Guidance: Reporting on vulnerable populations

LGBTQ+ people

We know that COVID-19 does not discriminate. However existing vulnerabilities may put some people at an increased risk of catching the virus, serious illness or to suffer the impact of the social and economic implications of the pandemic. As journalists, it's important to ensure our reporting is truly reflective of the communities in which we live.We need to consider both the differing information needs people in our community may have, as well as ensuring that all voices are represented in our reporting.

No one will be safe from the pandemic until we all are, so inclusion is especially important during this crisis, but more diverse reporting should be encouraged at all times. While lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) people face many challenges from COVID-19 which are similar to others in the community, they may also experience impacts from the pandemic as a result of discrimination, disparities, and other differences connected to their LGBTQ status.

These include, but are not limited to:

- **Existing health needs:**
   Pre-existing disparities put some LGBTQ+ people at greater risk of severe health consequences from contracting COVID-19. These disparities include social barriers, which can cause reluctance in accessing health care (particularly when it comes to non-urgent, routine or preventative care) - which can lead to the development of more serious health issues over time; financial barriers including disproportionate rates of unemployment and/or lack of paid sick leave; as well as pre-existing health conditions that may compromise the immune system.

Additionally, higher rates of depression and suicide place LGBTQ+ people at risk when faced with physical distancing measures. Greater isolation and a sudden loss of community or professional support and cultural spaces may contribute to this risk.

- **Scapegoating:**
   Vulnerable groups may be singled out and blamed for spreading the virus. For example, in South Korea we saw how gay people were blamed for the second wave of COVID-19 infections. The infections occurred after restrictions were relaxed in early May, and were traced to nightclubs in Seoul's Itaewon area, known to be a gathering place for gay people.

- ## Access to healthcare:

LGBTQ+ people already face challenges in assessing culturally appropriate and inclusive healthcare. In the COVID-19 environment, where some healthcare systems may be stressed, this increases the likelihood that people will struggle to access the treatment they need.

Health care workers may, either consciously or unconsciously, make decisions to deny or delay treatment on the basis of their LGBTQ+ status. This could be because of prejudiced attitudes, unconscious bias, or a failure to consider, or lack of understanding of the specific health needs of particular LGBTQ+ populations. Fear of discrimination may also stop some individuals from providing information for contact tracing for fear that their sexuality or relationships be exposed.

Laws that criminalize same-sex relations or that target trans persons due to their gender identity or expression exacerbate negative health outcomes for LGBTQ+ people. This may mean that people may not access healthcare services for COVID-19 testing or treatment for fear of arrest or violence. As is true for many vulnerable groups, if people avoid testing, it can result in clusters of infections within that population.

In contexts where health systems are overwhelmed, there may be delays in access to treatments such as antiretrovirals, hormone treatment, and gender-affirming procedures, STI and blood-borne virus testing, surgeries, or absence of support post-surgery. These procedures may be considered 'non-essential' by the medical community, however this classification is often undertaken without input from the trans community and or politicised to intentionally deny access.

- ## Access to social services:

LGBTQ+ young people often face a higher risk of homelessness due to rejection within the family home. Lockdown measures may place them at further risk of violence in the home. They also face significant barriers accessing family violence services. For example, gay and bisexual men, and trans and gender diverse people, who are victims of family violence may not be accommodated in services.

This combination of impacts and consequences may be further compounded and magnified for those with additional needs based on other attributes, such as disability or age. Many LGBTQ+ people may also face significant economic disparities compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers, which means they will more often lack the resources they need to stay afloat during the COVID-19 crisis.

How do I know what information people may need?

The simple answer is to ask! All good quality reporting needs to start with the voices and opinions of the community you are talking about. If you are new to reporting on this issue, a good place to start is to make contact with an LGBTQ+ organization in your community.

It's important to consider both the information needs of LGBTQ+ people in this pandemic, but also the information you could provide to the wider community about LGBTQ+ people to combat prejudice, stigma and encourage community unity.

While these organisations will be able to give you a great introduction into some of the issues affecting LGBTQ+ people, remember that every community is made up of individuals with diverse experiences. It's important to never generalise in your reporting that *all* LGBTQ+ people have particular challenges or feel a certain way. Similarly, the issues affecting LGBTQ+ people in your city may be very different to other areas within or outside of your country.

If you're an editor or a manager, then you can also make a big contribution to how your team reports on these issues. One of the big steps to having a greater understanding of LGBTQ+ issues is to ensure that there is greater diversity in the newsroom. It is, of course, important to avoid pigeonholing reporters into reporting only on LGBTQ+ stories just because they happen to identify in that way. You could also consider working together with a local LGBTQ+ organisation to create reporting guides that work to collate resources and to agree on terminology that is inclusive and respectful. A good example is the [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#).

Start with good research

When you are reporting on any new topic, it is important to make sure you understand the concepts and terminology used. Start with good research.

If you are interviewing an individual: Do a pre-interview. Depending on the story this might be basic or in-depth, on the day or before – but generally, a pre-interview involves briefing your guest on the format of your interview, checking facts, perhaps outlining what territory you'll cover, discussing how they would like to be introduced and asking if there are any topics they're not comfortable discussing.

The bigger picture: Be sure to know the legislative environment of the country from which you are reporting. Across the world, LGBTQ+ rights vary greatly. Same-sex marriage has been legal in The Netherlands since 2001. In Iran, LGBTQ+ people risk the death penalty. While discrimination is illegal in many countries, this does not mean that social stigma and taboos don't exist. These cultural attitudes can profoundly impact the quality of life of LGBTQ+ people, even in states where laws are liberal. [This is the state of LGBTI rights around the world in 2018](#).

In addition to getting consent from the individual, it is important that you as a journalist also understand and carefully consider the legal and social implications for the individual if the story identifies them and their sexuality. This does not mean that you should not report on the story, but you might consider protections such as removing or changing identifying information (such as name, occupation or location) if the person is likely to be put at risk if identified. This all depends on the context and how safe it is for your story subject.

Media stories about minority groups can powerfully shape norms in society and can highlight areas for reform and intervention. This Internews guide is a great tool in discovering how media can contribute to changing behaviours and attitudes in society.

Language is important

Make sure you understand the impact of the words you choose. Some terms commonly used to refer to LGBTQ+ people in your community may be discriminatory or offensive. Speak with your editor to ensure your newsroom style guide is regularly updated to ensure journalists use language that does not discriminate against anyone in their community based on their sexuality, religion, ability, or ethnicity.

A pre-interview is also a good time to confirm how your guest would like to be introduced. There's a strong chance that your interviewee has dedicated a lot of time and energy to thinking about how they wish to discuss their gender or sexual orientation (if at all). Assume the person you're talking to has the expertise to identify themselves. Avoid saying things such as "she goes by this name", "he wants to be called" or "she calls herself." This language can sound like you're casting doubt on the person's identity. Similarly, If someone clearly states that they identify as bisexual, for example, do not identify them as gay, lesbian, or straight instead.

When reporting on LGBTQ+ families, it is important to treat those families, parents, and children with dignity and respect. Never put quotation marks around descriptions such as family, parents, mothers, or fathers. Such tactics are often used by anti-LGBTQ+ groups to denigrate, delegitimize, and dehumanize loving families.

Be careful with 'balance'

It is important for journalists to distinguish between opposing viewpoints on LGBTQ+ issues and ideas and opinions that fuel prejudice and discrimination. While defamatory comments may be newsworthy, they should not be used simply to provide "balance" in a news story.

Another consideration is how you portray LGBTQ+ people. Ensure that your stories provide an insight into the myriad of experiences people may have, not only highlighting their vulnerabilities or 'differences'.

Is it relevant?

Think carefully before mentioning a person's sexuality or identifying LGBTQ+ communities or community spaces in your reporting. In most cases, their sexuality or gender will not be relevant to the story at all.

Think about the implications of singling out a vulnerable group in your reporting. Ask yourself, am I reinforcing discrimination or damaging stereotypes or contributing to a greater understanding in our community.

The Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists gives this advice:

Reasons to ask:
- It adds context to the story. Are you interviewing the person specifically because they identify as LGBTQ+? If so, politely ask how they would prefer to be introduced.
- It is central to the story. Would it seem out of place if you didn't mention it? For example, if you are covering same-sex marriage or anti-discrimination laws, it's relevant to include that the person is or could be directly impacted by the events.
- If it isn't central to the story, what is your motivation for asking? Are you trying to add diversity to your story or highlight how different populations might be impacted differently?

Reasons to avoid asking or including:
- It would cause harm to the subject.
- It's merely for prurient reasons or to sensationalize the story.
- Would you include the information if the subject were heterosexual? If yes, include it for an LGBTQ+ person. If not, think about why you want to include it: It needs to be relevant.

Working with anonymity

Particularly in countries where LGBTQ+ people may face serious stigmatization, and/or even criminal prosecution for having same-sex relationships, you may want to consider changing sources' names, and/or offering your subjects the option to remain anonymous in your reporting.

Just remember, if you agree to change the name of your subject and/or protect their identity, you should also be careful to not include any other "identifying information" as part of your report either - such as a photo where their face can be clearly seen, the name of the street where they live, the name of their employer (especially if they work for a small business or organization), specific details about their daily routine, etc.

Story Ideas

You may be reporting from a country where legislation or social taboos impose restrictions on your writing about the LGBTQ+ community. One way around this may be to reflect the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in other countries. If you write purposefully and carefully, your audience will still get value from this content and it can encourage your audience to reflect on the local context and how it compares.

For example, this story from South Korea, signals problems of which may also be reflected in other countries and offers ideas to reduce the risk for the queer community, as stated here:

> *"South Korea's coronavirus surveillance program is alerting the public about new disease outbreaks, but at the expense of marginalized communities that rely on anonymity and privacy. A coalition of 23 groups, calling itself "Queer Action Against Covid-19," is conducting a survey to see how widespread these problems are – in hopes of finding effective ways to protect public health that also respect the privacy of Korea's queer communities and other vulnerable populations."*

More story ideas:

- Are there any special initiatives or efforts being made to educate or inform health care providers about addressing urgent needs of LGBTQ+ people during the COVID-19 pandemic? This might include a focus on physical as well as mental health services.

- Given the added pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, how are healthcare providers ensuring continuous provision of important treatments such as antiretrovirals, hormone treatment, STI and blood-borne virus testing, sex reassignment or gender affirmation surgeries, and/or post-surgery support?

- How are LGBTQ+-run businesses and/or employees faring during the COVID-19 pandemic? In some contexts such as America, 40% of LGBTQ+ people are employed in restaurant and food services, hospital, education and retail industries - industries particularly hard hit by COVID-19 restrictions. In Asia, *waria* are disproportionately employed in the beauty industry in Indonesia, *ladyboys* in Thailand have a niche in performance, while in India *hijra* make a living from alms, ritual occasions, or sex work. In other contexts, LGBTQ+ people may be more likely to be experiencing homelessness or other vulnerabilities exacerbated by the crisis.

Story Ideas

- Are there groups that are not accessing health services for fear of discrimination or criminalisation? What can health services do to reduce this issue? This might be changes in practices within clinics, or health services that come to the patient in their home or a safe space.

- Look at the statistics in your country. What statistics are there on LGBTQ+ people? Would a better understanding of the size of the community encourage policy makers to make changes?

- What are the community led solutions to these issues? When people feel they cannot access government services such as healthcare or housing support, often these groups turn to their own community for support. Are there examples from your context where ideas for reform or solutions to issues are coming from the community itself?

Some other great examples of reporting on, and with, LGBTQ+ issues in the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Forbes - 'LGBTQ Finances Are At Risk Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic', April 20, 2020
- BBC News - 'LGBT: Covid-19 forced me back home where I'm 'unwanted', May 31, 2020
- New York Times - 'Coronavirus economy especially harsh for transgender people', June 16,2020
- Star Observer - 'New report shows unique effects of self-isolation', June 15, 2020
- Free Malaysia Today, 'LGBTQ Indians face 'lonely and claustrophobic' life under lockdown', June 22, 2020