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Lesbian, Bisexual/Pansexual and Trans Women in Elected Office

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Lesbian, Bisexual/Pansexual and Trans Women in Elected Office

Robust data on the size of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) population only exists for a very few countries (chiefly the UK and USA) and even in these two cases the enduring pressures to stay in the closet suggest that a significant number of same-sex loving people are not being counted. In 2019 the Williams Institute estimated that 4.5% of the US population self-identified as LGBTQ. In polling during the 2020 Presidential primaries Gabriele Magni and I found 10% of registered voters (13 million) identified as LGBTQ.¹ Those findings were supported by proximate NBC and Edison polling. The LGBT Foundation and Hornet found that 7% of Americans said they were LGBTQ but in addition found another 6% identified as 'sexually fluid.'² As detailed below, across all surveys there is consistency in the finding that by far the largest, and fastest growing, share of the LGBTQ community are bisexual/pansexual cis-gendered women under 30 years of age. Our polling found that bi/pansexual women alone constituted the largest share of the LGBTQ vote in the US (6% of all women voters, 4.5 million voters in total).³ BiPan women are now the largest single part of the LGBTQ identifying electorate in the US (at 37%). Partial data from other cases supports this pattern. 33% of Australia's LGBTQ population (which totaled 7%) identified as bisexual women in 2013 and women made up 55% of the queer population. A 2017 survey in Canada found that 52% of the LGBTQ+ population identified bisexual or pansexual.⁴ 7% of Germans identified as LGBTQ in 2019 - 46% were bisexual and women made up two-thirds of that group.⁵

If one takes the view that sexual orientation is not culturally or geographically determined, rather the ability to be open about one's sexual orientation or gender identity and opportunities to flourish are culturally and geographically determined, then we should assume that the LGBTQ population has been massively underestimated across the globe.

These demographic realities are not reflected in the political representation of LGBTQ people. Of the 45,913 parliamentarians in office in the world as of September 1st 2020 only 245 (0.5%) identify as LGBTQ. While surveys consistently show that women clearly constitute the largest proportion of the LGBTQ population, women only make up 26% of the LGBTQ national parliamentary cohort. Fifty national parliaments have seen gay or bisexual men elected but only 35 have seen lesbian, bi/pansexual or trans women elected.

Further, the overwhelming majority of these women identify as lesbians rather than bi/pansexual or transgender (despite the fact that in the US there are more than two bi/pansexual women for every lesbian identifying woman). The relative balance between LGBTQ elected official proportions globally have remained constant over time. The lesbian, bi/pansexual, transgender and gay male shares are the

¹ Beginning February 26th 2020 - after the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire and Nevada primaries - we polled 6,345 likely voters in twelve states (eight swing states, along with Texas, Indiana, California and New York).

² <https://lgbt-token.org/identifying-and-reaching-the-hidden-1-trillion-lgbtq-economy/>

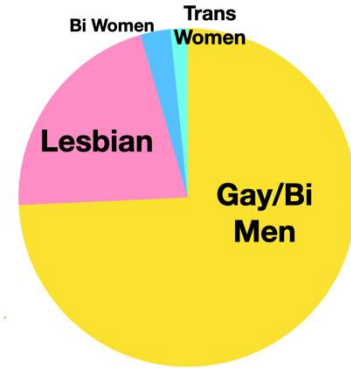
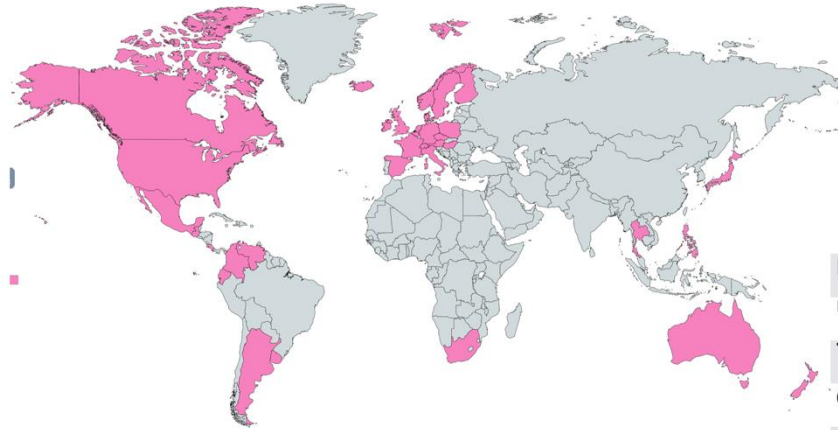
³ 6,345 respondents from 12 states. 597 identified as LGBTQ (171 gay men, 81 lesbians, 282 bisexual/pansexual and 57 transgender or gender-non-conforming or other).

⁴ <https://fondationjasminroy.com/en/initiative/lgbt-realities-survey/>

⁵ https://www.stadt-koeln.de/mediaasset/content/pdf16/pdf161/studie_Isbtiq_als_wirtschaftsfaktor_für_köln_2019.pdf

same for the overall period 1976-2020 (encompassing 441 elected LGBTQ parliamentarians from 50 countries) as they are for parliamentarians currently in office. There has not been any change in the dominance of gay white men representing LGBTQ people in office.

Global LBT Parliamentarians 2020



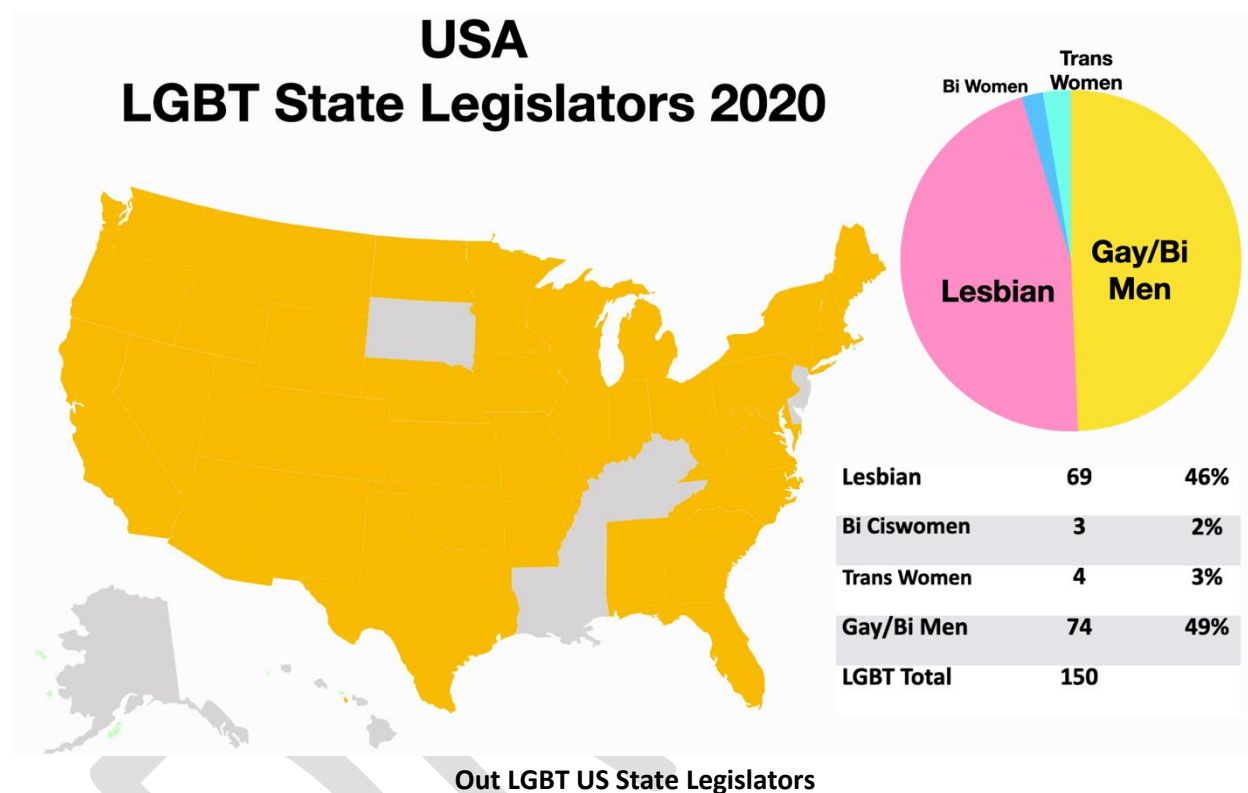
Lesbian	52	21%
Bisexual Ciswomen	7	3%
Trans Women	4	2%
Gay/Bi Men	182	74%
LGBT Total	245	(0.5%)
Straight Global	45,668	99.5%

Out LGBT Parliamentarians (Upper/Lower Houses)

	Parliamentarians 1976-2020		Parliamentarians September 2020	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Lesbian	93	21%	52	21%
Bisexual Ciswomen	13	3%	7	3%
Trans Women	8	2%	4	2%
Gay/Bi Men	327	74%	182	74%
LGBT Total	441		245	(0.5%)
Straight Global			45,668⁶	99.5%

⁶ <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages> (190 nation states)

In US state legislatures we see a different dynamic. While bisexual men and women are still dramatically underrepresented, lesbian candidates have made more gains than their international peers. Lesbians may well be underrepresented when compared to their share of the electorate, but they are over-represented within the LGBTQ cohort. Based on the UCLA Williams Institute data from 2018 we would expect to see 125 bisexual/pansexual women State Legislators (there are three) and 52 lesbian state legislators (there are 69). Although this data almost certainly underestimates the US LGBTQ population.



	1976-2020		September 2020	
Lesbian	119	37%	69	46%
Bisexual Ciswomen	11	3%	3	2%
Trans Women	4	1%	4	3%
Gay/Bi Men	188	58%	74	49%
LGBT Total	322		150	(2%)
Straight			7233	(98%)

Queer women of color (similar to queer men of color) are not represented in proportion to their prevalence in the overall population. Black and LatinX women only constitute 9% and 13% respectively of the LGBTQ US state house cohort but they account for 16% and 22% of women who identify as lesbian, bisexual or transgender. White women make up 58% of the US LBTw population but 78% of the LBTw statehouse members. Globally there are only a handful of LBTw women parliamentarians who

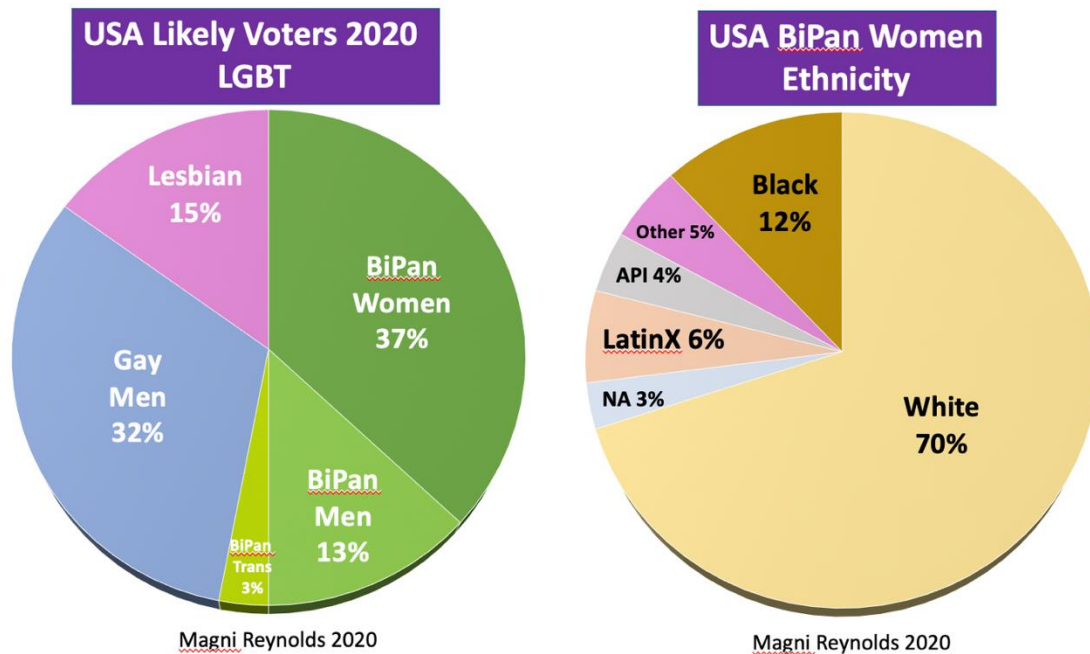
come from minority communities: most notably Sharice Davids (Native American), Penny Wong (Chinese-Australian), Faika El-Nagashi (Egyptian-Austrian), Layla Moran (Palestinian-British); while Louisa Wall, Meka Whaitiri and Kiri Allan are part of a LGBTQ caucus in New Zealand which is majority women and Māori. The Lesbian, Bi/Pansexual, Trans Woman global parliamentary caucus as a whole is 87% white.

Out LGBT US State Legislators by Race (Sept 2020)*

	Men (G and B)	Women (L, B, T)	Total	L,B,T Women ⁷
Black	6 (8%)	7 (9%)	13 (9%)	16%
LatinX	8 (11%)	10 (13%)	18 (12%)	22%
API	3 (4%)	0	3 (2%)	3%
NA	0	0	0	1%
ME	1 (1%)	0	1	-
White	56 (76%)	59 (78%)	115 (77%)	58%
Total	74	76	150	

* Including D.C and US Virgin Islands

Lesbian, Bi/pansexual, Transgender: self-identification among women



⁷ Williams Institute: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/lgbt-stats/?topic=LGBT&characteristic=female#density>

Across all surveys there is consistency in the finding that by far the largest, and fastest growing, share of the LGBTQ community are bisexual/pansexual cis-gendered women under 30 years of age. Our US polling found they alone constituted the largest share of the LGBTQ vote in the US (6% of all women voters, 4.5 million voters in total).⁸

- At one-third, bi/pan women are now the largest single part of the LGBTQ identifying electorate. 6.2% of all women identified as bi or pan. 2.5% as lesbian, 0.8% as queer/trans/GNC.
- In total 9.5% of US women registered voters identify as LGBTQ.
- 2.2% of all men identify as bi/pan. 5.5% as gay. 1.1% as queer/trans/GNC. In total 8.8% of our men identify as LGBTQ.
- LGBTQ voters are disproportionately young, they constitute nearly 20% of all 17-29 voters. Bi/pan women are even more likely to be younger.
- A significant number of women of color identify as bi/pan. Nearly 9% of black women and 13% of Native American women. These numbers are in line with the growth in bisexual identity by race picked up the General Social Survey since 2008.⁹
- While the majority (56%) of LGBTQ voters are Democrats, 34% of Independents identify as LGBTQ.
- Bi/pansexual voters are slightly less likely to be Democrats (50% versus 56% for LGBTQ overall) and more likely to be Independents (38% versus 34%).
- LGBTQ voters are much more liberal than straight voters (59% versus 28%). Among LGBTQ voters we find that lesbians are slightly more liberal, bi/pan voters slightly less liberal, and gay men are as liberal as the overall queer voting community.
- BiPan women are slightly less liberal than LGBTQ voters overall but they remain very liberal when compared to straights.
- Transgender and gender non-conforming respondents demonstrated more polarization with 45% saying they were liberal, 22% moderate and 28% saying they were conservative.

Voter responses to Lesbian, Bi/Pansexual, Trans Women Candidates (New Zealand, USA and UK).

⁸ 6,345 respondents from 12 states. 597 identified as LGBTQ (171 gay men, 81 lesbians, 282 bisexual/pansexual and 57 transgender or gender-non-conforming or other).

⁹ 2018 GSS finds 6% of women identify as bi.

Gabriele Magni and I conducted surveys in the United States (1,829 respondents), the United Kingdom (1,122 respondents), and New Zealand (1,287 respondents) in Fall 2018.¹⁰ To evaluate voter attitudes toward candidates with minority identities, we embedded a conjoint experiment in each survey. Voters penalize gay candidates in all three countries, with the strongest negative effect in the US. Compared to their straight counterparts, gay candidates face penalties of 6.7% points in the US, 4.6% in the UK and 3.3% in New Zealand. Transgender candidates faced an even stronger bias. Their penalty compared to cisgender candidates was 11% points in the US, 10.7% in the UK and 8.5% in NZ.



2018: United States (1,829 respondents), United Kingdom (1,122 respondents), New Zealand (1,287 respondents)

In the US and New Zealand, lesbians did not face a significantly different electoral penalty from gay men for their sexual orientation but lesbians had an advantage over gay men because voters showed a preference for women candidates over men (+3.9% points in the US and +2.5% points in New Zealand).

In the UK, compared to gay men, lesbians face a penalty of 2.6% points. While female candidates perform better than men in the UK (+3.4% points), the gap in favor of women is larger when voters consider straight male and female candidates, rather than gays and lesbians.

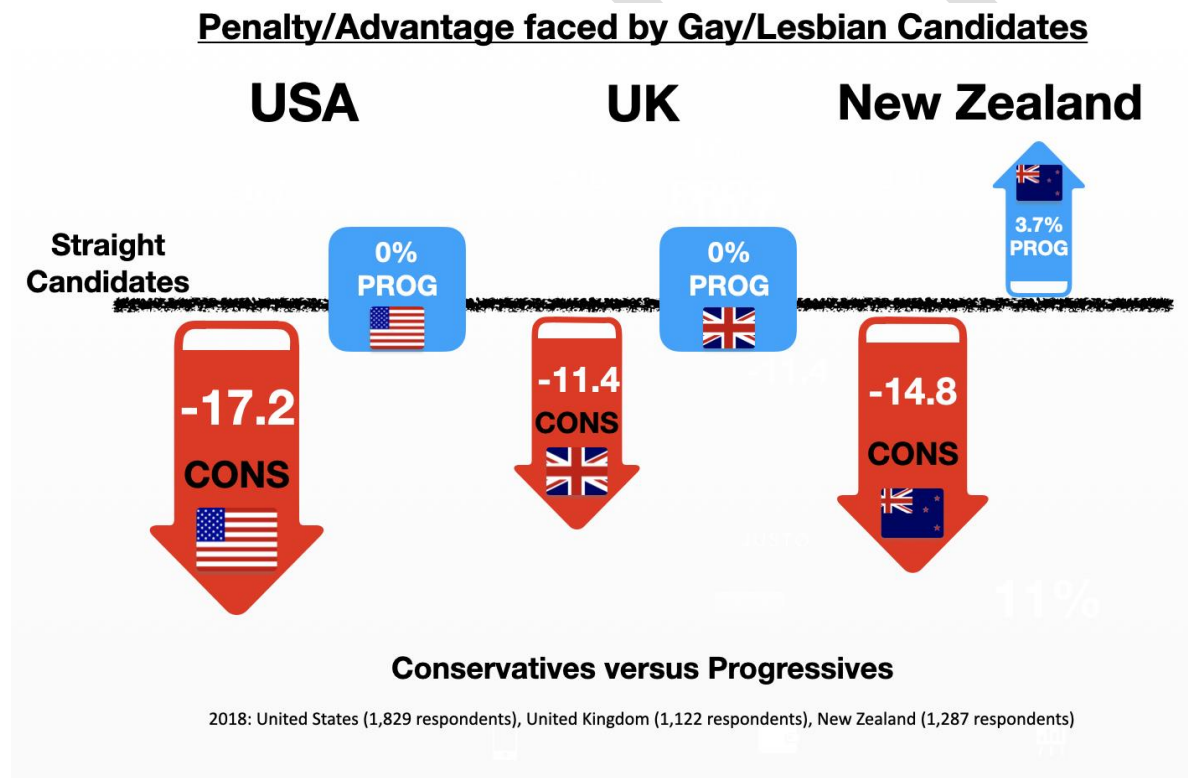
Intersectional identities can be as significant as the various labels that we carry are important in their singularity. Candidates who are both sexual and racial minorities, for instance, may suffer a particularly strong penalty which comes from combinations of these traits, rather than just as a result of separate additive penalties from their sexual orientation and racial identity. Outright prejudice against non-white LGTW candidates can be especially severe. Indeed, such candidates suffer from several layers of stigma derived from their gender, sexual and racial identities. Electability concerns will also likely play a heightened role, given that successful gay and lesbian candidates in national elections have been disproportionately white. In our survey voters did not additionally penalize racial and ethnic minority

¹⁰ "Voter Preferences and the Political Underrepresentation of Minority Groups: Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Candidates in Advanced Democracies," (with Gabriele Magni) *Journal of Politics*, forthcoming

candidates for being gay or transgender, with one important exception: black gay candidates in the US faced an additional penalty for their sexual orientation of 3.6% points, compared to whites.

Partisan identity strongly conditions voter attitudes. Supporters of left-leaning parties did not significantly penalize gay candidates, while right-wing voters strongly did. While in the US Republicans strongly penalize gay candidates (-14.8% points), the penalty is considerably weaker among supporters of the UK Conservative Party (-6.4% points) and the New Zealand National Party (-7.3% points). Results were even starker for political ideology. Progressives do not discriminate against gay candidates in the US and the UK, and in New Zealand they actually favor gay over straight candidates by 3.7% points. In contrast, conservatives in the US, the UK and New Zealand penalize gay candidates by 17.2%, 11.4%, and 14.8% points, respectively.

Women and younger people support transgender candidates more than men and older voters in the three countries, but the difference fails to reach significance in the US.



Chief challenges to the representation of lesbian, bi/pansexual and trans women in elected office

1. Persistent stigma and prejudice within society.

In 1990, the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, recognizing homosexuality as a natural variant of human sexuality.

Nevertheless, out lesbian, bisexual and transgender women continue suffering varying levels of social discrimination and marginalization throughout the world. Ranging from lingering

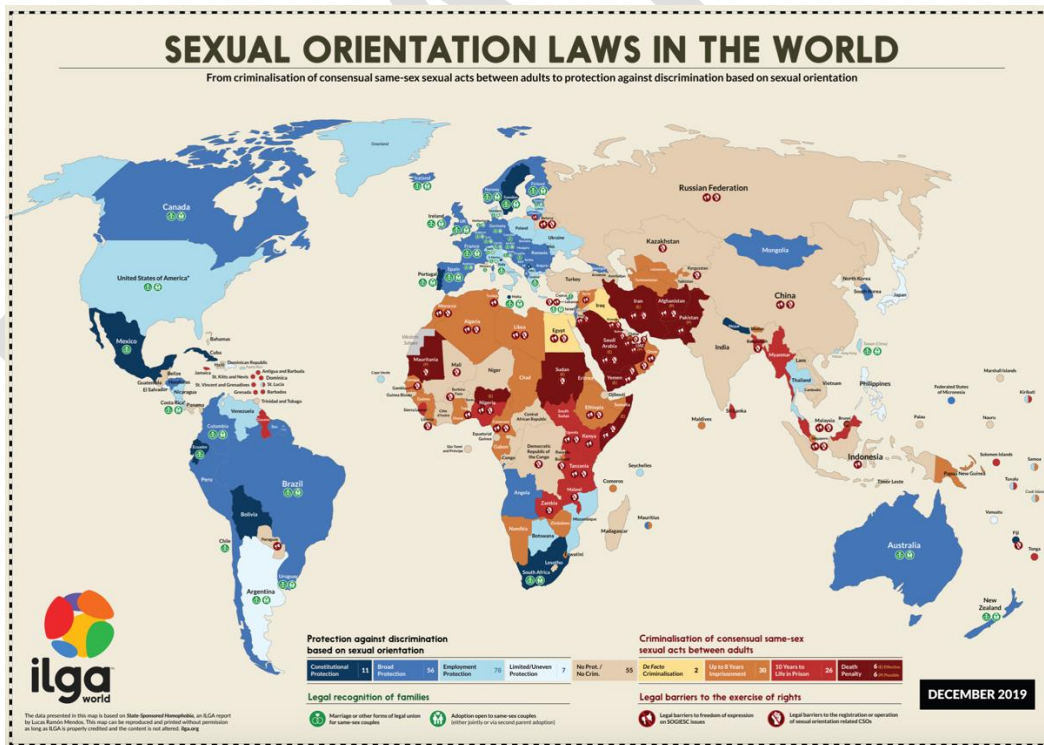
misperceptions and biases to outright and vicious homophobia, bi- and transphobia. In some societies being a sexual minority places barriers and hurdles in the way of advancement in politics and employment but in other places visibility is tantamount to a death sentence. The degree and type of prejudice determines how queer women navigate the political sphere.

2. Media fetishization of sexual minority women in public life.

Even in established democracies the mass media continue to fetishize and sensationalize queer women in public office: denigrating their competences and diminishing their leadership roles. For example, US Representative Katie Hill (CA 25) was targeted with biphobia when her estranged husband weaponized private photographs against her in 2019. She was forced to resign. The UK MP for Oxford West and Abingdon, Layla Moran, was threatened with being outed by *The Mail on Sunday*, before coming out as the first pansexual MP the same year.

3. Legal discrimination.

Same sex loving women are oppressed by broad anti-homosexuality laws which are declining globally but remain in place in many places. If it is illegal to be a lesbian or bisexual then it follows that elected office is off-limits. 70 nation states still criminalize consensual same-sex sexual acts: 12 with the death penalty.



Legal discrimination against trans women is perhaps even more pernicious. The 2020 ILGA *Trans Legal Mapping Report* notes that: “At least 13 UN States criminalize trans persons *de jure*, mostly with “cross-dressing” laws. These are: Brunei, the Gambia, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malawi, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, South Sudan, Tonga, and the United Arab Emirates.

While evidence collected from communities on the ground highlights how measures related to public nuisance, indecency, morality, loitering, sex work-related offences, and consensual same-sex activity amongst others are actively deployed for the same purpose. The systemic targeting of trans people using seemingly innocuous laws is just as damaging as so-called ‘cross dressing’ regulations which overtly target gender expressions.” On a more positive note, legal gender recognition is available in at least 96 UN member States, 25 of whom allow for legal gender recognition without prohibitive requirements.¹¹

4. Party reticence to run LBTw candidates because of electability concerns.

Behind the scenes party gatekeepers are reluctant to run candidates who they feel will face barriers to election. It is true that LGBTQ candidates face voter biases, with transgender identity seen as the strongest disqualifier for public office. Most voters do not see LGBT people in leadership roles and assume that society is not ready to elect candidates. This self-fulfilling prophecy is pernicious. If citizens are less likely to vote for candidates because they are seen as unelectable, marginalized groups never have a seat at the table. The lack of descriptive representation then hinders the promotion of the rights and interests of marginalized groups and makes poor public policy choices more likely. The barriers to election are often over-blown. In many cases out lesbian, bisexual and transgender women have demonstrated the ability to win when given the chance to run.

5. Self-policed and externally enforced invisibility.

75% of American gay men and lesbians say they out to ‘all or most of the important people in their lives’ in the USA but only 19% of bisexuals say the same thing.¹² Running for office is a most public outing. The closet is the only option for millions of LGT women globally and running for elective office, even as a closeted queer person, is fraught with danger.

Practical Policy Suggestions

1. Celebrate and publicize the presence and power of LBT women in positions of power.

Role modeling is a huge aspect of weakening prejudice, inspiring younger queer people to come out and be politically active and reducing the social and medical challenges that LBT women face. Highly visible queer women in positions of power have led challenges to homophobia, biphobia and transphobia the world over.

2. Incorporate LBTw history into K-12 education.

Prejudice takes root early on in a child’s development and is driven by family and school. The incorporation of positive narratives of LBTw history and life is an enormous help to building

¹¹ <https://ilga.org/ilga-world-releases-trans-legal-mapping-report-3rd-edition>

¹² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/18/bisexual-adults-are-far-less-likely-than-gay-men-and-lesbians-to-be-out-to-the-people-in-their-lives/>

respect for queer lives. The Scottish government will be the first to mainstream LGBTQ education in public schooling from 2021.¹³

3. Educate political parties in the potential benefits of running out LBT candidates.

As noted earlier, a significant challenge to the representation of queer women is that party gatekeepers are reluctant to run out LBT women as candidates. Our evidence shows that LBTw can be successful when they are given the backing to compete on a level playing field in politics. Data can help persuade sympathetic party leaders than running LBT women as candidates can be a positive.

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¹³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/scotland-mandate-lgbtq-inclusive-curriculum-across-all-public-schools-n934646>


Appendix


LGBTQ by Party ID (USA)

	LGBTQ	Gay men	Lesbian	Bi/Pan	Trans/GNC
Democratic	14.2%	5.0%	2.2%	6.3%	0.7%
Republican	2.8%	0.8%	0.1%	1.6%	0.3%
Independent	9.3%	1.9%	1.2%	5.3%	0.9%

Total #: Democrat: 2,270; Republican: 2,013; Independent: 2,031

Political Ideology by Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity (USA)

	Straight	LGBTQ	Gay	Lesbian	Bi/Pan	BiPan 	Trans
Extremely liberal	5.1	18.6	18.9	15.4	17.7	17.5	27.8
Liberal	12.8	26.3	33.7	35.9	22	22	5.6
Slightly liberal	10.5	14.4	14.8	12.8	16	15	11.1
Moderate	36.1	30.3	22.5	32.1	34.4	39	22.2
Slightly conservative	11.4	4.8	3.6	2.6	4.6	1.5	11.1
Conservative	15.6	4.1	4.1	1.3	4.6	4.5	5.6
Extremely conservative	8.5	1.5	1.8	0	0.7	0.5	11.1

591 LGBTQ likely voters: 181 gay men, 71 lesbians, 282 bisexual/pansexual (200 bipan ) and 57 transgender or gender-non-confirming.

LGBTQ vs. Straight voters by age (USA)

	17-29	30-44	45-64	65+
LGBTQ	19.2%	9.6%	7.2%	5.2%
Straight	80.8%	90.4%	92.8%	94.8%
<i>Bi/Pan Women</i>	<i>17.5%</i>	<i>5.4%</i>	<i>1.7%</i>	<i>0.5%</i>

Proportion of Women Who Identify as Bisexual/Pansexual (USA)

	% of ♀
Asian	5.8%
Black	8.8%
Latinx	5.9%
Native	13.0%
White	5.5%
Other	14.0%

Total N: Asian: 292; Black: 513; Latinx: 435; Native: 93; White: 4,846; Other: 140

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