ACCESSING CONNECTION:
Bridging the Digital Divide for LGBTI Communities Worldwide

2024

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Foreword

by Luz Elena Aranda and Tuisina Ymania Brown
Co-Secretaries General, ILGA World

In an era defined by unprecedented digital interconnectedness, access to information and digital inclusion are crucial for individuals to find community, advocate their rights, and fully participate in society. And yet, meaningful connectivity for all remains far from reach. To date, an estimated 2.6 billion people remain offline. For many among the remaining two-thirds of the global population, being able to access digital resources depends on overcoming barriers on the grounds of intersecting aspects of their identities.

Gender, economic status, urban-rural contexts, disability, and several other dimensions have long been considered in analyses looking at how the digital divide impacts people across the world. What has been largely missing until now is research on how it is specifically affecting LGBTI people and communities, and ILGA World is particularly proud to fill in the gap with this publication, perhaps the first of its kind at the global level.

Accessing Connection delves into uncharted territory by unravelling the complex interplay between disparities in digital access and the unique experiences of individuals and communities of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics. With this report, based on both desk research and first-hand accounts of activists from every region of the world, ILGA World sheds light on what needs to change towards meaningful digital inclusion for all.

Our deepest appreciation goes to the resilient human rights defenders who generously shared their stories. Their voices are a testament to how, despite a diverse tapestry of hurdles, online spaces continue to be crucial for LGBTI and other marginalised populations to build community and mobilise. Their lived experiences also challenge the conventional understanding of the digital divide as a mere issue of access to technology, showing how accessibility, digital literacy, the discrimination and harassment often pushing our communities away from online spaces, and legal and policy barriers all play a part in deepening the LGBTI digital divide.

The stories and issues highlighted in this report are by no means a complete picture of the multitude of ways in which digital exclusion contributes to leaving our communities behind. As we begin to spotlight these realities, may this research serve as a catalyst for change, inspiring collective action to dismantle barriers and create a world where digital connectivity is truly inclusive, affirming, and empowering for all.

Luz Elena Aranda

Luz Elena Aranda is a bisexual *artivist*. She studied Dramatic Literature at UNAM and Ethnology at ENAH, in addition to a technical career in Production in Media and Communication at the Ansel Adams Photography School. She is the General Director of Las Reinas Chulas Cabaret and Human Rights AC and Director of the International Cabaret Festival. She has worked in different organisations, including ProDesarrollo, Finanzas and Microempresa (where she developed the theatre component for the Methodology for the Incorporation of the Gender Approach in the Mexican Microfinance Institutions MEGIM), Faces and Voices FDS, AC (where she created the campaign against poverty "I look, I know, I act"), and Oxfam Mexico, where she was a consultant for the project "Building an integrated approach to inequality: indigenous peoples, rural populations and women victims of violence in Mexico". She obtained the Leadership Scholarship from the MacArthur Foundation through the Mexican Society for Women's Rights AC (SEMILLAS) and the recognition "Women investing in women" by the same institution. She is part of generation 54 of the Global Women in Management program: Advancing Women's Economic Opportunities sponsored by CEDPA and Exxon Mobil.

Tuisina Ymania Brown

Tuisina Ymania Brown is a proud fa'afafine trans woman from Samoa, and an unyielding pillar in the global trans movement. She is a testament to resilience, triumphing over child rape, spousal gender-based violence, racial profiling, and unrelenting anti-trans violence, which makes her a compelling public speaker. She is also a former in-house counsel and intellectual property attorney with 20 years of experience in corporate finance, HR & legal.

She lives in Brisbane, works in Sydney, and is a devoted mother to two adopted sons and a recent grandmother, and has over 15 years of experience in international NGOs, including the current co-Secretary General role at ILGA World. Former affiliations include the roles of co-Chair of the Global Interfaith Network on Sex, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (Johannesburg), International Advisory Board member for Copenhagen2021 (Copenhagen), International Advisory Board member for Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice (New York), and co-Chair of the International Trans Fund (Toronto), as well as a number of specific campaign-related committees. She was the Strategic adviser/Project lead for Equality Australia/Sydney WorldPride award-winning Human Rights Conference, the largest-ever LBTIQA+ human rights conference in the world as part of Sydney WorldPride 2023, and she is the Chair of the newly-formed TransEquality Council for Equality Australia.

Editor's preface

by Daniele Paletta
Communications manager, ILGA World

Like other marginalised groups who are confronted with hostility in the public sphere, LGBTI people have found the online space to be revolutionary. It has helped create community, spearhead movements, and provide tools to be heard.

And yet, at this stage of our digital lives, we are no strangers to the twisted flip-side of the coin. For many of us, being online means facing hate speech, bullying, and harassment on the grounds of who we are. Surveillance and limitations to freedom of expression are just a few examples of how the work of human rights defenders is hampered every day. For many, the lack of connectivity, accessibility, affordable data plans, or digital literacy hit particularly hard during the Covid-19 pandemic, as the world was dramatically and abruptly forced to move online. The impossibility of accessing connection leaves people stuck between the necessity to be online and the many hurdles along the way.

As a global human rights organisation, most of our communications happen in the digital world, as do many other areas of work. Finding out about advocacy opportunities within human rights bodies requires navigating websites or the resources we provide. The fact that, to date, one-third of the world remains offline bears an inevitable answer to the question, "Are we inadvertently leaving people behind?".

Daniele Paletta	🔍

Daniele Paletta is the Communications manager at ILGA World, and has worked on media and communications for the organisation since 2015.
He has almost twenty years of experience in various communications roles - including as a deputy editor for a business magazine and as press officer for cultural institutions. As a freelance journalist, his articles have appeared in several newspapers, magazines and news sites in Italy. He also worked as a communications manager for a law firm supporting the UN Global Compact and is a published author of three books. In 2017, he contributed to a manual on digital strategies.
He holds a Master of Science in Communications at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, and a Master's degree in Communications for Discography and Radio at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan.

Grassroots LGBTI organisations worldwide have long worked to reach out to the least connected, and being online is not the only way to serve our populations: community engagement takes many forms. And yet, ensuring meaningful and safe connectivity could open up a whole new avenue of opportunities – especially for those whose voices the digital divide contributes to maintaining unheard.

With this ground-breaking report, ILGA World aims to start a conversation. The stories and data in these pages provide evidence as to why the unique, intersectional experiences of LGBTI people must be considered by everyone looking for solutions to overcome the digital divide. They indicate new pathways and areas for research. They point out community demands towards meaningful digital inclusion. But also, they provide a call to action for everyone, including ourselves: reaching out to the least connected and uplifting the voices of those systemically marginalised — by the digital divide or otherwise — must be at the core of what we do. Enjoy your reading.

About the authors

Olivia Johnson is an Associate on Research at The Engine Room, where she designs and conducts research, integrating communications and community engagement into research design.

Olivia is passionate about issues related to technology, surveillance, and the impact of AI on marginalised communities. Prior to joining The Engine Room, she was a research consultant with the Immigrant Defense Project, working on their Surveillance, Technology, and Immigration Policing Project. She holds a master's degree in Migration Studies and has supported projects at non-profits and universities.

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Acknowledgements

Note   🔍

Although the report refers to "LGBTI organisations", not all the interviewees have LGBTI populations as their primary focus. Nevertheless, their perspectives were instrumental in describing how the digital divide affects our communities.

Introduction

Access to the internet and digital inclusion are crucial in order for individuals to enjoy full political, social, and economic participation in society. Globally, the internet is used for employment, healthcare, social services and benefits, voting, digital ID systems, communication, research and information services, dating and social life — and since the Covid-19 pandemic its role has only increased. Worldwide, the digital landscape has allowed for spaces of community to develop, fostering inclusivity and empowerment yet at the same time reflecting and amplifying existing social disparities.

This disparity in access, commonly referred to as the 'digital divide,' is a growing topic of focus for institutions and global bodies concerned with digital inequity.[1] One such divide exists for many LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex) people around the world, where access to and use of digital resources remains uneven and fraught with barriers. The concept of the digital divide has been heavily researched with regard to gender,[2] race/migration status,[3] geographic regions,[4] urban–rural contexts,[5] indigeneity,[6] and disability.[7] There exists, however, far less research focused on the digital divide and LGBTI communities. For this reason, this research, which seeks to deepen knowledge of the important work being done at the intersection of LGBTI digital inclusion, is both timely and gap-filling.

While this report uses the phrase "digital divide" to refer to these gaps in access and use, we acknowledge that oftentimes many digital divide(s) occur simultaneously. People may face barriers to access due to multiple elements of their identity, location

1 - "Good Governance, "OHCHR, September 4, 2023.

2 - UN Women, "Gender Analysis in Technical Areas: Digital Inclusion," *UN Women*, (2022); OECD, "Bridging the gender divide: include, upskill, innovate," OECD, (2018); GSMA, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023" *GSMA* (2023); Hija Kamran, "Access Denied: Gender Digital Divide as a Form of Violence in South and Southeast Asia," GenderIT.org, December 12, 2022.

3 - Brandeis Marshall, PhD and Kate Ruane, "How Broadband Access Advances Systemic Equality," ACLU, April 28, 2021; "Divides – Impact of the Digital Divide on the Foreign Population," European Commission, December 18, 2018.

4 - Ashnah Kalemera, Victor Kapiyo, and Dr. Wairagala Wakabi, "Digital Divides or Dividends? Synthesis Report on Digitalisation of Basic Services in Benin, Ghana, Mauritius, Rwanda, and Uganda," CIPESA, (2023),

5 - Sora Park, "Digital Inequalities in Rural Australia: A Double Jeopardy of Remoteness and Social Exclusion," *Journal of Rural Studies* 54, (August 2017); Marek Feurich, Jana Kourilova, Martin Pelucha, and Edward Kasabov, "Bridging the Urban-Rural Digital Divide: Taxonomy of the Best Practice and Critical Reflection of the EU Countries' Approach," *European Planning Studies*, (March 2023); "Bridging the Digital Divide: Empowering Indigenous Regions through Internet Connectivity in Guyana," UNDP Guyana, August 9, 2023; Manuel Otero, Marcelo Cabrol, Rossana Polastri, and Christiaan Monden, "Digital Rural Gender Divide in Latin America and the Caribbean," Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), (2020).

6 - "Indigenous Connectivity Institute," Connect Humanity, accessed November 30, 2023; "Indigenous Connectivity in the United States," *Internet Society*, June 1, 2020.

7 - Andrew Perrin and Sara Atske, "Americans with Disabilities Less Likely Than Those Without to Own Some Digital Devices," Pew Research Center, September 10, 2021; Deepti Samant Raja, "Bridging the Disability Divide Through Digital Technologies," World Bank Group Background Paper, (2016).

and social position. Components of the digital divide include: access to the internet (availability, connectivity, affordability), utility of use (equipment, language-appropriate resources, literacy and accessibility) as well as the ability to use the internet safely (digital literacy, digital security).[8]

This report will identify critical gaps and challenges for LGBTI advocacy in addressing disparities in internet access and digital inclusion. Drawing upon comprehensive desk research, encompassing a thorough literature review and qualitative insights gleaned from interviews with ILGA regional offices and civil society organisations (both members and non-members of ILGA World), this report delves into the challenges and opportunities surrounding digital inclusion for LGBTI individuals and organisations worldwide, including real-world stories and region-specific data.

Growing anti-LGBTI legislation, rampant online violence, hate speech and harassment that LGBTI people face on- and offline on a daily basis can prevent people from having public profiles on social media, limit the functions of LGBTI organisations, impact mental health and well-being and, in some cases, result in offline violence and harm. A crucial element of this research involves considering the factors that may prevent LGBTI individuals from feeling safe online — a component that is as necessary to bridge as connectivity.

Despite these barriers, our interviews with ILGA offices and member organisations repeatedly spoke of the importance of the internet as a site of community and contact. For example, Pan Africa ILGA office staff observed how the internet has allowed for the formation of digital communities, for people of all ages and backgrounds, to come together and converse, seek advice, advocate, and find community.[9] In our conversations with ILGA Asia, as well, staff identified how online spaces can be safer than convening in person due to heightened state surveillance. Even in the midst of hostile legislation and LGBTI-phobic sentiments, they observed LGBTI people can find spaces on the internet to be themselves.[10]

An important aspect of this research, then, is to show how access to the internet is important for LGBTI communities and why safety and care should be centred in this process.

While the internet is crucial for expanding advocacy efforts, increased visibility

8 - Charlie Muller and João Paulo de Vasconcelos Aguiar, "What is the Digital Divide?," Internet Society, March 3, 2022.

9 - Pan Africa ILGA meeting

10 - Read more on the internet as a space for community: Justine Stephens-Reicher, Atari Metcalf, Michelle Blanchard, Cheryl Mangan, and Jane Burns, "Reaching the Hard-To-Reach: How Information Communication Technology Can Reach Young People at Greater Risk of Mental Health," *Australian Psychiatry*, (July 2011); Veera Helena Pitkänen "You're Not Left Thinking That You're The Only Gay in the Village' – The Role of the Facebook Group: Seksualiti Merdeka in the Malaysian LGBT Community: Ethnographic Perspectives Across Global Online and Offline Spaces," *Digital Environments*, (December 2017).

also comes with risks for LGBTI organisations in countries with criminalisation policies and/or high levels of surveillance. Research conducted in Kenya has exhibited this tension, noting that activists constantly have to negotiate their relationships between anonymity and visibility,[11] a phenomenon a Uganda study calls 'controlled visibility.'[12] Hence, while increased access and connectivity is essential for expanding community and reach, this online access should prioritise safety, privacy and security.

The digital divide that impacts LGBTI communities is not confined to mere access to technology; rather, it encompasses a set of barriers that hinder full social and economic participation for individuals, as well as access to an essential tool for organising and advocacy for LGBTI organisations. In this research, we identified key barriers to the digital inclusion of LGBTI people globally. They are as follows:

1. Access to technology and internet connectivity (inclusive of barriers related to urban-rural divide, gender, and affordability)
2. Accessibility (including for people with disabilities), digital access and digital literacy
3. Online discrimination and harassment
4. Legal and policy barriers

The report will conclude with a set of actionable recommendations to foster increased digital inclusion for LGBTI communities globally.

An intersectional lens

An important consideration when looking at the LGBTI digital divide is the fact that LGBTI lives do not exist in vacuums; LGBTI people belong to many communities and multitudes of identity groups. The concept of intersectionality, promoted by Black feminist scholars in the United States such as Kimberlé Crenshaw[13] and the Combahee River Collective,[14] provides utility in thinking about how an individual's various identities compound in overlapping, and at times interdependent, forms of oppression. In 1974, the Combahee River Collective wrote,

11 - Maya Indira Ganesh, Jeff Deutch and Jennifer Schulte, "Privacy, Anonymity, Visibility: Dilemmas in Tech Use By Marginalised Communities," Tactical Technology Collective, (July 2016).
12 - Cecilia Strand, "Navigating Precarious Visibility: Ugandan Sexual Minorities on Twitter," *Journal of African Media Studies* 11, 2 (June 2022).
13 - Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991).
14 - Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, e.d., "How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective," (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

(…) The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.[15]

In this research we acknowledge there are many factors impacting the condition of LGBTI lives, including race, class, indigeneity, disability, caste and religion. In addition to the theory of intersectionality, we draw on Glitch's use of "multiple identities" to recognise these intersections. In *The Digital Misogynoir Report* they write, "women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination offline because of their different identities (i.e. race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, etc.) are also likely to be targeted with discrimination that targets their multiple and intersecting identities online."[16] LGBTI individuals are part of many groups and impacted by a multitude of factors which impact individual access to the internet and experiences online.

Ultimately, this report seeks not only to underscore the urgency of addressing the digital divide within LGBTI communities but also to advocate for a more equitable and inclusive digital landscape – one that fosters empowerment, representation, and full participation for every individual, irrespective of their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics.

We invite readers to join us in envisioning a future where technology serves as a catalyst for positive change and empowerment for LGBTI communities worldwide.

Definitions

- **LGBTI**: acronym referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex persons. We use this term in the report to correspond to ILGA World's and the UN's usage, but we use different acronyms when referring to other organisations' research and reporting the words of our interviewees. While this term is widely used and accepted, there are many other regional terms used to ascribe people who are attracted to people of the same (or multiple) gender(s), people whose gender identities differ from their sex assigned at birth, people who are born with reproductive features that do not fit definitions of "typically" male or female, and/or who exist outside of the gender binary or are non-binary.[17]

15 - (emphasis added). "The Combahee River Collective Statement," *American Studies Yale*, accessed November 30, 2023.

16 - Glitch, "The Digital Misogynoir Report: Ending the Dehumanising of Black Women on Social Media," *Glitch*, UK, (2023): 19.

17 - Read more on the term LGBTI: "OHCHR and the Human Rights of LGBTI People," OHCHR, accessed November 30, 2023; "GLAAD Media Reference Guide 11th Edition," GLAAD, accessed November 30, 2023.

- **ILGA**: ILGA World - The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.
- **ILGA World regions**: The regions of ILGA World are Pan Africa ILGA, ILGA Asia, ILGA-Europe, ILGA Latin America and the Caribbean (ILGALAC), ILGA North America and the Caribbean, and ILGA Oceania — Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and Pacific islands.[18]
- **Digital divide**: The digital divide is the disparity in access to digital technology (including devices such as laptops, desktops, smartphones, tablets) and the internet. Many components of the digital divide are discussed in this report, including access and cost, quality of service and inclusive design, digital literacy and digital security, and legal and policy barriers.[19]
- **Digital security**: The practice of protecting your data, online activity and identity from threats online. Common digital security skills include creating and using strong passwords, using secure sites, using 2-factor authentication, and being able to identify and prevent becoming victim to online scams and phishing attempts. In this research, we see digital security as a layer of protection in keeping LGBTI communities and organisations safe online.
- **Digital literacy**: The ability to navigate, use and communicate on online platforms. This includes knowing how to use devices, how to browse and find relevant information on the internet, and how to stay safe online. Digital literacy determines how comfortable someone is in using the internet, which impacts their likelihood of using the internet to fulfil tasks such as accessing healthcare, voting, attending online events, communicating on social media, etc.
- **Internet poverty**: A term used to describe the inability to afford even a basic internet package. It focuses on three pillars of access: affordability, quantity, and quality. The World Data Lab has developed an internet poverty index to better measure this phenomenon globally.[20]
- **Community networks**: Community networks connect or strengthen weak internet infrastructure in areas where it is not economically beneficial for commercial networks to operate. They are typically built and maintained by the communities who use them.[21] One definition of community networks claims they are when, "infrastructure is built, managed, operated, and administered by a community-driven organisation or by a community itself by pooling their existing resources and working with partners to start-up and scale their activities." [22]

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18 - "Regions," ILGA World, accessed November 30, 2023.
19 - Read more on the digital divide: Muller and Aguiar, "What is the Digital Divide?."
20 - "Internet Poverty Index," World Data Lab, accessed December 19, 2023.
21 - "Community networks: Internet for the People, by the People | The Web Untangled," Web Foundation, September 2, 2019.
22 - Leon Gwaka, Müge Haseki, and Christopher S. Yoo, "Community Networks as Models to Address Connectivity Gaps in Underserved Communities," *Information Development 39* (March 2022): 3.

Methodology

The research for this report employed a combination of desk research, survey methods, interviews and a comprehensive literature review conducted by The Engine Room.

Desk research

As a first research step, The Engine Room staff conducted a non-exhaustive literature review between August and October 2023, in which different secondary research literature was consolidated to assess and analyse the current situation of the digital divide globally, highlight emerging trends and present data. Based on the literature review, we constructed a methodology grounded in qualitative and participatory research methods to bring focus to the experiences of LGBTI people – represented by ILGA World members, regions and communities at large. A survey of ILGA World members regarding digital divide issues was additionally sent through the ILGA World newsletter. This survey resulted in the gathering of 14 responses.

Scoping and in-depth interviews

In October, scoping interviews were conducted with representatives of ILGA's Latin America and the Caribbean, Pan Africa, Europe, Asia, and Oceania regional offices and governing bodies in order to sense-check findings gathered through preliminary literature review and survey results. Through these interviews, The Engine Room connected with organisations working in each of the six regions and conducted a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with both ILGA members and non-member organisations from each of the six regions in October and November. These interviews took approximately one hour each and discussed topics related to the digital divide, such as affordability, safety and security, technology practices in LGBTI advocacy, identity-based barriers to connectivity, legal and social developments, and solutions to digital divide issues. Interviewees were selected based on ILGA World's networks and attempt to represent a variety of issue areas covered in this report. Interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed thematically, which resulted in the articulation of key themes explored in the report. Interview excerpts have been edited for brevity and clarity and all views expressed belong to the speaker and not The Engine Room nor ILGA World.

The six organisations featured in this report are:

HER Internet, Uganda
Uganda-based organisation founded in 2018. They prioritise creating safe spaces,

holding rights-based advocacy and building connectivity through feminist activism. HER Internet focuses on reaching structurally silenced women in Uganda.[23]

Colectivo LGBT do MST, Brazil
LGBT branch of the Brazilian Landless Movement. The Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) is a social movement focused on generating agrarian reform. The LGBT collective was formed in 2015, with the understanding that MST settlements and camps "must be spaces without LGBTphobia."[24]

TransWave Jamaica, Jamaica
Founded in 2015, TransWave Jamaica is an advocacy organisation that promotes the inclusion and protection of trans and gender non-conforming communities. Their work focuses on legal gender recognition and access to services.[25]

European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA), Netherlands
ESWA is a sex worker-led network of over 100 organisations working across 30 countries in Europe and Central Asia. Established in 2002 (and renamed in 2021), ESWA works to amplify the voices of sex workers and protect their rights.[26]

TARSHI, India
TARSHI began as a helpline in 1996 for sexuality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues and today works to support sexual and reproductive health through knowledge sharing.[27]

Tonga Leitis Association, Tonga
Established in 1992, the Tonga Leitis Association works to support the health and rights of people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in Tonga, as well as across the Pacific. They focus on HIV response, protecting health and education, supporting law reforms and capacity building.[28]

Research limitations

There are a number of limitations to this research, notably potential sources of bias and gaps in available data. With the exception of the in-depth interview conducted

23 - "About Us," HER Internet, accessed November 30, 2023

24 - Quem Somos," Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), accessed November 30, 2023.

25 - "About Us," TransWave Jamaica, accessed November 30, 2023.

26 - "About ESWA," European Workers Sex Workers Rights Alliance, accessed November 30, 2023.

27 - "Who We Are," TARSHI, accessed November 30, 2023.

28 - "Our History," Tonga Leitis Association, accessed November 30, 2023.

with an ILGA World member from Latin America and the Caribbean, which was conducted in Portuguese, and the scoping interview done with the ILGA Latin American and Caribbean headquarters, which was conducted in Spanish, all interviews were conducted in English. Interviews were conducted online. Desk research was conducted in English as well.

Of course, the findings resulting from this report can in no way be representative of all digital divide issues faced by LGBTI groups globally. Rather, the objective of this report was to identify barriers and opportunities for future research and interventions. Future research projects should consider the challenges that this research highlights — especially when it comes to thinking about how we engage with people who might find it difficult to connect digitally.

Key insights from our research

The internet is essential for LGBTI organisations (fundraising, solidarity, etc.)

The internet is a useful tool for LGBTI advocacy organisations to widen their reach, provide information, fundraise and build community. In places with repressive legislation that suppresses LGBTI identities, interviewees said that the internet provides a safer space to convene and gather.

> *Access to a community is what gives most of us strength. Knowing that you're not the only one and there's someone else who is working alongside you on this journey is where we derive most of our strength from, especially as leaders.*[29]

The internet has expanded activism and fundraising to global audiences. Organisations can work in solidarity to leverage governments and advocate for change beyond borders. It provides an important avenue for visibility of the challenges as well as the important work LGBTI organisations are doing.

> *Our media and communications and online work is at the core of what we do because it's the core of our visibility work. We do a lot of campaigns. We do a lot of videos. We do a lot of [Instagram and Facebook] Live. Because we also want people to recognise that we are [as] average Jamaicans as everybody else, and that the same things that they love and they do and they use are the same things that we love and we do and we use.*[30]

29 - HER Internet interview
30 - TransWave Jamaica interview

Financial barriers lead to lack of access to technology and internet connectivity

There is no single narrative around access to the internet for LGBTI people. Access is impacted by external factors such as the cost of wifi and data, as well as having the appropriate infrastructure to connect online. It varies by one's economic status, location, and social positioning. However, this research shows that many LGBTI people are impacted by economic precarity, due to factors like difficulties finding employment, harassment, societal stigma and hostile legislation. This impacts one's ability to purchase devices and afford adequate internet coverage. Additionally, many LGBTI people live in rural areas and/or belong to other marginalised communities who face systemic barriers to internet access. Further quantitative research is needed to collect data on the specific connectivity barriers LGBTI communities face worldwide, especially taking trans, intersex and gender-diverse people's experiences into account.

There is a need for greater disability inclusion and digital accessibility

The internet was not designed for everyone, and there is a need for greater inclusivity and accessibility in the design of applications, devices, and platforms. LGBTI people with disabilities face access barriers due to a lack of inclusive design practices on online platforms. Further, this research has identified issues of language accessibility, censorship, and content filtering as areas that impact people's abilities to fully use sites and access information online. There is a need for tech companies to develop more inclusive design practices and content moderation frameworks that protect LGBTI communities from the violence they experience, especially in the Majority world.

Online violence and harassment of LGBTI people must be addressed

LGBTI communities are vulnerable to online violence and harassment. This violence can manifest as offline violence, such as physical and sexual abuse and stalking; in extreme cases, it can be life-threatening. Those who experience violence may choose to leave platforms and close accounts out of fear. LGBTI victims of violence can struggle to find legal protections, due to a lack of enforcement and dismissiveness of their experiences and/or identities. Addressing and combating online violence is a key element of overcoming the LGBTI digital divide. Work towards this can be done through digital security trainings, increasing knowledge of laws that can be used to protect privacy, and greater advocacy around this issue.

Social and legal barriers limit the full expression of LGBTI people online

Legislation that criminalises and surveils LGBTI communities prevents people from fully enjoying all the internet has to offer. In some regions, such as Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), LGBTI people face issues of entrapment, blackmail, and abuse from the police as well as peers on dating apps and social media. Hostile legislation that criminalises people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions creates environments where people fear posting on social media and in some cases prevents people from using public wifi and media centres.

What needs to change

Increased cooperation across movements and borders is essential

International solidarity is needed to bridge movement work in addressing the LGBTI digital divide. Expanding access, fighting surveillance and state repression, and advocating for digital rights and legal protections will require cross-movement work. LGBTI people belong to many communities that might be impacted in various ways by government policies and lack of internet access.

Education and awareness is needed to improve online experiences

Increased digital literacy and digital security training will be beneficial in supporting LGBTI communities in using the internet safely. There is also a need for more research on the issues raised in this report, especially how the digital divide impacts rural and less connected communities, as interviewees noted this as a particular area for more data.

Legal reforms are key to addressing the LGBTI digital divide

An essential element of combating the LGBTI digital divide is working to protect LGBTI lives both online and offline. Laws that criminalise LGBT communities or leave them exposed to human rights violations impact people's abilities to afford to connect and shape their experiences online. In addition, there is a need for stronger legislation concerning digital rights, privacy and surveillance. In many instances, overcoming connectivity barriers will require government programming to expand coverage options and subsidise inflated costs of data.

More funding and support are needed to strengthen online access

As always, funding is needed to support LGBTI organisations in strengthening digital literacy and digital security programming. Many organisations are already working to protect the security and online experiences of community members but additional funds will help expand this work. Some interviewees mentioned the desire to translate materials and invest in graphic design to improve existing materials and expand the reach of who can use the available resources. Additionally, many interviewees spoke of the support they provide, such as access to SIM cards, data, and devices. There is a need for more unrestricted funding for organisations to provide for both their staff and community needs.

Access to technology and internet connectivity

The issue of affordability came up in this research as one of the main barriers to being online. Limited access to smartphones, computers, and digital devices due to financial constraints were cited by both ILGA offices and interviewees as major barriers to internet access. At an organisational level, LGBTI organisations and organisations who work with or represent LGBTI people tend to be severely underfunded. [31] This impacts the level of access to devices they are able to offer to community members. Interviewees noted that rural areas tend to be less connected than urban areas due to a lack of infrastructure, combined with factors like systemic poverty limiting device ownership as well as access to broadband and data.[32]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, connectivity issues became even more prevalent on a global scale. Research conducted by The Engine Room in 2021 found that while the pandemic catalysed a massive movement of activity online for NGOs, less connected organisations were excluded. The rapid digitalisation that happened during this period produced a reliance on digital platforms, which shaped the work of NGOs and activists, but also at times impeded it.[33] In many of our interviews with ILGA members, the Covid-19 pandemic came up as a time where the lack of connectivity was felt particularly strongly by community members. The pandemic both exposed and reinforced existing disparities in cost and access, which we will cover in this report.

Across the board, cost and affordability of data, broadband, and wifi remain one of the largest barriers to people being online worldwide.[34] The Internet Society calls the inability to afford even a basic internet package 'internet poverty,' reporting that 15% of the world (over 1 billion people) cannot afford to access the internet.[35]

Of the top ten countries experiencing internet poverty, eight are located within Africa, with the other two located in Oceania and South America. According to The Internet Society's list of countries with the highest monthly mobile internet prices for the minimum package size, six of the top ten countries with the most expensive

31 - Emily Haynes, "LGBTQ+ Nonprofits Get Less Than 1 Percent of All Charitable Giving, Report Finds," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 23, 2023

32 - HER Internet interview; Colectivo LGBT do MST interview

33 - The Engine Room, "Strengthening Intersectional Approaches to Data and Digital Rights Advocacy During the Pandemic," *The Engine Room*, (February 2022): 9.

34 - "Internet Poverty Index: More Than 1 Billion People Live in Internet Poverty Worldwide," Internet Society Foundation, May 19, 2023.

35 - "Internet Poverty Index."

mobile internet prices are located within North America and the Caribbean, with two in South America and two in Asia (Middle East).[36]

The world's highest data prices tend to be found in Africa south of the Sahara, and in small island nations, primarily in Oceania. But even in countries with lower data costs, factors like systemic poverty and income inequality still exclude many from accessing mobile data.[37]

Beyond the cost of the internet, there are also still places and areas that lack the electricity and broadband infrastructure for network coverage. There is typically a disparity in electricity and broadband infrastructure in urban and rural areas, commonly referred to as the urban-rural digital divide. However there are still areas in urban centres that lack widespread wifi infrastructure, and that offer limited network choices and lower quality coverage.

According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), as of 2023, 2.6 billion people are still unconnected to the internet.[38] In response to this coverage gap, some governments are promoting more investment in broadband infrastructure,[39] while some rural communities are taking matters into their own hands and developing alternative solutions like community networks.[40]

When speaking of the urban-rural divide it is important to note the gendered dimensions of unequal access to connectivity. There is a great deal of research on the gendered components of the digital divide, as women face stark inequalities in internet access due to pay gaps, gendered norms, and lower rates of digital literacy.[41] Gender pay gaps persist in many countries and in some countries there are lower rates of women participating in the workplace.[42] Mobile device ownership is lower for women in many countries, especially in rural areas or for those with multiple impacted identities.[43]

36 - "Internet Poverty Index."

37 - "Mobile Data Costs Fall but as Demand for Internet Services Surges, Progress Remains Too Slow," Web Foundation, March 4, 2021.

38 - "Measuring Digital Development Facts and Figures 2023," *International Telecommunications Union Publications*, (2023): 21.

39 - Read more on government investment in broadband infrastructure in the recommendations section.

40 - Read more on community networks: "Community Network Learning Repository," APC, accessed November 30, 2023; "Lifting the Curse of Digital Isolation: How One Rural Community in South Africa Is Creating Opportunities for Its Youth," Internet Society, accessed November 30, 2023; Vedetas, "Cultivating a Feminist Community Network: Reflections of Practices in the Quilombo of Ribeirão Grande/Terra Seca," Feminist Internet Research Network, (October 2022); João Paulo de Vasconcelos Aguiar, "How a Rural Community in Armenia Built Their Own Internet," Internet Society, May 22, 2023; APC, "The Community Network as a Connectivity Strategy for Rural and Remote Myanmar," *Rising Voices*, December 31, 2018.

41 - Sarah Boxall, "The Pacific Digital Transformation: Is Everyone a Winner?," *DevPolicy Blog*, November 2, 2022, UN Women, "Gender Analysis in Technical Areas," *UN Women*, (December 2022).

42 - "Benchmarking Gender Gaps, 2023," World Economic Forum, June 20, 2023.

43 - GSMA, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023," 1.

Lack of representative data on gender diversity	🔍

While there is a great deal of research on the gender digital divide, the subjects of this research are generally cisgender individuals. There is much less research that includes the experiences of gender-diverse people. Conceptualising the gender digital divide beyond the gender binary is essential for accounting for the most unconnected. It is essential that these studies include trans women in discussions of women's access to internet connectivity. There is a need for more research on the experiences of gender-diverse people in regards to internet connectivity, access, and experiences online, as existing reports are few and far between.[44]

A 2022 GSMA study on the mobile gender gap found that in general, worldwide, women are less likely to be connected than men, as they often "belong to the groups that are most likely to be unconnected, such as those who are unemployed or have low literacy levels."[45]

Over the following pages, we provide an overview of some of the barriers related to connectivity and affordability within each of the six ILGA World regions (Pan Africa, Europe and Central Asia, North America and the Caribbean, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Oceania).[46] Special attention is paid to disparities in access deriving from the urban/rural divide, economic status, race, and gender. While this overview is far from comprehensive in scope, it identifies some of the unique contexts in each of the six regions. This section highlights connectivity and access barriers for the general population, since LGBTI people are also subject to these factors, as well as specific examples for LGBTI communities in each of the six regions.

Africa

Across Africa, some countries are still facing low internet penetration rates, a problem compounded by growing reliance on digital services for civic participation, work, healthcare, and banking and the high cost of devices and network coverage.[47]

Disparities in cost, especially the cost of data, have had a disproportionate impact

44 - Tesi di Laurea, "The Right To Be Connected: Digital Gender Mainstreaming in South Asia According to a non-binary perspective," Università degli Studi di Padova thesis, (2020); Kamran, "Access Denied: Gender Digital Divide as a Form Of Violence in South and Southeast Asia."; Zeynab Peyghambarzadeh, "Breaking the Silence: Digital Media and the Struggle for LGBTQ rights in Iran," Small Media, (May 2018

45 - Matt Shanahan, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022," GSMA, June 22, 2022.

46 - "Regions,".

47 - Paradigm Initiative, "Londa: Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa Report 2022," Paradigm Initiative, (April 2023).

on women and rural communities. A 2023 report found, "Poor women, rural populations, refugees and persons with disabilities face particularly acute digital exclusion. There is indeed a growing concern that minority and marginalised communities are being left behind in accessing information and services with the advent of Covid-19."[48] In South Africa, which has strong, widespread internet coverage (41.19 million users in 2022), electricity cuts, known locally as load shedding, have had a stark impact on internet connectivity. In 2022, South Africa experienced 200 days of power cuts, severely impacting education and healthcare and reinforcing disparities for homes with limited access to devices.[49]

Just as elsewhere, the urban-rural divide is a strong factor in determining connectivity in African countries. According to the ITU, 57% of urban populations on the continent are connected to the internet compared to 23% of those in rural areas.[50] In our discussion with the Pan Africa ILGA office, it was noted that throughout the continent the internet remains a luxury in some rural areas, especially given high data costs. Many rural areas still do not have access to 3G or 4G, let alone 5G coverage.[51] The ITU notes that 18% of rural populations across Africa have no mobile network coverage available, while 11% only have 2G coverage.[52] Even when there is connectivity, for lower-income people the cost of devices and data plans remains far too prohibitive. In these cases, people are limited to basic cell phones, restricting access to the internet and the ability to take advantage of the range of participation the internet offers like video calls, apps, social media, etc.[53]

Limited electricity access in rural areas of some countries presents an additional challenge, as electricity is an essential component for wifi. To take one example, urban regions in Rwanda (a major tech hub in Africa)[54] have much higher access to electricity than those in rural areas. A recent CIPESA study found urban areas in Rwanda having a 97% access rate compared to 44% for rural areas. This is worsened by gender inequalities, with rural households headed by men having connectivity rates of 31.2% compared to 21.1% for those headed by women.[55] In Ghana, which enjoys an internet connectivity rate of 75% of the population (as of 2022), mobile phones are the most popular devices for accessing the internet. But mobile phone ownership varies by locality with phone ownership rates at 63% for urban areas and 44% for rural areas.[56]

48 - Kalemera, Kapiyo, and Wakabi, "Digital Divides or Dividends?," 2-3.

49 - Paradigm Initiative, "Londa: Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa Report 2022," 184-185.

50 - "Measuring digital development Facts and Figures 2023," 6.

51 - Omoleye Omoruyi, "Despite 5G Rollout, Data Shows that 70% of Africans Only Have Access to 2G/3G Networks," Technext, September 15, 2022.

52 - "Mobile Network Coverage," ITU, last updated November 15, 2021.

53 - Pan Africa ILGA interview

54 - Paradigm Initiative,162.

55 - Kalemera, Kapiyo, and Wakabi, 6.

56 - Kalemera, Kapiyo, and Wakabi, 7.

In Africa, women are typically less likely than men to own mobile phones in cases of economic hardship or when there are limited devices in a household. For example, in Kenya, women are disproportionately underrepresented in mobile phone ownership among low-income households, especially since Covid-19. Many households had to limit internet spending during the pandemic and women were more likely to downgrade their phones, sell their smartphones, or be unable to upgrade old phones.[57]

In Uganda, HER Internet sees a similar pattern in rural areas where the organisation runs digital security trainings. A particular issue they see in rural areas are LBQ women in heterosexual marriages for safety, as well as intimate partner violence and abusive behaviours within LGBTI relationships. This means in addition to the infrastructure barriers to connectivity, there are also access barriers due to control and power.[58]

Access to smart devices: we cry that the levels are low here in the central region, but upcountry it's much worse. So sometimes we go upcountry and maybe only two or three people out of a group of 15-20 people have a smart device or own the device, like they have constant access to it. That in itself is an issue because if we had come with a plan to do something like a digital security clinic, we would have to completely change the conversation and probably have a dialogue as opposed to doing a training session. Then people share devices mostly with their intimate partners. That causes issues around intimate partner violence in terms of power: who holds more economic power, who owns the phone versus the one who doesn't own the phone, can use the phone. That whole pot of trouble around sharing devices which then also seeps into the conversations that we are having. Because if you've gone to impart knowledge around use of tech, use of devices, use of the internet, then it becomes a conversation around intimate partner violence, which also then completely changes the course of what we're going to talk about.[59]

The gender digital divide is exacerbated by other factors, like location and disability. In Mozambique, for instance, there is a 16% gender gap in mobile phone ownership overall, with this rate doubling to 33% in rural contexts. Likewise, in Uganda, the mobile gender gap is 11% but increases to 42% for those with disabilities.[60] This reinforces the notion that cross-cutting factors impact individual levels of access.

In interviews, a Uganda-based organisation told us how high data costs impact internet usage, especially for those with fixed incomes, as well as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on worsening inequalities when it comes to internet access.

57 - GSMA, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023," 37.
58 - HER Internet interview
59 - HER Internet interview
60 - UN Women, 19.

Reality clocked in during the Covid pandemic when movement was restricted, but also in-person interaction was not happening. Uganda had one of the longest lockdown periods in the world, two years of being on lockdown with intermittent phases of allowing transport and movement from here and there. Even if someone has a smart device, affording internet costs is really on a low because on average, I think we would purchase about 2GB for maybe US$1.50, and that 2GB doesn't usually last more than two days. If you're informally employed or just have no sources of income, [or even] actually a comfortable source of income, it's just not enough. Internet costs are really high. Usually people prioritise other things, other basic needs over being connected. But then that also means that being disconnected is leaving a large portion of us behind. This also stems from just the underlying issues around LGBT people being able to finish school and therefore find meaningful employment, but also around their safety and security if they're employed in mainstream workspaces. And, you know, how outing works or the fear of their work colleagues finding out about their identities and orientation and stuff like that.[61]

In recent years, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought connectivity issues to light. Notably, the effects of isolation on community members brought some of these access issues into greater focus. Research on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on LGBTI people has shown that domestic violence, social isolation, the toll on mental health all became worse during the pandemic, as well as exacerbating existing disparities concerning income and lack of resources.[62] In Uganda, HER Internet saw some community members were stuck in difficult living situations made worse due to the lockdown in place as well as a lack of financial resources to make alternative living arrangements.

When movement was restricted, that source of minimal income was also cut off. Very badly. And then when you add not being connected online to the mix, it meant that a lot of us were isolated in not good conditions, because some people had to move out of their apartments to go back home because the economy wasn't enabling them to thrive. Some people had to stay in abusive relationships with their intimate partners or with their platonic friends who then turned out not to be great friends after all, for one reason or the other. Connectivity then, in that sense, widened the digital divide. I'm not saying that we are doing "suffering Olympics" or whatever, but this is the reality of the community on the ground. We could clearly tell, when some of these Covid measures were loosened, how greatly this affected the collective, but also the individual mental wellness of community members being isolated, unable to communicate as freely as they would like to, unable to move from one place to another. We had instances of people walking distances just so they can get out of the house or just so they can hang out with the community, even if it's just two or three

61 - HER Internet interview
62 - "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Human Rights of LGBT Persons," OHCHR, 2020

people gathered in a particular spot.[63]

The pandemic drew into sharp focus the pre-existing conditions of internet inequality as well as the importance of having on- and offline community spaces for LGBTI people to freely express themselves and gather.

Europe and Central Asia

Just as in African countries, cost is an important factor in the LGBTI digital divide in Europe. Many European countries have extremely high data and wifi costs that can be prohibitively expensive to LGBTI people, some of whom face higher unemployment rates, lower educational attainment and higher rates of housing insecurity,[64] leaving them vulnerable to poverty.[65] This is compounded for LGBTI people holding multiple marginalised identities, such as racialised people, migrants, people with disabilities and/or elderly people.[66] A 2019 ILGA-Europe survey found that racialised LGBTI people living in Europe, especially those with disabilities, experience higher rates of difficulty in making ends meet, and experience higher rates of homelessness. The survey found that:

> *Compared to all respondents (17.39%), MOEU [Migrants from outside the EU] have a higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness in their lifetime, with 24.74% of them reporting so. This percentage increases to 41.62% if they also have a disability, 46.53% if they self-identify as an ethnic minority and trans, and 46.64% if they are intersex."*[67]

The study also explains that LGBTI migrants from outside the EU experience discrimination when looking for work, especially those with disabilities or who are perceived as being trans. The FRA LGBTI II survey found that 46% of trans respondents experience difficulty in making ends meet,[68] with research from Transgender Europe (TGEU) substantiating that this is particularly the case for trans women.[69] Non-migrant ethnic minorities also experience high rates of discrimination when looking for work. The ILGA-Europe survey found:

63 - HER internet interview

64 - "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity," The World Bank, accessed November 30, 2023.

65 - "Inclusion and Equality," ILGA-Europe, accessed November 30, 2023.

66 - ILGA-Europe, "Intersections: The LGBTI II Survey – Migrant and Racial, Ethnic and Religious Minorities Analysis," *ILGA-Europe*, (August 2023).

67 - ILGA-Europe, "Intersections: The LGBTI II Survey – Migrant and Racial, Ethnic and Religious Minorities Analysis," *ILGA-Europe*," 7.

68 - European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "A Long Way to Go for LGBTI Equality," *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights*, (2020): 63.

69 - Dodo Karsay, "Trans & Poverty: Poverty and Economic Insecurity in Trans Communities in the EU," TGEU, (2021): 10.

Non-migrant ethnic minorities (NMEM) are slightly less likely to be in paid work (43.84%) than all LGBTI respondents (49.06%). This disparity increases if they have additional intersecting identities, such as a being non-binary (23.99%), trans (29.33%), intersex (32.00%), having a disability (35.14%), or being trans men (39.95%) or trans women (40.88%).[70]

Racialised LGBTI people holding multiple marginalised identities are less likely to be in formalised work, leading to higher rates of unemployment and poverty. This came up in our interview with ESWA as well. Our interviewee explained, "Migrant sex workers are most of the time more precarious. So they experience poverty at a way harsher level in a harsher way. So there's also that kind of barrier when it comes to affordability–like the affordability is lower, of course, when you have intersecting identities."[71]

I'm from a country where being trans equals almost like a death sentence for most people; many of my trans friends did not expect to live. When you are thinking about the future, they would always say, 'Oh, well, I'm going to be dead in ten years by the age they are 40,' basically. Because that's the situation there. They can't find any employment. So almost all of them go into sex work and being trans and doing sex work, it was always very difficult. There's a huge amount of criminalisation. Especially before digital technologies were this widespread, most sex work happened in the streets which is considered one of the most dangerous ways of working because you are more exposed to the outside elements. But then the digital technologies came and they became more and more advanced. Then the issue of digital divide came up in terms of access to digital technologies, which is proven to actually decrease the likelihood of a sex worker experiencing violence.

But there is really a difference between the level of access basically between sex workers. LGBT sex workers are one of the poorest amongst sex workers. I mean: you can't really make a comparison. Of course, there are so many different people working in different modes and have different levels of income, but being LGBT and a sex worker translates into bigger issues in terms of poverty and experience of violence. (A lack of) Access to digital technologies due to poverty is really widespread amongst LGBT sex workers, but especially amongst trans sex workers. I would say this is more prevalent in some countries than others, of course. As usual, I think Western Europe is in a much better shape than the rest of the world.[72]

Europe and Central Asia also experience urban/rural divides when it comes to connectivity. In Central Asia and the Caucasus region, around 40% of the population

70 - ILGA-Europe, 9.
71 - ESWA interview
72 - ESWA interview

live in rural areas. These areas are almost entirely reliant on mobile data, as the environment and high costs prevent internet companies from developing broadband infrastructure.[73]

Across Europe and Central Asia, 52 million women are unconnected to the internet through mobile devices. Women are still 4% less likely to use mobile internet compared to men, although there are starker divides in places like Turkey (11.2%), Serbia (5.8%), Azerbaijan (6.2%) and Uzbekistan (9%).[74] While older women tend to be less connected, there are some exceptions, such as in Ukraine. Interestingly, this may also correspond to older women in Ukraine's higher rates of asking young people for help with using technology (compared to asking older men).[75]

North America and the Caribbean

Income inequality is quite stark for LGBTI people in North America and the Caribbean. In the United States, LGBTI people are more likely to be living in poverty compared to heterosexual and cisgender households – 22% LGBTI adults live in poverty compared to 16% for others. This is further worsened by race, ethnicity, gender, and other identity factors. For trans adults, 29% live in poverty, similar to the 29% rate for bisexual women (much higher than for bisexual men). Latine trans adults face poverty rates of 48% while Black trans adults experience poverty rates of 39%, respectively. Gay cis men, however, have lower rates of poverty compared to national averages.[76] In Jamaica as well, LGBTI adults face higher rates of unemployment and poverty. Many are reliant on friends and family for support, face discrimination in the workplace as well as lack legal protections. Trans people are not afforded legal recognition of their gender identities, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination[77]. A survey by TransWave conducted in 2019 showed that at the time of the survey, about 50% of respondents were unemployed, with 81% of trans women experiencing unemployment.[78]

I think Covid kind of shook up a lot of things. It made people realise just how important having these things are. Of course, these things are expensive, phones are expensive, laptops are expensive. If you don't have specific income to be able to afford

73 - Kenechi Okeleke and Sayali Borole, "Closing the Digital Divide in Central Asia and the South Caucasus," GSMA, (June 2023).

74 - UNDP, "Gender Equality in Digitalization, Key issues for programming," *UNDP*, (2021): 11.

75 - UNDP, "Gender Equality in Digitalization," 12.

76 - Bianca D.M. Wilson, Lauren J.A. Bouton, M. V. Lee Badgett, and Moriah L. Macklin, "LGBT Poverty in the United States: Trends at the Onset of Covid-19," Williams Institute, (February 2023).

77 - USAID and UNDP, "Being LGBT in Jamaica National Survey for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons in Jamaica," *UNDP*, (March 2023).

78 - Carla Moore, "Trans Economic Survivability in Jamaica," TransWave Jamaica, (November 2019).

these things, it becomes difficult. My community [trans and gender non-conforming people], notoriously has some of the highest unemployment rates and are amongst the poorest. Their ability to access these things is difficult.[79]

The urban-rural digital divide presents challenges to accessing the internet in many countries in North America and the Caribbean as well. Yet this digital divide does not affect all demographics equally. For example, in the United States, lack of internet access is particularly striking when it comes to rural Black people. In general there are stark digital divides when it comes to rural, suburban and urban populations in the United States. Rural populations are less likely to have home broadband services or own personal computers, smartphones, or tablets.[80] As of 2021, nearly 40% of rural Black people living across ten Southern states in the United States lacked access to home internet due to lack of internet infrastructure as well as long standing structural poverty.[81] The Movement Advancement Project (MAP) estimates that approximately 3 million LGBTI people (15-20% of the national LGBTI population) live in rural parts of the US, including LGBTI people of colour.[82]

In addition to people needing the internet to fulfil basic needs like health, employment and education, the internet is also a tool for building community. MAP notes that for rural LGBTI people, the internet is needed for finding spaces and resources such as gender-affirming healthcare, inclusive faith communities, legal aid and, of course, for building connections. LGBTI youth, trans people, or other individuals may not feel safe accessing in-person services; the internet also provides anonymity and digital spaces to ask questions, receive support, and explore facets of identity. Likewise, the internet can provide a space of community and care. Online communities like Queering the Map[83] provide avenues of building community and redefining especially what rural areas look like and who lives there.[84]

In North America, indigenous communities face connectivity challenges, especially in rural areas. In Canada, First Nation communities have spoken out about the lack of access to affordable, high-speed internet. There are still areas in rural Canada that have to rely on dial-up, while other areas still lack cell service. For example, British Columbia's auditor general declared that 60% of remote and rural areas and 62%

79 - TransWave Jamaica interview

80 - Emily A Vogels, "Some Digital Divides Persist Between Rural, Urban and Suburban America," Pew Research Center, August 19, 2021,

81 - Avi Asher-Schapiro and David Sherfinsk, "'Digital Divide' Hits Rural Black Americans Hardest," *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, October 6, 2021

82 - Movement Advancement Project, "Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America," *Movement Advancement Project*, (April 2019): iii.

83 - "Queering the Map," *Queering the Map*, accessed November 30, 2023.

84 - Movement Advancement Project, "Where We Call Home."

of indigenous remote areas are unconnected.[85] There has been growing attention to how this divide especially impacts indigenous youth, women, two-spirit, trans and gender-diverse people.[86]

Desk research and interviews describe how the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing challenges with access to technology and internet connectivity. To counter connectivity challenges, some organisations, like TransWave Jamaica, tried to offset high data costs faced by community members by purchasing phone cards or data for them, even if this was not previously part of the organisational mandate.

> *During Covid, it was especially difficult as well, because of course, we were all locked in our homes and not everyone had access to internet and cable and wifi and a phone or a laptop to be able to conversate and to meet with different people and to participate in different online forums and such.*

> *During Covid we've definitely tried to do more online. What we ended up doing was to provide phone cards for people to be able to put on their phones to access the internet. For persons who didn't have that type of access, we encouraged them to meet up with their friends to be able to do that. But the first chance we got to go back to in-person meetings, we did. Because then that was where we got the most yield, and our community came out in droves because of course, they missed being in safe spaces. We hosted mostly live events, and we still go live, host them online for those persons who can't make it. And we can access it online.[87]*

An area identified for further funding is supporting LGBTI organisations in providing access to devices and networks for their community members, especially for those who are lower-income and/or live in rural areas (see Section 6).

Latin America and the Caribbean

In Latin America and the Caribbean the main determinant of the internet usage divide for those with connectivity in place is cost. Although prices have come down in recent years, income inequality as well as internet taxes (especially in Ecuador and Argentina) prevent people from being able to afford the internet.[88] Other obstacles include poor internet quality, power outages, and high service fees, which increase frustrations when cost is already a factor.

85 - "*Fixing the digital disconnect in First Nations communities*," Indigenous Success, February 22, 2023.

86 - "Native Women's Association of Canada Heads to UN Conference on Status of Women; Will Focus on Closing Gender Digital Divide," Native Women's Association of Canada, March 3, 2023.

87 - TransWave Jamaica interview.

88 - GSMA, "Connectivity Gaps in Latin America," *GSMA*, (March 2023).

According to the World Bank three out of every ten people in Latin America and the Caribbean do not have access to the internet;[89] a number estimated to be nearly 230 million people.[90] A 2023 GSMA study found that the coverage gap in Latin America is primarily concentrated in remote areas or regions with complex terrains. They argue that this signals that closing this gap will be economically difficult in the coming years.[91] In the Americas (including North America) 22% of populations in rural areas lack network coverage while 4% can only access 2G.[92]

In the Caribbean, rural areas struggle with connectivity due to lack of electricity, poor network coverage, high costs for using available networks and high taxes associated with owning mobile devices.[93] Many Latin American and Caribbean countries have high tax rates for purchasing SIM cards and mobile phones.[94] In 2023, Guyana[95] removed the 20% tax for purchasing mobile phones in an effort to lower costs for consumers.[96]

In our interview, Brazil-based Colectivo LGBT do MST spoke about the disparities in internet connectivity when it comes to rural communities, including those who live in *acampamentos* (temporary camps where people irregularly occupy the land and are waiting for the right to the land) as well as those in *assentamentos* (have earned the right and live there permanently).[97]

There's no specific reality. The specific reality of those who live in the countryside is that those who produce and live in the countryside and are close to the city have the opportunity to work in certain dynamics. This person is going to work outside and stay in the field, they come for the weekends, do the training and everything. But there are those who only stay in the countryside, who work in the countryside, or who are teachers, or who are working in cooperatives, or who are camped and are producing on the land. Each reality is different. Nowadays, if we look at the majority of MST territories, yes: there is already a lot of access, because the telephone internet companies have reached various places in the world where they wouldn't have reached ten years ago. I think they've made a lot of progress in terms of technology, but we can't say that everyone has wifi everywhere. Everyone has it and can put

89 - "World Bank, "Data: Individuals Using the Internet (% of the Population)," *World Bank*, accessed October 10, 2022.

90 - GSMA, Connectivity Gaps in Latin America," 5.

91 - GSMA, 5.

92 - "Mobile Network Coverage."

93 - Lester Henry, "Bridging the Urban-Rural Digital Divide and Mobilizing Technology for Poverty Eradication: Challenges and Gaps," United Nations, (2019)

94 - For more on global taxes for mobile phones read this study: *GSMA*, "Rethinking Mobile Taxation to Improve Connectivity," GSMA, (February 2019).

95 - ILGA World classifies Guyana as a part of ILGA North America and the Caribbean

96 - "Guyanese Parliament Removes Taxes on Cell Phones," *Loop News*, July 21, 2023.

97 - "What is the MST?," MST Brazil, accessed November 30, 2023.

credit on their cell phone to access the internet throughout the week. Often they put it on a monthly basis and then have to save up their data so that they can access it throughout the month. It depends on each reality, these realities are many. There are people who have more access, there are people who have less access.[98]

The gender divide is a prominent feature of the urban-rural divide in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is estimated that four out of every ten women in Latin America and the Caribbean are unconnected to the internet (due to lack of connectivity and/or cost)[99]. In Latin America, studies have shown that rural women, especially farmers, are especially at a disadvantage when it comes to internet access, which provides farmers with banking and financial services, weather forecasting, and other business benefits. Women living in rural areas who have acquired lower levels of education are some of the least likely to be online.[100] Hence, when it comes to being online, there exists a self-reinforcing vicious cycle of dysconnectivity.

In our interview with Colectivo LGBT do MST, we also discussed the disparities for rural, poor Black people.

There are white people who, even if they are LGBT, they are a privileged guy who was born into a family with slightly better conditions and who was able to study, go to university; who had the right, even if it's through a social program or a private college, to a better job, to a better income. Then there's the Black person, who also has class differences, social differences, ethnic differences too. The Black person who doesn't have access to all this because you've been historically denied it, because you're Black, because you're poor, because you can't go to university.

If you're talking about those who live in the city, who are Black, who are poor, imagine those who live in the countryside, who barely have any schooling, who are Black, who are LGBT and who live where they barely have access to a telephone signal. Yes, there are many differences.[101]

Desk research and interviews showed that in Latin America the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated already existing challenges with access to technology and internet connectivity. For example, in Brazil during the pandemic, Colectivo LGBT do MST saw that people living in rural areas with poor internet and cell coverage were unable to access digital programming without travelling to nearby towns or cities.

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98 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview
99 - "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide is Critical to Achieve Women's Autonomy and Substantive Equality in Latin America and the Caribbean," United Nations, February 8, 2023.
100 - Manuel Otero, Marcelo Cabrol, Rossana Polastri, and Christiaan Monden, "Digital Rural Gender Divide."
101 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview

During the pandemic, when we had the process of social isolation, we kept think-ing about possibilities to continue doing political training and studies for LGBT peo-ple which we couldn't do in person. We created a platform with the courses so that they could continue the process of studying and training, but many of them had no way of accessing it. Because they were in their territory, in the settlement, in the camp, which are in rural areas and don't have a proper telephone signal. In other words, you even have a cell phone, but it's more for you to use when you're in the city. Or if you go to a place a little higher up in the countryside you cannot get a phone signal, or even if there is one, it isn't enough to be able to hold the internet. And there's also the cost of mobile data for you to sit through a Zoom platform, to be able to watch a two-hour lesson. So, that was a very strong limiting factor. I think in other periods we didn't have so much difficulty. On the one hand, the internet is a world of possibilities. Social networks and WhatsApp itself have come to make life a lot easier. But when we got to the period of social isolation, we saw how this ended up hindering the process of formation and continuity of these collectives self-organising themselves to think about the LGBTI struggle in the countryside.[102]

While some people were able to travel to mitigate some of these connectivity is-sues, new risks emerged from this movement; namely, exposure to Covid-19 as well as risks for non-cisgender individuals for travelling in public. Outside of Brazil, there were reports of increased policing and arrests toward LGBTI people moving during restricted periods of lockdowns.[103]

I think that, especially during the pandemic, we had these risks: the risk to health, the risk of violence that we face everywhere. Especially when you see a person, es-pecially a person who is not cisgender, but a transgender person on the street – that person faces a much greater risk of violence. Especially those who don't live in the city, who only go to the city to access basic everyday things - a market, a health cen-tre if there isn't one in the area, things like that.[104]

In Latin America and the Caribbean, lack of network infrastructure particularly impacts rural LGBTI people, many of whom are also marginalised due to their race, indigenous status and/or gender. There is a need for more internet infrastructure and devices, but also the centring of safety for those who experience harassment on- and offline, in the process of connecting to the internet.

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102 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview
103 - "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Human Rights of LGBT Persons."
104 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview

Asia

Despite some of the fastest and most advanced internet connections in the world, internet affordability is a hurdle to connectivity in Southeast Asia, and even countries with higher internet penetration rates do not necessarily have internet access distributed evenly throughout entire countries.[105] For example, Indonesia experiences a relatively high internet penetration rate of 66% as of 2022, but this rate is heavily concentrated on the islands of Java and Sumatra.[106] Rural islands experience lower levels of electricity, less infrastructure, and lower levels of device ownership. In Indonesia, rural communities have found workarounds to connectivity barriers through using alternative technologies like community radios. During the Covid-19 pandemic community groups used locally-run radio to communicate information about Covid-19, facilitate distance learning for kids, and report incidents of domestic violence, among other uses.[107]

In Afghanistan, communities struggle with high data costs and low internet speed. 2G is widespread for about 50% of the population but only 6 million people (out of more than 40 million) have access to 3G. The price for 1GB of data can be as high as US$1-2, which is unsustainable for those lacking employment or in infrequent employment. In rural areas, there is even less connectivity due to a lack of telecommunications infrastructure. For LGBTI people who are less likely to be employed due to discriminatory policies, the costs can be prohibitive. This has further worsened with the return of Taliban control, which has increased financial instability.[108]

South Asia has the largest gender gap worldwide for mobile internet use. More women have moved online since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, but that number has stagnated since 2022.[109] GSMA found that once women own a smartphone, their internet use is essentially equal to men's use. However there are still large gaps in smartphone ownership along gender lines. Persistent issues include less decision-making power (in choosing devices), unemployment rates and low digital literacy.[110] In Afghanistan, women experience limited independent phone access due to Taliban bans on telecom companies selling SIM cards to women.[111] In Pakistan, almost 30% of low-income women found cost to be a barrier to mobile phone

105 - "Building an Internet for the Future of Southeast Asia," Kearney, June 5, 2023.

106 - "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)- Indonesia," The World Bank, accessed November 30, 2023.

107 - Indri Sri Sembadra and Misiyah, "Women's Community Radio: How Islanders and Mountain Residents Are Coping with the Impact Of Covid-19 in Rural Indonesia," GenderIT.org, December 12, 2022.

108 - Artemis Akbary, "Afghan Queer Community's Access to the Internet is a Double-Edged Sword under Taliban Rule," GenderIT.org, December 12, 2022.

109 - Shanahan, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022."

110 - Shanahan.

111 - Kamran.

ownership.[112] Mobile data usage is also impacted by age and gender; in Bangladesh for instance, the mobile gender gap is 17% for 18-24 year olds and almost triples to 46% for those 55 years and older.[113]

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh also have affordability disparities along gender lines, coinciding with the gender wage gap. As of 2018 in India, women make four times less than men and have lower educational attainment rates. The mean number of years women spend in schooling is half of that of men, which also impacts economic status.[114] Studies have shown the interlinkage between income, education and mobile use. For example, in Myanmar, completing secondary education increases the odds of mobile adoption to 55%. Finishing tertiary education increases these odds to 375%. Similarly, having employment increases the odds by 84%.[115]

In our interview with an India-based organisation, we discussed how there is a lack of data on specific connectivity issues that LGBTI communities there face; the organisation had, however, seen affordability and device ownership come up as barriers.

> *To be very honest, in India we don't have data to actually map out how many people can't specifically [connect online] when it comes to diverse gender and sexual identities. We don't have data to talk about what these communities can afford or what's the rural-urban divide. But in the work that we have done in understanding that we have developed, we can just see that affordability is definitely an issue. It stems from a very systemic lens. It's not only about just not having enough resources. It's also systemic in the way that it's also because of mindset. It's also because of societal stigma. It is also because there are certain laws that do not help or alleviate you to have that access to resources. So in India, a trans person needs to have a self-identification certificate from a local government. If that person does not have that certificate, they won't be able to access education or they won't be able to access a job, which will inherently lead them to poverty. Because they can't have a certain education, they can't have a certain job, they don't have enough resources to sustain themselves. This in turn leads to issues of affordability. They can't afford a stable internet. They can't afford devices. It's not like nobody has devices, but the kind of devices we use. Like, we use smartphones. But there's also a Nokia where you can't even access the internet. You can only afford based on how much you get in terms of how you earn, the opportunities that you receive. I think that's why we say it's more systemic, because there are less opportunities created for queer and trans folks within our system, for them to be able to afford devices.[116]*

112 - After Access, "Understanding the Gender Gap in the Global South," *After Access*, (2018).
113 - UN Women, 19.
114 - After Access, "Understanding the Gender Gap."
115 - After Access, 28.
116 - TARSHI interview

Additionally, affordability barriers arise from the hurdles of social stigma. Our interviewee gave an example of how the internet is de-prioritised when there are more pressing concerns about food and shelter.

> *There's a lot of stigma in India about your identity. It's not considered the culture. Queer and trans rights are considered a Western ideology. It's not considered very Indian to express yourself in different ways and move beyond the binary. It's still a society that's very much restricted within the binary. I think when somebody does come out and be like, okay, I want to move beyond the binary, then you face a lot of natal family violence. Your family abandons you. They don't help you access resources. At that point your priority becomes to get shelter, food, housing, or employment to sustain yourself. I think in the list of priorities like health care — there's a major gap in how queer and trans folks can access health care — technology takes a back seat. Affordability hence becomes an issue because there are other areas you want to prioritise because of the stigma or of a cultural setup that is there for you in society.[117]*

Another group that faces disparities in internet access are refugees, some of whom are LGBTI. In our discussions with the ILGA Asia office, LGBTI people who are displaced and/or living in conflict zones came up as a particularly excluded group when it comes to the digital divide.[118] In Jordan, 23% of Syrian refugees lack home internet and children in particular experienced challenges due to the switch to online learning during the pandemic, with 46% of participants in a UNHCR survey saying that their children did not access the government learning platform.[119] While Jordan recently issued work permits to Syrian refugees (no other refugees are allowed to work) and the UNHCR provides limited cash assistance to 13,500 of those they deem to be the most vulnerable, many refugees are unemployed or take home insufficient wages.[120] Thus wifi and data can be inaccessible for those who lack income, work in the informal sector or subsist on cash assistance. In Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, which houses Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, internet access is very unreliable, with limited 2G and 3G coverage in limited areas. While there is fibre available in nearby settlements and available infrastructure outside the camp, refugees in the camp are predominately excluded from access.[121] Access to the internet for LGBTI people experiencing conflicts and natural disasters is an area beyond the scope of this report but is a crucial area for further inquiry.

117 - TARSHI interview
118 - Meeting with ILGA Asia office
119 - Merissa Khurma, "Childhood Interrupted: The Case of Syrian Refugees," Wilson Center, June 18, 2021.
120 - "Cash Assistance Provides Vital Aid and Hope to Syrian Refugee Families in Jordan," UNHCR Jordan, January 29, 2023; "Jordan Issues Record Number of Work Permits to Syrian Refugees," UNHCR, January 25, 2022.
121 - "Data & Connectivity in the Rohingya Refugee Camps," NetHope, September 2020.

Oceania

The Pacific islands have a range of data costs: 1GB of data can be as high as US$35.60 for the small island of Palau, but US$13.50 for the Northern Mariana Islands, US$5.20 in Fiji and US$2.20 in Papua New Guinea.[122] While Papua New Guinea has lower data costs, due to the cost of living this price is still prohibitive to many who live there. The Federated States of Micronesia and the Solomon Islands also have prohibitively high data costs.[123]

The Pacific still lacks access to widespread submarine cables, which provide more reliable service than satellites. These cables are typically connected to Australia, countries in Asia or Hawaii. The environment can present difficulties to ensuring widespread access: Tonga's internet cable (connected to Fiji), for example, was damaged during the tsunamis that followed the eruption of the Hunga Tonga volcano in January 2022. It took five weeks to repair the damage from the storm, leaving the country without high-speed internet access until it was repaired.[124]

In general, the remoteness and distance between island chains of Pacific islands means strong signal and connectivity continue to be issues even with increased development of infrastructure. Our interviewee, based in Tonga, explained some of these access issues.

Even though we have two main network companies over here, there's certain areas in Tonga that one can work in, even here on the main island. When you go out to the rural areas, however, there's certain areas where some of these, one of the two, do not work. It's a very expensive exercise because we have to carry a phone that has two SIM cards. So when one dies we can use the other. Sometimes you go to one area and both of them die. It doesn't even have any network at all. And it's so expensive. Internet connection wifi over here costs a fortune because these companies over here in Tonga do not offer unlimited packages or anything like that. It's so expensive. Very expensive.

Even a $10 data or $50 data finishes in two days. Their cost is ridiculous. I can cover 35 Gigabytes in just three days in the line of work that we do – uploading files, transferring files, it eats up like there is no tomorrow.[125]

While strides have been made to bridge urban-rural digital divides, this remains a crucial element of digital inclusion discussions. For example, the Australia Digital

122 - "The Cost of Internet Access in Palau: A Comparative Analysis," ISP, June 23, 2023.
123 - UNCTAD, "Chapter II: Digital Infrastructure and ICT use in the Pacific," *UNCTAD*, (2022).
124 - "Tonga Volcano: Internet Restored Five Weeks after Eruption," *BBC*, February 22, 2022.
125 - Tonga Leitis Association interview

Inclusion Index found that while gaps are closing there are still visible divides between urban and regional areas.

In 2021, metropolitan areas recorded an average Index score of 72.9 (1.8 points higher than the national score). Regional areas, however, recorded an Index score of 67.4. This is 3.6 points less than the national score, and 5.5 points less than metropolitan Australia.[126]

In particular the Index notes people lacking the most access are those over the age of 75, mobile-only users, people who did not finish secondary school, those in public housing, and those in the lowest income bracket.[127] Research has shown that LGBTI people in Australia are more vulnerable to unemployment, homelessness, and poverty.[128] A 2020 study found that one in three trans and gender-diverse persons experience homelessness, a rate much higher than the general population. Additionally, of the survey participants, 31.3% of LGBTI respondents reported having an income of less than A$400 a week (under the poverty line of A$457 during the time of the study).[129] Hence, while there is no specific data on LGBTI access to the internet, we can infer that there is an overlap in those lacking access due to economic barriers.

In our interview with the Tonga Leitis Association, internet access was a crucial theme. Tonga is a nation of 170 islands, with 40 inhabited islands. The level of connectivity varies greatly depending on location.

> *Internet connection is always an issue here, but especially when we have to travel to the outer islands because it's very limited. We cannot have access unless we get to the main island: if anything happens, it has to be on a phone call. Or if we run out of credit, we'll have to try and find somehow, somewhere to connect with the main island when you're in Ha'apai or Vava'u, or to connect with the local person in that area to deal with. One time we were in the middle of our HIV awareness programs in one of the islands, and then a cyclone hit: we had nowhere to go. We were stuck there for a few days until everything cleared up. There's just no connection at all, even when we're in the main island of Ha'apai or in the main island of Vava'u, there's certain times of the day you cannot connect to the internet at all.[130]*

126 - Julian Thomas, et al, "Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021," Melbourne: RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra, (2021): 5.
127 - Julian Thomas, et al, "Australian Digital Inclusion Index," 6.
128 - Equality Australia, "LGBTIQ+ experiences of poverty," *Equality Australia*, (April 2023): 2.
129 - Equality Australia, "LGBTIQ+ experiences of poverty," 3.
130 - Tonga Leitis Association interview

On a practical level, outreach work on the islands is a tricky endeavour given the lack of network coverage. The expenses are not solely in paying for data but also in the cost of physically transporting materials for events and presentations. In addition to the flight costs of around US$200-300 roundtrip to the Ha'apai group or the Vava'u group, the organisation has to pay extra to transport printed materials due to limited carry-on weights.[131]

> *Because a lot of materials are online, we try so hard to avoid printing materials. Not only that: we're only allowed certain kilos, when we take our clothes and shoes and bath stuff and all that on the plane, on the little plane that we have, unless we go on the ferry boat. But going to the outer islands, it takes about 24 hours to. At least with the ferry, we can take as much carry-on luggage or something, but for planes we're only allowed 15 kilos. If we print materials to take with us, just to avoid data connections, it's going to cost us another 100-150 bucks for that extra luggage but we have no choice. We have to do it that way. Because sometimes, we take the projector and everything, but in certain islands we do not have the access to use those things, and so we have to print and it's quite an issue. No matter what you do, we have to think strategically on how to be able to carry out the work without depending on data. We might have to just take three changes [of clothes] and just keep washing it every day. It's like this just so we can carry everything else.[132]*

A Pacific study conducted in Samoa, Tonga and Papua New Guinea found the gender divide to be an ongoing issue, especially in remote areas. In Papua New Guinea, women are more likely to live in rural areas, less likely to work in the formal sector (38%) and generally face steep wage gaps (on average women take home at least 50% less than men). All of these factors contribute to the affordability as well as the connectivity gap.[133] More research is needed on the specific experiences of LGBTI people's ability to connect to the internet throughout the Pacific, especially as consensual same-sex sexual acts are criminalised across many islands, leading to discrimination and marginalisation for many LGBTI people.[134]

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131 - Tonga Leitis Association interview.

132 - Tonga Leitis Association interview

133 - A4AI, "Pacific Digital Gender Scorecards," *A4AI*, (March 2022): 14.

134 - UNDP, "Resources for, and Needs of Vulnerable and Marginalized Young People on Digital Literacy, Safety and Participation," *UNDP*, May 17, 2022; John Curtis, Anna Dickson, Eleanor Gadd, and Timothy Robinson, "LGBT+ rights and issues in Pacific islands," *House of Commons Library*, (March 2022).

3.
Disability
and digital
accessibility

Disability and digital accessibility

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) notes that while the majority of the world has access to the internet, not everyone makes use of it, and an important aspect of closing the digital divide is moving beyond access to think about "meaningful use."[135] The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) as well cautions that in considering the digital divide we must not just think about "access for 'who', but access to 'what'; in other words, content that is meaningful and empowering."[136] How then can we ensure that everyone has the option to make meaningful use of the internet? In this section we explore the issues of disability inclusion, language accessibility, and online censorship.

An important dimension of internet accessibility is the recognition that the internet is not created nor designed for everyone. Access and content are limited, especially for LGBTI people who are living with disabilities. People with disabilities are also more likely to face economic and access hurdles when it comes to connecting online. In Europe, people with disabilities have higher rates of poverty and unemployment and lower rates of education.[137] In 2018, for instance, the employment rate was 50.8% for those with disabilities compared to 75% for those without disabilities. People with disabilities who are employed may face barriers such as precarious contracts, lower wages, and lack of fulfilled worker protections. In the UK, people with disabilities experience a pay gap of about 15% less than for those without disabilities.[138]

In terms of device ownership, affordability and usability play a role in the disability digital divide. In the United States, for example, people with disabilities are less likely to own devices for connecting to the internet although connectivity rates are similar.[139] In Mexico, there is an 18% disability gap in mobile phone ownership, which increases to 37% for smartphones. This corresponds to the 38% disability gap in mobile internet use.[140]

There are also clear links between the gender digital divide and disability. As highlighted by WHO data, women are more likely to live with a disability.[141] This group

135 - "Internet use in urban and rural areas," ITU, accessed December 20, 2023.

136 - APC, "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide from a Human Rights Perspective: APC submission to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights," *APC*, (February 2017): 6.

137 - Fundación ONCE and the ILO Global Business and Disability Network, "An Inclusive Digital Economy for People with Disabilities," *ILO*, (February 2021).

138 - Fundación ONCE and the ILO Global Business and Disability Network, "An Inclusive Digital Economy."

139 - Perrin and Atske, "Americans with Disabilities Less Likely than those Without To Own Some Digital Devices."

140 - Fundación ONCE and the ILO Global Business and Disability Network, 14.

141 - World Health Organization and World Bank, "World Report on Disability," *WHO*, (2011).

experiences low levels of mobile phone ownership and is the least likely one to own a smartphone, according to GSMA. Even in countries with scarce gender gaps in mobile phone ownership, this divide shows up alongside disability. While women with disabilities have said that their phones help them complete many tasks, overall those with disabilities benefit less from mobile devices.[142] We can infer that some of this at least is due to the lack of universal design. Women with disabilities also face less internet connectivity, experiencing gender and disability gaps of, respectively, 80% in Pakistan and Uganda, 75% in Kenya, 44% in Mexico, and 43% in Brazil.[143]

However, people with disabilities also use the internet at extremely high rates, although this varies according to individual experience, type of disability, and context. A study conducted in Sweden found that people with ADHD, autism, and bipolar disorder use the internet at higher rates compared to those with other disabilities. Additionally, they found that those who are deaf and/or have mobility disabilities use the internet at higher rates than those who are visually impaired. While the degree to which participants in the study used the internet varied, the researchers note that a larger proportion of them felt digitally excluded compared to those living in Sweden without disabilities.[144]

With regard to digitalisation, especially since Covid-19, some studies have shown difficulties in the shift to remote working for people with disabilities due to a lack of home devices.[145] Others have argued that remote working and virtual activities have increased accessibility for people with disabilities.[146] In particular, people with mobility impairments have appreciated not needing to commute (often on inaccessible public transportation services) as well as not having to navigate offices not built for wheelchairs; those with chronic diseases and those with intellectual disabilities benefit from the option to take more breaks;[147] and of course remote working has lessened the risks of contracting Covid-19, especially for high-risk people with pre-existing conditions.[148]

The rapid digitalisation of platforms in recent years, especially in the wake of Covid-19, has left many people out. Research on digital ID systems by The Engine Room explored the global shift in adopting digital ID systems, particularly through-

142 - Clara Aranda Jan and Matt Shanahan, "The Digital Divide at the Intersection of Gender and Disability," GSMA, July 16, 2020.

143 - Aranda Jan and Shanahan, "The Digital Divide at the Intersection of Gender and Disability," 26.

144 - Stefan Johansson, Jan Gulliksen, and Catharina Gustavsson, "Disability Digital Divide: The Use of the Internet, Smartphones, Computers and Tablets among People with Disabilities in Sweden," *Universal Access in the Information Society* 20, (2021).

145 - Fundación ONCE and the ILO Global Business and Disability Network, 18.

146 - Matt Gonzales, "Remote Work Helps People with Disabilities Land Jobs," SHRM, October 21, 2022.

147 - Jeffrey Howard, "The Benefits of Remote Work for People With Disabilities," InclusionHub, March 22, 2022.

148 - "People with Disabilities," CDC, accessed November 30, 2023.

out the Majority world. The shift to digitalisation has made these systems mandatory to fulfil essential tasks and receive government aid; for instance, in Uganda, Pakistan and Indonesia pandemic relief was tied to digital ID registration.[149] These systems often include biometric components such as iris and fingerprint scans.

Digital ID systems, like Aadhaar in India, have excluded people with disabilities through additions of retina/iris scans and fingerprint scans, especially individuals with visual impairments, cerebral palsy, and muscular disorders.[150] People have experienced difficulties during the enrolment process as well as the authorisation and verification stages.[151] Additionally, these ID systems can exclude trans and gender-diverse people through rigid designs based on gender binaries. In Pakistan, although a third gender box 'X' has been available for trans and khawaja sira[152] individuals, there have been numerous reports of discrimination by registration officials. To bypass similar forms of harassment to trans individuals enrolling in the digital ID system, in Indonesia LGBTI advocates have partnered with government agencies to improve access and act as intermediaries to shield trans persons from harassment.[153]

Accessibility

Being able to actually use devices and find and use online services and platforms are just as important as being able to connect to the internet. The internet, and devices used to access it, are not usually designed with people with disabilities in mind.[154] Many digital tools and platforms are not accessible without additional support such as assistive technology (e.g. text enlargers and keyboards with large keys for people with vision impairments, text-readers, and live captions for those who are deaf and/or blind).[155] Other challenges that might impact full participation in digital spaces includes the lack of disability-inclusive design in e-governance platforms and portals,[156] a lack of on-screen captions or interpreters on video calls and presentations, and non-accessible design choices for colours, fonts, and text size.[157]

149 - The Engine Room, Quito Tsui and Teresa Perosa, "Digital Ids Rooted in Justice: Lived Experiences and Civil Society Advocacy Towards Better Systems," *The Engine Room*, (January 2022).

150 - "Submission on behalf of Sruti disability rights centre, Point of View and Crea," OHCHR, 2017.

151 - Smriti Parsheera, "Participation of Persons with Disabilities in India's Aadhaar Project," (September 2020).

152 - The name for the third gender community in Pakistan, also known as hijra across South Asia. Read more: Amen Jaffer, "Embodying Sufism: The Spiritual Culture of Third Gender (Khwaja Sira) Communities in Pakistan," LSE blogs, April 8, 2022.

153 - The Engine Room, Tsui and Perosa, "Digital IDs Rooted in Justice," 24; 27-28.

154 - "Introduction to Web Accessibility," W3C, accessed November 30, 2023.

155 - "What is Assistive Technology," Access Computing, accessed November 30, 2023.

156 - Kalemera, Kapiyo, and Wakabi.

157 - Paul Kimumwe, "Why Access to Information on Covid-19 is Crucial to Persons with Disabilities in Africa," CIPESA blog, April 13, 2020.

There have been examples of inclusive design choices that broaden service offerings to people with disabilities:

> *(…) During the Covid-19 pandemic, mobile applications and digital devices have proved to be particularly effective to reach groups that suffer multiple forms of discrimination, and to grant them access to information–e.g. deaf women, who cannot access traditional hotlines, can use mobile applications and platforms.[158]*

In our meeting with Pan Africa ILGA, staff shared how they try to be inclusive for people with disabilities and/or without formal education but that they still are not doing enough. Part of the issue is the tech is not designed to be accessible.[159] ILGA Oceania representatives as well emphasised the need for more inclusive disability programming at events. One of the hurdles listed included using sign language across multilingual settings.[160] TARSHI shared some of the ways they try to increase accessibility in their programming:

> *In our work, we usually try in whatever materials that we create, [to ask] how it can be accessible even to persons with disabilities. We put a content warning if there's some flash in the videos, we have online courses, we have readable transcripts that you could download, embedded screen readers that people can use. We have a mix of audio and video that could work for all audiences, something that is very slow paced and not very jarring. There are some elements that we also try to add to build that accessibility. But I would still say that, since people with disabilities are still seen as a liability in society, there's very little steam that's built to actually include them and create accessible spaces for them.[161]*

Additionally, TARSHI emphasised that app and platform developers should also focus on pleasure and sexuality for people with disabilities in the design of their digital applications. In particular, they talked about the lack of accessibility in dating apps and information around accessible sites to physically or remotely go on dates.

> *A lot of people aren't aware of opportunities to explore dating. Persons with disabilities are also sexual beings. They would also want to go and date and like to know where there are accessible places in their locality to go and have a chat with somebody. I think since we work very closely on sexuality, we have a lot of authors [for the e-magazine] who are disabled. And they talk about how dating sites are often inaccessible, because you never look at a person with a disability and be like, "This*

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158 - UNDP, "Gender Equality in Digitalization," 21.
159 - Meeting with Pan Africa ILGA
160 - Meeting with ILGA Oceania
161 - TARSHI interview

person can date." So you never create spaces like that. Even, for example, parks or a restaurant: you don't create accessible spaces for people to virtually go and meet or access it.[162]

Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) as well present both challenges and opportunities for disability inclusion. While companies are increasingly using AI for integrated auto-captioning and other innovative ways of improving the accessibility of web-based services, AI models are also often designed with biassed training data and lack disability inclusion, and have the potential to cause further harm to people with disabilities as well as other communities.[163] Improved disability inclusion in AI would look like more input from designers with disabilities, accessible keyboard navigation, inclusion of alternative text, speech-to-text interfaces, image-to-speech interfaces, clear language, and accessible font colours and sizes.[164]

Relatedly, AI- and algorithm-reliant tools have the potential to exclude and harm LGBTI people through lack of inclusive design. Issues like gender bias in datasets (worse for gender-diverse people), gender-unaware design, and lack of gender impact assessments all contribute to exclusionary design practices. When it comes to emerging technologies and digital services, gender-diverse people typically have less access to these technologies (and face greater harms) due to persisting digital divides.[165] In particular, hard-coding things like sexual orientation prediction and automated gender recognition impacts LGBTI individuals in particular, as it runs the risk of reinforcing gender binaries, misgendering people, excluding people from services, and has the potential to be misused to threaten people's safety. For these reasons, advocacy organisations like Access Now and All Out have called for scrapping these tools altogether.[166] Likewise, emerging tech that relies on biometrics, such as facial recognition, has the potential to be misused by governments and companies to target and surveil LGBTI activists, including in contexts where consensual same-sex activity and diverse gender expression are criminalised.[167]

Accessible design also includes mobile device compatibility for websites, as the majority of the world access the internet through their phones, using data.[168] This is

162 - TARSHI interview

163 - Fundación ONCE and the ILO Global Business and Disability Network, 13.

164 - Laurie Henneborn, "Designing Generative AI to Work for People with Disabilities," *Harvard Business Review*, August 18, 2023.

165 - UNDP, 15,

166 - Daniel Leufer, "Computers Are Binary, People Are Not: How AI Systems Undermine LGBTQ Identity," Access Now, April 6, 2021.

167 - "How Artificial Intelligence Is Affecting Human Rights and Freedoms," *Global Citizen*, January 3, 2023.

168 - Lucy Handley, "Nearly Three Quarters of the World Will Use Just Their Smartphones to Access the Internet by 2025," *CNBC*, January 24, 2019.

especially true for lower-income populations and those who have more limited internet access.[169]

Literacy is another aspect of accessibility to take into account, as one of the largest factors that determines mobile phone ownership. In Bangladesh, for example, 22% of women and 18% of men say that difficulties in reading and writing are the primary reasons they do not own mobile phones. Literacy and lack of digital skills are also leading reasons for the lack of mobile ownership for women in Egypt and Ethiopia.[170]

Language

As reported by Pollicy, "the digital language divide demonstrates that out of 6,000 contemporary languages, only ten make up 82% of the Internet."[171] The Internet Society has found that while English only makes up 16% of world speakers, 55% of all online content is in English. No other language comes anywhere close to this level of online dominance. English is also the leading coding language, with most other coding languages using English syntax.[172] Overall, there are only 29 languages that have 'digital vitality,' which is the measure of how a language is used (and usable) online.[173] Currently, Siri is only available in 25 languages,[174] X (formerly known as Twitter) supports 34 languages, Facebook has 200,[175] and WhatsApp supports around 40 languages on iPhone and 60 on Android.[176]

As much as for society at large, the lack of language localisation poses barriers to LGBTI people, too, potentially hindering meaningful and truly understandable access to information about their identities, community services, or advocacy opportunities - especially where none of these are easily available to them. Multiple interviewees mentioned language as an area that could benefit from more funding and resources. Interviewees based in Uganda and India acknowledged that most of their materials were produced in English, which excludes some members of their communities. There is a need for more translation and resource generation in local languages. In India, language and knowledge production also intersect with issues of caste.

169 - Paul T. Jaeger, John Carlo Bertot, Kim M. Thompson, Sarah M. Katz, and Elizabeth J. DeCoster, "Digital Divides, Digital Literacy, Digital Inclusion, and Public Libraries: The Intersection of Public Policy and Public Access," *Charles Sturt University*, (2012).

170 - GSMA, "The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023," 24-41.

171 - Meital Kupfer and Jason Muyumba, "Non-Dominant Languages in the Digital Landscape," Pollicy, (2022).

172 - "The English Programming Language," Github, last updated July 17, 2023.

173 - Kupfer and Muyumba, "Non-Dominant Languages," 1.

174 - Kupfer and Muyumba.

175 - Ina Fried, "Facebook's AI Translator Now Works with 200 Languages," *Axios*, July 6, 2022.

176 - "How to Change Whatsapp's Language," WhatsApp, accessed November 30, 2023.

In India there's diversity in terms of languages that we speak. Often the resources that we end up building are in English. So people from certain communities — like people from certain castes, people from certain classes — aren't able to access information easily in India. I think that is a huge barrier in itself that we often face. We try to diversify the languages in which we put out our content. We currently do English and Hindi and some bits of southern languages like Tamil. But I think language becomes a huge barrier. The resources that we develop in certain languages are a big identity marker of who can access what. I think when you talk about India, caste is something that would come up a lot. Because our systems are different. There's a caste system that exists and usually the upper caste are supposed to hold and acquire knowledge. And the lower caste are the ones who are the doers who just work like labour. This notion has been perpetuated for a very long time. What has happened is a way of looking at knowledge is very brahmanical and patriarchal. So the language that we use, and the affordability practices and narratives we build online, are only catering to a certain caste because they are dominant. This does make a lot of difference, even in the digital world, as the kind of narratives that we end up building and idealising do not cater to everybody in India because you're only trying to put forward a dominant narrative.[177]

In addition to language accessibility, content moderation is an ongoing topic of concern – particularly when it comes to the dismal quality of content moderation in the majority of the world's languages.[178] Especially in the Majority world, content moderation can lack language nuance (or in some cases can lack meaning altogether) and cultural context,[179] and can fail to identify online violence and hate speech.[180]

Big tech needs to be, I guess, more serious, for lack of a better word, with the way their products impact the end users and they need to listen because we know people use the report buttons quite often. But then because we are in sub-Saharan Africa, our reports aren't taken as seriously or by saying something is being done about it, it's really already too late. Of course the language issue also comes in really clearly here. We need to decolonise the language. Sometimes abuses, insults, and slurs are said in local language, depending on the context. Even in your report, it's not flagged as harmful content because it's in a local dialect or whatever. So yeah, the role of big tech, really we need to be a bit more serious with the way their products affect us.[181]

177 - TARSHI interview.

178 - "Violent TikTok Images Are Traumatising Moroccan Content Moderators," *Middle East Eye*, August 2, 2022; Evelyne Musambi and Cara Anna, "Facebook Content Moderators in Kenya Call The Work 'Torture.' Their Lawsuit May Ripple Worldwide," *AP News*, June 29, 2023.

179 - Patricia Waldron, "One-Size-Fits-All Content Moderation Fails the Global South," *Cornell Chronicle*, April 13, 2023.

180 - Andrew Deck, "AI Moderation Is No Match for Hate Speech in Ethiopian Languages," *Rest of World*, June 27, 2023.

181 - HER Internet interview.

In Sri Lanka, for instance, a report on strengthening protections against online violence found that there is a need for more content moderation in the local languages of Sinhala and Tamil. These content moderators should be working in appropriate time zones and also not conflate violent language with consensual sexual expression by LGBTI people[182] (an issue seen globally). Indeed, there have been incidents of Tik-Tok being blocked in Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka over "pornographic" content, in which women openly expressed their sexual desires. YouTube as well has had incidents of banning non-explicit content with LGBT themes using the restricted mode, a feature used largely in educational contexts and for parental controls.[183]

Even for global languages like Arabic, content moderation on Facebook (now Meta), where Arabic is the third most-used language, fails to adequately address hate speech directed to LGBTI people. Likewise, despite protections in place such as bans on the promotion of 'conversion therapy' materials, such content is widely seen on the platform throughout the SWANA region.[184] Human rights activists have also been censored and have had their accounts banned due to their materials being flagged.[185]

Likewise, with the growth of artificial intelligence and natural language processing (NLP), these same issues persist. NLP is a branch of AI which allows computers to understand and form text similar to humans[186] and is commonly integrated into functions like email filtering, search engines, voice-to-text readers, Siri and Alexa, as well as online translation.[187] Indigenous languages and dialects within widely used languages are inadequately represented in NLP and AI systems.[188] NLP can also reinforce heteronormative language and contexts and lack gender-inclusive syntax, although there are growing efforts to address this.[189] The increasing use of AI by governments, institutions and platforms is a growing concern for many marginalised groups, including LGBTI people, and certainly an area for more research.

In efforts to build greater knowledge and understanding around international SOGIESC protections, the Tonga Leitis Association has been working to translate materials into Tongan. Adapting international standards to local contexts is an element of converting online content into accessible formats.

182 - Groundviews, "Opinions, B*tch: Technology Based Violence Against Women in Sri Lanka," *Groundviews*, (June 2019).

183 - Subha Wijesiriwardena, "Private Parts: Obscenity and Censorship in the Digital Age," GenderIT.org, June 24, 2019.

184 - Marwa Fatafta, "Facebook Is Bad at Moderating in English. In Arabic, it's a Disaster," *Rest of World*, November 18, 2021.

185 - Marwa Fatafta, "Facebook is Bad at Moderating in English."

186 - "What is Natural Language Processing (NLP)?," IBM, accessed November 30, 2023.

187 - "8 Natural Language Processing (NLP) Examples," Tableau, accessed November 30, 2023.

188 - Gabriel Nicholas and Aliya Bhatia, "Languages Left Behind: Automated Content Analysis in Non-English Languages," CDT, August 18, 2022.

189 - Lillian Goodwin, "Busting Anti-Queer Bias in Text Prediction," USC Viterbi, August 11, 2022.

Some of these scientific words, we do not have the Tongan word for. We can go through Webster dictionaries from the beginning to the end: you won't find the Tongan translation to any of these. We don't use LGBTIQ+++ in our daily lives: we have our own terms. We only use LGBTIQ when we go overseas, when we work with international donors and all that. It's always better when we use our own terms, especially when we go and teach, when we go and do advocacy work, and to translate things into our language is a costly exercise.[190]

Additionally, they worked to integrate the material into culturally relevant and accessible forms. In this case, they paired Bible verses with each of the slides to hone in on the deeply religious sentiments of many of the Tongan people.

For those who overcome the challenges related to internet access and accessibility, there often exists challenges in finding needed information online. LGBTI-specific content, as well as information about reproductive health, feminist-specific content, and sources of employment like sex work, are targeted for internet filtering, website blocking, and censorship.[191] ILGA World has identified 54 countries with legal barriers to freedom of expression, with at least 15 having specific educational barriers and more than 27 having media restrictions. Recently, there has been a wave of proposed laws blocking LGBTI materials in educational content across educational settings in Niger, Brazil, the US, Guatemala, Indonesia, Israel, and Moldova, among other places. Likewise, there have been proposed media bans blocking LGBTI content in Uzbekistan, Burkina Faso, Iraq, and Jordan.[192] In our interview with TransWave Jamaica we discussed the lack of information online that is both trans-specific as well as Jamaican-specific. The information is a key resource for building knowledge, finding resources and connecting with people with similar experiences.

I think having the necessary equipment is always important, but you don't necessarily have a lot of people who support that. It's one thing to have access to go online, but if the information doesn't exist online for you to find, that also becomes a problem. Having more information like that, that's trans-specific and Jamaica-specific, I think is useful for us.[193]

Creating more accessible formatting and relevant content is necessary in widening the use of online resources for LGBTI people, especially those with disabilities. Accessible design is an important element of bridging the digital divide, as ensuring materials in a format, language, and presentation that people will actually use expands access to them.

190 - Tonga Leitis Association interview.

191 - Read more on this issue for sex work: Martin K.N. Siele, "Kenyan adult content creators fear a TikTok crackdown," *Rest of World*, September 26, 2023.

192 - "ILGA World Database - Legal Frameworks | legal barriers to freedom of expression," ILGA World, accessed December 18, 2023.

193 - TransWave Jamaica interview

Digital literacy

Overcoming digital literacy gaps is essential in widening the use of technology once there is connection in place. Digital literacy includes being able to navigate websites, communicate online, and browse safely.[194] Ultimately digital literacy determines how comfortable someone is in using the internet, which impacts the extent to which online platforms can be used for education, work, healthcare, voting, communication, dating, and so on.[195] Knowing how to navigate the internet and how to find resources online is an important element of digital literacy.

We do know there are a huge number of people who actually do access internet spaces. We believe that you might give somebody a device, but if they can't navigate this virtual world - if they don't have the literacy to navigate the virtual world because it's not easy as a queer and trans folk to be online and express your sexuality - then the point of giving access to devices does not fulfil itself. I think that's when a solution could come in, for example, like funding for digital literacy for these communities. Our work does not stop with just providing devices. It is also important for us to make the community aware of the laws. Because there are so many laws. If you face harassment online, you can actually reach out to the government too. How do you navigate threats? How do you navigate a breach of data? How do you navigate resources?

I think information is very empowering and hence the digital world becomes very empowering for LGBTI communities. Just to be able to navigate, to access resources that are queer- and trans-affirmative, also shapes people's understanding of how they can find pleasure in a virtual world, since we work in a pleasure-affirming manner and not everything is violence and threats. There are possible opportunities of exploration, of expression, of empowerment that you could feel when you are in the virtual world. Our work is focused on that. How can we change this narrative? Okay, there are issues, there is violence. We are not negating that. But how could you make this experience [of being in an online space] also empowering for you to own who you are, express your sexuality, and build a narrative?[196]

Another component of digital literacy is digital security. Strengthening digital security and privacy practices protects vulnerable users and prevents people from leaving platforms out of fears related to safety.

It was because we found some challenges. We were listing these challenges. The contradictions. For us, it is mainly about the fight to guarantee the right to have access

194 - "Digital Literacy and the Digital Divide," Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, accessed November 30, 2023.
195 - OECD, "Bridging the Gender Divide: Include, Upskill, Innovate."
196 - TARSHI interview

to the internet, to all its tools for communication, interaction, and sociability. Understanding that it can be an instrument. But digital security is a challenge, in the sense of accessing networks while guaranteeing privacy and protection against LGBT-phobic attacks. And how about the political persecution of individuals? And the criminalisation of the movements themselves? Considering all this, we asked ourselves some questions. How can we occupy the networks? Then we even asked ourselves, how can we occupy the networks with closeness, with training and fighting safely? These were some of the first questions. Another was how do we use these digital tools for leisure, for entertainment - sharing content and information, but without making ourselves vulnerable? The third was how to protect ourselves against LGBT-phobic violence, while still positioning ourselves and acting politically on social networks? It was from this that we came up with some important elements and that's why we even did a [digital security] course itself. First we had to understand what social networks were, what open networks were, what closed networks were, and what each network was for. Then we had to do a lot of explaining, because our students need a bit more access to information. We went on to explain one by one what Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp were and their purposes, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Skype, LinkedIn, Tinder, Snapchat, which was a bit of fun back then, right? And also Messenger, Flickr and many others, right? Like Grindr, which is super famous even among us. Our girls love the apps Gaydar and TikTok, which exploded during the pandemic especially.

The other thing was for us to recognise that this world of the internet, as much as it is for everyone's use — but very much in quotation marks — we need to understand who the owners of the internet are, what they stand for. We already say a lot that the system is cisgender, it's binary. We're going to talk about the best-known networks, what the companies have been doing. If we look at the past year, everything that happened on Twitter and the elections themselves, the issue of the haters, the Bolsonaro bots... We had several examples that we can put out there, that were happening, that we knew that all this was against the poor, that it was against the population that lives in the countryside, that it's there to serve a bourgeois society and not us, those of us who are poor. Then we talked about how we can occupy the social networks with closeness, with struggle, with political awareness. We taught them everything we could. So we put forward how we can dispute and take back the technologies. What is this act of occupying social networks? It's with a lot of security.[197]

Limited knowledge of online safety, digital security resources, and digital skills are also a major barrier. Throughout our information meetings with ILGA offices as well as our interviews, this came up as an area in need of increased funding. Digital literacy is very much a gendered issue, with women having lower levels of numeracy and literacy, globally, due to gender disparities in educational access. This also

197 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview

corresponds to the gender digital divide, as fewer women have access to devices and the ICT skills that are developed through using the devices.[198]

Some organisations have taken the initiative to build safe, physical spaces for LGBTI people to access the internet and build digital literacy skills. SAGE, a US-based organisation, hosts a computer lab for LGBTI elders, offering them computer skills training in addition to a social space, particularly for those who may not have the support of children or partners. The emphasis on creating this space came from the difficulty LGBTI elders, especially those who are trans, face in navigating the social service system and may lack home access to connectivity and/or devices.[199] HER Internet, one of our interviewees, explained why they set up their resource centre. Part of the reason, they explained, is due to the fact that other public spaces can be unsafe for some members of LGBTI communities. This supports research claiming that women and gender-diverse people may fear travelling to tech access points,[200] as well fears over peers observing online content and browsing history in public spaces.[201]

A business, an internet cafe would be ideally the space that someone would go to. It's fairly affordable for maybe 30 minutes, an hour or so. But then when the issue is compounded around security, around what people are accessing online and the security of that as well, not just their own physical security, but also every time people are in public, especially for very visibly queer people, when they're out in public, then it's a different case even if you are just going to the cafe, a five-minute walk away from your home. It's a different issue because you're encountering neighbours, people on the road who are looking at you in some type of way. The resource centre then comes to close this gap, but also they don't just access the devices and the internet at our offices. They also come to seek capacity support or capacity strengthening. For example: how to use a computer, how to use, let's say the Microsoft Office package, how to write CVs. How to look out for opportunities, how does someone apply and really, polish up on their resume and stuff like that. So we offer support beyond just them literally accessing the devices and the internet.[202]

Digital security is essential for protecting LGBTI organisations from targeted attacks. In our interviews, some organisations shared the ways in which they protect themselves and their communities from hacking, data breaches, and other online threats. TransWave Jamaica shared how partaking in global security trainings have protected them from attacks:

198 - Human Rights, Big Data and Technology Project at the Human Rights Centre of the University of Essex "Ways to Bridge the Gender Digital Divide from a Human Rights Perspective", OHCHR, 2017.

199 - "Digital Divide Impacting the Isolated LGBTQ+ Elderly Communities", SAGE, July 29, 2021.

200 - APC, "Bridging the Gender Digital Divide from a Human Rights Perspective," 5.

201 - "Safe Browsing," Switchboard LGBT+ helpline, accessed November 30, 2023.

202 - HER Internet interview.

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Unlike people who had certain spaces and said that people hacked them, and they had breaches and they had cyber things happening – we have never had that issue, which is weird because of course trans people in Jamaica are used as, like, the hot topic for especially the Christian right-wing groups. Especially right now. They're trying to say that we're the epicentre for violating morality. So it was weird, but we never had any of those issues. But other people did. But none of our events are ever hacked. None of our spaces were ever. Of course, I think maybe that has to do with my team as well, because I have really brilliant people who run our media and communications, who would have been trained around like cyber security. A lot of times the things that we use are encrypted. So I think on that end, we've benefited a lot from global trainings.[203]

Digital security is also important for protecting individuals for protecting sensitive data, or identifying information when their identities are marginalised and/or criminalised. In our interview with ESWA they shared that privacy and online security protects sex workers, especially those who are LGBTI, from unintentionally sharing information about themselves or their work, which could put them in danger if exposed.

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Basically, privacy acts as a safe outside layer of the skin, a basically protective skin that helps shield sex workers from surveillance. This means that they can keep their identity safe from people they don't want to share it with. Many sex workers live in criminalised conditions. So this means protecting your actual identity and all the sensitive data. This may be your real name. It may be where you live or any kind of thing that can be sensitive when it comes to sex work, any identifying information. Protecting this identifying information is really, really crucial. It is sometimes a matter of life and death. When privacy is lost, sex workers experience outings, both as sex workers and their LGBT status. For example, countries like Turkey, where it is really socially unacceptable to be LGBT, you are doubly kind of stigmatised being a sex worker and gay, and you can actually lose your accommodation due to this loss of privacy, and not just because you're a sex worker, but also because you are gay. Or in the case of single mothers, they can lose the custody of their children. Or sex workers can be generally just victims of stalking or blackmail.[204]

Some organisations have focused on promoting the digital literacy and security of their members. Colectivo LGBT do MST in Brazil has developed partnerships to train members on digital literacy and for using the internet safely. They particularly focused on ensuring access for rural members who are trans and *travesti,*[205] who are

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203 - TransWave Jamaica interview.
204 - ESWA Interview.
205 - 'Travesti' is a Latin American gender identity generally understood as a person who performs roles socially perceived as feminine without necessarily changing their primary sexual characteristics. (Definition: Benedetti MR. "Toda feita: o corpo e o gênero das travestis", (Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2005)

some of the most vulnerable populations to online targeting, but who also struggle with internet access the most.

> *When the pandemic hit, we even managed to form a partnership with a laboratory here in Brazil called MariaLab, so that we could do a course with them on digital security. Beyond thinking about democratising access to the internet, it was also about thinking about how we access it safely, right? The various LGBT-phobic attacks on collectives and groups, but also, in some way, on individuals, right? We're part of an organisation, a social movement, a political movement. It ended up that this also often came up: how did we organise and take care of ourselves so that there wouldn't be these criminal attacks on movements. We did some very nice work with them. From this work came a booklet that we wrote about how to access [internet] safely. It was really cool. We did a two-week course with them and in order for this course to take place, we managed to get our trans people, travesti and trans men who took part in the meeting to receive a grant, which was precisely so that they could access the internet. It was either to put credit on their cell phones to have access to the internet or to be able to go to a space, whether an internet cafe or a city hall facility. A place in the city where they could access the wifi so that they could be mobile and take part in the course.[206]*

Additionally, as an organisation they've been focusing on using the internet more safely and securely. Internally this means thinking about their own communications team and how they want to strengthen internal security to amplify their messaging.

> *We need to take ownership of the fact that the internet is there for us to use. So, what do we use safely? And also thinking about this thing of talking about who we are. To promote our struggles, because we know that no one else is outside the internet. But how do we occupy this part responsibly, with as much security as possible, thinking about the safety of individuals, and collective safety of people, of the movement itself, and of other organisations, too? We're still a little afraid, but as an organisation, we've been working a lot on this. The MST's own communications department has been studying and working with as much security as possible, so that we can also talk about the MST on social networks.[207]*

206 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview.
207 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview.

Online violence and harassment

Persistent harassment and discrimination are key factors preventing LGBTI people from being online, and they impact their day-to-day experiences. GSMA has found fears of online safety to be a key factor in the mobile data usage gap, which can be as influential as cost and affordability in some cases. In Guatemala, safety and security is the number one factor preventing both men and women from using the internet (when they have access), with women citing the same in Mexico.[208] Cis and trans women, non-binary, gender-diverse, and intersex people face greater exposure to online violence and harassment. This is worsened by factors like misogynoir and racialised forms of violence.

APC has found that violence against women and girls online including cyberstalking, cyberbullying, and other misogynist patterns of speech and behaviour impact their ability to fully participate online. They argue that, similar to how women and girls are silenced and controlled in public spheres, online instances of misogynistic violence are no different. In particular, women's rights advocates face extremely targeted online violence like cyberstalking, hacking, sexual harassment, and censorship of speech.[209] These patterns of violence can lead women and girls (as well as gender-diverse people) to self-censor, leave platforms and sites, close online accounts, and participate less in the digital sphere. Additionally, online violence can lead to more serious consequences of mental and psychological damage as well as physical harm.[210]

In their *Digital Misogynoir* report, Glitch defines digital misogynoir as "the continued, unchecked, and often violent dehumanisation of Black women on social media, as well as through other forms such as algorithmic discrimination." They argue that this phenomenon is particularly dangerous because of its ability to incite offline violence.[211] Research in Brazil has shown that online harassment guised as jokes or 'derogatory humour' is a rampant form of racialised violence, particularly directed toward Black women.[212] There is evidence that online violence in the form of jokes is also used in spreading homophobic online discourse.[213] In Brazil, Black LGBTI people are singled out as targets for online harassment and violence. In a survey of online violence directed toward LGBTI Brazilians, conducted from 2015-2017,

208 - GSMA, 24.

209 - APC, 7.

210 - APC, 7.

211 - Glitch, "The Digital Misogynoir Report," 10.

212 - Luiz Valerio P. Trindade, "Social Media in Brazil: Distilling Racism Against Black Women," *Social Science Space*, August 13, 2018.

213 - Roberto Borges de Lima, "Piadas Homofóbicas Veiculadas Na Mídia On-Line : Uma Análise Discursiva Crítica," Repositório Institucional da UnB, (2022).

Black respondents made up 50% of the victims.[214] In our interview with Colectivo LGBT do MST, online violence in the form of jokes was noted as a trend.

> For example, there's a travesti person who lives in the countryside. In the countryside we're going to have older people, younger people, people our own age. Heterosexual people and we'll also have other LGBTQIA+ people. We're going to have a percentage of the community that will welcome this person, who is there, who has their own life, who works in the community. But there's this conservative idea that a subject who isn't binary, who isn't a man, who isn't a woman, can't exist, right? Then there are the attacks in the WhatsApp groups themselves. The jokes, the threats on social networks and on WhatsApp itself, in your private DMs, [they make you wonder:] 'What's going to happen? Threats in person? Will it happen? Threats on the socials, right? [Coming from] where? Where is this person?' It could be a person who is on Facebook and will receive a kind of threat that comes dressed up as a kind of veiled threat. Those veiled threats that we say are a kind of stupid joke, but that aren't jokes: they're the pure expression of violence.[215]

LGBTI people across the world face rampant online violence. Online violence against them has risen on social media platforms like X and Facebook, as well as YouTube.[216] In some cases this hate speech escalates to offline violence, a trend we observed throughout our research. We discuss this further in section five on social and legal barriers. In our interview with Colectivo LGBT do MST we were given many examples of how people living in the countryside experience online violence, and how this transcends into physical violence as well. Our interviewee mentioned that many LGBTI people living in rural areas in Brazil are beginning to migrate to cities out of fears of safety and due to threats they have received on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. These fears are not simply paranoia: interviews conducted as part of this research spoke of real cases of serious violence which have occurred.[217]

> We've seen a lot of mental illness in these people due to threats, which come from various places. These people have had a lot of mental illness, depression, and even suicides. Nowadays we communities in Brazil as a whole, we've had a high suicide rate due to LGBT-phobia and it comes through various channels, whether in person or through social networks, especially from the people around you, who know you, whether it's family members, or people in your town or community who don't accept the fact that you're an LGBTQIA+ person, who are conservative, and that person ends up being raped, killed, or even committing suicide themselves. I say that because last

214 - Patrícia Figueiredo, "Negros São Alvo De Metade Dos Registros De Violência Contra População LGBT No Brasil, Diz Pesquisa," *Globo*, July 15, 2020

215 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview.

216 - David Klepper, "Anti-LGBTQ Hate Thrives Online, Spurs Fears of More Violence," *AP News*, December 17, 2022.

217 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview

year we had an occurrence that is still happening today [to a lesser extent] because we managed to denounce it at a national level, but we managed to support indigenous communities in Mato Grosso do Sul from a certain region, where there are more than 7,000 families. They're territories of large villages, and there's a large community in Mato Grosso do Sul where there was a list of LGBTQIA+ people. Those were being killed, and all the killings were done with the same, let's say, strategy of making it look like an accident.

But there were lists of people, as we later learned from some other LGBT people in the community, who came to tell us about the threats they had received via WhatsApp and Facebook. Then there's a big issue. It's the growth of communities, of evangelical churches within indigenous territories. The very process of disputing territory with indigenous territories, with the gold miners and the big landowners who want to take over the land to extract goods from nature. It's the process itself of those who are conservative and evangelical and who are the leaders of the villages there, of this configuration of indigenous culture that they have, their organisation, which was also very strong in the process of LGBTphobia. We had a list of 50 really young girls. So 15, 20 years old, lesbians, indigenous people who were on a list to be burned at the stake. And we managed to denounce it and report it widely, making OAB [Order of Attorneys in Brazil] look [at the issue], right? at the Facebook conversations, and they were able to gain access from the investigations. We saw the threats that were made. Then we were able to map out who the aggressors were inside the villages and outside the villages.[218]

Additionally we were given the example of a MST member, Lindolfo Kosmaski, a gay teacher who was violently murdered.[219] The organisation was able to trace WhatsApp and Facebook messages in his lawsuit to find the perpetrators, as Lindolfo had received death threats online prior to his murder.

Online violence targeting LGBTI people is not only an issue in Brazil, it is a global phenomenon. Research has shown that LGBTI people are more vulnerable to online harms than their heterosexual and cisgender peers.[220] LGBTI people are particularly targets of gender-based violence, which is often underreported due to the misgendering of trans and gender-diverse individuals.[221] Trans women in particular, experience some of the highest rates of violence. A 2021 study across nine African countries

218 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview.

219 - Donald Padgett, "Gay Teacher and Activist Shot, Body Set Ablaze in Horrifying Attack," *Out Magazine*, May 17, 2021.

220 - Rachel Keighley, "Hate Hurts: Exploring the Impact of Online Hate on LGBTQ+ Young People," *Women & Criminal Justice*, 32:1-2 (2022).

221 - Nyx McLean and Thurlo Cicero, "The Left Out Project report: The Case for an Online Gender-Based Violence Framework Inclusive of Transgender, Non-Binary and Gender-Diverse Experiences,' *Feminist Internet Research Network*, (August 2023): 17-18.

found that three in four trans women had experienced violence in their lifetime with almost half also experiencing violence within the year of the study.[222] Across England and Wales, hate crimes against LGB identifying people decreased by 6% in the year ending March 2023 (although still the second highest motivator after race), but there was an 11% increase in trans hate crimes.[223] In a 2020 UK based survey, 96% of LGBTI respondents had experienced more than one incident of online hate within the past five years.[224] LGBTI youth are particularly targets for online violence. A 2017 study across 75 countries of young people aged 13-25 found that respondents identifying as bisexual, pansexual and/or queer faced higher rates of online violence.[225] This correlates with a GLSEN study in the United States which saw one in four young LGBTI people experienced bullying due to their gender identities and/or sexual orientation within the past year.[226]

Generally, online violence is a difficult legal category as many countries do not recognise online hate as a form of hate speech or a hate incident.[227] But this is worsened by the invalidation of online violence toward LGBTI people by police or reporting authorities, especially in countries without legal recognition or protections.

Our experience has been that, number one, online violence against women is invalidated and under-reported. Even those who report don't usually go through the entire reporting system, the entire justice system. It's invalidated to the point that, as a queer woman, if I went to police and said 'My partner is threatening me with whatever it is on WhatsApp, in our private chats,' the police would laugh at me and tell me, 'But first of all, aren't you guys friends? Aren't you housemates?' Because that's how we portray ourselves. 'What are you? Why has the fight between you escalated to this level?' There's already an invalidation of the experience of online violence, even with law enforcement. Even sharing the experiences with friends elicits the same response because we haven't yet moved as a group, as a country, as a society, we haven't accepted online violence for the harm that it is.[228]

When we talk about preventing gender-based violence, it's still very restricted to preventing violence against women and girls. So I think in our country [India], we

222 - Alex Mülller et al., "Experience of and Factors Associated With Violence against Sexual and Gender Minorities in Nine African Countries: A Cross-Sectional Study," *BMC Public Health* 21, 357 (2021).
223 - "Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2022 to 2023, Second Edition," Home Office, November 2, 2023.
224 - Luke Hubbard, "Online Hate Crime Report 2020," *Galop*, (2020): 5.
225 - Zachary R. Myers, Susan M. Swearer, Meredith J. Martin, Raul Palacios, "Cyberbullying and Traditional Bullying: The Experiences of Poly-Victimization Among Diverse Youth," *International Journal of Technoethics* (IJT) 8, no.2 (2017).
226 - GLSEN, CiPHR, & CCRC, "Out online: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth on the Internet," GLSEN, (2013): x.
227 - Keighley, "Hate Hurts."
228 - HER Internet interview

need to push forward to include diverse queer and trans folks when we talk about violence.[229]

An area for further research is documentation and data collection around online harms that LGBTI people face globally, especially in rural areas, where there is less infrastructure set up for reporting incidents of violence as well as less research conducted on this issue generally.

If we look at Brazil today, we still don't have very tangible data. When we look at all the data on violence against the LGBTQIA+ population, we still lack a lot. We have a lot of data from the capitals and metropolitan regions, but each state is very large. If we think about a city in the countryside that is 1,000, 2,000 kilometres away from its capital, it barely has a police station. It barely has a health service and that's how we look at it too, because we know there are LGBTQIA+ people living there.

We need data to know about these populations. Research is very much focused on the capitals and Brazil is extremely large and we don't have the control to know, but we need to know as much information as possible that we still don't have access to, not even ourselves. We've been thinking on the one hand, how do we use the tool, the technology, the internet, the social networks, so that we can report what violence is happening, but also how can we put an end to this LGBT-phobic violence that happens on social networks? But also how do we access it in a more democratic way and also think about protocols with technology, protocols to think about the fight, right? Prevention and combating LGBTphobia where we still can't reach state apparatuses in a safer and more effective way.[230]

Increased data collection on the specific harms (and the reasoning for these harms) that LGBTI people face globally is essential for combating the rise in anti-LGBTI violence and improving the online experiences for those who are exposed to violence online.

229 - TARSHI interview.
230 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview.

Social and legal barriers

As of December 2023, 63 UN member states criminalised consensual same-sex sexual acts, with many laws rooted in colonial eras.[231] ILGA World research has shown how diverse gender expressions appear to be a central element triggering a disproportionate number of arrests, and that the mere existence of these laws means that LGBTI communities live under a constant threat.[232] LGBTI human rights defenders are the second most targeted group after environmental, indigenous people's rights, and land defenders. The United Nations reports that LGBTI human rights defenders have experienced offline harms such as arbitrary arrests and detainment, having their homes and offices raided, and online slander. From 2015-2019, the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded 45 killings of LGBTI human rights defenders with the vast majority in Latin America and the Caribbean.[233] Even in cases without criminalising legislation, LGBTI-phobic rhetoric from governments and officials reinforces the dangerous atmosphere for LGBTI individuals living in countries with hostile policies. For example, Poland has seen a radical reduction in the safety and freedom of LGBTI people through measures like "LGBTI-free zones," profiling of activists and crackdowns on freedom of assembly.[234] ILGA World has documented 58 countries with legal barriers to freedom of association for LGBTI civil society organisations, which impacts their ability to register as well as impedes on the activities they conduct.[235]

In India, social stigma and government restrictions on free speech have created a hostile online environment for both LGBTI individuals and advocacy-focused organisations.

We have a digital magazine. We have a lot of queer and trans authors writing for us. I was just going through those and somebody did mention that they don't have the freedom to loiter, mindlessly scroll, or post about something of their own lives on social media. I found that very powerful. Because when it comes to sexuality, you literally don't have the freedom to be mindlessly you and post something online. Personally, I work in this field and, as a communications person, a major part of my

231 - "ILGA World Database - Legal Frameworks | Criminalisation of Consensual Same-Sex Sexual Acts," ILGA World, accessed December 18, 2023.

232 - ILGA World: Kellyn Botha, "Our Identities Under Arrest: A Global Overview on the Enforcement of Laws Criminalising Consensual Same-Sex Sexual Acts between Adults and Diverse Gender Expressions," 2nd Edition (Geneva: ILGA, November 2023).

233 - "Defenders of the Human Rights of LGBT Persons Constantly At Risk, Warn UN Experts," OHCHR, March 24, 2022

234 - Amnesty International, "Poland: 'They Treated Us Like Criminals' : From Shrinking Space to Harassment of LGBTI Activists," *Amnesty International*, (July 2022)

235 - "ILGA World Database - Legal Frameworks | Legal Barriers to Freedom of Association," ILGA World, accessed December 19, 2023

work is social media. I'm somebody who advocates that social media is good. I mean, it has the power to change. That's what I do, right? But I also fear sharing if I post something, some resources for queer and trans folk, some stories of queer and trans folks. I do fear sharing it in my own personal stories because I know that there is a potential threat out there for me that people could troll me or attack me, and for that matter, I think our organisation is very careful when we post. Because we know that we have right-wing-like elements and governments who might not agree.

As an organisation, also. Funding comes from various sources. So you are literally fearful that your funding will be cut off if you post something that is not in agreement with the laws or the government. There is surveillance on how organisations post about those who do advocacy for queer and trans folks. Because we get foreign funds and the government can easily restrict how many funds you get, they can cancel your licence.[236]

Additionally, countries with state crackdowns on digital rights and freedom of speech impact LGBTI activists as well. In our discussion with ILGA Asia, we were given the example of how the monitoring and surveillance of environmental activists (the most targeted activist group)[237] can end up targeting individuals who are also LGBTI, leading to them to be harmed and/or arrested due to their identity. Surveillance practices can harm LGBTI people even when their identity is not the focal point of legislation or criminalisation policies.

Offline consequences for online behaviour is a theme we observed throughout this research. A key area where this is an issue is throughout the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, where there are many documented cases of police using WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger messages to target LGBT and gender-diverse people, as well as instances of dating app use leading to blackmail, extortion and violence by police and peers.[238] State officials use criminalising legislation to crack down on online behaviour through the explicit targeting and entrapment of LGBT and gender-diverse people by monitoring social media content, creating fake dating app profiles (on apps like Grindr), and illegally searching people's devices. People are prosecuted on charges ranging from same-sex conduct, prostitution, and vague crimes of "debauchery" and infringement of morality, in cases where consensual same-sex sexual activity is not explicitly criminalised. These incidents showcase how police threaten and silence LGBT and gender-diverse voices online and use *de facto* criminalisation tactics in the absence of formal protections for the community.[239]

236 - TARSHI interview.
237 - Defenders of the Human Rights of LGBT Persons Constantly at Risk, Warn UN Experts."
238 - "ILGA World Database - Legal Frameworks | Legal Barriers to Freedom of Expression."
239 - "'All This Terror Because of a Photo': Digital Targeting and Its Offline Consequences for LGBT People in the Middle East and North Africa," Human Rights Watch, February 21, 2023

Human Rights Watch has reported that LGBT people are targets of state harassment throughout the SWANA region through social media entrapment. Their research conducted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia exposed how officials and police would use social media posts and dating apps to subject LGBT persons to harassment, blackmail, and forced outing. Additionally, they have used social media posts and dating app profiles as evidence in trials; illegally obtaining photos and message histories for prosecution. Not only is this a significant breach of privacy, but these actions can lead to arrests, arbitrary detentions, job loss, and in some cases abuse.[240] At times, the police fabricate evidence, argue that money is exchanged for sex to trap people on prostitution charges or simply lie about the context or meaning of online content.[241]

Additionally, research from Article 19 shows how police use street surveillance to search people's phones and incriminate people suspected of being LGBTQ in Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia. Police specifically target trans women and feminine-presenting gay men. Research on police use of digital technologies throughout MENA to entrap and prosecute LGBT and gender-diverse individuals show how the police do not rely on sophisticated surveillance mechanisms but rather use manual monitoring and searches of WhatsApp messages, Facebook accounts, and dating apps. This has led LGBT and gender-diverse people to delete messages and intimate photos more frequently, although police would use innocuous messages to imply criminal charges – there is only a degree to which people can exercise increased security and caution as this is predominantly an issue of abuse of power (and lack of LGBTQ legislative protections).[242]

These issues are not isolated to MENA. In our discussion with the Pan Africa ILGA office we discussed the issue of blackmail and extortion that might occur between peers on dating apps. In our interview with TARSHI as well, the issue of online harms occurring through dating apps from peers was a theme.

Dating apps are now made a bit accessible for all identities. But there was an incident where one of my friends who identifies as gay accessed a dating app where straight men connect with him and if the other person does not agree to meet or interact, they would literally threaten that "you will be called out and we'll report you to the police." Even in spaces that you think are predominantly made only for queer people. Even in spaces that you think are a safe space and all of us to identify differently, or for people to question their own sexuality. If you don't agree to what they do, they would be like: "We will call you out and we'll put your identity in public

240 - "Middle East, North Africa: Digital Targeting of LGBT People," Human Rights Watch, February 21, 2023.
241 - Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, "How Egyptian Police Hunt LGBT People on Dating Apps," *BBC*, January 30, 2023.
242 - Afsaneh Rigot, "Digital Crime Scenes: The Role of Digital Evidence in the Persecution of LGBTQ People in Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia," Article 19, (March 2023)

and your parents might not know you identify as a different gender identity or sexual identity".

They could put your personal data online, put your photos online, threaten you if you don't give them what they would like. There are many instances like that, as well. I think I would say sexuality as a whole is restricted in digital spaces because in India it is related to something obscene. So if you express your sexuality, it is related to an obscene, unacceptable way. That pushes people to be like: 'This is corrupting our culture.'[243]

LGBT and gender-diverse people face high levels of surveillance and criminalisation in countries with hostile legislation. This surveillance can come from community members, friends and family members in the form of lateral surveillance and/or from state apparatuses. In our interview with Uganda-based HER Internet we discussed the recent Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda and how the climate of this extreme bill impacts LGBTI people's experiences of public life. We specifically discussed in-person surveillance that can impact people going to places to use public internet resources as well as the impacts it has had on LGBTI advocacy groups.

Surveillance is an issue in our experience, but also from the conversations we have with community members, both informal and formal. Surveillance is both from people that they know - so: family, friends, ex-lovers, work colleagues, the neighbours - but there's also state-sponsored surveillance that is targeting the collective. With the people that they know, usually this stems from people being perceived as queer, even if they aren't visibly queer or aren't out to friends and family and neighbours and whatever. We have very bad social habits in Uganda, where the neighbours are really nosy. Like you might be going about your business normally, but because it's only women who enter that particular apartment, people will raise eyebrows. They might even involve the police or the local council or the landlord or something like that. That's also a part of surveillance, like physical offline surveillance. Because why monitor who enters my house and ask all these questions about things that don't really concern you? In the current wave of the Anti-Homosexuality Act this year in Uganda, we've had instances of women-focused organisations being raided by the police because the neighbours are saying, what does that organisation actually do here? We don't really understand what they do because we only see women entering that gate, you know? But ideally you don't pay that rent. And if you aren't necessarily part of their target audience, then why would you involve police? You can come ask, what do you guys do? How can I be part of your work? But involving police is a drastic step.[244]

243 - TARSHI interview.
244 - HER Internet interview.

In addition to the example above, state surveillance can involve stalking, especially that of public figures and activists.

That's kind of the surveillance that we've seen offline, of course, from family members. It's also an issue. Family is family, despite the difference of opinion you might have or whatever issues that might be, you're still going to have to interact with family at some point. We've had family members who actively pay for surveillance against their own children, against their own kin. In Uganda, we have public transportation with motorbikes, which are pretty much everywhere. You just step out of the house and you'll find a motorbike by your gate to get you somewhere. Motorbikes are also used for surveillance by either state-sponsored or non-state sponsored people who want to surveil someone. So you just step out, be about your business, and there'll be a motorbike guy following you, and this usually happens for the activists, the leaders in the community who are kind of publicly known or publicly out or something like that, who have found themselves in these situations of being followed by motorbikes, by people they don't know.[245]

Anti-LGBTI legislation impacts the LGBTI community's freedom of expression, as it leads people to self-censor online. In our discussion with the ILGA Asia office, the representative reiterated that people cannot exist freely on the internet when there are sanctions or where it is illegal to be openly queer. This impacts how people will act online and what they will post. Legal infrastructure can be as important as physical infrastructure when looking at factors that contribute to the digital divide.

Our interview with ESWA showcases how online safety and privacy practices can protect LGBTI sex workers online, even in the midst of the criminalisation of sex work.

If you have access to digital technologies, if you can afford one and if your use of these technologies is not criminalised, it's not restricted, then that means that you are able to enjoy the kind of anonymity that digital technologies give you. This anonymity means that you can construct your identity in a way that will give you security. It could shield you from criminalisation and it could shield you from violence by providing you with the tools that enable you to screen clients. There are lots of benefits to of technologies when it comes to sex work, as well as lots of downsides of it as well. But the digital divide definitely means that some sex workers are safer than others.[246]

In addition to hostile legislation, digital rights legislation is still lacking when it comes to LGBTI protections, especially when there is the stigma of criminalisation

245 - HER Internet interview.
246 - ESWA interview.

laws in place. When there are laws in place to protect online harassment, non-consensual sharing of intimate imagery and other cybercrimes, LGBTI individuals are often dismissed as victims, especially in countries where their identities are criminalised or not legally recognised. This is especially true for LGBTI sex workers, who are doubly stigmatised for their identities as well as for their professions.

> *Basically there's this distinction between "good victim" and "bad victim". We see this dichotomy everywhere in national contexts and in European contexts, in global contexts, where even victims' rights organisations, NGOs, for example, act like they represent a certain kind of victims. There is this thing, as if some victims deserve justice more than the others. As if different groups deserve different kinds of justice. For example, when we are talking about intimate image-based abuse, non-consensual sharing of images and videos. So there are lots of attempts in national and European contexts to criminalise the non-consensual sharing of images and videos. But most of these amendments or laws are made with some consultation with some portion of the population that is impacted by this issue. Sex workers often experience image-based abuse because they share their own pictures online in order to find clients. So they consent to upload their pictures on a certain website, but they don't consent for other individuals to steal these pictures and upload it in other places or distribute it further. But in the eyes of policymakers and some victims' rights organisations, because sex workers are doing this, they deserve to, they should expect basically that image-based abuse will happen to them. What happens is that when there are legislators trying to form policies, they end up not consulting sex workers. They end up not recognising sex workers as one of the main populations that experiences this issue and as one of the key victims.*[247]

But while online harms are a pressing issue that prevent LGBTI people from fully engaging online, the internet has also provided a safer space for LGBTI advocacy organisations to host events and gatherings in the wake of hostile environments and legislation. Due to the legal landscape in Uganda, many organisations like HER Internet have moved almost all of their activities online.

> *This year has changed how we work completely. Actually, I remember the law was passed by the parliament. A day before we had a large in-person gathering planned. That night, we were scrambling to internally organise and see if we could continue with the workshop. That was the last in-person gathering we held. We've had to move online. We've done most of our digital security training online virtually. We also host regular dialogues to just talk about whichever relevant topic in tech is there, whether it's AI, whether it's surveillance, whether it's a new app like Facetune or TikTok, whatever it is usually posting regular dialogues. We've moved everything*

247 - ESWA interview.

online. For our own safety as an institution and the staff, but also because people don't feel comfortable being in large gatherings anymore because anything can happen. We've had instances where we are in a physical meeting, and then one of the participants is not known by any of us. So we don't know whatever their intentions were and we don't know where they had come from and where they took that information. Because as any gathering is, you introduce yourself, introduce your organisation, talk about your pronouns and all those things. We don't know where that information went. So people are also very wary around being in large gatherings.[248]

While moving online can offer a higher level of safety for their members, it also makes it difficult at times to run activities or trainings. Remote digital security training is particularly tricky to accomplish. This has particularly impacted the rural outreach of the organisation.

That also means that we are unable to reach out to community members outside of the central region as effectively. Because the infrastructure is always in cities. The farther you move out of the city the connectivity is way worse. People don't have access to smart devices. One device is used by more than five people. So people don't have money to be on Zoom for two hours. Or even for an hour because it's very costly. We've had to then tone down our organising also upcountry, which is really affecting the beneficiaries, because at the end of the day, we are here to provide this support, but because of the legal and social context, we are unable to do it as well as we would like to.[249]

Another ongoing issue that impacts the legislative arena is widespread disinformation and misinformation around LGBTI people, globally, embedded in LGBTIphobia. In the EU, for instance, it is believed that LGBTI-specific legislation promoting equal rights and protections has been singled out and targeted for disinformation campaigns. Disinformation in this context is the spread of false and misleading information, which is intentionally disseminated to undermine human rights legislation.[250] Common dangerous and harmful tropes include conflating homosexuality with paedophilia, fears that schools are converting children into 'sexual deviants' through sexual education programmes, and general stigmas of sexual deviance for those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or non-binary.[251] These harmful tropes slander LGBTI people but also make online landscapes especially hostile and non-welcoming.

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248 - HER Internet interview.

249 - HER Internet interview.

250 - Cecilia Strand and Jakob Svensson, "Disinformation Campaigns about LGBTI+ People in the EU and Foreign Influence," *European Parliament Briefing*, (July 2021): 4-6.

251 - Strand and Svensson, "Disinformation Campaigns About LGBTI+ people in the EU," 8.

Disinformation can have impacts on legislation. An interview with HER Internet spoke of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023[252] being borne out of disinformation (much of it coming from the US).[253] Much of the propaganda around this bill concerned 'sexual deviance' of children allegedly being promoted in schools (just like in the EU).[254]

Prior to this law, our interviewee suggests a good deal of people felt comfortable being out online and sharing content about their life, publicly. The impact of the law has led many LGBTI people in Uganda to self-censor their content online and delete their accounts.

> *The narrative ran until a law was birthed out of this misinformation and disinformation. In that sense, then, that is how online harms kind of shape policies and shape the law and shape people's experiences in their context. Because of this law, even before the law was made, before it was passed and signed on by the president, there was a mass exodus of queer people from online spaces, because safety first, and people weren't taking chances. We went down this road ten years ago in 2013, 2014. So we knew what to expect. People deactivated their X accounts - Twitter back then - people deactivated Instagram, people cleaned out their friends lists so that the algorithm doesn't out them or whatever. People who are not part of their small, trusted community and so on. So mass exodus from online spaces also means that, for queers who are still struggling with their identity, coming out, and self-acceptance, then they have fewer people to look up to because no one is saying anything about them being queer. Everyone is self-censoring around how they portray themselves publicly on these online platforms. That is a problem because access to information is what got us here.[255]*

Like disinformation campaigns, online censorship is a global phenomenon. In India, some people choose to self-censor themselves rather than risk the online harms that can occur from expressing themselves freely.

> *The effect of who you identify in the virtual world actually has real-life, real-time implications for you. A lot of people do choose to be anonymous. I think we also respect those decisions. Even a lot of authors who write for us, sometimes they choose to be anonymous writers. I think we completely respect that because we know the implications that it can cause. While we do encourage people to openly speak about their identity, it is hard for a lot of people to even accept themselves and then deal*

252 - Ashwanee Budoo-Scholtz, "Uganda's President Signs Repressive Anti-LGBT Law," Human Rights Watch, May 30, 2023.

253 - HER Internet interview.

254 - "In Dialogue with Uganda, Experts of the Human Rights Committee Commend Improvement of Prison Conditions, Raise Issues Concerning the Anti-Homosexuality Law and Free Elections," OHCHR, June 28, 2023.

255 - HER Internet interview.

with what's happening out there. While homosexuality is decriminalised in India, still it's heavily, heavily stigmatised. Even laws that are there do not protect you enough from these violence and threats. Even queer and trans folks have to face a lot of police brutality, so they don't have a safe space to go back and be like: 'Okay, the law is supporting me so I can be who I want'. That does push people to be anonymous and not disclose their identity very openly.[256]

In particular, due to the United States' online dominance of platforms and social media sites, US legislation has direct impacts on LGBTI persons' experiences online, globally.

A large part of the regular person's internet experience is shaped predominantly by about four or five US-based social media platforms, owned more or less by about two or three US-based corporations. It has become almost habit for many of us to point to governments of Global South/non-Western nations as purveyors of censorship, rather than turn to the corporate giants who regulate our internet experiences every minute.[257]

Many tech companies used globally are based in the US, and as such these companies have to comply with US legislation. In our interview with ESWA, the example of the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), introduced under the Trump administration, came up as a key piece of legislation which has censured sex workers. These laws were intended to protect victims of sex trafficking from online exploitation as they hold platforms liable if they are caught promoting sex work through advertising sex on their websites. Rather than protecting victims of sexual trafficking and online harms, this legislation has unintentionally resulted in pushing sex workers into increasingly harmful situations.[258]

This ended up being a push for online platforms and services all around the world because they are mostly American companies. They have to play by the rules of the US mostly. It ended up being this huge sweep where all platforms and services started discriminating against sex workers. They started banning sex work accounts, even if sex workers are just being there and not promoting their services or anything. It ended up actually being harmful for political organising as well. For example, many of our members sex workers' rights organisations in many countries have their accounts on several online platforms constantly being taken down and they are being banned on a kind of weird IP level so that they can't even reopen a new account.[259]

256 - TARSHI interview.
257 - Wijesiriwardena, "Private Parts."
258 - "What Is SESTA/FOSTA?," Decriminalize Sex Work, accessed November 30, 2023
259 - ESWA interview.

Certain groups of LGBTI people, like LGBTI sex workers, are especially impacted by censorship laws. When their accounts are blocked or banned or platforms it forces them into more precarious work conditions, such as moving to less secure platforms or offline entirely.

Sex workers experience online discrimination a lot. This comes in different shapes and forms. We know that LGBT sex workers, or migrant or racialised sex workers and LGBT sex workers, are the two groups that are heavily censored and discriminated against when it comes to online technologies. They are banned, for example, much more frequently from using payment methods, or they are continuously, repeatedly kicked out from online services and platforms, which means that then these discriminated individuals have to use other forms of services that would not give them the same amount of protection. I'm talking about smaller platforms, more niche platforms which don't have the infrastructure to offer certain types of protection to their users because they are smaller. This discrimination from bigger platforms and services ends up being a safety issue for sex workers.[260]

This type of banning is especially harmful for those who are the most marginalised. In our interview with ESWA, they explained that in the wake of SESTA/FOSTA one of the US companies that began banning sex workers was PayPal.[261] While many sex workers continued using PayPal since the new laws were difficult to regulate, sometimes the platform would catch on and shut down accounts. In this event, if the person had money in their account, they would lose access to it, placing poorer sex workers at risk.

If you have money in that account at the time that they ban your accounts, you lose that money as well. It happened to many sex workers where they had to then lose the rent money for that month. This means that they have to work more in the remaining of that month so that they can remake the rent money, which means that they have to say yes to clients that they would normally say no to. Clients that they don't trust; clients that may be violent. In this way, digital discrimination and digital divide keeps sex workers poor. The poorer sex workers are more vulnerable to violence because they don't have any leverage to refuse clients. Because so many sex workers in Western Europe especially are migrants, many of them are racialised, they may be undocumented, so they don't have access to any other way to basically generate income. So sex work ends up being 100% of their income. The digital divide means for this community is that you can't work anywhere else, but you can't really do sex work either. So what then? It's just very dangerous for everyone.[262]

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260 - ESWA interview.
261 - "Letter to PayPal and Venmo from EFF and others," Electronic Frontier Foundation, June 15, 2021
262 - ESWA interview.

Again and again, in this research we saw that the digital divide creates a vicious cycle: those most affected are also the most vulnerable to the harms of online censorship, blocking, and harassment. Or, as our interviewee put it, "The digital divide basically in some situations creates poverty and in others it maintains the poverty."[263]

Yet in all this, there is hope. Despite a wave of LGBTI-phobic legislation and cultural pushback worldwide, people are finding ways to organise, especially online. While this research focuses on the barriers to online access, there are a multitude of cases of people circumventing LGBTI-phobic sentiments and legislation to find community online. In Brazil, we were reminded of how long the struggle for the human rights of LGBTI people has been and the progress that has been made:

> *Nowadays, we are suffering from various threats, not just as rural subjects. We're suffering as a whole. But we're also doing our bit to fight back and stand up for what is our right. After all, we're back in a government that's a bit more democratic in Brazil. We also need to move forward in order to be able to hold on to what is an agenda and a right that we have already won over the years of struggle by the LGBTQ+ population.[264]*

In Uganda, people are finding safety in collective voices and are using organisational accounts to speak up: as HER Internet told us, "So that's how people are now organising, behind organisation accounts or collective accounts, rather than using their individual accounts for information sharing, knowledge production, building community."[265] Additionally, LGBTI organisations and activists are taking up space in the movement to fight hateful legislation.

> *People have moved back into the closet, people have moved offline. But at the same time, we are resilient. I know we are resilient. Now more than ever, there's also been a pushback, like a proper pushback. When the law was passed ten years ago, the community was still young and fragile. We are still fragile and young, but you get what I mean. The people were fighting the law on our behalf as allies and partners, other civil society organisations, feminist organisations, legal partners and allies. Those working in SRHR agencies, embassies who all were speaking on behalf of the LGBT community.*
>
> *The difference between then and now is that at the moment, queer people are the face of the pushback. We've self-organised to the point that, yes, the allies are still supporting us here and there, but the people speaking against the law, speaking against all this injustice, are actually community members. As much as terrible things are happening and they are terrible, there's also been some great*

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263 - ESWA interview.
264 - Colectivo LGBT do MST interview.
265 - HER Internet interview.

things happening which have been, people rising up to say no, like ten years ago, were silent. Now we can't afford to be silent because, as Zora Neale [Hurston] has said in her quote, that when you're silent about your pain, people will kill you and say that you enjoyed it. There's been a lot of pushback from the community itself, both online, and also organising offline, engaging different embassies, engaging different civil society organisations that are our allies to see that this is fought. I'm very happy that we have, I think two or three appeals against the law in court currently, and two of those are being spearheaded by community members and community leaders. That says something about the growth of the movement, but also our resilience and our tendency and how we are pushing back.[266]

LGBTI organisations are at the forefront of combating legal and policy barriers so their communities can enjoy full rights in society, including the freedom to full expression online. Whether it's promoting rural access to internet services and online safety trainings, fighting bills like the Anti-Homosexuality Act, translating materials into local languages and contexts or building networks of solidarity, our interviewees are exhibiting resilience in the face of exclusionary policies.

There is much to be done to bridge the LGBTI digital divide and ensure online experiences that are free from violence and harm. We hope this research inspires more data collection on access to the internet and experience online for LGBTI communities, especially for trans, intersex and gender-diverse individuals. In the next section, we outline recommendations for broadening internet access and online safety for LGBTI people.

266 - HER Internet interview.

Recommendations and success stories

This section provides recommendations for next steps to address the digital divide for LGBTI people. Recommendations were gathered based on conversations with ILGA regional offices and in-depth interviews with ILGA World members.

Foster collaboration between groups and across identities

There is a need for greater collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and technology companies to bridge the digital divide. This is especially necessary to improve safety and accessibility online for LGBTI individuals.

Interviewees spoke of the need for increased solidarity working across movements to advocate for groups collectively. Cross-movement collaboration is necessary for combatting the barriers people face due to the multiple identities they hold.

> *We can't just work in isolation anymore. Any organisation that is an LGBTI rights organisation and sex workers rights organisations, migrants rights organisations, anti-racist organisations...we should make long-lasting collaborations and look for ways to support one another in our own advocacy activity in addition to what we are doing. That's very important. Also, I think it's important to try to influence the policy-making spaces.[267]*

They also spoke of the need for greater inclusivity when it comes to sharing stories and narratives that includes the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities, lower-class and lower-caste people.

> *Queer people who are Dalit also face double stigmatisation and marginalisation based on where they come from. There's no acknowledgement of that. There's a constant battle of who owns the narrative. What narrative are we putting out even within movements and even online?[268]*

Further, there is a need for collective advocacy across borders to promote the rights of LGBTI people on- and offline, especially for combatting disinformation

267 - ESWA interview.
268 - TARSHI interview.

campaigns. This collaboration will help to counter the similar policies emerging within regions, such as the wave of LGBTI-phobic legislation in East Africa.

It would really be great if we could have some support in that way in terms of fighting back, not just in individual countries, but as a region. Because when this law came up in Uganda, Tanzania said they're drafting a law. I know in Rwanda the president has said that in his country there are no queer people at all. Yet we know very many queer Rwandese people. So that kind of backing up, that carries weight, that carries a punch. But then also recognising the fact that many sponsors of these oppressive laws are actually from the West. West Evangelicals who are all about the traditional family, who are transphobic, who are homophobic. We can't now, here in our developing countries, in the sub-Saharan region, we can't fight them alone. We need that support also from where they come from, to meet in the middle and find a way forward against them.[269]

Interviewees spoke also about the need for increased collaboration between civil society groups and technology companies in relation to policy development and design. For example, the need was expressed for technology companies to intentionally support online safety, improve content moderation and improve identification of online violence. Groups spoke also about the need for improved security features on dating and messaging apps, to protect against situations of entrapment and harm.[270] Groups also spoke of the need for technology companies and governments to include diverse voices (including LGBTI, those with disabilities and language minorities) in their design of technology on the user end and to comply with standards such as the design justice principles.[271]

Big tech needs to listen to their end users seriously. I mean, their tech is made for end users like me, like you, who are not necessarily part of the designing and developing phases. They also need to be able to listen to their end users with as much effort as they put into developing the tech. Social media platforms are where most of these harms happen. But somehow content moderation is not taken as seriously, and people who are doing content moderation are also not working in great conditions, so they aren't able to do their work as effectively. But then also big tech would come and set up companies in our countries and still not involve diverse voices. So it will be their own tech developers and maybe one or two management people that are going to manage the company here in the context of the country. They aren't involving diverse voices — LGBTQ voices, Black people, women — to be part of these conversations, in how their products impact the end users lives. I think the role of big

269 - HER Internet interview.
270 - Nora Noralla, "Digital Persecution: Surveillance in Queer Digital Spaces," The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, August 25, 2023.
271 - "Design Justice Network Principles," Design Justice Network, last updated summer 2018

tech needs to come out really clearly around what they are doing, around account-ability and transparency of their products, around how they are using our data.[272]

Education and awareness

Education around digital literacy and digital security are necessary for widening access to online spaces and improving online safety. Lack of digital literacy, especially for women and gender-diverse people, is a key barrier for digital participation. Increased funding and programming in this area is an essential area for growth.

Interviewees spoke of increased promotion of digital literacy and safe online practices within LGBTI communities. It was suggested that this could be through capacity building, increased funding to support existing programmes, and trainings by digital rights organisations to support local offices. Additionally, interviewees identified a desire for trainings on how to be safe online, especially for criminalised populations.[273] Further, partnerships with content creators were suggested as a means by which to increase knowledge and awareness of and speak about identity and sexuality from an affirming and pleasure-centred view.[274]

> *Now times are shifting, right? You don't rely on traditional methods for information. You're relying on digital platforms and media for information. I mean, 27 years ago, TARSHI would run a helpline where people would call you to get this information, even about gender reassignment surgery or what does it mean to be a transgender [person]. Those are things we used to answer in the helpline 27 years ago. But now we have seen a drastic shift where we get DMs and we get messages, and there are content creators who are being asked such questions. How do we bridge that gap? Our work is mostly about accessibility. There are people who are already looking out for information, who are not able to get it in a pleasure-affirming and rights-space perspective. We envision a project where we do training for just content creators, new or old, for them to give them the right kind of information that we have accumulated for the last 27 years.*[275]

Many interviewees already provide support and trainings to their key beneficiaries related to digital security and digital literacy, even if this falls outside of their primary mandate as organisations. This includes, for example, HER Internet's resource centre as well as ad hoc digital security trainings, Colectivo LGBT do MST's digital security training partnerships with Maria Lab, and attendance at larger global security

272 - HER Internet interview.
273 - ESWA interview.
274 - TARSHI interview.
275 - TARSHI interview.

trainings, such as that done by TransWave Jamaica. Additional or continued support and funding to LGBTI organisations for this work, as well as facilitated knowledge exchanges to promote replicability of other organisations, are vital. This includes funding to support translation, graphic design, and research to provide education-al resources. Interviewees requested the generation of more online resources and education programmes tailored to the LGBTI community, especially those that are language- and regionally-specific.

> *It's very important that we continue doing digital security work because that's one of the ways to minimise or mitigate the occurrence of online violence. So people are aware about how to keep themselves secure online. It's a ripple effect because they will also act accordingly when they are online to other people. We need more support resources, whether it's reading material, whether it's support with doing graphics design work or translating materials. We have quite a number of publications on this at HER internet, I know other organisations also have a couple of publications, but these are mainly in English. So translating this or converting that written content into graphics design work – that would be easy for people to follow and utilise. Then of course more research like this around how people use and access the internet, but also how they are impacted by technology generally.*[276]

Legal reforms and infrastructure support

A major barrier to online participation identified in this report is legislation that limits the digital rights of LGBTI individuals. This includes the criminalisation of LGBT and gender-diverse communities and sex workers (as well as "morality laws"), sur-veillance and a lack of victim protection for incidents of online violence. Additionally, there is a need for greater government investment and support for expanding broad-band infrastructure and regulating (and subsidising) high internet costs. LGBTI peo-ple are trying to stay safe online (and are able to do so to a degree). More can be done to support this through capacity building and support for digital security. But ulti-mately there are legal hurdles of legislation that criminalises people and surveils and monitors activists. Raising awareness about these laws and advocating for change at a macro level would protect LGBTI digital rights and promote digital inclusion.

Interviewees spoke of the need for greater advocacy regarding laws and policies to protect online rights, digital rights, and rights of LGBTI people. Increased aware-ness around laws that threaten online safety, as well as knowledge sharing around legal protections to freedom of expression, are vital towards combating online vio-lence and threats to privacy.

276 -HER Internet interview.

We need more awareness within the LGBT community at an individual level and collective level for us to bridge that gap between digital rights and general human rights. Sometimes these are treated as different, but actually, it's all part of human rights. If I have a right to live, then I have a right to enjoy where I live and how I live and how I decide to live my life. In this way, then we shall be able to tackle single issues like the Anti-Homosexuality Act because with digital rights, I'm not necessarily contravening the law in that way. I'm simply bettering my experience online and bettering the experience of others, while also being cognisant of the fact that it is part of human rights. For someone to live with dignity, with freedom of association, freedom of speech. We need a lot of resources in terms of that, whether it is resourcing organisations like ours that do this work already, or it is offering more resources for collaborations between organisations doing different work.[277]

In addition to legal reforms, there was a desire by interviewees for more government programming to increase investment in internet connectivity and infrastructure.[278] State-wide interventions are necessary in broadening infrastructure and improving access, particularly in rural areas.

Funding and support

Interviewees were unanimous on the need for more funding to support LGBTI organisations. Several of the groups we spoke to mentioned the need for additional funding and support towards bolstering digital inclusion initiatives for ILGA World members and LGBTI communities more generally. Interviewees mentioned many initiatives that already exist that are providing a number of services to their target communities. In India, the example of government control over restricting funding is a growing concern, which impedes advocacy work, limits foreign funding and silences LGBTI and feminist advocates.[279]

Further resources are needed to bolster digital inclusion initiatives for LGBTI people. Many LGBTI organisations are already providing such services but require additional support (refer to the education and resources section). Hence, additional funding and support is needed to allow for current work providing digital security

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277 - HER Internet interview.

278 - Read more on government investment in broadband infrastructure: Débora Prado, "Including Community Networks in Universal Service Fund Strategies: A Step to Overcome the Digital Divide," APC, last updated August 2, 2023;
David Indeje, "Universal Service Funds as a Financing Mechanism for Community Networks in Kenya," KICKTANet, February 22, 2023; "Digital Malawi Project to Promote Access to Information," Government of the Republic of Malawi, September 4, 2023; "Affordable Connectivity Program," FCC, accessed November 30, 2023; "Broadband infrastructure fund: Finance for rural internet access," European Investment Bank, November 30, 2016; USAID, "Connecting People: Transforming Nations," USAID, (May 2022).

279 - TARSHI interview.

trainings, digital devices, and internet and data plans.

> *I think definitely more support in terms of getting people access to equipment and internet access is always the best solution. I would love to be able to provide more credit support to our community so they can return their phones so they can have access to certain things. That would be good. We always need more equipment here as well.*
>
> *At least that's where we need more support in and for the community in general, I think just being able to have access to the internet. like phones and for the most part, they'll tell you they prefer a phone over a laptop. I guess because you can do everything from your phone, including typing a document or creating anything, If they have access to phones and to credit here, they'll be good.[280]*

The need for core funding to support full time staff and the ability to adapt to prioritise areas that the community deems to be the most pressing are also considered very relevant. Some interviewees mentioned that while internet connectivity and resources are important, for some LGBTI organisations, this is not always the most pressing need. Listening to LGBTI organisations, especially smaller ones, about what they need and how they can best support their communities is essential for maximising impact.

> *I know the internet is very important, but the lives of our people on land are more important than connectivity. We can go without connections. But if we aren't able to serve our people, nationally, how can we connect overseas, and when they don't have the energy, when they don't have the freedom to talk.[281]*

Lastly, more funding to support research centred on the experiences of LGBTI people and their experiences online (such as this report) will be beneficial in understanding the extent of the LGBTI digital divide. There is a need for more research on areas and communities who are less online as well as greater regional coverage than was possible for the scope of this report. We hope this report launches increased dialogue and engagement over this issue and a wider conversation of what digital inclusion for LGBTI people globally looks like.

280 - TransWave Jamaica interview.
281 - Tonga Leitis Association interview.

ilga world