

Guidelines for Journalists

reporting on LGBTI issues,
people and communities



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Do’s and Don’ts: How to report on the human rights situation of LGBTI people	3
Do’s and Don’ts: How to talk to and about LGBTI people in your stories	6
Do’s and Don’ts: Language and pronouns	9
Do’s and Don’ts: What you need to know about intersex and trans people and communities	11
Resources	14
Good examples	17
Final notes	19

INTRODUCTION

ILGA-Europe’s Guidelines for Journalists is an information document with recommendations for media professionals reporting on LGBTI issues, people and communities. It is designed to help journalists and newsrooms make conscious approaches to news affecting LGBTI people and draw sensitive depictions of LGBTI subjects.

When any media reports about minoritised groups, such as LGBTI communities, certain challenges become apparent. While there are many stories about LGBTI people and the things that may shape their lives, there are risks in labeling LGBTI people as ‘other’ and presenting what happens to them as isolated events, detached from the bigger picture. What happens to LGBTI people impacts our societies at large and showcases the good or bad health of our democratic systems.

In the current context of rising anti-LGBTI and anti-gender forces, official hate speech in countries across Europe and the world, and the introduction of new legislation that backslides on the rights of LGBTI people, it is incumbent on us to remain vigilant. These guidelines contain clear recommendations in the form of ‘do’s and don’ts’ on how to cover LGBTI-related news and how to approach and talk about LGBTI people and activists. It is intended for journalists for whom LGBTI issues are not their main area of reporting, although everyone can apply them no matter what media they are writing for, or what experience they have. It also includes a list of instructive resources, inspirational examples from different media outlets, and a link to our glossary of terms.

We hope you will find these guidelines useful, and will apply them to your reporting on LGBTI issues, for the better of all.

ILGA-Europe’s Communications Team

1.

DO'S

AND

DON'TS:

How to report on the human rights situation of LGBTI people

Terrible things happen to LGBTI people every day, but not only bad things happen. There are powerful stories of resilience and recovery that are also part of LGBTI people's realities. Yet, LGBTI people are often only defined as victims in media stories.

Finding balance

Do: Look for new angles. Have you thought that trans people suffering transphobia, for instance, may also be very active and resourceful in finding ways to fight back?

Don't: Always look for the victim perspective when reporting on a difficult situation for LGBTI people. Of course you should represent how anti-LGBTI forces, for instance, affect the daily lives of LGBTI people, but you should also provide a sense of people living their best lives, and/or taking positive action in the context.

Do: Also cover the stories of LGBTI people and the events happening to them when it's not bad news. There are so many positive developments, led by the advocacy and activism of LGBTI people.

Promoting inclusion

Do: Report about LGBTI people as wholly belonging as part of society, rather than as people on the outside, who you are observing. LGBTI people are minoritised groups within our societies. LGBTI people are not "the other".

Don't: Paint an 'us' and 'them' picture, where LGBTI people are seeking special rights, or are agitating simply for their own sake. LGBTI rights are part of the panoply of human rights, and an attack on one set of human rights is an attack on all.

Providing nuance

Do: Things don't happen for one reason, but for several and often complex reasons, while LGBTI people's realities are as multilayered as everyone else's. When writing about these realities, be mindful of the nuances of LGBTI people's lives, and the complexity of the situations they face.

Don't: Tell polarised stories, such as that there is a division between Eastern and Western Europe on LGBTI rights. The situation is far more nuanced, and many people and politicians in countries with governments who seek to further marginalise LGBTI communities, promote and wish to live in a world where there is healthy diversity, and where LGBTI people are not demonised. The same goes for any situation involving LGBTI people in any country or region. Nothing is ever black and white.

[Talking about marriage equality](#)

Do: When reporting about marriage equality, make sure you mention other rights and freedoms, which LGBTI people should enjoy the same as everyone else. For a long time in several parts of the world, LGBTI activism has focused on marriage equality, and the universal experience of love has been at the core of activist framing. This is something we still see a lot in the media on LGBTI-related international days and Pride season. Although there's still a long way to go until we achieve marriage equality for all in all countries, remember that LGBTI people's human rights go far beyond simply marriage.

Don't: Think that once a country has achieved marriage equality or civil partnership rights for same-sex couples, that it has suddenly become a great place for LGBTI people to live, or visit. Many countries where same-sex couples have equal marriage rights have no legislation against conversion therapy, for instance. In many countries where same-sex marriage is legal, there is still violence against LGBTI people on the streets.

2.

DO'S

AND

DON'TS:

How to talk to and about LGBTI people in your stories

When you talk about LGBTI people, or interview them, it is important to get it right, otherwise you will fall into a trap where, even with the best intentions, you can cause harm.

[Background Research](#)

Do: Make sure that you are talking to the right person/organisation. Many people set themselves up as media pundits, but have little experience of the nuances of complex situations. If you're looking for comments on an LGBTI issue, check activists' backgrounds before assuming they are experts or represent the collective.

Don't: Include comments from individuals who claim to represent LGBTI people's interests, but who have no history of activism or pedigree, and are speaking only from a personal perspective, even if they have a large social media follower base.

[Being transparent](#)

Do: When you reach out, make sure you introduce yourself and the media you work with. LGBTI activists face threats on a regular basis. You should provide enough information for them to be able to research you, so they know they can trust you.

Don't: Give meagre details and expect a comment. Never take for granted that an LGBTI person/activist/commentator has a full understanding of who you are when you contact them.

[Disclosure](#)

Do: Before disclosing the sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression of a subject, ask yourself: is it relevant to the story? Would I include this information if the subject was heterosexual and/or cisgender?

Don't: Include details on the sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression of your subjects if this only serves to sensationalise your story, exoticises the subjects or gives colour rather than value.

[Diversity](#)

Do: Consider making an active effort to have a diverse pool of sources in any story you are covering, and that includes LGBTI people, who can be experts on non-LGBTI issues or may have meaningful stories that do not arise from their sexual and gender identities.

Don't: Only approach openly LGBTI people to talk about LGBTI issues. Diversity of representation in all areas of reporting will help integrate LGBTI people in the minds of readers.

[Extraction](#)

Do: Clarify with the person you are looking to comment on a story, why you are writing the story, and what benefit you believe it will have for the advancement of LGBTI people's rights. If possible and appropriate, pay the person you are interviewing a fee for their time.

Don't: Extract people's personal stories for economical, personal, or business profit. The goal when sharing someone's story, as in any other piece of information, should be to enrich the reader's capacity for making informed decisions in society.

[Managing your expectations](#)

Do: Be sensitive to capacity for engagement. LGBTI activists usually do a lot of work with little resources, especially during a crisis, which is when journalists or broadcasters are more eager to reach out to them. In these moments, be sensitive to the fact that their capacity is probably more reduced than usual.

Do: Respect their boundaries and propose alternatives. Maybe some will not be comfortable on camera but will be at ease providing a written comment.

Don't: Give up on getting a comment if someone doesn't get back to you immediately. Reach out again, say you understand they may be under pressure, but that you would really value their contribution, if they can spare the time.

[Safety](#)

Do: Bear in mind that when LGBTI people talk publicly about their experiences, they are oftenly speaking about their intimacy and a part of their identities. This puts them in a vulnerable position and at a potential risk of discrimination in the future.

Don't: Unless a person is public about their sexual or gender identity, never identify an LGBTI person as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or as part of the LGBTI community without express permission first.

[Stereotypes](#)

Do: Remember that LGBTI people come from all walks of life, and are not defined as one kind of person.

Don't: Stereotype based on false internalised assumptions. We all have been deeply conditioned, for instance to see gay men as 'camp' or effeminate, or lesbians as 'butch' or masculine. When reporting about people from the LGBTI community, examine your internal assumptions. For instance, do you falsely assume that all bisexuals are actually gay, but haven't come out of the closet yet?

3.

DO'S

AND

DON'TS:

Language and pronouns

Historically, the language used to speak about LGBTI people has 'othered' us, separating us as people apart from the general society. Increasingly, inclusion is becoming as much about using the right pronouns, as it is about using appropriate language.

Language

Do: Use language in your story that everybody can understand and where everybody has a space.

Do: Avoid the following terms: transsexual, LGBT lifestyle, lifestyle choice, gay lifestyle, sex change, homosexual, homosexuality, homosexual relationship, hermaphrodite, prostitute, rent boy...

Do: Keep our glossary to hand, or refer to it as needed. It provides a broad range of the correct terminology, and is a living document, updated as new language comes into parlance.

Don't: Say 'gay marriage' unless you are specifically referring to marriage between two men. If you are referring to marriage between two people of the same sex, use same-sex marriage, which includes lesbian and bisexual people.

Don't: Unless you are a specifically LGBTI media outlet, don't use "gay" or "queer" as encompassing terms for LGBTI communities.

Pronouns

Do: Before starting an interview, ask for pronouns and names, and use them in your article and during your conversation. To help create a safe and comfortable space, you can start the conversation by introducing yourself and your pronouns.

Don't: Make assumptions. Ask for pronouns. If you are in doubt when referring to someone during the interview or writing your story, use 'they/them'.

Don't: Quote or italicise pronouns.

4.

DO'S AND DON'TS:

What to know about intersex and trans people and communities

What to know about intersex people

Intersex people are born with sex characteristics that do not fall under female or male categories as defined by prevalent medical and administrative norms. Intersex people are particularly exposed to exclusion and violence as children, very often undergoing non-consented and unnecessary medical interventions to modify their body parts. This may have life-lasting consequences for their physical and mental health.

Do: Reach out to [intersex-led organisation](#) for comment. There are a great variety of voices and positions in the intersex movement, but intersex-led organisations are most likely to have a strong human rights angle and clarity. If there are no intersex organisations in your country, you can reach out to regional international networks.

Do: Be patient. The intersex is a young movement, it may take a bit of time to find the right person to comment on your story.

Don't: Only talk to medical doctors.

Don't: Confuse intersex for a sexual orientation or a gender identity. Intersex people have all kinds of identities and all kinds of sexual orientations. They can be gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual, just like anybody else. They may identify with the sex assigned at birth or they may not. Intersex is not a synonym of non-binary, but some intersex people are non-binary.

Don't: Use outdated language. Check out this [style guide](#) by Intersex Australia to stay updated.

What to know about trans people

Trans people's right to exist shouldn't be a debatable subject, yet trans people's lives have been at the center of heated debates in the media for quite some time now. Reporting about trans communities, especially when it comes to children, should be done with responsibility, care and sensitivity.

Do: When developing a story that involves trans people, make space for other than their medical transition processes. Ask yourself: is it relevant for the piece to include details about this?

Do: [Trust trans children](#) when they speak about their identities. All children, cis and trans, have the capacity of knowing who they are. [Research](#) shows that growing in an environment where adults respect their identities decreases the risk of suicide and suicide ideation among trans children.

Do: Include the accepting voices of the majority of parents. Most parents are supportive of their trans children, however minority groups of opposing voices sometimes get disproportionate attention in the media.

Do: Approach trans parents with the same respect any parent deserves.

Don't: Echo the myth of trans children going through permanent medical interventions. Trans minors cannot undergo transition-related surgery in any country in the world. All medical care trans children may receive is reversible, including psychological support, hormone blockers and hormones for adolescents.

Don't: Use sport at school as a divisive issue. Most trans children just want to play alongside their peers.

Don't: Use a trans person's former name, especially if you do not have explicit consent from them.

Don't: Perpetuate anti-trans discourse. Do not reproduce trans-exclusionary language or include trans-exclusionary voices just for the sake of having "both sides of the story". When it comes to the right of trans people to exist, there are not two balanced sides of a debate. Check out the Radical Copyeditor Style Guide for more about [language](#) and our [mythbusting report](#) from 2021 to learn more about misconceptions concerning trans rights.

5.

RESOURCES



Useful data and resources on the situation of LGBTI people for media reporting and fact-checking

Europe and Central Asia

ILGA-Europe's Rainbow Map & Index: It ranks 49 European countries on a scale between 0% (gross violations of human rights, discrimination) and 100% (respect of human rights, full equality): <https://rainbow-europe.org/>

ILGA-Europe's Annual Review: It documents legal, political and social developments in 54 countries in Europe and Central Asia and four international institutions over the past calendar year: <https://rainbow-europe.org/annual-review>

ILGA-Europe's Glossary: A list of ILGA-Europe's most commonly used phrases and acronyms.

Fundamental Rights Agency Survey on LGBTI people (2020): A total of 139,799 persons aged 15 years or older who describe themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI) completed the online EU-LGBTI II Survey in all EU Member States and the candidate countries of North Macedonia and Serbia: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-lgbti-equality-1_en.pdf

TGEU's Trans Rights Map in Europe and Central Asia: It provides detailed information on the legal situation of 47 European and five Central Asian countries covering legal gender recognition, asylum, bias-motivated speech and violence, non-discrimination, health and family: <https://tgeu.org/trans-rights-map-2021/>

World

ILGA World 'Conversion therapy' report (2020): An extensive global research into laws banning 'conversion therapies' both at the national and subnational level: <https://ilga.org/Conversion-therapy-report-ILGA-World-Curbing-Deception>

ILGA World State-Sponsored Homophobia report: Since 2006, ILGA World publishes every year its State-Sponsored Homophobia report, a world survey of sexual orientation laws: <https://ilga.org/state-sponsored-homophobia-report>

ILGA World Sexual Orientation Laws map: Every year, ILGA World publishes maps on sexual orientation laws in the world. The maps are published in several languages and they can be reproduced and printed without permission as long as ILGA World is properly credited and the content is not altered: <https://ilga.org/maps-sexual-orientation-laws>

Pew Research Centre: The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists (2019): This analysis focuses on whether people around the world think that homosexuality should be accepted by society or not. The 2019 survey shows that while majorities in 16 of the 34 countries surveyed say homosexuality should be accepted by society, global divides remain: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/>

Transrespect Trans Murder Monitoring: It is a systematic collection, monitoring and analysis of reported killings of gender-diverse and trans people worldwide: <http://transrespect.org/trans-murder-monitoring/>

Transrespect Legal and Social Mapping: It provides an overview of existing laws, law proposals and actual legal and healthcare practices as well as diverse aspects of the social situation relevant to gender-diverse and trans people in 119 countries in the world: <http://transrespect.org/map/pathologization-requirement/>

Other

Open For Business Reports: They are the most collective and cogent evidence base for the economic and business case for LGBT+ inclusion to date. The reports synthesize hundreds of academic studies, business reports, data set, and expert perspectives into a clear and convincing case that shows LGBT+ inclusion is good for business and good for economic growth: <https://open-for-business.org/reports>

6.

GOOD

EXAMPLES

Inspirational work from fellow journalists.

- [Elliot Page Is Ready for This Moment](#) by Katy Steinmetz for TIME. 2021
A profile of trans actor Elliot Page.
- [Revealed: \\$280m 'dark money' spent by US Christian right groups globally](#) by Claire Provost and Nandini Archer for openDemocracy. 2020
An in-depth investigation following the money fuelling campaigns against women and LGBTIQ people's rights.
- ['You don't belong here' In Poland's 'LGBT-free zones,' existing is an act of defiance](#) by Rob Picheta and Ivana Kottasová for CNN. 2020
A collection of personal stories framed in a larger context.
- [No medicine, no food: Coronavirus restrictions amplify health risks to LGBT+ people with HIV](#) by Nita Bhalla and Oscar Lopez for Thomson Reuters Foundation. 2020
An international coverage at the intersections
- [Georgia 'doesn't care about me': LGBTQ struggles worsen under lockdown](#) by Chloe Lula for Politico EU. 2021
Nuanced portraits and reconstruction of past events and context

FINAL NOTES

To elaborate these guidelines we have relied on other resources.

We want to thank and credit GLAAD, TGEU, NLGJA, Google News Initiative, Intersex Australia, GATE

Suggested citation: ILGA-Europe (2022). *Guidelines for journalists*



Rue du Trône/Troonstraat 60
1050 Brussels Belgium
www.ilga-europe.org



**Co-funded by
the European Union**