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## Bringing diverse SOGI into peacebuilding policy and practice

Megan Daigle and Henri Myrttinen

*Peacebuilding sets out to respond to societal breakdown in times of violent conflict, but the needs and experiences of people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI) have been notably absent from peacebuilding research, policy and practice thus far. Individuals who fall outside the binary categories of women and men, or who do not adhere to heterosexual norms, confront a spectrum of violence that transcends conflict itself. War and displacement function to add layers of vulnerability, precariousness and danger to lives already under threat. This article draws on primary research conducted with refugees, activists, service providers, and lawyers in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, Nepal, and Lebanon, as well as a survey of published research from around the world. We argue that it is essential to broaden the debate on gender in peacebuilding and humanitarian response so that it includes diverse SOGI issues. We then elaborate on possible ways that humanitarian and peacebuilding work can better address these issues in future.*

**Keywords:** LGBTIQ+, sexuality, peacebuilding, conflict, SOGI.

### Introduction

At its core, peacebuilding is about building more inclusive societies, and reducing social marginalisation and violence. Following John Paul Lederach (1997: 20), we see peacebuilding “as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships.” Identifying—or being identified by others—as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ+), or other difference related to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), can dramatically heighten vulnerability amongst people affected by conflict. This makes the current lack of attention to SOGI issues sit quite uneasily with the kind of inclusive and rights-based approaches put forward by peacebuilders today. Furthermore, as we explore below, persons of diverse SOGI face violence and discrimination already, both prior to and after the end of violent conflicts. Thus, if practitioners are serious about prioritising the most marginalised and vulnerable, as we believe they should be, then often it is persons of diverse SOGI who should be included in various peacebuilding efforts.

In this article, we highlight the reality of violence and discrimination being experienced by people with diverse SOGI, along a continuum that extends beyond peace and war. As such, these experiences and the needs they create transcend and extend beyond conflict itself. Feminist activism and research has long argued that sexual and gender-based violence exists on a continuum across conflict and peace, affecting women, girls, and non-binary people in particular, but also men and boys who are rendered vulnerable by social norms and other factors (Moser 2001). We show here that there is a similar dynamic at work for individuals with diverse SOGI. In conflict settings, violence against people with diverse SOGI may rise in intensity and be experienced in additional ways, but violence is already part of everyday life in peacetime. Violence may be committed by a range of armed and civilian actors: militaries, police and rebel factions certainly, but also non-combatant community members, up to and including people’s own family members (Daigle and Myrttinen 2017, Myrttinen, Khattab, and Maydaa 2017, Rumbach and Knight 2014, Serrano-Amaya 2014).

As part of its broader work on gender in peacebuilding, International Alert began examining SOGI-related issues in more detail approximately five years ago. In recent years, peacebuilding as a field has

assimilated gender equality issues into its rubric for building more inclusive societies, but the model used by the wider gender and development (GAD) field has privileged a binary distinction between women and men, with a single gender identity connected to each (El-Bushra 2012). As a result, integrating a gender perspective into development and humanitarian policy and programming has not automatically led to inclusion or representation of people who do not conform to dominant heterosexual norms and binary gender identities, and they remain largely absent from research, policy and programming.

We believe our research offers important insights for humanitarian and development policymakers and practitioners. Foremost amongst these is the perspective our research offers on the particular challenges that individuals with diverse SOGI face in finding support networks and accessing critical services and resources, all of which are essential to their survival. Conflicts and disasters often result in the loss of whatever informal (and often by necessity secretive) communities or peer support systems built up by diverse SOGI communities (Rumbach and Knight 2014). It is also important to note that there is nothing innate or unavoidable about the vulnerabilities facing people with diverse SOGI; on the contrary, their lives are conditioned by socioeconomic marginalisation and prejudice that are only exacerbated in times of violent conflict.

Below, we start by offering a reflection on terminology. We then discuss our research aims and methodology, before moving on to examine experiences of violence amongst people with diverse SOGI in conflict. Next, we explore the multiplicity of exclusions that people with diverse SOGI face from an intersectional perspective, and how this marginalisation is magnified by conflict. Finally, we explore the innovative ways that people with diverse SOGI have made use of conflict to create new spaces and forms of agency in the midst of adversity.

### ***A note on terminology***

Terminology is not merely semantic—it is also conceptual and practical, given that visibility and naming are central to raising political and rights-based concerns, and to ensuring that marginalised voices are heard. However, as we will discuss below, societal invisibility may in some contexts also be a survival strategy for people with diverse SOGI.

While variations of the acronym LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, queer and other non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities) are commonly used in the West, they are not used universally, and some of our non-western research respondents objected to this kind of categorisation, which they felt did not reflect their lived realities. Identity categories like LGBTIQ+ also sit uneasily with people who view sexuality as set of *practices* rather than fixed identities.[1] Likewise, socially conservative groups often (erroneously) allege that LGBTIQ+ identities are Western impositions, leading individuals to distance themselves from these labels. LGBTIQ+ is also an aggregate category, and therefore risks glossing over differences between the groups—and individuals—to which it refers. Each faces disparate challenges, needs and goals, and each must be understood intersectionally[2]—that is, taking into account diversity in age, class, ethnicity, caste, appearance, social capital, location, education, marital status, urban or rural settings, having official papers or not, religious and ethnic background, as well as nationality.

The term SOGI[3] in itself does not indicate any particular group, as all human beings have sexual orientations and gender identities. In our research, we wanted to avoid labelling individuals or groups with identities and intentions that they have not themselves chosen. We settled on ‘diverse SOGI’ in an

attempt to express the variation that exists between individuals, as well as to avoid privileging 'normative' (i.e., heteronormative) identities and groups. We also chose to use the term 'diverse SOGI' because it highlights the specific vulnerability faced by those who are perceived to fall outside normative understandings of gender and sexuality. Aside from the ethical reasons for integrating SOGI concerns into peacebuilding, we argue that such a move can shed light on the functioning of violent ideologies—including xenophobic, ultra-nationalist and extreme secular ideologies, as well as various religious ideologies—that have used SOGI rights as a rallying point for broader campaigns against increased gender equality, democratisation, or other processes seen as threats to patriarchal traditions.

Conversely, some European far-right groups have attempted to co-opt struggles for SOGI rights, charging Muslim migrants and communities with homophobia in a cynical effort to turn public opinion against immigration and refugees (see for example Sehmer 2015).

Examining violence and exclusion relative to diverse SOGI can lead to a better understanding of the interplay between gender norms, gender identities, gendered power relations, and violence, getting to the heart of dominant heteronormative (and often violently masculinist) gender ideologies and how they perpetuate violence and unequal power relations.

### **Our research aims and methodology**

The research on which this article is built began with an initial scoping in Colombia and Nepal, carried out as part of a broader study of the role of gender in peacebuilding in 2013–14 (López Castañeda and Myrttinen 2014, Myrttinen, Naujoks, and El-Bushra 2014, Naujoks and Myrttinen 2014). Over the course of this research, it became clear that diverse SOGI were missing from peacebuilding work. This prompted us to carry out a second, more comprehensive piece of research, made possible by funding from the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Over the course of two years (2015–2016), International Alert, together with local partner organisations and two research consultants conducted field research in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, Nepal, and Lebanon, where we focused mainly on the situation of refugees with diverse SOGI from Syria, Palestine and Iraq. The aims of the research were three-fold:

- To conduct detailed research into the situation of persons with diverse SOGI in conflict, displacement, and peacebuilding scenarios in different geographical locations and at different stages of a conflict;
- To make the case for integrating diverse SOGI perspectives into peacebuilding policy and programming;
- To examine what this kind of integration of diverse SOGI perspectives would mean in practice for peacebuilding actors, including NGOs such as International Alert.

Our case studies were chosen for a number of reasons. First, these were countries where we had pre-existing networks with organisations working on diverse SOGI issues. Second, we were aiming for a broad geographical scope to give us a better comparative overview, and preferably one not focused on those countries that were already receiving a comparatively large amount of attention on these issues. Lastly, given the sensitivities around diverse SOGI issues, we decided to choose countries where there was at least some societal space to conduct research on this topic, without running the risk of endangering our partners and intended beneficiaries. The key findings were published in a 2017 report (Myrttinen and Daigle 2017), with the Lebanon data also serving as the basis for a separate book chapter (Myrttinen, Khattab, and Maydaa 2017).

The primary research consisted of 38 key informant interviews, and 17 focus group discussions. All insights and views attributed to research respondents in this article come from these interviews and discussions. In addition to the field research in the four countries, we conducted extensive desk research and individual key informant interviews with SOGI rights activists from different conflict-affected countries. In the sections that follow, we share some of the insights from the research.

### **Diverse SOGI, conflict, and continuums of violence**

Homo-, bi- and transphobic violence and discrimination does not start with the outbreak of conflict nor disappear with a ceasefire; likewise, escaping a conflict zone does not necessarily mean an end to violence for people with diverse SOGI as well as other marginalised groups. Armed conflict involves state-sponsored and -supported security forces, and often non-state militias, fighting each other and also meting out violence against the wider population. That said, it is important to understand this is not the only violence experienced during armed conflict. Other forms of violence are a daily reality in all societies, at all levels, from the household to the state. Even in peacetime, when armed groups are either absent or less empowered, violence against people with diverse SOGI is a common experience.

Our focus group discussions and interviews in Lebanon with Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian refugees, for example, showed that refugees with diverse SOGI are exposed to violence across various settings and at different stages of their flight. Research participants from Syria reported they had faced violence in rural towns and urban centres in Syria prior to the conflict, and this violence had escalated as the armed conflict intensified. While the violence committed by Islamic State has received the most attention, our respondents reported homo-, bi- and transphobic assaults by other non-state and state armed forces as well. Unlike most other civilians, persons of diverse SOGI also face the risk of violence from other civilians, including close family members. Refugees reported that they also experienced violence, extortion and discrimination based on their SOGI at multiple stages of their flight to Lebanon.[4]

The threat of violence thus came from multiple directions, and exploitation was rampant even in presumed 'safe spaces' like the diverse SOGI community of Beirut, where respondents experienced discrimination as refugees.[5] More broadly, upon arrival in Lebanon the refugees faced harassment, assault and discriminatory curfews by authorities; kidnapping and robbery without recourse; sexual harassment of refugee women identified as lesbians or trans; and extortion by their own sexual partners under threat of "outing" them.

Our respondents highlighted that they must also guard their SOGI and any relationships they may have in camps and interim housing that deny them privacy—including once they have made it to 'safe' EU countries (Myrttinen, Khattab, and Maydaa 2017). Research suggests that under-reporting of attacks in such situations is commonplace, since reporting itself can lead to more violence, either in retribution or from the security services to which the violence is reported (as for example documented in Colombia [CNMH 2015] or Northern Ireland [Duggan 2012]). These experiences demonstrate that it can be all but impossible to distinguish 'conflict-related' violence against people with diverse SOGI from 'non-conflict' violence, as violence is already integral to diverse SOGI groups' day-to-day experiences.

To add a further dimension to these analyses of continuums of violence, research shows that degrees, forms and intensities of violence and discrimination vary across contexts. Important factors include access to financial and social capital (due to factors including access to support networks, or educational level), class, caste, ethno-religious background, age, dis-/ability, or urban/rural location.

As stated above, sexual and gender-based violence functions on a continuum of violence that spans conflict and peace. Lesbian, bisexual and trans women, as well as some trans men, may face similar risks to heterosexual and cisgendered women, but violence is often exacerbated if their SOGI is revealed, as seen in so-called ‘corrective rapes’ of suspected lesbians in South Africa and elsewhere (HRW 2011). SOGI therefore intersects with other societal identity markers, including biological sex, age, and class, to shape these experiences of violence. Likewise, those in high-risk groups—sex working, living with addiction, accused of adultery, displaced as refugees—confront the same risks of violence as others in these categories, but theirs are heightened due to the way others in society judge their gender identity. Another additional factor of risk is their ‘visibility’ (or audibility) to others—that is, when physical appearance or voice suggests they are people with diverse SOGI.

It is increasingly recognised that armed groups engage in homo-, bi- and transphobic violence in conflict for the purposes of shaming, humiliation and dehumanisation of victims/survivors; reinforcing territorial control; obtaining community support; and maximising resources and impeding social mobilisation in areas under their control (Serrano-Amaya 2014). This is part of an often-deliberate strategy wherein armed actors maintain and propagate particular political and social models—and norms of masculinity and femininity—through public acts of violence. Our field research showed this being or having been perpetrated by a variety of armed actors in Colombia, Nepal, and Syria, and this has also been documented for a variety of other conflict contexts such as Iraq (OutRight Action International 2014), Northern Ireland (Duggan 2012) and Peru (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación 2003).

Below, we detail some of the distinct (but overlapping) forms of violence and exploitation faced by people with diverse SOGI that we have observed in our research on conflict and displacement.

### ***Targeted violence against diverse SOGI***

Sexual assault, exploitation and humiliation of individuals with diverse SOGI are commonplace at the hands of conflict actors as well as civilians, taking advantage of the culture of impunity around this abuse, and/or using the threat of ‘outing’. This was reported in all our focus countries, as well as across the literature. It affected people across the SOGI spectrum and both in and outside conflict zones. Physical and sexual abuse is common in spaces of detention, including refugee camps and prisons, and respondents in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia, Lebanon, and Nepal also reported blackmail and instances where they had to ‘buy’ protection from security services or armed groups, including through sexual services (see also UNHCR 2017, CNMH 2015, Daigle and Myrtilinen 2017, López Castañeda and Myrtilinen 2014, OutRight Action International 2014). [6] Targeted violence against persons of diverse SOGI has been reported from across the ideological spectrum, be it secular right-wing or left-wing groups, ethno-religiously motivated groups identifying with all major religions, as well as state and non-state actors.

### ***Policing of gender norms***

Homo- and transphobic rhetoric has been deployed by a variety of political movements and armed groups to entrench their own visions of gender. At the same time, they are entrenching their visions of nationhood, motivated by a range of factors from ideological positions through to a pragmatic need to shore up support with socially conservative civilian support bases. The language of social or moral ‘cleansing’ is common, as noted by the UN Security Council (2015). Colombia’s *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (CNMH) (2015,26) also reported that,

*armed actions [...] formed part of a calculated strategy to ‘clean’ the territories [...] or to ‘correct’ those life choices that they considered counter to how they should be.*

This quotation shows, supported by our research findings, that the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and Colombia’s right-wing paramilitaries acted as arbiters of gender relations, causing many to flee their homes following threats and harassment as well as public humiliation. Healthcare providers also reported referring trans, gay and HIV-positive patients to larger cities for their safety (Zea et al. 2014).

Echoing our findings, explicit or implicit policing of non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative identities and behaviours by armed groups as part of maintaining social order has been reported in locations as diverse as Peru (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación 2003), the South Caucasus and the western Balkans (Serrano-Amaya 2014), Northern Ireland (Duggan 2012), and Nepal (Naujoks and Myrtilinen 2014,). In both Peru and Northern Ireland, armed non-state actors have engaged in ‘regulation and punishment of deviant sexualities’, lumping persons diverse SOGI with sex workers, paedophiles and drug dealers (Curtis 2013).

### ***Blackmail and extortion***

Sexual and financial extortion of people with diverse SOGI was, according to our research, not necessarily systematic, but rather occurred opportunistically. Respondents from Syria and Lebanon reported coercion by security forces (police, military, and border guards) under threat of ‘outing’ to provide bribes or sexual services. In Colombia, this finding is independently corroborated by the trans support organisation Santamaría Fundación, which has documented extortion, abuse, and extra-legal practices by Colombian police (López Castañeda and Myrtilinen 2014).

Landlords were also known to blackmail tenants in Lebanon, where lesbian, bisexual and trans women reported harassment, assault, and extortion, all of a sexual nature, to avoid ‘outing’ and/or to keep their accommodation. Similar patterns were also reported by our respondents in Nepal, in particular in central Kathmandu.

### ***Multiplicities of exclusion***

As noted above, the marginalization of people and communities with diverse SOGI does not begin with the outbreak of conflict; rather, it is underpinned by legal, social, and ideological narratives that exclude such people from full access to the rights and opportunities available to all. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, public services are already likely to be limited by displacement and upheaval.

People with diverse SOGI also experience marginalization and exclusion that operate above, through, and beyond the law in terms of treatment by security services, ideological condemnation, social isolation, and lack of access to services.

### ***Legal—and extra-legal—persecution***

According to the UN OHCHR (2017), 77 countries worldwide have laws that criminalise same-sex sexual practices. Some countries going even further, criminalizing non-normative identities as well and exposing people with diverse SOGI to prosecution for their consensual activities and identities, or even for being the target of sexual violence, thus protecting perpetrators of homo-, bi-, and transphobic violence.

General legal provisions—for example, those that aim to control sex work, prevent what is classified as sexual deviance, and maintain public decency—are also frequently used disproportionately against people who do not conform to gendered norms of behaviour and appearance. In a UNHCR (2015, 13) report, one field office said that legal concepts like decency were ‘elastic concepts’ that could be deployed as security forces saw fit. Security forces themselves also tend to be vehemently masculinist[7] around the world (Enloe 2017). They may engage in occasional purges of members suspected of being gay or trans and instil intolerance in their ranks in a range of ways, although a few militaries and police forces have begun to allow openly non-heterosexual membership.[8]

In addition to legal criminalization, groups and individuals with diverse SOGI commonly confront extra-legal harassment and violence from state security actors. In Nepal, we interviewed staff of the Blue Diamond Society (BDS), a Nepalese organisation that provides advocacy for diverse SOGI people and tracks abuse against them, and reviewed their archive of documentation. BDS’s experience underscored the fact that increases in violence against people who fall outside normative gender and sexual identities—including physical and sexual assault, robbery, arbitrary detention, and ‘outing’ to family and media of both military and civilian individuals—were ‘directly linked to the increased mobilisation of military and police given the critical security situation in the country’ in the early-mid 2000s (key informant interview, Kathmandu, April 2013). Despite an official government policy of neither encouraging nor punishing homosexuality, a Nepal Ministry of Health official was reported by a key informant at BDS as noting, ‘police feel they can do anything to [diverse SOGI] people because there will be no consequences’. Our respondents in Lebanon reported police and soldiers extorting refugees with diverse SOGI who engage in sex work for sexual services with threats, which has been reported in other locations as well.

While violence and discrimination against people with diverse SOGI remain widespread, it is important to note that moments of acceptance and openness do occur. For example, the Philippines’ first same-sex marriage was organised by the Maoist New People’s Army (NPA) as part of its effort to promote ‘revolutionary families’ (Alburo 2011).

### ***Ideologies of exclusion***

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and gender non-conforming people are often convenient scapegoats for nationalist, religious, and other extremist propaganda that frames them as outsiders, traitors, or deviant and unpatriotic elements (Mohamed 2015). Gay men, or those perceived as such by others, are frequently viewed as susceptible to blackmail and hence to influencing by external forces hostile to society (Boellstorff 2014). Women identified as lesbians may be seen as threats to the patriarchal order (Igrutinović, Sremac and van den Berg 2015); people with diverse SOGI have also been portrayed as mentally ill, diseased, or contagious. Nationalist groups have been known to embrace hyper-masculine and heterosexual self-images that necessarily cast other nations, groups and actors as subordinate or inferior versions of masculinity, characterised by homosexuality and effeminacy. By casting them in this way, they can be seen as less legitimate in their claims (Igrutinović, Sremac and van den Berg 2015).

In the process of peacebuilding after conflict, backlashes against gender equality and SOGI rights are sadly common and shaped by what we have elsewhere called ‘golden age-ism’ (Myrntinen, Naujoks, and El-Bushra 2014, 9)—a longing for a purportedly better time in the past when (usually heteronormative) families, gender relations, and social lives were seen to be simpler and better. To that end, societies recovering from conflict and engaging in development may attempt to inaugurate



‘traditional’ gender roles (real or invented) in the name of social order—and find people who do not conform to these norms to be a barrier to these goals. An example of this trend was observed by our interviewees in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where SOGI-related activism in the period after the conflict of the 1990s has been met with increased violence by a range of non-state actors and actors from different ethno-religious backgrounds.

SOGI rights are often associated with Western influence across eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and south and southeast Asia, with the effect of invisibilising local non-heteronormative SOGI and the role played, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, by conservative Western private donors in supporting these agendas. Homo-, bi-, and transphobia are thus nationalist rallying points, even for those born after the outset of war, who have no memory of the purportedly better times they are trying to resurrect, as we saw in our research in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina.

On the other hand, some Western European countries, along with Israel, the US, Canada and Australia, have also seen the rise of ‘homonationalism’. This concept was originally developed by Jasbir Puar (2007, 83), who describes how accepting SOGI-related rights is increasingly seen as a prerequisite to being (or becoming) a liberal, progressive society. This also means that a certain vision of SOGI rights is being used to help build up a picture of the kind of person who is deserving of state support and protection. This idea of the ‘right kind’ of citizen or migrant tends to disadvantage non-Western migrants, and populations such as Palestinians and other Arabs in Israel. As such, it is critical for peacebuilders to be aware of this potential for the cause of SOGI rights to be operationalized in sometimes unexpected ways.

### ***Isolation and exclusion in social and community life***

Social exclusion for people with diverse SOGI begins with family and community, the social safety nets whose loss leaves them isolated and more vulnerable. Children who are revealed to be gay or trans are often ejected from family homes and thus struggle to complete school, experiencing higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, and instability and often resorting to petty crime, violence and sex work (CNMH 2015). These risks are exacerbated by conflict: over the course of our own research, for example, we encountered Syrian refugees with diverse SOGI in Lebanon who had turned to sex work in the absence of other options to earn money in their host country.

Our respondents amongst Syrian refugees in Lebanon reported pressure from their families to enter heterosexual marriages, as well as rejection from family homes; some had fled Syria to escape persecution by families, neighbours, and armed groups, while others were displaced with their families and lived closeted double lives. Likewise, in the wake of Nepal’s civil war, 20 percent of lesbians in a survey reported exclusion from family events and 25 percent had changed accommodation to escape prejudice in their neighbourhoods (Naujoks and Myrntinen 2014, 14).

### ***Poverty and lack of access to social services***

Particularly in the wake of violent conflict, leaders might view SOGI-related rights as trivial relative to more urgent concerns, but as Henry Armas (2007) argues, sexual rights are indivisible from political, social and economic rights—and are directly linked to health, education, and employment outcomes. Employment and social services suffer across the board in conflict, and all the more so for poor and marginalised groups, including people with diverse SOGI. The criminalisation of homosexuality can cause health workers to refuse to treat gay and transgender patients, either fearing repercussions or

because the law legitimated their own prejudice. Men in locations in conflict-affected societies from Colombia (Zea et al. 2013) through Northern Ireland (Duggan 2012) to Lebanon (Myrttinen, Khattab, and Maydaa 2017) and Uganda (Nyanzi 2013) have been subjected to forced examinations to ‘prove’ their sexual orientations, making hospitals themselves sites of violence for vulnerable people.

### ***Impacts of exclusion of diverse SOGI groups***

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the impact of conflict on people with diverse SOGI relative to the wider population is greatest in places where acceptance of SOGI-related difference was already poor prior to the outbreak of violence.

Stigma is as widespread as it is varied—culturally specific factors such as social caste in Nepal and ethno-religious divisions in the former Yugoslavia can play an important role—and the stress of conflict and displacement can increase familial violence, intimate partner violence, self-harm, and suicide. Gail Mason (1997, 27) wrote about the ‘double move’ of homophobia: non-normative people are marked out for violence while simultaneously silencing them with fear of that same violence, leading to stress, paranoia, disturbed sleep, further exclusion from services and communities, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide.

Our focus groups in Lebanon showed that conflict exacerbates both the need for secrecy on the one hand, and the stress of achieving it on the other, leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Likewise, research in Northern Ireland has shown that shame and fear throughout the time of the violent conflict there have limited the visibility of gay and lesbian people in public spaces even after the end of conflict, with many living secretly from family, friends and colleagues and avoiding public expressions of affection (Duggan 2012).

### **Claiming spaces and using peace for change**

The post-conflict moment can be an opportunity to enact real social change—and this change can be progressive toward diverse SOGI identities and behaviours, given the right pressure and support from rights activists, inclusive peacebuilders and allies (Clarke 2008). New laws and civic education can help to protect people from discrimination and shift the social norms and attitudes that give rise to prejudice in the first place. Recognition of marginalised and minority groups, as well as laws against discrimination and hate crimes, can be incorporated into treaties and constitutional processes. South Africa’s post-Apartheid constitution stands out in this regard as the first in the world to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.

All of these measures, however, must be undertaken with a degree of care to avoid causing backlash or increasing vulnerability for their intended beneficiaries. As a case in point, it has been argued that the inclusion of diverse SOGI rights in Colombia’s 2016 peace agreement may have prompted socially conservative voters to reject it in the referendum (Krystalli and Theidon 2016). In Nepal, a 2007 lawsuit by activists and organisations including BDS saw the Nepali Supreme Court overturn discriminatory constitutional provisions and recognise a third gender, based on indigenous forms of non-heteronormative identity. Nepal now has a focal point in its National Human Rights Commission that specifically examines the rights of SOGI minority groups, as well as inclusion in the national HIV/AIDS strategy (Naujoks and Myrttinen 2014).

Even outside formal peace processes and courts, conflict can provide openings for forging communities

and spaces in civil society, which offer opportunities to challenge and change social norms. These processes are not straightforward, and can be met with repression and violence, but they are important opportunities for people with diverse SOGI, as well as other groups and communities. They are also examples of resilience in the midst of upheaval. In both Syria and Nepal, our research tentatively suggested that crisis has caused a re-evaluation of social norms in some circles—although this is not guaranteed to be in favour of more progressive views on SOGI.

The development of a strong civil society with organisations agitating for rights and protection, a necessity in the absence of government institutions in conflict, has also shown benefits in establishing progressive and stable post-conflict societies. In Lebanon, the organisation Helem was founded post-civil war in 2004. It is the first organisation to serve people with diverse SOGI in the Middle East region, while other, more conservative organisations have been encouraged to take on SOGI issues after having worked with Syrian refugees with diverse SOGI. Likewise, Nepalese trans sex workers who participated in our research reported benefiting from organisations like BDS, which have fought to advance their rights. They said they are now less likely to face arrest and harassment by police than their cisgender counterparts.

However, these are not unproblematic developments, as activism and organisation are often focused around Western-style LGBTIQ+ identities. Some individuals do not, or for security reasons judge that they cannot, identify with an LGBTIQ+ label—and thus feed theories that diverse SOGI are Western impositions, as discussed above—but it is nonetheless encouraging and has provided lifelines for many.

Given the struggles faced by people with diverse SOGI, or even those perceived as such, it may be surprising that gay and trans individuals have managed to catalyse new spaces in the midst of conflict that have served as neutral ground—not only for themselves, but for others in their wider communities as well. In the midst of adversity, places such as gay clubs and organisations can become inclusive spaces where populations in conflict might find an escape from violence and the entrenched identities that divide them, however temporarily—as happened in Belfast during the Troubles (Duggan 2012).

In the next section, we consider some of the key insights that arise for us from the research and suggest some ways of making peacebuilding policy and practice more inclusive of the many issues faced by people with diverse SOGI.

### **Building inclusive peace—what does it mean for peacebuilders?**

Gender is at the heart of how individuals define their own identities, and how societies are structured, so it behoves those working on issues related to gender identity (and, inextricably, on sexual orientation) to be sensitive, proceed with caution, and engage any intended beneficiaries in the work itself, from planning through to implementation. Peacebuilders have an obligation towards the constituencies with whom they work to avoid causing harm, even unintentionally, and people with diverse SOGI will be best placed to define their own needs, not least in terms of confidentiality and anonymity.

The process of considering and integrating the full range of people and communities with diverse SOGI into peacebuilding policy and practice is, to our mind, a key plank in fomenting truly inclusive and transformative peacebuilding. It also shines light on a core paradox of the peacebuilding project: that challenging the power dynamics and social norms that give rise to violence will lead to conflict with those who have vested interests in these norms and dynamics. Hence, challenging violence may in turn

indeed lead to violence.

Proceeding with caution may mean abandoning plans where the risk is simply too great, but we believe that there is still space to take inclusive, collaborative and consultative stands for SOGI-related rights in conflict and post-conflict settings. Thus, peacebuilders aiming to work on these issues need to inform themselves, and coordinate closely with existing SOGI-related rights organisations and networks in the places they work, making sure to listen to, work with and support these groups, rather than duplicating or drowning out their own work.

Below are some suggestions for inclusive peacebuilding policy and practice.

### ***Practical ways to build inclusion***

Access to justice and recognition of, if not compensation for, atrocities and abuses committed in the course of a conflict are important elements of reconciliation. As we have discussed above, people with diverse SOGI are particularly vulnerable to violence and marginalisation both in and out of conflict itself, but post-conflict transitional justice and reconciliation mechanisms have by and large ignored their experiences to date. Some exceptions here include the *Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) in Peru, which included a section on violence against gay and trans individuals and communities in its final report, as well as the Colombian CNMH, which released a dedicated report on the impact of the conflict on diverse SOGI groups. International Alert is currently working on integrating diverse SOGI perspectives into local-level transitional justice work in Nepal.

In key peacebuilding activities such as security sector reform and disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration processes, building trust between security services and local populations is essential—and integrating SOGI issues has been a key part of transforming the security sector in places like Northern Ireland (Duggan 2012) and Serbia (Radoman et al. 2011), where people with diverse SOGI had viewed police as intolerant, hostile, and repressive. In terms of reintegration of former combatants, the *Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración* (Colombian Agency for Reintegration) has been engaging in internal discussions about ex-combatants with diverse SOGI and their needs, like benefits for same-sex couples and health plans that include hormonal treatments for trans ex-combatants (López Castañeda and Myrtilinen 2014).

Humanitarian relief and protection is another key area where steps can be taken to improve integration of diverse SOGI individuals and groups. While major agencies like UNHCR have begun mainstreaming diverse SOGI-related needs into their work, only 20 per cent of field office staff have been adequately trained—and these staff can be critical in ensuring (or preventing) access to services and resources (UNHCR 2015, 45). For the most part, humanitarian organisations still focus their efforts on an out-dated model of the nuclear family—for example, providing accommodation for family units, no non-binary bathroom facilities, and aid distribution to mothers for their families, disadvantaging those whose families do not fit such a mould, or whose gender identities do not permit them to safely use men's or women's bathrooms (Rumbach and Knight 2014).

Some areas, like HIV/AIDS prevention and care or sexual and gender-based violence prevention, tend to be more progressive in terms of gender sensitivity or sexuality—but even then, there is often more that can be done to ensure efforts are relevant to conflict situations or cognizant of the full range of SOGI diversity. For instance, while ending sexual and gender-based violence in conflict settings has been a key agenda item in development and security for some time now, and a key pillar of the UN Women,

Peace and Security agenda, this work has also only rarely taken SOGI issues into account, even where these directly contribute to increased vulnerability (Hagen 2016).

### ***Inclusion starts at home***

Peacebuilding organisations themselves can take important steps toward including people with diverse SOGI by considering their own ways of working: human resources, security planning, sensitisation and other training, and inclusive language, in addition to advocacy, policy and programming. Training on SOGI issues is particularly important for frontline staff—often the first point of contact with beneficiaries—including receptionists, drivers and security guards. A number of major NGOs have established in-house and cross-sector networks and focal points on SOGI issues in order to build institutional support and ensure continuous re-evaluations of progress. Funding is another key area, as NGOs and donors can encourage or even require inclusion of diverse SOGI experiences and perspectives, but this must again be done carefully to ensure the result is not cursory or superficial.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Ultimately, SOGI issues are amongst the many factors that affect experiences of violent conflict and peacebuilding processes, at both the individual and community levels. SOGI issues, and the perspectives and experiences of people with diverse SOGI, have not been taken into account in peacebuilding (nor in the wider security and development sectors) in an adequate way, due to both lack of knowledge and—possibly—reluctance to engage with a contentious and divisive issue. Nevertheless, we have made a clear case here for integrating SOGI issues in all their diversity into peacebuilding. People with diverse SOGI are frequently amongst the most vulnerable in any given society, exposed to heightened risks of violence and marginalisation at the hands of both armed and civilian actors, and they may face further challenges and risks on escaping conflict zones. These factors mean that examining their experiences and perspectives builds a better understanding of the power relations and gendered dynamics that create exclusionary social norms and foment violence before, during, and after conflict.

For International Alert, this research has been the basis for opening up new discussions both within the organisation and externally with partners and donors as well as policy audiences. Being very aware of the sensitivity of the issue, we aim to take a ‘do no harm’ approach to the greatest extent possible, adapting our work to what is locally feasible and basing it on discussions with those country teams who see an opening for this kind of work with local SOGI-rights organisations. In practice, this has meant the integration of diverse SOGI perspectives into our internal and external trainings on gender and peacebuilding as well as, where it is safe to do so, mainstreaming SOGI perspectives into our programming frameworks, including background research, baseline studies, and monitoring and evaluation. We have also commenced further research on diverse SOGI on conflict and peacebuilding in particular in Lebanon/Syria and Nepal with local partners and into SGBV prevention work in Myanmar. The language we use on the issue is tailored as much as possible to the local context, using whatever terms our partners prefer to use.

Peacebuilding is not just about technical processes and policies—it is a long-term endeavour that seeks to strengthen social cohesion and comprehensively reduce violence, which we argue necessitates a broad and deep understanding of SOGI issues and how they shape opportunities, challenges, and risks for people in all walks of life. Inclusive ways of working and building peace that combat homo-, bi-, and transphobia are thus transformative not only for people with diverse SOGI but for everyone.

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## **Endnotes**

**[1]** The use of catch-all labels like LGBTIQ+, as a fixed set of identity categories, has been criticised for excluding those who view sexuality as a more fluid form of identity or as a set of sexual and social practices (IDS 2017). We are also indebted to Nour Abu Assab from the Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC) for highlighting this.

**[2]** The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 1296) as ‘a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color’. It has since been used more widely as a way of analyzing how gender identities and expectations interact with other societal markers such as ethno-religious background, age, social class, sexual orientation, marital status, disability or the like.

**[3]** The acronym ‘SOGI’ (sexual orientation and gender identity, which is related to but distinct from our own use of ‘diverse SOGI’ as every person has a sexual orientation and a gender identity) is most commonly used by UN bodies to encompass their work on integrating sexual and gender diversity into the UN human rights agenda, although other organisations and institutions also use the term and/or address SOGI issues using other language. The term ‘SOGI’ emerged in 1990s as increasing attention was directed to discrimination and violence faced by people with diverse SOGI. It has also been prominently used by the architects of the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, an international legal framework developed by activists in 2007. The use of ‘SOGI’ in peacebuilding and development is generally intended to challenge the arbitrary categorisation of normative versus non-normative identities and orientations, while also avoiding some of the political concerns around terms like LGBTIQ+, which we also discuss in this article. For more on the term ‘SOGI’, see McGill (2014).

**[4]** Experiencing flight as a continuum of violence is of course not limited to refugees with diverse SOGI, although their vulnerabilities are gendered differently. There is a wide range of research on sexual and gender-related violence experienced by refugees at different stages of flight (for example,

Krause 2015). These studies generally assume the refugees to be cisgender—that is, they assume that the biological sex assigned to each individual at birth matches their innately-felt gender identity.

[5] For more information, see Myrntinen, Khattab, and Maydaa 2017.

[6] Similar findings have been reported by other researchers, including López Castañeda and Myrntinen (2014) and Zea et al. (2013) in the context of Colombia, as well as Nyanzi (2013) in Uganda.

[7] By masculinist, we refer to a narrow and prescriptive understanding of male identity that emphasises heterosexuality, dominance, and other qualities

[8] Purges and other practices that make militaries hostile environments for people with diverse SOGI have been observed in armed forces and armed groups as diverse as the US military (Belkin 2012), the loyalist Ulster Defence Association in Northern Ireland (McDonald 2008), and Hamas in Gaza (Hadid and Waheidi 2016).

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