

LGBTQI rights during pandemic times: Activists raise alarm over increase in hate speech and violence

Poland, Iraq and Bangladesh in the spotlight during a webinar in Brussels. Strategies to strengthen protections and improve funding mechanisms discussed.

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HRWF (01.10.2020) – During 2020, LGBTQI people around the world, an already marginalised group, have been subjected to an [increase in risk and violence](#) largely due to responses towards and misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Friday, 25 September, the *Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom* hosted 'Protecting and Advancing LGTBI Rights Globally' in Brussels, an event that exposed the threats facing LGBTQI people and highlighted strategies to push for much-needed protection and rights.

The event began with a virtual panel discussion with three LGBTQI activists:

Julia Maciocha, the Director of *Warsaw Pride* in **Poland**,
Amir Ashour, the Founder and Executive Director for [IraQueer](#) based in **Iraq**,
and an **activist** from **Bangladesh** who remained anonymous for safety reasons.

The questions centred on the state of LGBTQI rights in each of their respective contexts, activism within the local LGBTQI community, their personal experiences as activists and suggestions for how to move forward.

The second half consisted of a discussion facilitated by Rachael Moore and Aida Yancy from the [RainbowHouse](#) Belgium.

Country-specific threats to LGBTQI people and activists

In **Poland**, a Catholic majority country, the outspokenly anti-LGBTQI agenda of the government is not reflective of the general public's sentiments as about 50% of Polish people support same-sex marriage, Julia Maciocha argued.

One major unresolved issue that she raised concerned legal and administrative barriers for transgender individuals seeking legal gender recognition (LGR). LGR is essential to obtain identity documents that correspond with one's identified gender, which increases one's ability to navigate public spaces with more dignity and safety. Unfortunately, the current process in Poland is handled by the court system and requires the transgender individual to [sue their parents](#), even if they are an adult. If their parents are not supportive and refuse, this lengthy and costly court procedure is at a higher risk of taking longer and ultimately failing.

State-sanctioned hostility towards LGBTQI people in Poland is at odds with many of the commitments and values of the EU, which has led to controversies such as the so-called 'LGBT-free zones' and EU funding. In July 2020, the European Commission [rejected applications](#) from six Polish towns for the opportunity to 'twin' with other EU cities because these towns had declared themselves 'LGBT free'. Consequently, these towns did not receive the funding involved in this exchange programme. A month later, the Polish Justice Minister announced that the government would provide financial support to these towns and decried the EU's [actions as 'illegal and unauthorized'](#).

In **Iraq**, a Muslim majority country, LGBTQI people live with the constant fear of violence, torture or even death through annual 'killing campaigns' that have terrorised the LGBTQI community for over a decade now, according to Amir Ashour. Recently, the hate speech and violence targeting LGBTQI people has dramatically increased, he said, because of political and religious leaders spreading misinformation related to the pandemic and framing LGBTQI people as a threat. Additionally, measures such as quarantines to combat the pandemic have increased risk, as LGBTQI people may be stuck in abusive homes or kicked out of temporary housing. Another pressing issue he highlighted was that when LGBTQI asylum seekers flee to Western countries, they are then forced to 'prove' their sexual orientation or gender identity during the refugee determination process.

In **Bangladesh**, a Muslim majority country, homosexuality is still criminalised by a law that was inherited from British colonialism. After the 2016 highly publicised murder of Xulhaz Mannan, the founder of the first Bengali LGBT magazine, the movement was forced underground. Since then, social media platforms have been essential for LGBTQI activists to mobilize. Unfortunately, anti-LGBTQI sentiments are widespread amongst the general public, and so violence against this community is typically viewed as justified. One exception is the perception of transgender people, who are seen more positively due to historical cultural norms. Transgender women in particular are generally more accepted, but this does not translate into tangible rights.

Rachael Moore and Aida Yancy explained that although **Belgium** is ranked as the [second-best country](#) regarding LGBTQI rights by ILGA Europe, the lived experience of the LGBTQI community varies widely depending on which 'letter' one identifies with. For example, intersex children are still operated on at birth because, legally, parents need to register a child's sex with their birth certificate. Additionally, bisexual people comprise of the largest portion of the LGBTQI community yet are often invisible due to prejudices from general society and LGBTQI people alike. Despite numerous legal protections in Belgium, many individuals still experience violence and discrimination, but do not always report to the police.

Globally, LGBTQI activists face many hostilities for their advocacy, including online threats and smear campaigns. Additionally, fear is a constant reality: fear of increasing political and legal persecution; fear that loved ones may be attacked either because they identify as LGBTQI or are associated with advocacy work; fear for LGBTQI people who are struggling with depression and may commit suicide; and fear of persecution and violence by the state or religious fanatics. Activism comes at an immense personal cost.

Strategies for increasing rights and improving funding mechanisms

Throughout the event, it was made clear the importance for members of the international community to learn from activists themselves if international involvement would be helpful and, if so, in what way. In Poland and Iraq, international pressure was welcomed by the panellists, while the panellist from Bangladesh requested a more indirect approach.

Julia Maciocha advocated to expand legislation in Poland to include hate speech on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as for the EU to enact sanctions against the Polish government.

Amir Ashour stated that there was a huge need to tackle religious hatred in Iraq and advocated for the separation of state and religion.

However, in Bangladesh, there have been instances where international involvement has resulted in an increase of risk for the LGBTQI community and activists. Instead, the focus

should be on supporting local efforts. For example, the transgender community have been acting as liaisons with local preachers to combat the increase in anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQI rhetoric amongst religious leaders in Bangladesh.

Providing accessible avenues of funding for small NGO's and grassroots initiatives is an essential step forward in protecting and advancing LGBTQI rights. Across all national contexts, funding was a huge issue, especially since governments and other donors are not giving as much due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the many reasons that funding is so essential is that activists often cannot find paid work due to their role as human rights defenders and so, without funding, these movements may become unsustainable.

Currently, application processes for funding are typically very time consuming and complicated, often requiring experts to complete them which is an additional expense. These applications, which usually must be renewed on an annual basis, take precious human resources away from the actual work of the NGOs tackling these issues on the ground. It is in everyone's best interest to find a balance between the need for transparency and accountability, and the need for accessibility.

Finally, during any decision-making process about the LGBTQI community ranging from funding mechanisms to policy making, there was a call for increased intersectionality. Rachael Moore and Aida Yancy explained that it is not enough to tailor a programme to fit the needs of one 'letter', because each member of the community will have different needs. This will also be impacted by other aspects of an individual's identity such as race, ability, age, etc. Without taking these factors into account and planning accordingly, well-intentioned legislation and programmes will continue to exclude already marginalised members of minority groups.

To learn more about LGBTQI rights, religions and human rights in Europe, read HRWF's 2013 report: ['LGBT People, the Religions & Human Rights in Europe'](#).