing free commenting on their social media and keeping their locations and names private (Woolf and Dwyer, 2020: 25). The interviewees reported similar defensive strategies, including hiding names and locations and blocking comments on their posts. One proactive strategy was used in West Africa, where Kadi and Estelle maintain an 'observatory' for safety and security on social media. When they identify someone making an anti-LGBTQI+ comment, they denounce and report them.

Conversely, social media also enables activists to widely disseminate informative and positive content about LGBTQI+ people's lives and experiences. It can provide a voice to those silenced in traditional media and can have transnational reach (Kojoué, 2022). Activists regularly conduct campaigns on social media to increase knowledge and change attitudes. Short videos that demystify specific issues or provide counter-information have been useful, as have longer documentaries showing alternative narratives (Mariam, West Africa). Social media can also be useful for organising protests (Kojoué, 2022).

The most productive engagement might not be with people who hold opposite views, but with the 'moveable middle' (Human Rights Watch, 2018). In the case of trans rights in Europe, a respondent said:

> The narratives or the arguments should never be aimed at convincing the opponent; they should be aimed at convincing the target of the opponent's messages.
> *(Chris, Belgium)*

It is unlikely that directly challenging extreme views will work, but building positive engagement with people and communities who are not particularly invested one way or the other may produce results.

To engage that audience, some campaigns use empathy and shared understanding. An exploration on changing trans narratives shows that focusing on positive shared values is more likely to work, targeting the politically centrist middle group (Laintersección.net, 2023). Empathy with victims of violence is more likely to achieve wide appeal than abstract human rights language (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 159), and empathy with minoritised groups helps to stop the moveable middle being influenced by hate speech (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020).

It is possible that international funders over-emphasise narrative change through the media, constraining the ways that activists can respond (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023: 30). The interviewees flagged diverse strategies for resistance, several of which involved disengaging from countering gender-restrictive rhetoric directly or changing popular discourse. Kojoué (2022), through a survey and interviews with West African activists, found a sense among the participants that the public opinion battle is lost, and that using the law would be a more effective strategy.

For more resources on media and communications strategies to counter gender-restrictive activity, see Global Action for Trans Equality's toolkit (GATE, 2024).

5.9 Norm change

Norm change towards societal support for LGBTQI+ people is a less direct means of countering gender-restrictive politics and GBV, but it is a crucial – and sustainable – protection mechanism. When LGBTQI+ movements build a base of ordinary people who support LGBTQI+ rights, gender-restrictive rhetoric is less likely to take hold. Similarly, progressive legal changes are unlikely to embed unless society has some level of support for LGBTQI+ rights. As Juana said, 'when you have that level of community support it is much harder to repeal a law'. ALIGN's previous work discusses what drives norm change for LGBTQI+ rights, with examples across different regions (Section 4 in Browne, 2019).

Influencing public opinion was sometimes seen as an important strategy to support LGBTQI+ rights and reduce violence. Diane, the Jamaican respondent, said that her organisation had made a strategic decision to work on influencing attitudes in society first, before pursuing decriminalisation of homosexuality.
Her organisation's attitudinal survey, conducted every two years, suggests that there are increases in tolerance in society. The methods Diane's organisation use include:

- training media personnel on language and sensitivity
- public communications campaigns via billboards, murals and social media video series to increase knowledge
- campaigning with nationally recognisable figures, including LGBTQI+ people, talking about being Jamaican
- individual advocacy engagement.

Progress on LGBTQI+ rights often comes through long-term processes of awareness-raising; changing hearts and minds of individuals; raising positive visibility; and public protests (Browne, 2019). It is also worth bearing in mind that the current wave of gender-restrictive politics is perhaps partly a result of the slow success of norm change towards acceptance (Corredor, 2019). Norm change could provide sustainable protection against GBV and gender-restrictive politics (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020).

5.10 Queer joy and pleasure

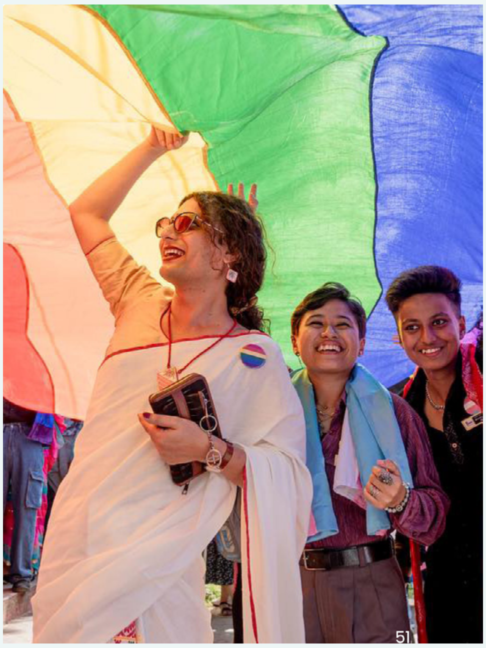
Joy and pleasure run counter to gender-restrictive rhetoric that trades on fear and hatred. Some interviewees emphasised the value of disengaging from gender-restrictive rhetoric to disempower and delegitimise it, arguing that if they engage with those actors, they give them more visibility and credibility (Laintersección.net, 2023). An influential gender-restrictive group, CitizenGo, itself acknowledges that the more the media talks about it, the more power it has (Shameem, 2021: 82). Instead of giving (too much of) their attention to such groups, interviewees emphasised building the world they want to see through community spaces of queer joy. Existing in a joyful way provides a lived example as a powerful counterweight to negative gender-restrictive narratives (Juana, Argentina).

LGBTQI+ Pride events often serve multiple purposes: to increase visibility, protest repression, bring communities together and sustain them through joy, pleasure and solidarity. In 2023, Outright International estimated that 101 of 193 UN member states held LGBTQI+ visibility events (Outright International, 2024). Figure 4 shows an example of a Pride event in a small town in India, where the organisers saw that the event helped strengthen the connections between the small number of community members.

Trans Pride events are good examples of resistance through building positive communities. In the UK, Clare expressed that her Trans Pride is not about raising visibility or providing learning about being trans, but about feeling queer joy and anger in equal measure through creating an alternative space. She said:

> My friends always tell me that the way I see the world is not how it is, and I spend all of my energy trying to create a world that I think and see in my head. I am happy doing that. And that's a lot of what Trans Pride does. We ignore the bad things, and we focus on what we can change and we focus on the positive that we can bring.
>
> *(Clare, UK)*

Figure 4: Dibrugarh Pride, Assam state, India, October 2023



Source: OutRight International, 2024: 51.
Image credit: Rituparna Neog.

Creating strong, joyful communities is a powerful form of resistance against gender-restrictive politics and violence – both in terms of increasing protection, resilience, well-being and the capacity for activism; and in terms of sending a message that LGBTQI+ communities cannot be threatened into silence.

Queer joy and alternative spaces are not always acknowledged as activism by outsiders, including by policy-makers (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023). But they are important to queer communities, some of whom are tired of dwelling on negative aspects of their lives. Rohan told us that queer youth in their workshops in South Africa did not want to talk about violence, but everyday joy and happiness, like their favourite things to eat and places to go out. 'Joyful dreaming', as Rohan called it, creates possibilities for a better future. In the current climate of oppression, '[t]he very existence of spaces for queer joy within hostile contexts is an act of insurgency' (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023: 32).

The strategies outlined in this chapter provide some promising approaches that activists have used to counter gender-restrictive actors and gendered violence against LGBTQI+ people. Although movements always need to respond to the specific local configurations of gender-restrictive politics and gender norms, it is hoped that the case study examples can provide insight into effective approaches and potential areas of focus for activists and their allies in other contexts.

6 Conclusion

This report has reviewed literature on gender-restrictive actors and GBV against LGBTQI+ people, supported with data from 14 interviews with people who work for LGBTQI+ rights, including activists and policy-makers. It adds to an emerging picture that gender-restrictive politics might contribute to an increase in GBV against LGBTQI+ people, through fostering a climate of normalised homophobia and transphobia, and violence as a punishment for perceived transgression of gender norms. Since the data is limited, the analysis only begins to highlight this connection. It identifies an urgent need for empirical research to trace the pathways through which gender-restrictive politics lead to violence.

The analysis draws together insights from theories on GBV, gender norms and decolonisation with analyses of gender-restrictive groups, strategies and networks; studies of hate speech against LGBTQI+ people; and empirical insights from activists. While this may seem like a broad field, in fact the literature and findings all point towards the same critical understanding: that GBV against LGBTQI+ people asserts patriarchal gender norms and disciplines gender and sexual identities; and that it can be used as a tool by gender-restrictive actors as part of their ambition to structure societies in a patriarchal way.

Gender-restrictive actors view LGBTQI+ people as transgressing gender norms, by breaching acceptable gendered behaviour, roles and expression. Their rhetoric spreads hate against LGBTQI+ people, often through constructing them as a threat to the nation and traditional family values. In some countries, this takes the specific form of imagining LGBTQI+ people and LGBTQI+ rights as a foreign, Western imposition that threatens local cultures. This narrative of threat and disruption to traditional values creates a climate where violence is normalised and legitimised as a punishment and a means to maintain control.

Gender-restrictive groups weaponise the concept of gender to (re)gain power and control over social, political and economic spheres. This line of analysis is important because the issue is much more significant than a contestation between people who are pro- or anti-LGBTQI+ rights. It is a fundamental battle for control over the normative structure of societies. Violence is sometimes a means to this end.

Different contexts experience gender-restrictive politics and violence in different ways. Discussions of European gender-restrictive movements are centred on disputing 'gender ideology' (Paternotte, 2020). This concept does not necessarily travel to Global South countries (Sardá-Chandiramani and Abbas, 2023), which often draw the battle lines around 'foreign values' and Western imposition (McEwen, 2020; Kojoué, 2022). Gender-restrictive movements have differing relationships with nationalist and religious groups: one respondent in West Africa recalled Ghanaian imams directly calling for violence against LGBTQI+ people, while others had found sympathetic allies in some faith leaders. Any counter-strategies need to start with an in-depth analysis of the specific context to understand how violence is used, by whom and to what end.

The interviewees discussed the value of disengaging from gender-restrictive debates as well as trying to counter them. Some activists preferred to delegitimise gender-restrictive rhetoric by refusing to engage with it, emphasising instead the value of norm change, through engaging the 'moveable middle' of people and communities who are not particularly invested in either pro- or anti-LGBTQI+ rights stances.

New, positive narratives are needed to undermine and replace the fear-based ones that gender-restrictive actors have used to whip up populist support against LGBTQI+ rights (Tant et al., 2023). Positive engagement that builds strong community support for the human rights values of dignity, safety and respect for all may create a protective layer that prevents gender-restrictive politics from taking hold. Norm change towards acceptance of sexual and gender diversity could be sustainable protection against GBV and gender-restrictive politics (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020). As part of this, activists noted the importance of building alternative spaces and communities that create the world they want to see. For some people, the prevention of violence might come from the promotion of joy (Kilbride, 2023: 199).

6.1 Future research directions

The most important finding in this report is the need to empirically trace the pathways through which gender-restrictive politics lead to violence. The analysis suggests that gender-restrictive politics have a relationship – of different quantity and quality in each context – with hate speech, nationalism and religious fundamentalism, all of which might lead to violence. However, it is not currently clear whether gender-restrictive actors directly incite violence or contribute to an environment that indirectly legitimises violence. The interview respondents reported a climate of growing fear and insecurity fuelled by inflammatory rhetoric in public arenas, which they felt directly resulted in increased symbolic and physical attacks. Empirical case studies with greater depth would significantly improve understandings of the pathways to violence.

The report points to a move in the conceptual debate on gender-restrictive politics, beyond a framing of the rollback of human rights or an anti-gender backlash, towards a framing that examines the relationship between gender-restrictive politics and colonial logics. Future research could explore how to operationalise a decolonial framework for LGBTQI+ activism, including amplifying indigenous voices and local queer alternative gender and sexuality frameworks.

6.2 Emerging counter-strategies

The most promising strategies for counteracting gender-restrictive politics, identified consistently in the interviews across contexts, can be summarised as follows:

1 Connect the dots between LGBTQI+ rights activism and GBV prevention

The report highlights that some violence against LGBTQI+ people is gender-based, especially violence against trans people, yet it is often not included in violence prevention work. Activist interviewees identified that they need to connect with GBV prevention actors to build stronger, more effective, responses. The analysis suggests that a gender norms approach could be the bridge to make this connection. Using the concept of norms helps to show how violence against LGBTQI+ people is sometimes motivated by the perception that they transgress gender norms. GBV in such cases occurs as a social sanction or ‘corrective’. Countering GBV against LGBTQI+ (as well as cisgender and heterosexual) people could be much more effective if the two sets of discourses and programmes were brought together.

2 Embed decolonial approaches

Gender-restrictive movements have co-opted anti-colonial and anti-imperial framings, describing 'gender ideology' as a foreign import that threatens local values. LGBTQI+ rights activists also use anti-colonial and decolonial framings for their work. In some cases, they saw gender-restrictive movements as a form of colonial violence, drawing parallels with previous waves of colonialism that used heteronormativity as a means of control over local populations. In other cases, they positioned themselves as defending indigenous and local forms of gender and sexuality that exceed the colonial binary. Across the interviews, respondents voiced that progress on LGBTQI+ rights needs to be led by local communities. They emphasised that outsiders, particularly Europeans and North Americans, should not define gender and sexuality, but should support community-based organisations to use their own local understandings to push for protection of rights. The evidence suggests that there is great potential in aligning decolonial strategies with queer activism. At the same time, it is important to not romanticise pre-colonial societies, and to be aware of (and prepared to effectively counter) right-wing nationalists' deployment of decolonial discourses.

3 Maintain respect for the human rights framework

The LGBTQI+ rights framework, as supported in the UN system and international conventions, is critical to activism. Strategies using human rights approaches centre LGBTQI+ people's humanity, and make connections to wider struggles for equality and freedoms. They reframe the debate away from gender-restrictive moral, religious or cultural relativist arguments, towards a defence of human rights more widely. Although activists and academics recognise the limitations of rights-based approaches, they remain the central plank of almost all strategies. Gender-restrictive actors target human rights norms and undermine them as a tactic to destabilise and weaken LGBTQI+ rights (Holmes, 2024). At the highest level, it is vital to retain the legitimacy of the human rights framework and respect for the international system.

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Annex 1: Recent resources on resistance strategies

GATE (2024) ***Recognizing, documenting and addressing anti-gender opposition toolkit*****. New York: GATE** (https://gate.ngo/knowledge-portal/news/anti-gender-opposition-toolkit/).

Detailed approaches to help activists identify anti-gender actors in their contexts, how to counter misinformation, maintain activist well-being and report to national and international mechanisms.

Sardá-Chandiramani, A. and Abbas, H. (2023) ***Global resistance to anti-gender opposition: LGBTQI+ activism in Colombia, India, Kenya, Peru, and Serbia*****. New York: Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice** (https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2023/10/12/resistance-anti-gender-opposition/).

This report outlines the main focus of activist resistance: alliance-building, strong solidarity movements and unfettered funding.

GATE, ILGA-Europe and TGEU (2021) ***Trans rights are human rights: dismantling misconceptions about gender, gender identity and the human rights of trans people*****. GATE, ILGA-Europe, and TGEU** (https://tgeu.org/trans-rights-are-human-rights-dismantling-misconceptions-about-gender-gender-identity-the-human-rights-of-trans-people/).

This document provides talking points to directly counter misinformation about gender face-to-face with anti-gender actors.

Ahlenback, V. (2022) ***Ending violence against LGBTQI+ people: global evidence and emerging insights into what works*****. London: Ending Violence Helpdesk** (www.sddirect.org.uk/resource/ending-violence-against-lgbtqi-people-global-evidence-and-emerging-insights-what-works).

A report summarising global information on ending violence against LGBTQI+ people.

Countering Backlash website (https://counteringbacklash.org/).

Contains resources for action, webinars and reports.

Annex 2: Interview respondents

Pseudonym	Country/Region
Africa	
Estelle	West Africa
Kadi	West Africa
Mariam	West Africa
Rohan	South Africa
Europe	
Chris	Belgium
Felipe	Belgium
Clare	UK
Latin America and the Caribbean	
Juana	Argentina
Silvia	Argentina
Gabriela	Colombia
Diane	Jamaica
South Asia	
Ahmad	Afghanistan
Noor	Afghanistan
Shreya	India (Canada based)

ALiGN

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 – discriminatory 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 harmful gender norms.

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