

# MEASURING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



Data collection and evidence on violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics

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## INTRODUCTION

The risks of gender-based violence (GBV), understood as violence perpetrated with the intent to punish those who are perceived as defying dominant gender and/or sexual norms and narratives, are compounded for women, girls, and people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Global human rights standards and legal provisions outline States' obligations to protect against violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) people as violations of international law.<sup>1</sup>

Despite a growing evidence base and accelerated efforts to develop fit-for-purpose research and data collection methods, significant quantitative and qualitative gaps remain in our understanding of the scale and particular manifestations of violence based on SOGIESC. These data gaps are both driven by, and drive or reinforce, the very risk multipliers for violence based on SOGIESC.<sup>2</sup> While not the *cause*, the lack of data is an *enabler* of this violence— and of the impunity and inaction that so often follows it.

High-quality data, when safely collected and managed, has the potential to heighten awareness and visibility about the scope and nature of the issue, enable conditions for safe disclosure of experiences with violence, unlock crucial resources, and inform policy and programmatic advocacy and design.<sup>3</sup> **Addressing data gaps should not be done at any cost:** not only do the same ethical and safety considerations as for any data collection on gender-based violence apply, but particular considerations must be given to the size of the studied group and to the legal and sociopolitical context around SOGIESC to ensure no harm is done because of the research.<sup>4</sup>

*“There are no accurate estimates regarding the world population affected by violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity,”*

United Nations' Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity<sup>5</sup>

**Overlapping methodological, ethical, and sociopolitical challenges** are hampering efforts to fill data gaps about the full scale, scope, and manifestations of violence based on SOGIESC. The question at hand is how to safely support and enhance approaches to building out the existing evidence base.

This brief summarizes the paper “**Measuring Gender-Based Violence: Data collection and evidence on violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics**”, developed by Ladysmith as part of the UN Women-WHO Joint Programme on Violence Against Women Data.

### SOGIESC AND LGBTIQ+, A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY<sup>6</sup>

This brief uses both of the following terms, where appropriate, while respecting their distinctions: violence that is perpetrated against people based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), and violence against LGBTIQ+ people.<sup>7</sup> LGBTIQ+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer people. The plus sign represents people with diverse SOGIESC who identify using other terms or none.



# APPROACHES TO DATA COLLECTION

To date, efforts to generate evidence on people with diverse SOGIESC, including their experiences with violence, have leveraged a range of data collection approaches. Each of these approaches present opportunities as well as limitations when it comes to data accuracy, quality, and usefulness.

## QUANTITATIVE SURVEY DATA

Data produced through censuses and population surveys on violence can be useful to collect initial data such as demographics of LGBTIQ+ populations or violence against sub-groups such as lesbian women, and to support resource mobilization and policy and programme advocacy. Still, for reasons that range from overt State discrimination to reluctance amongst groups to self-disclose, SOGIESC populations' experiences with violence are not easily reflected in nationally representative population-based surveys.

### → Example:

In countries such as Argentina, Ireland, Costa Rica, Pakistan, and Australia, efforts are being made to integrate questions about elements of SOGIESC into State-led censuses and national population surveys. In New Zealand, the country's NSO has implemented a statistical standard for gender identity that is also being deployed by administrative bodies and research institutes.<sup>8</sup>

## ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Administrative data from state agencies and service providers (such as justice, health, or social services, including those delivered by CSOs) can provide valuable and timely insights related to violence against LGBTIQ+ people seeking services after experiencing violence, although this data can be limited due to under-reporting or criminalization.

### → Example:

Kenya's National Commission on Human Rights added non-binary markers on sexual orientation in its complaints management data collection forms and system; the data is recorded only with the complainant's consent.<sup>9</sup>

## QUALITATIVE STUDIES

Quantitative data is critical for showing the scale of violence based on SOGIESC. One of the most significant contributions of the qualitative studies, most of which are undertaken by scholars and advocates, has been in providing a more nuanced understanding of the **manifestations of violence that are specific to LGBTIQ+ sub-populations**.

### → Example:

In Cuba, UNESCO is working with the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual to generate data about homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools, including through research conducted amongst young LGBT adults about their experiences of violence when they were in school.<sup>10</sup>

## MIXED METHODS APPROACHES

Research that is geared towards policy and advocacy often relies on mixed methods approaches that can help answer questions concerned with measuring levels of a phenomenon (e.g., violence based on SOGIESC), as well as questions concerned with illuminating particular experiences (e.g., amongst LGBTIQ+ sub-populations) and developing strategies to address these dynamics. Studies retrieved during the scoping review suggest that **CSOs in particular are playing a vital role in filling gaps in the data on prevalence and forms of violence based on SOGIESC using mixed methods approaches**.<sup>11</sup>

### → Example:

In France, the volunteer-run *SOS Homophobie* publishes annual quantitative and qualitative data on violence and discrimination against LGBTI people; and *Colombia Diversa* does the same in Colombia.

# STATE OF EVIDENCE AND DATA

While there remain significant data gaps, available evidence already identifies trends and main characteristics of violence based on SOGIESC.

## PREVALENCE

There are no accurate estimates about the world population affected by violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and sex characteristics. The overall gaps in representative data are due to a myriad of methodological, ethical, and sociopolitical challenges that are discussed further below.

## FORMS OF VIOLENCE

- The literature highlights that LGBTIQ+ people are put at risk of or experience numerous forms of physical, sexual, psychological (including bullying) or emotional, and economic gender-based violence across both private and public spaces throughout their life.
- LGBTIQ+ people are also exposed to specific forms of violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and sex characteristics.<sup>56</sup> These include forms of sexual violence like so-called “*corrective rape*”, and psychological or emotional forms of violence like intentional misgendering, or threats to “*out*” an individual, and economic forms of violence like withholding of social protection benefits, amongst others<sup>12</sup>
- In diverse country contexts, studies have also shown how perpetrators of gender-based violence against LGBTIQ+ persons range from the individual (interpersonal or familial) scales to the organizational (coworkers) and institutional (police and healthcare providers) ones, to strangers and people not known to victims.<sup>13</sup>

## RISK FACTORS AND DRIVERS

### Social and gender norms

LGBTIQ+ people challenge (or are perceived to challenge) patriarchal gender and social norms due to their SOGIESC which exposes them to severe forms of violence across their life course, by a diverse range of actors.<sup>14</sup>

### Intersectional discrimination

- Much of the evidence base takes an intersectional approach in analyzing concurrent risk factors associated with experiences of violence among LGBTIQ+ individuals; these studies train attention on how race (or racialization), ethnicity, caste, age, religion, disability, migratory status, having multiple intimate partners, or participation in the sex industry shape exposure to and experiences with violence.<sup>15</sup>
- Across diverse socio-political contexts, research shows that the failure of states to protect LGBTIQ+ individuals from violence creates environments of impunity that puts them at further risk of violence.
- Evidence shows that the rise of authoritarianism around the world has contributed to a rollback of progressive rights, including the criminalization of LGBTIQ+ people. Such contexts increase risks of violence, as well as impunity in relation to it.<sup>16</sup>



# CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

## Methodological

1. There is a lack of existing research tools, agreed upon methodologies, or standardized frameworks for capturing the unique experience of LGBTIQ+ individuals.
2. There is a lack of broader consensus around definitions of violence motivated for reasons related to SOGIESC – for example, what types of violence ‘count’, and what types of violence against LGBTIQ+ people are physical, sexual, psychological, or economic, etcetera – and around definitions of perpetrators and their relationships to individuals – including questions of who counts as an ‘intimate’ partner.
3. VAW surveys that include questions about sexual orientation and/or gender identity provide important sources of data, although partial, about LGBTIQ+ women.
4. Data collection and evidence generation is also made difficult by **definitional inconsistencies** between contexts.<sup>17</sup> When there exists a lack of clarity between researchers, governments, and international organizations on terms, labels, or categories of measurement the result can be data collection that is inconsistent and therefore **difficult to compare** with other datasets, including in contexts where individuals are able to self-identify.
5. Challenges also arise when researchers fail to differentiate between sexual identity, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior when measuring violence. Treating them as synonymous can flatten or invisibilize certain dynamics of violence, for example, sexual violence against or by men who have sex with men (MSM), or women who have sex with women, who do not identify as non-heterosexual.
6. Researching LGBTIQ+ populations poses specific methodological challenges relating to sampling. Experts have identified that one of the “greatest barriers” to including people with diverse SOGIESC in more population-based surveys is related to sample size; smaller sample sizes increase the risk of revealing personal identifiable information (PII).<sup>18</sup>

## Ethical

7. Research and data collection can present varying degrees of security concerns, depending on the social and legal contexts in which it takes place, for researchers, data subjects, and other engaged stakeholders. There is a clear dilemma inherent to efforts to make highly vulnerable populations more visible through qualitative and/or quantitative data collection.
8. Guidelines on ethical research specific to violence based on SOGIESC are still nascent<sup>19</sup>. In the absence of universally agreed upon **ethical guidelines**, there is a risk that research with LGBTIQ+ populations is held to lower standards than with the general population, or that some researchers may refrain from pursuing sensitive research agendas, particularly in contexts hostile to LGBTIQ+ rights.

## Sociopolitical

9. Sociopolitical challenges that hamper data collection on violence based on SOGIESC relate to discriminatory legal and social contexts, (related) underreporting, and a lack of state investment in due diligence monitoring. Private, consensual same-sex sexual acts are criminalized in 64 countries across the world; with seven countries (with the recent addition of Uganda) imposing the death penalty. In settings like these, research and data collection efforts can put data subjects, researchers, and partner organizations at risk of significant harm.<sup>20</sup>
10. **Underreporting** is a significant challenge highlighted in the literature. LGBTIQ+ individuals can be reluctant to report experiences with violence to authorities, which results in underreporting to services and, consequently, biased administrative data and survey data assumptions about data subjects rather than directly asking them for information.<sup>21</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## METHODOLOGIES

1. At a global level, aggregate high-level standards for methods, measurement tools, and ethical or safety guidelines for data collection on violence based on SOGIESC, which can help with broader efforts to exchange knowledge, best practices, and set research agendas.
2. Ensure inclusivity of underrepresented and diverse definitions for LGBTIQ+ identities – including non-Global North-centric definitions – and for evidence generation.
3. NSOs and national machineries/line ministries responsible for gender equality and women's rights should collaborate with LGBTIQ+ civil society organizations to determine how to safely and respectfully include data on diverse SOGIESC in national data collection initiatives.
4. Where systematic data collection on VAW exists (and in countries with protections for LGBTIQ+ individuals, and where data privacy laws allow for the collection of personal information), data should be disaggregated by SOGIESC.
5. VAW administrative data record systems should – when safe to do so – collect (1) sex and (2) gender identity as two variables (rather than conflate the two). This will help illuminate LGBTIQ+ women's particular experiences with violence, and could provide a clearer pathway forward for service provision.
6. Ensure all data collectors, including service providers processing data, have received thorough training on LGBTIQ+ rights and inclusive language, as well as survivor-centered, trauma-informed data collection approaches.
7. Ensure data is secure and anonymized, aligning both with international standards as well as recommendations from local data privacy experts and LGBTIQ+ CSOs.

## INVESTMENTS

8. Where robust legal protections are in place, and LGBTIQ+ people and community and member-led organizations have been consulted, States should invest in efforts to include LGBTIQ+ populations in census data collection and relevant population surveys.
- Provide long-term, flexible financial support to CSOs and member-led research organizations engaged in data collection efforts, including those that are seeking to adapt, enhance, or produce novel methods and approaches to evidence generation.
- Support multi-country studies across regions, which can help to foster exchange of promising and best data collection practices and approaches.

## MULTISTAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- Support data collection projects that have established (or have a clear plan for) ethical approval by local research institutions and/or research ethics committees with representation from local experts, CSOs, and LGBTIQ+ rights activists.
- When working with smaller organizations, support their efforts at building strategic alliances, transnational advocacy networks, consortiums, and multi-stakeholder initiatives.
- Engage local LGBTIQ+ rights activists and CSOs early in the research design process, in order to identify what data is needed, and how it will be used, and also to establish context-appropriate research methodologies (concepts, terminology, etc). Provide compensation for such consultations.



# ENDNOTES

- 1 Adapted from LGBTQ+ Equality and Rights Internal Resource Guide (UN Women, 2022)
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 UN Women, 2022
- 4 See Cookson & Fuentes 2025
- 5 IE SOGI 2019, p. 5.
- 6 For more on terminology and definitions, see: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/06/lgbtiq-equality-and-rights-internal-resource-guide>
- 7 The focus is on adult populations.
- 8 UN Women 2022, p. 13. In this case, Statistics New Zealand revised the government's statistical standard for sex in response to concerns from transgender communities that this older standard "required them to respond on the basis of their sex assigned at birth, not their gender identity" (Pega et al. 2017).
- 9 IE SOGI 2019, p. 12.
- 10 OHCHR 2019.
- 11 IE 2019.
- 12 UN SOGI 2019; UN SOGI 2021; Human Rights Watch 2022; Motta and Saez 2013
- 13 Peitzmeier et al 2020; UNW Nepal Study
- 14 Johnston et al 2015; Balik & Belgin 2019; Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera 2017; Blongdeel et al 2018; Sabidó et al 2015
- 15 Langenderfer-Magrunder et al 2014; Balik & Belgin 2019; Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera 2017; Unmark et al 2021; Ali et al 2022; Hershow et al 2018
- 16 Chenoweth and Marks, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-02-08/women-rights-revenge-patriarchs>
- 17 A variety of countries, however, are making developments on capturing data about LGBTQ+ populations by going beyond binary sex categories or developing questions on LGTBQ+ populations in their censuses.
- 18 Sell 2017
- 19 See approach of the IE SOGI under the OHCHR's Special Procedures Branch: [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Report\\_Work\\_Plan\\_2021\\_2023.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Report_Work_Plan_2021_2023.pdf). Also see Henrickson et al 2020 and LGBT Foundation Ethics Guide, n.d.
- 20 For example, see Poore 2016
- 21 Peitzmeier et al 2020

