

# Identifying Effective Strategies to Improve Livelihoods of LGBTI People

*WORKING PAPER—Comments welcome*

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# Identifying Effective Strategies to Improve Livelihoods of LGBTI People

M. V. Lee Badgett, Katya Burns, Claire Gheerbrant, and Pawan Dhall

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*Summary:* A growing body of research shows that LGBTI people around the world face unique challenges that severely restrict economic opportunities and livelihoods. In particular, discrimination in education and employment, family rejection, and absence of adequate social and legal support mechanisms, create barriers to getting and holding jobs and to starting independent businesses. To date, work on livelihoods in LGBTI communities has been circumscribed, with a primary focus on advocacy for anti-discrimination efforts, such as public laws and private employer policies and practices that provide formal workplace opportunities. Outside the LGBTI community, many approaches are already in use to build the economic power of marginalised groups, especially women. These efforts focus on skills-building, job search strategies, business creation, and expanding bargaining power. Little is known about the extent to which these approaches have been utilized to improve the livelihoods of LGBTI people.

This paper draws on data from two recent efforts to identify existing programs that work to improve livelihoods for LGBTI people. Based on 59 projects we identified across more than 23 countries, our analysis found several major types of approaches that are thought to be effective: Skills building (including vocational skills and “soft skills” training), support with getting a job (including job search skills), microfinance programs to start small businesses, skills to start and run a business (including chambers of commerce, and mentoring), impact investing and use of supply chains to support LGBTI-owned businesses. Geographically, the projects identified were concentrated in Latin America & the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and East Asia & the Pacific. While the groups targeted by these economic projects were often very broad, we found that transgender people were the most commonly targeted subgroup.

We recommend increased attention and funding for these development needs from NGOs, development agencies, and government agencies, as the current efforts to improve the livelihoods and economic empowerment of LGBTI people are not sufficient to meet the need. Research should expand to study factors that enhance the effectiveness of these programs for individuals taking part, but should also expand effectiveness measures to include community well-being.

## Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people have identified numerous ways in which their human rights are violated in contexts of education, employment, health care, political and civic life, personal security, and other areas.<sup>1</sup> In response, global, national, and local human rights institutions have worked to strengthen human rights protections for people of different sexual orientations, gender identities, and sex characteristics. A major strategy used in this movement has been to add explicit protections for LGBTI people in human rights frameworks and national and local laws by supporting a strengthened LGBTI movement ecosystem (Burack 2018). However, less attention has been paid explicitly to issues of economic inequality and exclusion, although some advocates have begun to raise these issues (Crehan et al. 2020; The Council for Global Equality 2020; Singizi Consulting Africa 2020; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2017). This paper argues that economic rights are human rights that can also be pursued through economic development efforts. We collected and analyzed data on how organizations or other actors are incorporating goals of direct economic empowerment into LGBTI human rights work, allowing us to identify possible strategies and to better define the need for expansion of these efforts.

Economic discrimination and poverty in LGBTI communities are under-researched topics (Badgett and Crehan 2017). Nonetheless, a growing body of research in developing countries shows that LGBTI people face discrimination in many sectors that affect the livelihoods of LGBTI people, such as education, employment, health care, public policy, access to inclusive sanitation, households and other areas (reviewed in the next section). Together these challenges can result in poverty and economic inequality among some of the most vulnerable LGBTI populations.

These individual economic challenges demonstrate that much is at stake for the livelihoods of LGBTI people and their realization of human rights. More secure livelihoods might support the ability of LGBTI people to participate in efforts to expand rights, including forming and running organizations (Singizi Consulting Africa 2020; Eisfeld, Gunther, and Shlasko 2013). Beyond the individual and organizational effects, diminished economic opportunities and financial well-being also have implications for countries' ability to meet their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent studies show that to meet the SDGs and the pledge to "leave no one behind" will require commitment and action to ensure the inclusion of LGBTI people (Park and Mendos 2019; O'Malley and Holzinger

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<sup>1</sup> See United Nations, 2019, or Badgett, 2020, for a review of evidence of economic, education, and health inequality for LGBTI people in many different countries. In this paper we include people with intersex conditions as part of the LGBTI umbrella term, it has become the global term for thinking about human rights and economic development for sexual and gender minority groups. For instance, the Yogyakarta Principles were expanded to include individuals with variations in sex characteristics (*Yogyakarta Principles Plus 10*, 2017, [http://yogyakartaprinciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A5\\_yogyakartaWEB-2.pdf](http://yogyakartaprinciples.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A5_yogyakartaWEB-2.pdf)).

2018). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the economic vulnerability of LGBTI people even more obvious, as the economic and health effects have been devastating in many parts of the world (Outright International 2020; Sears, Conron, and Flores 2021).

Many of these experiences have parallels for other marginalized and stigmatized groups, such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, or people with disabilities. For women (predominantly cis-gender women), in particular, evidence of constrained opportunities and unequal economic outcomes in multiple sectors of life—such as employment, education, health, and families—has led to targeted programming and investments by economic development agencies (Grantham, Dowie, and de Haan 2020). These programs (and other factors) have helped to increase girls' education, women's rights, bargaining power in the household, and access to better paying jobs, for example (Duflo 2012).

In the case of investment in LGBT communities, development and human rights agencies have focused on human rights, research, and civil society capacity-building, leaving a large gap when it comes to direct interventions to address economic empowerment and poverty alleviation for LGBTI people (Burack 2018; Nilsson and Rothman 2017; USAID, n.d.). Globally, for every hundred dollars going toward development assistance, only four cents of government funding is allocated to all LGBTI issues. And out of the small bucket of philanthropic and government funding for all LGBTI issues worldwide, only 1%--the proverbial drop in the bucket--goes to economic issues (Global Philanthropy Project and Funders for LGBTQ Issues 2020).

However, some LGBTI organizations and funders have begun to address LGBTI people's economic needs. This study was designed to fill the gaps in our knowledge about the lives of low-income LGBTI people and efforts to improve their economic well-being by gathering and analyzing data on existing economic empowerment efforts for LGBTI people. Utilizing a dataset of such programs compiled during the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period of 2019-2020 (described in the third section), this study offers new evidence of how innovative programs are empowering LGBTI people to attain their economic goals, and thereby contribute to national economies. In section four, we analyze the data to classify the types of programs that have been created, the target groups served, and the factors that may be shaping the strategies and targets, such as the economic, legal, or cultural environment. These programs use strategies of skills building, provision of assistance with getting a job, microfinance programs to start small businesses, skills to start and run a business, impact investing, and use of supply chains to support LGBTI-owned businesses. We find that programs exist for a broad range of LGBTI people, with evidence that almost one third of projects focus on transgender people, particularly in South Asian countries.

We conclude with a summary of our findings and recommendations for development agencies, human rights agencies, LGBTI NGOs, and other stakeholders. Dramatically increased funding from international agencies, government development offices, and private funders is greatly needed to create more such projects and to allow the expansion of existing projects. In addition, development agencies and contractors, in particular, should assess whether LGBTI

people are fully included in non-targeted programs. Future research should assess the effectiveness of the projects at the individual and community levels in increasing the economic power of LGBTI people and communities.

## **Context and Literature**

This project builds on several literatures (described below) on economic barriers, economic resources, and legal and cultural barriers that contribute to creating economically disempowered LGBTI people in many, if not all, countries. Those literatures support the underlying premise of this study, namely the need for economic development attention and action for LGBTI people, especially in developing countries. A different literature on economic development projects, particularly from the gender and development field, suggests that specific, direct interventions to promote skills and opportunities might also be useful for improving LGBTI economic power and livelihoods, although very little research currently exists to suggest that they are actually being used for LGBTI people. In this section we describe those literatures and note implications and research gaps that motivate our research questions.

*Economic exclusion of LGBTI people:* The first body of research documents challenges faced by LGBTI people in sectors that influence whether the livelihoods achieved by LGBTI people are adequate and secure (see Badgett, 2020, for a recent review across many countries). Starting from young ages, the poor treatment of LGBTI people in educational settings reduces their skills and knowledge that could otherwise put them in a stronger position to get well-paying employment. Numerous studies have documented a high prevalence of bullying and discrimination against young people viewed by their peers and teachers as sexual and gender minorities (UNESCO 2016). Studies from both the Global North and Global South find that exclusionary treatment harms educational outcomes and leads to lower levels of education and poorer labor market outcomes (Sansone 2019; Ueno, Roach, and Peña-Talamantes 2013; Pearson and Wilkinson 2017; Drydakis 2014; Russell, Seif, and Truong 2001; Kosciw et al. 2016; Dhall and Boyce 2015; Coyle and Boyce 2015).

Once they go into the labor force, LGBTI workers face employment discrimination in finding and keeping jobs. In surveys in many countries, LGBTI workers report experiencing discrimination: 44% in Ecuador, 20% in Vietnam, 21% in China, 20% in the U.S., and 19% in the EU (Pew Research Center 2013; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020; Suen, Chan, and Badgett 2020; Huy and Phuong 2015; Instituto Nacional de Estadística Y Censos 2013). In addition to self-reports of discrimination, studies in high-income and developing countries confirm differential treatment by employers. Even with the same skills and education as non-LGBTI people, LGBTI job applicants are less likely to get job interviews than non-LGBTI job candidates (Valfort 2017; Winter et al. 2018).

The accumulated economic effects of employment discrimination and other forms of exclusion are evident in measures of income and poverty. Across many countries, gay and bisexual men have lower earnings than do similarly qualified heterosexual men, and transgender people have very low incomes (Klawitter 2015; Valfort 2017; Carpenter, Eppink, and Gonzales 2019). Detailed data available in some countries provides evidence that many LGBTI people experience poverty, and poverty rates may be higher than for non-LGBTI people (Badgett 2018; Badgett, Choi, and Wilson 2019; Itaborahy 2014; Chhoeurng, Kong, and Power 2016). These studies also show the importance of disaggregating the LGBTI population to identify the most economically insecure groups: transgender people have particularly high rates of poverty and low levels of income, and lesbian and bisexual women experience gender gaps that can exacerbate vulnerability to poverty. As such, those groups might be the most in need of economic development assistance to improve their livelihoods (Kuria Foundation for Social Enterprise 2020).

Two additional forms of exclusion are particularly related to LGBTI economic well-being. One concerns the existence of laws criminalizing homosexuality (and other laws related to sex work, vagrancy, and obscenity), which may be used by both public and private employers to deny employment to LGBTI people (Kuria Foundation for Social Enterprise 2020; Badgett 2020). Furthermore, they may increase harassment and violence against LGBTI people who engage in sex work (Dhall and Boyce 2015). The other kind of exclusion is the rejection of LGBTI people by their families of origin. Family rejection (even in the absence of physical violence) can have cascading economic effects if families evict LGBTI family members from their residence or if families refuse to pay school fees, cosign business loans, or allow participation in family businesses for their LGBTI family members (Philip and Raju 2020; Coyle and Boyce 2015).

*Strategies to improve livelihoods:* Given the economic exclusion faced by LGBTI people around the world, we might expect some efforts to reduce discrimination and other forms of economic exclusion. Indeed, many LGBTI human rights organizations have focused on reducing discrimination by lobbying for employment nondiscrimination laws (Belmonte 2021). Currently 81 countries have such protections against sexual orientation discrimination, while fewer protect explicitly against gender identity discrimination (Mendos et al. 2020). In addition, LGBTI workplace organizations push companies to create more inclusive and less discriminatory work environments for LGBTI people (Shahani 2020; All Manipur Nupi Maanbi Association et al. 2019; Badgett 2020). Much of the workplace effort has been conducted in high income countries with a focus on large companies, although that work might have spillover effects for employees in other countries.

As important as the public and private policies are, we have very little evidence of their practical impact in reducing inequality, and the existing evidence suggests that they reduce discrimination and inequality to some extent but do not eliminate it (Klawitter 2011; Burn 2018; Tilcsik 2011). We have no studies of policy effects on the low-income end of a country's labor force, such as greater opportunities for informal sector LGBTI workers to enter stabler and better paying jobs in the formal sector (All Manipur Nupi Maanbi Association et al. 2019). The

need for research on the situation for LGBTI people in the informal sector is important since most people have informal work in developing and emerging economies (ILO, 2018).

A more direct strategy for improving livelihoods—creating economic empowerment efforts that focus more directly on low-income LGBTI people—has not been widely visible or studied. The Sexuality and Development Programme at the Institute for Development Studies conducted some qualitative case studies describing livelihood challenges for LGBT people in India and Nepal (Dhall and Boyce 2015; Coyle and Boyce 2015). Only a few studies of projects that address livelihood challenges appear in the peer-reviewed research literature. One study assessed a program in Pakistan created by an HIV/AIDS service organization to provide beautician skills and fashion design and stitching skills to gender and sexual minority men (the term used in the study) (Moiz 2019). Participants reported learning new skills that were particularly useful for those already employed in related fields.

Most of the other studies focused on livelihood efforts for transgender people. Two studies focused on microfinance for transgender people. One assessed the interest of 15 transgender women and 18 cisgender women who were sex workers in Malaysia in a hypothetical microfinance intervention (Lall et al. 2017). Almost all said they would be interested in using microfinance and vocational training to start a small business, with food stalls and beauty salons the most often mentioned, but the transgender women were particularly concerned about facing stigma and discrimination. A second study of 76 transgender people in India found that 27% were members of a microfinance or self-help group (a small group of people pooling their savings and making loans to members), but only one had ever borrowed from such a group (Barik and Sharma 2018). Respondents identified lack of proper identification documents as the main barrier to receiving services, along with lack of awareness and guidance.

Although the academic literature on programs is small, each of these studies suggests that interest exists among LGBTI people for access to programs to enhance livelihoods, but general programs (that is, those not targeted at the LGBTI community) may not be adequately or proactively inclusive (UNDP, ODI, and Galang 2020; National AIDS Control Organization and United Nations Development Programme 2016). Furthermore, in countries where some of the co-authors of this paper have worked, opinions of LGBTI activists are mixed as to whether programs designed for LGBTI people are more desirable or whether inclusion in existing general programs should be emphasized. The lack of knowledge about the degree of inclusion of LGBTI people in mainstream development programs has limited this debate, and at least one study found very little inclusion of transgender people in mainstream economic development programs in India despite transgender people being recognized as intended beneficiaries (National AIDS Control Organization and United Nations Development Programme 2016).

Either way, the narrow range of program types seen in that very sparse literature (i.e., skills training that may reinforce stereotypes about LGBTI people and only hypothetical microfinance opportunities) contrasts dramatically with the richer approaches to economic empowerment and improvement of livelihoods for other marginalized groups. In particular, the

gender and development field has created a wide range of interventions to address women's economic inequality and lack of power. Some programs involve efforts to steer cash support for families to women in order to increase their bargaining power in the household (Duflo 2012). Microfinance schemes, business grants, and impact investments provide resources for women-owned businesses, and trainings in business skills are designed to enhance entrepreneurial opportunities (Kabeer 2021). Some programs provide training in technical skills and other kinds of skills, while other programs work on improving access to jobs (Chang et al. 2020). Legal changes that expanded women's rights, particularly with respect to holding property, have improved economic outcomes (Kabeer 2021). Many of these approaches could be usefully applied in LGBTI communities.

*Research questions:* Given the degree of economic exclusion experienced by LGBTI people and the range of possible programs that could be used, the fact that little evidence exists of LGBTI-targeted livelihood programs in existing research is surprising. Educational exclusion suggests that LGBTI people might need additional support as adults for developing skills to be prepared for jobs or developing their own businesses. Labor market discrimination research implies that LGBTI people might be unemployed or underemployed (such as being confined to the informal sector or to self-employment), situations in which added skills and job search assistance might be helpful, along with efforts to reduce discrimination by employers. Programs that provide alternatives to traditional jobs, such as funding and support for entrepreneurship might also be relevant for LGBTI people, especially when family support is not available.

Of course, it is possible that other programs exist but have not yet become visible to researchers. This study takes the first step to fill the gap in knowledge by collecting data on and describing the actual strategies that are being used to improve the livelihoods of LGBTI people. Here we first ask whether LGBTI people have had access to similar approaches seen for other disadvantaged groups, especially women. Secondly, we ask whether subgroups found to be particularly vulnerable in the economic research, mainly transgender people and lesbian/bisexual women, are specifically targeted by these programs. We also ask whether other cultural or legal factors shape which subpopulations are targeted. Our third guiding research question is to assess any evidence gathered by livelihood programs that sheds light on the effectiveness of these programs.

## **Data**

Data about LGBTI people is rarely collected by government statistical agencies or in administrative data collection by economic development programs in any part of the world (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020; Badgett and Crehan, 2017). Given the lack of other individual information about the need for or participation in economic development programs by LGBTI people, this study approached the research questions from a



programmatic level of analysis. We collected data on projects that relate to LGBTI economic empowerment, whether standalone or within a larger organization.

LGBTI economic empowerment programs (like LGBTI people themselves) constitute an often invisible population, as noted in the literature review. One reason is the relative rarity of such programs. As noted earlier, very little funding is directed to economic efforts. In addition, no central database exists that identifies such projects. Public information about LGBTI individuals and even organizations is generally considered highly sensitive because LGBTI people and organizations are vulnerable to violence and discrimination and might operate in contexts where being LGBTI is criminalized (Global Philanthropy Project and Funders for LGBTQ Issues 2020). Therefore, projects or organizations do not always use LGBTI in their names.

Because of these challenges to finding data, this project collated data collected from two independent efforts undertaken by the authors to identify economic empowerment projects for LGBTI people. Both sources used similar methods to locate projects by tapping into researchers' professional networks in the LGBTI human rights world and gender & development communities. Outreach efforts included posts on relevant listservs and multiple social media platforms, as well as direct email queries and interviews of knowledgeable LGBTI activists, people in development agencies, human rights organizations, funders of LGBTI programs, and relevant grantees.

Projects were included in the database for this study if the existence of the project could be independently verified through interviews, virtual site visits, webpages, publications, or social media descriptions. Those sources also needed to provide sufficient information about the program to be included in this project. In many cases the authors interviewed knowledgeable organization leaders about the project, and in some cases we had access to organizations' documents about projects. In a few cases, we also had access to results of qualitative evaluations and to published accounts of projects.

The broad net cast during data collection captured several projects that were relevant to economic inclusion but were very different from our eventual sample in some important ways. In particular, efforts to extend diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts in corporations to hiring LGBTI people were mentioned by several informants. We do not include those efforts in our dataset for several reasons. First, based on our knowledge of extensive efforts in the Global North, we suspect that we only heard about a small sample of those efforts elsewhere. If we had explicitly included that category of efforts in our data collection process, we would have likely heard from a broader range of actors. Second, while those efforts might result in additional employment opportunities in the formal sector, they do not typically focus on or necessarily benefit low-skilled and low-income LGBTI people who are the major focus of this paper.

Finally, this dataset is a convenience sample of economic empowerment projects for LGBTI people, not a complete census of all such projects nor a random sample of existing projects. Because of our networking process, the sample may be biased toward projects that are most visible to the mainstream LGBTI movement organizations, funders, and researchers.

Therefore, these might be the most stable projects or have the most access to funding, giving us a view of the programs that are biggest and strongest. However, that tendency might be at least partially counterbalanced by the fact that at least one funder for some of these projects explicitly chose to work with organizations representing more marginalized sectors of the LGBTI populations who have also had less access to funding and visibility. As we discuss further below, however, most of these projects were not large and not particularly stable, often lasting only one cycle.

## Methods

The resulting dataset included 59 programs that were located in developing countries and had been conducted since 2013. The database includes the name of the project, the organization undertaking it, and the country or countries covered. We used the information from websites, news articles, and interviews of project staff to create a description of the project.

We analyzed the 59 programs by reading project descriptions carefully to identify important themes. Our initial analysis showed that two of those programs address economic inclusion but are qualitatively different from the other 57 we identified, so we begin by discussing those two separately. Both projects are publicly known and involve complex relationships across organizations and LGBTI-owned businesses.

First, for several years a consortium of development agencies including USAID, Global Affairs Canada, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency have funded the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce in the United States to assist in the creation and growth of similar networks of LGBTI owned businesses in other countries, including a mix of high income and middle or low income countries.<sup>2</sup> The complexity and work of those networks means that they are often not focusing on low-income LGBTI people, the main subject of this study, although low-income people could be beneficiaries of those efforts in some way.

The second innovative project involves “impact investing” in small LGBTI-owned businesses in South Africa and Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Dreilinden, a private organization that uses grants and investments to promote social acceptance of LGBTI people, chose those two countries to develop a program of mentoring and financing for existing LGBTI entrepreneurs who pitch

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<sup>2</sup> See USAID, “The Multi-Donor LGBTI Global Human Rights Initiative,” [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Final\\_Multi\\_Donor\\_LGBTI\\_Global\\_Human\\_Rights\\_Initiative\\_Overview\\_PARTNER\\_LOGOS.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Final_Multi_Donor_LGBTI_Global_Human_Rights_Initiative_Overview_PARTNER_LOGOS.pdf). The NGLCC webpage on this project lists affiliated LGBTI chambers of commerce in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Central & Eastern Europe, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, India, Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, Scandinavia, South Africa, and Uruguay. <https://nglcc.org/global> last accessed 8/19/21.

<sup>3</sup> See posts about their project on their blog at <https://dreilinden.medium.com/>.

projects to Dreilinden and its project partners. Both the chambers of commerce and impact investing projects are very much aligned with the economic empowerment goal, but their organizational structures and efforts are unique types in our database, so we do not include them in the coding and analysis process described in the rest of this paper.

We coded the remaining 57 programs separately by reading project descriptions carefully to identify important themes. We created codes for those themes and collectively coded each program for several important variables that we had data for across programs:

- *Target population:* We coded data to capture the program's target population. Some projects did not specify any group other than "LGBT" or "LGBTI". Others focused on a particular subgroup or related group, and some projects had more than one target population. The final dataset included these target groups: LGBTI generally; lesbian/bisexual women; gay/bisexual men or men who have sex with men (MSM); transgender people; LGBTI refugees; LGBTI youth; and LGBTI people who are living with HIV or are sex workers.
- *Description of the program:* We found that projects deployed several different strategies to enhance economic opportunities for their target populations: skills training, job search assistance, job fairs, starting businesses, microfinance, social enterprises, and public sector engagement.<sup>4</sup> Some projects used more than one strategy, such as combining job search assistance with job fairs, or providing business start-up skills with microfinance to new entrepreneurs. In some cases, a project specifically mentioned an element that was not specified by other programs, which we classified as "other." These "other" programs included career guidance, creating a livelihood plan, working with private sector employers, and creating savings strategies.
- *Geographic region:* To avoid the potential risk to these programs from publicly identifying them as LGBTI-related, we do not refer to the specific countries in which they are located (with the exception of some projects that are already very public). Instead, we grouped them into the geographic regions used by the World Bank. Regions included in our data are East Asia and the Pacific region, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).
- *Type of organization:* We also took note of whether a project was initiated or run by an LGBTI NGO, a non-LGBTI NGO, or by a public sector entity. We could not identify projects that were initiated because they were encouraged by funders rather than emerging from a grassroots process in an NGO.

Another potentially important variable would be the size of the project, perhaps measured as the number of participants in the program or the amount spent on the project. We were not able to obtain those figures for all projects, but below we report on the general range of numbers of participants for that subset providing such data. We also were able to

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<sup>4</sup> "Public sector" is defined as being included in a government economic empowerment program or receiving some kind of public resources for the project, such as funding or trainers.

collect some information on the outcomes of the projects from interviews of project officials or from documents reported to the public or to funders, but we also have that only for a subset of projects.

## Findings

Our first set of research questions concerned the existence and general descriptions of economic empowerment efforts for LGBTI people. Overall, the identification of 57 projects from 23 countries confirms that LGBTI people have sought strategies to expand their economic well-being and inclusion in many places. Most projects were created and implemented by LGBTI organizations in the Global South, a key finding that indicates that these projects are largely driven by grassroots efforts. We know that some projects received funding from Global North organizations, suggesting that the confluence of NGO interest and donor interest made possible some of these projects. Only two projects were directly created and implemented by the same Global North LGBTI organization, and two projects were undertaken by non-LGBTI organizations.

The public sector has played a much smaller role in developing projects than has LGBTI civil society, with some form of public sector involvement in only 13 projects. Five projects were generated and implemented by government agencies, including public sector job quotas for transgender people in two countries (Argentina and Uruguay) and three government programs that were transgender-inclusive (Argentina, India, and Pakistan). Five other projects tapped into existing public resources, such as funding or training resources from existing economic development programs.<sup>5</sup> Four projects were funded by development institutions (USAID or the World Bank), in which LGBTI people and organizations were recruited into a larger project.<sup>6</sup>

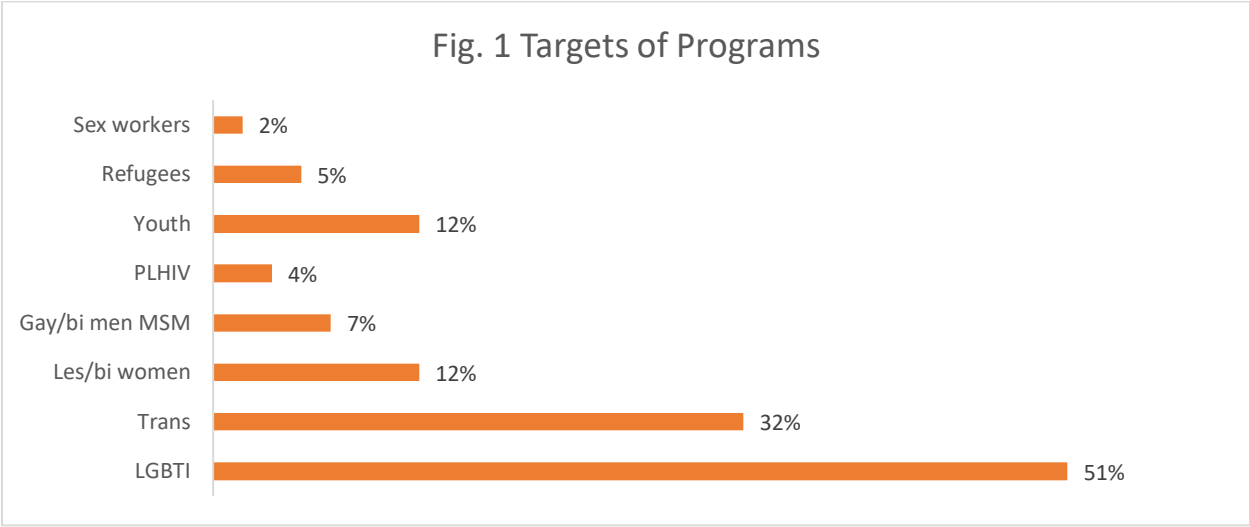
Next we present the subpopulations targeted by these programs. The database of projects shows that some targeted more than one specific group of LGBTI people. The percentages across targets shown in Fig. 1 are compared to the total number of programs (57), so the percentages add up to more than 100%. Half of the projects broadly targeted LGBTI people. Almost one third, or 32%, targeted transgender people. Lesbian/bisexual women and

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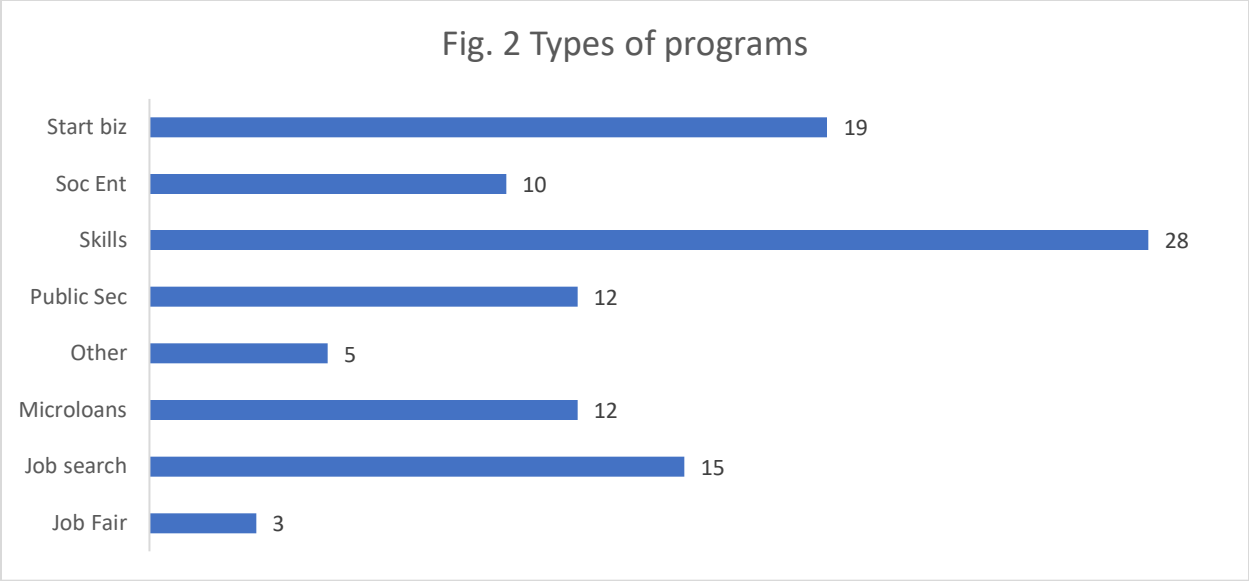
<sup>5</sup> For instance, in one program, a local lesbian NGO mediated access for lesbians to public sector trainings. See also NACO & UNDP, 2016, though, on the very low uptake of transgender people in more general programs.

<sup>6</sup> A World Bank-funded project included a pilot project to reduce barriers to employment services for transgender people <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/loans-credits/2015/01/15/argentina-youth-employment-support-project>. USAID's youth workforce development projects explicitly included LGBTI people in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, although the degree of actual LGBTI involvement is not clear. See project reports: [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00X12N.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00X12N.pdf) and <https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/YouthPower%20TO%20Review%20Final%20Report.pdf>.

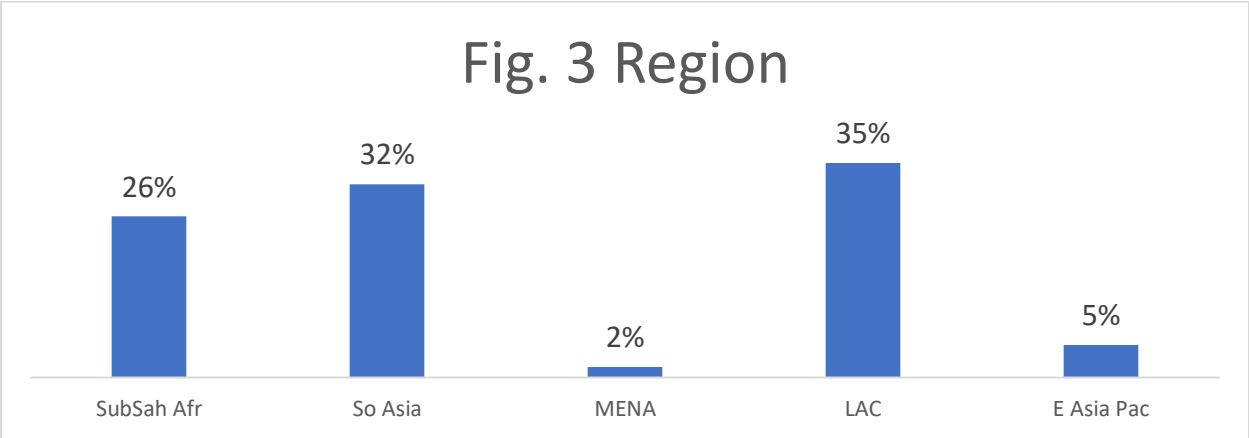
youth were each targeted by 12% of projects. Sex workers, refugees, people living with HIV (PLHIV), and gay/bisexual men or MSMs were targeted by only a few projects.



Projects used different strategies to empower LGBTI people in economic terms. Figure 2 shows the number of projects that use a particular strategy, again with some projects using more than one. Overall, the provision of marketable job skills was the most common strategy. Twenty-eight projects fell into the “skills” category that captured vocational training of some kind. Other kinds of skills also emerge in business start-up efforts (19 projects), which often included mentoring, support, or financial or management skill training. The job search programs sometimes specifically included skills specific to job search, such as accessing job listings, and also included other services like interview preparation and resume/application support.



Geographically, the projects are mostly found in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America/Caribbean, as shown in Fig. 3. Only a few were found in the Middle East/North Africa or East Asia Pacific region. In our ongoing efforts to expand this database, we will target those two regions for expansion of data collection effort, as well as Europe and Central Asia.



The second set of research questions sought to explain these patterns that we see in Figures 1-3. Three key findings that emerge from those simple descriptive charts are the focus on transgender people, the prominence of projects that focus on skills, and clustering of projects in three regions. Here we consider possible influences that shaped these patterns:

- Variation in targets could reflect patterns of economic vulnerability for some groups.
- LGBTI-specific conditions in a country or region might affect the number of projects and the types of projects created. In particular, countries where there is more social acceptance of LGBTI people or a more positive legal climate might have more projects or more visible projects.
- The structure of the economy in a country or region might influence the types of programs, particularly the role of education and the prominence of informal sectors.

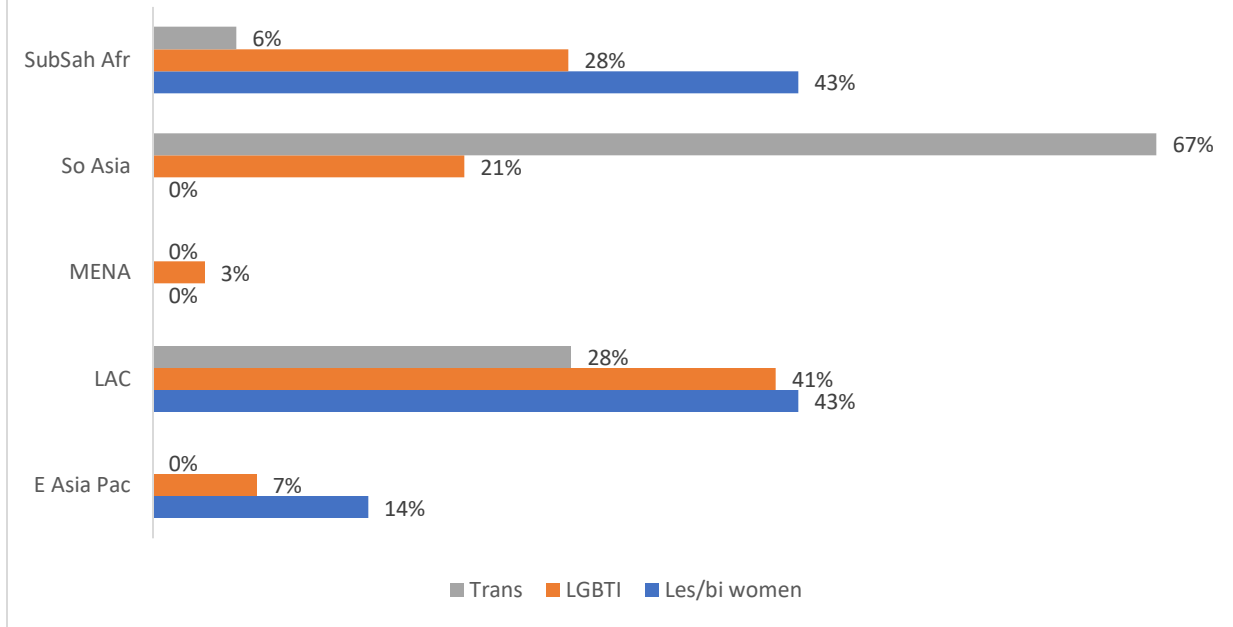
Consider first the high percentage (32%) of the projects found that target transgender people. As noted in the literature review, prior research suggests that transgender people are more vulnerable than other sexual and gender minority groups, so organizations might prioritize them for funding. Or relatedly, transgender organizations might disproportionately decide to take on economic empowerment to meet the needs of the constituency they serve, although we do not have evidence on that point. Another possibility is that the visibility of transgender sex workers might give transgender organizations access to funding targeted at sex workers.

To dig more deeply, we cross-tabulate the target population by region. Figure 4 shows the regional distribution of the top three target groups: LGBTI people, transgender people, and lesbian/bisexual women. We see that projects targeting transgender people are highly clustered geographically. Two-thirds of transgender projects (gray bars in Fig. 4) in the dataset (67%) are located in South Asian countries, while 6% are in Sub-Saharan Africa and 28% are in LAC countries.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, projects that target lesbian/bisexual women (blue bars) are spread out evenly across Sub-Saharan African and LAC countries but only account for 14% in East Asia. No projects targeting lesbian/bisexual women were identified in South Asia. Projects that broadly target the LGBTI community (orange bars) are also roughly equally common in SSA and LAC countries.

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<sup>7</sup> Another way to see the connection between region and a transgender focus is that 12 out of 18 projects in South Asia target transgender people.

Fig. 4: Regional shares of 3 program targets



Why might we see the focus on transgender people in South Asia? Those projects are located in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In those three countries, transgender rights are more tolerant of transgender people and gender minorities than are laws and treatment for sexual minorities (Dicklitch-Nelson, 2019). Name changes and some gender marker changes are allowed in those three countries for transgender people (Chiam et al. 2019). In 2014, the Indian Supreme Court, ruled in the *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* case that transgender people have a right to their identity and, because of their social treatment, are entitled to reservations in education and employment. Also Pakistan passed the Transgender Persons Act in 2018, giving transgender people the right to be recognized, to change gender in documents, and other rights to equal treatment (Redding 2019). In addition to a relatively higher legal status, the greater cultural space for people with particular (trans)gender identities, such as *hijras*, might also mean that projects directed toward transgender people are both more common and more visible than those directed toward other groups (Dhall and Boyce 2015). Therefore, the social and legal climate might combine with transgender economic vulnerability to enhance the emphasis on serving transgender people’s economic needs in South Asia, creating a lesser focus on lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

To explain the second finding—the predominance of skills training and entrepreneurship projects—we start by comparing how each project type is spread across region in Table 1. This table presents the share of each project strategy that is located in a particular region, so each row sums to 100%.



- Skills training, with a focus on vocational skills, was most commonly seen in South Asia (54% of projects), followed by LAC (25%).
- Job search and job fairs both work to improve participants' success in applying for jobs. Table 1 shows they are concentrated in LAC (40% of all job search programs are there) and South Asia (40% of all job search and 100% of job fairs are there).
- Half of the social enterprises were in SubSaharan Africa, and the rest were in LAC and South Asia.
- Support for entrepreneurs comes in the form of projects that provide business-related skills and mentoring, for example, and from projects providing microcredit to start businesses. Those projects are most common in LAC and Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Table 1: Shares of project types by region; rows sum to 100%**

Type	E Asia Pac	LAC	MENA	So Asia	SubSah	TOTAL
					Afr	
Skills	4%	25%	0%	54%	18%	100%
Job Fair	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	100%
Job search	7%	40%	7%	40%	7%	100%
Soc Ent	0%	30%	0%	20%	50%	100%
Start biz	11%	32%	0%	21%	37%	100%
Microloans	8%	25%	0%	25%	42%	100%
Other	20%	40%	0%	0%	40%	100%

Another way to look at the distribution of projects is to look within regions to see which strategies are most common within a region.<sup>8</sup> In East Asia & Pacific countries, projects to start businesses were the most common type (29% of projects in that region focused on starting businesses; 14% focused on microcredit). In LAC projects were fairly evenly spread out,

<sup>8</sup> Table 1 looks at percentages across rows (i.e. within types of program); the figures in this paragraph consider percentages within columns (i.e. within countries).

although skills training was the most common (21%). Skills trainings were also the most common strategy in South Asia (42%). Projects related to entrepreneurship were the most common strategy seen in Sub-Saharan Africa (27% for starting businesses; 19% microcredit).

Skills training might be especially important in countries and regions with higher levels of education. Exclusion in the education sector could mean that LGBTI workers are at a disadvantage when competing for economic opportunities with higher-skilled or higher status people (those with higher levels of education), so skills training might help make up for any educational gaps. Educational attainment varies across regions of the world (Klasen and Lamanna 2009). Among the five regions studied here, East Asia and the Pacific countries have the highest level of educational attainment. Latin America and the Caribbean and the MENA region are next at a significantly lower level, and Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have among the lowest levels of attainment globally. Since we see that skills training is a bigger focus in South Asia and in Latin America and the Caribbean, the education patterns do not line up neatly with the focus on skills in the LGBTI economic empowerment projects. That discordance suggests that the focus on skills training may be driven by something other than local education levels.

The other dominant type of project provides microcredit and other support for starting a business. Small businesses are especially important in developing and emerging economies, and the vast majority of own-account (self-employed) workers work in the informal sector—85% in emerging and developing economies (ILO, 2018). We would then expect entrepreneurship skills to be especially valuable and sought after by LGBTI people in regions with large informal sectors. According to the ILO, the share of employment in the informal sector (including agriculture) varies across the emerging and developing economies in these regions: 89.2% of employment in Sub-Saharan Africa is informal, as is 75.2% in South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, 87.8% in Southern Asia, and 53.1% in Latin American and the Caribbean (ILO, 2018). Again, as with the skills projects, entrepreneurship project patterns for LGBTI people do not line up precisely with the global patterns of informal work, since LAC has the lowest rate of informal labor but one of the highest rates of LGBTI entrepreneurship projects.

Although the regional variation in educational attainment and the size of the informal sector do not track the regional patterns of LGBTI economic empowerment strategies, the contextual features of economies may still influence the strategic decisions made by organizations. Future research might productively focus on how and why organizations choose particular strategies and target groups.

However, explaining the specific types of projects might be less important as a first step than understanding the concentration of economic empowerment efforts in three regions: LAC, SSA, and South Asia. Notably, the Global Philanthropy Project data on global philanthropic funding for LGBTI issues in 2017-18 shows that 31% went to countries in the Global South and East. Of that \$174 million, Sub-Saharan Africa received \$71.5 million for LGBTI issues, LAC received \$38 million and Asia & Pacific (combining South Asia and East Asia) received \$30.8 million. The global south/east regions with little representation in the current study, MENA and

Europe & Central Asia, also received much less global funding, \$7.2 million and \$2.3 million respectively. The funding data suggests that available resources to LGBTI organizations varies considerably, and the countries that receive more global resources are also more likely to have LGBTI economic empowerment efforts.<sup>9</sup> One possible link is that there is a higher likelihood of getting funding for livelihood projects in regions with more funding for LGBTI projects generally.

A remaining possible explanation for the patterns we find is that our sample of projects could be biased toward particular regions, strategies, and target groups. This might have happened if we were more likely to find visible projects and organizations that are closely aligned with the global LGBTI movement networks. The regional, target, and strategy patterns that we see in these data could potentially differ for economic empowerment projects not in our sample, although we were as thorough as possible in seeking information on programs.

Finally, while we could not directly measure project effectiveness for these programs, we were able to gather some information about project outcomes from reports, websites, and interviews. One measure of success would be the number of low-income LGBTI people who could participate in a program. The available data for size, measured in numbers of participants, suggests that projects were typically small and fell into several tiers.<sup>10</sup> One tier of projects across a range of countries were very small, serving fewer than 10 people. A second tier reached more people with at least one part of the project, typically in the 25-40 person range. A few projects reported participant numbers in the hundreds, and in one case, more than a thousand. In almost all of those larger programs, the higher numbers reflected (at least in part) more years of program operation. Also, the largest projects had government funding, which might have allowed them to be larger and to continue for more years. Accordingly, it is likely that the small sizes of most of these projects reflect difficulty getting funding. Two projects reported that they had more applicants—and more qualified applicants—than they could accept for the program, further evidence that the constraint on size is not the lack of need or lack of interest from LGBTI people or the inability to find people who want to enroll in a program. The small sizes of these innovative programs that are sometimes seen as pilot projects have raised questions about their scalability, as discussed further below.

Other common measures of effectiveness were not available from all projects, but several projects reported tracking measures of their program's impact on participants, sometimes at a funder's request. Programs supporting business start-ups and microfinance pointed to successful businesses launched by their projects that remained operational for some period of time. Some programs had self-reported evidence from participants that their improved economic position or business ownership resulted in more respect from family members and the larger community. Some projects also reported improvements in self-esteem and confidence among participants, a particularly important outcome since more than one project also reported needing to incorporate mental health or self-esteem components to their

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<sup>9</sup> The resources flowing to regions might also reflect the size and capacity of regional LGBTI movements, which could also be relevant for economic empowerment programs. Unfortunately, right now no consistent and comparable measures of LGBTI movement size or capacity exist for comparison purposes.

<sup>10</sup> We had even less data on budget size or expenditures for these projects.

projects. Other measures of success that could be tracked in the future might consider the creation of community role models, whether additional programs were generated, and whether these programs were influential in the passage of nondiscrimination policies.

## **Recommendations and conclusions**

The lack of research on efforts to promote economic empowerment of LGBTI people has created a large gap in knowledge that this study has begun to address. Even with a growing body of research showing that LGBTI people are routinely excluded from economic and educational opportunities, until now we have had very little knowledge about direct efforts to improve the livelihoods of LGBTI people beyond engagement with corporate employers.

In this study we found that economic empowerment efforts for LGBTI people exist, just as they do for other disempowered groups in developing countries. They are spread across many countries, but our data suggests that they may be concentrated in Latin America & the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and East Asia & the Pacific, all regions that are now receiving more attention from global philanthropic funders of LGBTI human rights.

The fact that most projects are designed and implemented by LGBTI NGOs suggests that an economic empowerment agenda is consistent with the agenda of the global LGBTI human rights movement. These projects deploy different strategies for boosting the economic opportunities of LGBTI people, including skills training, support for starting businesses, social enterprises, and job search assistance. The choice of strategy employed may be influenced by local economic conditions to tap into the clearest economic opportunities within informal sectors and to create stepping stones into the formal sector of employment.

Not surprisingly, many of the strategies used appear to be similar to economic empowerment efforts to promote gender equity for cisgender women. One apparent difference is the lack of specific focus on improving household bargaining power within the family, which is a common focus of women's economic empowerment efforts. However, interviews with project staff revealed that LGBTI participants sometimes reported improved treatment and respect within their families of origin as a result of their improved economic position.

Even as we begin to fill this large gap in knowledge, though, this study also uncovered many other questions for future research projects to take on. First, we need to understand why some groups receive more attention than other groups. The prominence of efforts to serve transgender people is likely to reflect the dire economic needs of many transgender people and the growth of transgender organizations. But other vulnerable parts of the greater LGBTI community exist as well, like lesbian/bisexual cisgender women or intersex people, but do not appear to receive the same attention. Other intersecting identities—like race, ethnicity, caste,

disability, or age—might also affect who is in need of improved livelihoods. Future efforts to expand economic empowerment programs should draw on our knowledge of how hierarchies of power have likely influenced the self-mobilization and resources of subgroups of LGBTI people.

A second general question concerns how to design meaningful and effective programs. This topic raises questions about necessary resources, facilitating conditions, and economic contexts that will lead to projects that have a meaningful impact on the livelihoods of LGBTI people and their families. Filling the gap in knowledge will require more research that starts early in the process of program design and implementation. Ensuring an appropriate set of measures of success will be essential for planning this research. Questions of scale and scalability are also related topics for future research. In recent informal conversations, funders have raised questions about whether the existing projects are able to grow to a larger scale.

A third related question seeks to get beyond the traditional individual measures of effectiveness in evaluation research. What effect do these projects have on other members of the LGBTI community who do not (or cannot) participate in the economic empowerment programs? Possible spillover effects include the hiring of other LGBTI people in new businesses developed by programs, the creation of community role models, and greater support for LGBTI organizations from LGBTI people whose income and wealth increases. Projects might also be designed in ways that will enhance the benefits to the larger community by expanding supply chains to include other LGBTI businesses or by providing goods and services tailored to community needs (such as producing larger size shoes for transgender women).

A fourth strategic question emerged from discussions in some countries. Which approach is better: A focus on making general economic empowerment efforts more open to and inclusive of LGBTI people? Or creating projects that are designed by and for LGBTI people? We know little about how open development agencies and projects are to LGBTI people, even though some community organizations have actively pursued engagement with mainstream development projects and agencies. But only a few programs run by non-LGBTI organizations showed up in our database, and anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be barriers that should be better understood and addressed (Dhall and Boyce, 2015). A study of government projects in India found a few livelihood and employment programs that explicitly include transgender people as beneficiaries, but only one program had actually trained any (but only seven) transgender people (NACO and UNDP, 2016). And we should better understand the specific needs of LGBTI people, as suggested by anecdotal evidence about projects building in mental health support to counteract the mental health consequences of a lifetime of stigma, violence, and discrimination (Coyle and Boyce 2015; Itaborahy, Kalume, and Ribeiro 2017). Likewise, we know little about how the resilience and life experiences of LGBTI people might create skills and knowledge—possible LGBTI “super-powers”—that could be developed to enhance their economic options (e.g. Tilcsik, Anteby, and Knight 2015; David 2015).

The double agenda that emerges in the near term combines more projects to enhance economic empowerment with research to answer questions that can improve future programs.

More funding for economic empowerment projects is desperately needed, as the COVID pandemic has made clearer, but some project officials interviewed noted the difficulty they had obtaining sustained funding. Human rights funders are not always open to these projects, especially when they involve the purchase of and transfer of capital to individuals, according to one funder interviewed. Researchers might also study how the growth of programs connected with organizational capacity as well as funding. Organizations that are providing livelihood opportunities to LGBTI people may also face other challenges, such as concerns about dealing with bureaucracies, acquiring registrations or licenses for legal legitimacy, and project management, for example.

Also, funders that provide support for those efforts will leverage their investments if some attention to research is built in to improve future outcomes. Research projects can and should be done primarily by local LGBTI (and allied) researchers, which in turn also provide short-term and long-term economic opportunities. Training interviewers or analysts for studies of LGBTI projects, for example, provides skills that can be used to work for private sector survey firms or other projects. Future research and interventions should also address the needs and challenges for service providers.

Overall, this paper provides a sobering but at least somewhat encouraging view of the prospects for improving economic opportunities for LGBTI people at a very precarious time. The LGBTI community and some related organizations are proactively and creatively working toward the economic empowerment of LGBTI people in many parts of the world, even in the absence of significant resources and commitments by funders and organizations to prioritize this work. However, the scale is as small as the need is large. Our expanding data on LGBTI lives and economic inequality demonstrates the need for a sustained, sizable campaign to include more direct efforts to promote economic equality as a human right.

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