

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HOSTILE LANDSCAPES

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

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Introduction

This ALIGN report draws out the links between the rise of gender-restrictive movements and gender-based violence (GBV) against LGBTQI+ people, and highlights activist strategies of resistance. Scholars and activists use the terms ‘anti-gender’ or ‘gender-restrictive’ (see Box 1) 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).

While scholarship has drawn attention to gender-restrictive movements’ attempts to curtail human rights and restrict freedoms for gender and sexual minorities, there has been limited exploration of whether their activities result in violence. There are suggestions and examples in academic literature and news reports that violence against LGBTQI+ people is increasing in many countries, in a climate of fear and repression, but analysis has not yet established a link between gender-restrictive movements and increased GBV. The 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 14 LGBTQI+ rights activists and policymakers from different world regions.

Box 1: The terminology of ‘anti-gender’ vs ‘gender-restrictive’

Scholars and activists have used the term ‘anti-gender’ to describe actors who promote the idea that biological sex is ‘natural’ while gender is an ‘ideology’ (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020). 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’ is primarily used to describe movements in Europe and the US; the term does not have clear resonance among LGBTQI+ activists in other regions, as movements against LGBTQI+ rights may not always be concerned with the concept of gender per se. For instance, actors may position themselves as against the ‘LGBT agenda’ (Martínez et al., 2021).

Because of contextual differences and the disparate nature of these actors, some research is beginning to use the term ‘gender-restrictive’ instead. ‘Gender-restrictive’ identifies the common feature binding together these groups: the attempt to enforce a limited binary and hierarchical patriarchal gender system.

Gender-restrictive movements’ opposition to LGBTQI+ rights

LGBTQI+ rights are a critical battleground in gender-restrictive politics, as heteronormativity is central to the project of asserting ‘traditional’ gender norms. The effort of gender-restrictive actors 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 therefore a core focus for many gender-restrictive actors.

Scholarship shows that, beyond oppressing people because they are different, gender-restrictive actors’ attempts to deny LGBTQI+ rights are a form of political struggle to gain control over the shape of society.

Violence against LGBTQI+ people: the significance of gender norms

The report's analytical approach draws on ALIGN's previous work on gender norms and GBV to suggest that violence against LGBTQI+ people operates as a way to assert patriarchal gender norms and discipline gender and sexual identities (Harper et al., 2020; 2022). 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. 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 norm of two fixed genders (Loken and Hagen, 2022).

Although the term GBV is often used to describe violence against primarily cisgender, heterosexual women, violence against LGBTQI+ people can be understood as GBV, as is recognised by the UN (Graaff, 2021). The report uses this term in order to emphasise the gendered aspects of homophobic and transphobic violence.¹

Violence can signal inclusion and exclusion and help shape national borders of citizenship, particularly by othering LGBTQI+ people (Puar, 2007; Schweppe and Perry, 2022; Edenberg, 2023). This view of violence suggests that GBV against LGBTQI+ people is not only about homophobic and transphobic hate, but about asserting power and control over society. The report connects this understanding of violence to gender-restrictive actors' goals to structure societies in a patriarchal way.

Prevalence of gender-based violence against LGBTQI+ people

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). However, there is agreement in the literature that there is a high prevalence of violence against LGBTQI+ people, with trans people particularly targeted.

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, although there are variations between countries and groups (Bettinsoli et al., 2020). This suggests that homophobic and transphobic violence is not only triggered by hatred and fear of people who are different from the norm, but also operates as a way to assert masculine superiority and discipline gender identities.

¹ 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.

Linking gender-restrictive politics to violence: the literature

The report highlights three elements that emerged as important to an analysis of violence and gender-restrictive actors:

Connections with potentially violent groups, including far-right political actors and conservative religious actors

Previous scholarship has pointed to the overlap of gender-restrictive actors with violent nationalist and far-right groups, and conservative religious actors that do not shy away from inciting violence against LGBTQI+ people. Some research has directly connected nationalist-leaning gender-restrictive politics with violence against LGBTQI+ people, such as neo-Nazi attacks at Białystok's 2019 Equality March instigated by Jarosław Kaczyński, the anti-gender leader of the Polish Law and Justice party (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022) and the increase in attacks on LGBTQI+ people in Brazil following the election of President Jair Bolsonaro (Ahlenback, 2022: 13).

While the report does not analyse other specific connections in detail, it highlights the potential for violence to stem from these relationships.

Narratives of threat and victimhood

The report discusses how gender-restrictive actors have weaponised concepts of gender and LGBTQI+ rights to gain political control. They have been very effective at using fear, scarcity and moral panic arguments to create an inaccurate narrative of 'traditional values' being under attack. In casting society as under threat, gender-restrictive actors have also been successful in co-opting human rights language, framing themselves as actors seeking 'freedom' from oppressive 'gender ideology' (Tudor, 2021). When gender-restrictive actors reposition themselves as defenders of culture, violence is cast as a legitimate means of protection from those perceived as the threat.

Colonial logics

In some Global South countries, gender-restrictive actors have co-opted decolonial politics, exploiting legitimate fears about neocolonialism to frame LGBTQI+ rights as Western imports that violate national sovereignty and cultural beliefs. However, this obscures the fact that the 'traditional' cultures that people want to protect are sometimes themselves based on colonial constructs (Martinez et al., 2021).

As some scholars have argued, binary gender categories, heterosexuality and patriarchal gender norms were imposed violently by European, particularly Christian, colonisers (Lugones, 2006; Tudor, 2021; Madrigal-Borloz, 2023; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; GATE, 2024). From a historically informed perspective, therefore, gender-restrictive actors directly replicate this colonial enforcement of binary gender and heterosexuality, which can be understood as a form of neocolonial violence. But contemporary gender-restrictive movements do not acknowledge that they reinforce colonial logics. Instead, they appropriate the language of anti-colonialism for political gain (McEwen, 2020).

Linking gender-restrictive politics to violence: interview findings

The empirical data, though limited to illustrative case study examples, suggests that increases in gender-restrictive rhetoric have led to increases in violence against LGBTQI+ people. 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. For instance, one European respondent chillingly described Poland's 'LGBT-free' zones as having 'unleashed some of the darker demons inside local people' because it creates impunity for harassment of LGBTQI+ communities.

Strategies for resistance

While LGBTQI+ activists relayed a sense of being under attack, the report outlines some promising approaches to counter gender-restrictive actors and reduce violence. Of course, each country's history and politics are different, so some strategies may work better in some contexts than others. Approaches must be tailored to speak to local concerns, histories and politics, and to address and engage with local gender norms.

The interview data included strategies related to the following themes:

Allyship and building alliances. This was the most important strategy mentioned in the interviews. LGBTQI+ issues are often seen as too politically sensitive for other actors to want to be involved, which is a direct result of gender-restrictive rhetoric. LGBTQI+ rights activists emphasised the urgent need to build alliances with other rights-based movements, including feminist movements and the GBV violence prevention sector, as well as with influential leaders within legal, political and policy spheres.

Decolonise. Decolonising strategies were highlighted strongly in the interviews: LGBTQI+ activists in the Global South found hope in reclaiming the narrative that queer people have always existed and are not foreign imports. Queer decolonial strategies emerged as promising locally led and place-based approaches to contesting gender-restrictive politics.

Survival and well-being. Taking care of the community is vital to enabling resistance. 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+ groups, and they are often the only sources of support for LGBTQI+ people.

Research and information. Interviewees highlighted the need for research, to produce accurate data on violence against LGBTQI+ people, and also the need to better understand the nature of gender-restrictive movements: their funding, motivations and connections, and how to effectively delegitimise and defund them.

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. 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 social approval for LGBTQI+ people before advocating

for legal change. 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.

LGBTQI+ rights are human rights. Activists have effectively used the international human rights framework to campaign for LGBTQI+ rights. In the context of gender-restrictive attacks on LGBTQI+ rights, some of the interviewees have 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 approach emphasises that LGBTQI+ rights are not a special category of rights, but are already protected under most countries' national and international obligations.

Critical thinking. The interviewees highlighted the importance of conducting campaigns and advocacy to foster critical thinking, in order to counter the disinformation spread by gender-restrictive movements. On the particular issue of trans women's inclusion in feminist and women's movements, interviewees emphasised the need for people to educate themselves about how gender-restrictive attacks on trans people are based on inaccurate information.

Media. Increased positive and sympathetic coverage of LGBTQI+ issues in national media and on social media was widely felt to be an effective strategy to counter gender-restrictive rhetoric. Training journalists on LGBTQI+ rights has been effective at increasing positive representation and interviewees also described training religious leaders on content to discuss on the radio. Activists regularly conduct campaigns on social media to increase knowledge and change attitudes. Media campaigns are most effective if they target the 'moveable middle' (Human Rights Watch, 2018). As a respondent emphasised in the case of trans rights, the aim is 'convincing the target of the opponent's messages' rather than trying to convince the opponent.

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.

Queer joy and pleasure. Finally, respondents talked about queer joy and the importance of positive world-building, which some people framed as resistance to oppression.

Conclusion

The broad field of literature reviewed and the interview findings all point towards the same critical understanding: that GBV against LGBTQI+ people is a means to maintain patriarchal gender norms, disciplining gender and sexual identities. 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. Their rhetoric spreads hate against LGBTQI+ people, often through constructing them as a threat to the nation and traditional family values. The narrative of threat and disruption to traditional values creates a climate where violence is normalised and legitimised as a means to maintain patriarchal norms.

Gender-restrictive groups weaponise the concept of gender to (re)gain power and control over social, political and economic spheres. In other words, 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.

Future research directions

As it is not currently clear whether gender-restrictive actors directly incite violence or contribute to an environment that indirectly legitimises violence, there is an urgent need for empirical case studies that trace the pathways through which gender-restrictive politics lead to violence. Future research on how to operationalise a decolonial framework for LGBTQI+ activism would also be valuable.

Emerging counter-strategies

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

- **Connect the dots between LGBTQI+ rights activism and GBV prevention.** GBV against LGBTQI+ people 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. A gender norms approach could be the bridge to make this connection.
- **Embed decolonial approaches.** The evidence suggests that there is great potential in aligning decolonial strategies with queer activism. Activists in the Global South emphasised that outsiders, particularly Europeans and Americans, should not define gender and sexuality, but should support community-based organisations and activists to use their own local understandings to push for the protection of rights.
- **Maintain respect for the human rights framework.** The LGBTQI+ rights framework, as supported in the UN system and international conventions, is critical to activism. At the highest level, it is vital to retain the legitimacy of the human rights framework and respect for the international system.

References

For full references, see main report.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – 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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