



Nordic Council
of Ministers

Seven challenges for LGBTI equality

– and how the Nordic co-operation can
solve them

Contents

Introduction	3
Challenge #1: We don't know enough – and we know almost nothing about double minorities	5
Challenge #2: Not everyone bears us good will	7
Challenge #3: Internationally, things look bleak	9
Challenge #4: Only a small slice of the rainbow is visible	11
Challenge #5: Family life is reserved for the few	13
Challenge #6: The health service lacks knowledge – and sometimes the will	15
Challenge #7: We are dependent on the organisations of civil society – and they are dependent on reliable funding	18
The way forward	20
About this publication	21

Introduction

I think many people suppose that we're at the finish line here in the Nordic countries – that the fight for queer rights is virtually over, and that LGBTI people can now live safely, openly and equally. Sometimes it's almost as if I feel that way myself – for example during Pride, when there's glitter on my face and a tear in the corner of my eye, and there are people around me on all sides celebrating diversity and love. Hundreds of thousands of them, here in Oslo. And in recent years, the rural areas have dressed in rainbow colours as well.

But – we are still queer when the flags have been tucked away and the glitter has been swept up. In all situations, and in all phases of life. And it isn't always as easy as during Pride Week.

It isn't easy to be queer when you avoid seeking health care because you can't be sure that those who are going to take care of you are willing to tolerate you. Or when life is drawing to a close, but you feel you have to leave a large part of yourself behind when you move to a nursing home. When whom you fall in love with leads to you being harassed online or attacked in a street alley. When you lack rights because your family is not legally recognised. When your asylum application is rejected because you do not fit into Western European stereotypes. When you are subjected to irreversible operations that you have no chance to consent to, because you were born intersex. Or when you belong to several minorities, but are not really included in any of them.

So we're not quite at the finish line yet. There are countless ways to be human - but today, society and legislation only take some of them into account. In many areas of life, we still have major structural challenges that affect the lives and health of LGBTI people. It is about lack of knowledge, old-fashioned attitudes and inadequate legal protection. It is about legislation that exists, but perhaps first and foremost on paper, and which we must ensure is followed up on and applied in a good way. And it is about ensuring that the rights we already have in place can withstand the extreme conservative ideas we see taking root and spreading in several parts of Europe.

The Nordic countries are now to face these challenges across national borders.

In the autumn of 2020, the Nordic Council of Ministers invited a number of professionals, activists, social actors and organisations to a series of debates, with the aim of highlighting the obstacles and challenges for LGBTI people in the Nordic region. After eight debates in each Nordic country, each with its own focus, a total of 44 people shared their experiences, knowledge and thoughts about what measures should be taken in future, so that we can get even closer to a Nordic region where there is room for all of us.

I have attempted to boil down twelve hours of presentations and conversation to the following seven points. What challenges are we facing, and how can the Nordic co-operation solve them.

Gisle August Gjevestad Agledahl



Challenge #1

We don't know enough – and we know almost nothing about double minorities

There is insufficient research into LGBTI people in a Nordic perspective. Janne Bromseth, a researcher with the association FRI, said during the debate in Åland that much of what we know is patchwork knowledge – in other words it is drawn from different reports, and also often from a different context than the Nordic one. To understand more about the challenges of life that queer people face, and what measures should be taken to meet them, we must focus on bringing the voices of the underrepresented into the statistics.

Double minority = double burden, and then some

The biggest blind spot applies to those who belong to double – or multiple – minorities. Minority status is often discussed and addressed in isolation, but the situation is seldom that simple.

Deirdre Palacios, head of RFSL, said in Umeå that the lack of an intersectional perspective leads to the invisibility of the double minority issue. "There is knowledge of the consequences of being exposed to racism, and of the consequences of being exposed to homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. But where is the knowledge of the overall vulnerability, and what it brings about?" they said.

The living conditions of LGBTI people are affected not only by sexual orientation or gender, but also by other social categories such as ethnicity, religious affiliation, functional ability and social class. What role do these factors play? There is limited knowledge about this, and so far there has been little focus on it – but fortunately this is changing.

It was not only in Åland that this issue was raised. During the debate in Nuuk, Ronja

Vaara, committee member of Garmeres, Queer Sámi Organisation, spoke about her experiences of belonging to several minorities at once. She defines herself as both queer and Sami – a combination that, just a handful of years ago, was completely invisible to the public. Vaara said that people with double minority status often face discrimination from several sides:

"In the Sami communities we risk exclusion and loneliness, and in queer societies we encounter racist attitudes and ignorance," she said.

But the problems are not just personal.

"We also experience structural problems in our encounters with public services such as health care, child welfare and other welfare services, where there is a focus on putting us in boxes with regard to how we practice our gender and sexuality. These boxes often build upon nationalist and colonialist thinking that does not necessarily accord with how we think about this in a Sami and indigenous context."

International research projects and the introduction of gender equality data

Collaborating to fund and obtain data across national borders can be a good solution, as there is generally little research on LGBTI people in a Nordic context. Such collaboration could also solve the problem of there sometimes being such a small number of people whom we wish to know more about – queer Sami, for example – that obtaining data from just one country makes it difficult to provide a representative sample.

"In some research, it can be hard to find large enough populations in one country," said Anna Galin, development manager at the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, during the debate in Umeå. "But we can merge our studies. We should be able to co-operate more and see what knowledge can be applied across the countries. This is a development area that is very interesting."

In both Umeå and Tromsø, it was proposed that *gender equality data* should be introduced as part of national data collection in each country – something the UN has also called for in the past. This means that respondents to surveys would also fill in information about their minority status, so that the reports would make any connections visible. Mikkel Eskil Mikkelsen, Member of the Governing Council of the Sámi Parliament, explained: "A simple step to creating more data would for example be to include a question in national surveys about whether you define yourself as Sámi and/or speak Sámi languages. But as far as I know, this has never been done in any country."

Irrespective of the solution chosen, there is a pressing need for more knowledge. Knowing more will help us to raise awareness about the challenges that exist, find the right tools to manage them, and provide incentives to act. The intersectional perspective should be with us in everything we do.



Challenge #2

Not everyone bears us good will

"What young people or teachers *haven't* witnessed 'gay' being used as an insult?" asked Helga Eggebø, a researcher at the Nordland Research Institute, during the debate in Torshavn.

Surveys show that there has been a steady improvement in the attitudes of the majority population towards LGBTI people. But queer people are still exposed to hate crimes and various forms of harassment, smears and social control – for example in the form of negative comments in the workplace or in the schoolyard, as Eggebø mentioned. This contributes to making queer people somewhat more exposed to challenges such as mental health issues, suicidal thoughts and substance abuse.

Legislation and attitudes go hand in hand

Within the Nordic region, both the attitudes of the majority population and the legal protection against discrimination and hate crimes vary somewhat. Social acceptance in Iceland, for example, is a few steps ahead of their legislation, while in the Faroe Islands it seems to be the other way around. In Norway, there has been almost a parallel development between legislation and social acceptance:

"The attitude of the majority population towards those of us who live queer lives has become increasingly positive, while at the same time the legislation has been moving in the direction of increasing legal and formal equality," said the researcher Helga Eggebø during the debate in Torshavn.

In Reykjavik, it was pointed out how important it is to also undertake attitude-forming work – legislative changes alone are not enough.

"It's not enough just to change the legislation and then sit back. We mustn't forget to also work with social acceptance. If we want to see real change, the work with legislation and attitudes must go hand in hand," said human rights lawyer Katrín Oddsdóttir during the debate in Reykjavik. "The acceptance is there – but it has its

limits. People who are more marginalised experience more resistance in everyday life than those who are not as marginalised."

Another challenge is how the legislation is applied. Uglu Stefánía Kristjónudóttir Jónsdóttir, head of Trans Iceland, pointed out in the same debate that it is crucial that those who enforce the laws possess the right knowledge of and attitude to the legislation, for it to have any meaning. Are the police able to catch and deal with hate crime – and are they themselves free of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia?"

"LGBTI people must be able to exercise their rights without worrying about being subject to discrimination. That means that the police and the authorities need more training," said Jónsdóttir. "These institutions must also bring more diversity into their own ranks. At the moment, they have very few employees who are able to handle these challenges."

Organised opposition

There are milieus and organisations in the Nordic region that expose LGBTI people to real danger – and some of them are also state-subsidised. These might include conservative religious communities that oppress queers with social control, harmful attitudes or even conversion therapy, or right-wing extremist organisations that stalk and threaten LGBTI activists. These groups also have an impact on society in general. There is a need for greater shielding and protection from those who actively try to prevent LGBTI people from living in safety and openness.

During the debate in Umeå, Deirdre Palacios, leader of RFSL, said that Nazi groups have become a major problem in Sweden. "Rainbow flags have been burned, and our local associations have been threatened. The police have problems doing anything about it, and few of the reports are followed up. In Sweden today, it's hard for us to ensure that our local branches in small towns can feel safe in their activism."

In Reykjavik, concern was also expressed about the opposition that is arising. Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir, head of Samtökin '78 – the National Queer Organisation of Iceland, made it clear that the situation is now urgent.

"Fascism, homophobia and especially anti-trans rhetoric is on the rise across the continent. This is not the time to ignore LGBTI rights or to pretend that our relatively secure position in society can last forever. We cannot face this storm without the right anchoring. Our legal rights must be secured," she said.



Challenge #3

Internationally, things look bleak

"There are a lot of cold winds blowing in the world today," said Åsa Lindhagen, Sweden's Minister for Gender Equality, when she opened the debate in Umeå. Outside the Nordic region, the situation is escalating for LGBTI people, and in many places it has become critical. Rights and protection are being torn away, while harassment and hate crimes are on the rise. In several places the authorities are actively working to undermine civil society, and the pressure on activists is growing day by day.

During the debate in Tromsø, focus was placed on what the Nordic co-operation can do to improve the situation internationally. Freddy André Øvstegård, a member of the Nordic Council, stated that it should be a given that the Nordic countries clearly distance themselves from the setbacks we are seeing. But he also believes that we must do much more than that:

"It's great that we in the Nordic countries say that we condemn what is happening around the world, but nothing will change by us just sitting here and being terrified at what we see going on outside our borders. We must also support the local people who are working with these problems. It is from them that change will come. It's important that we support capacity building and the strengthening of civil society – both within the Nordic countries, but also from the Nordic countries to others," said Øvstegård.

In the same debate, Björn van Roozendaal, Programme Director for ILGA-Europe, shared his experiences of working with LGBTI rights outside the Nordic region. He emphasised that we cannot just compare East and West and try to work out how other countries can become just like us, but that we must identify what kind of change is possible in the local context.

"We know for example that major legal changes are not feasible in the countries of the former Soviet Union, but that it may be possible to work with the local health sector or the police in order to make progress," he said. "To succeed in this work, it is crucial to identify the areas where change is actually possible."

Protection for asylum seekers

The need to shield and protect queer refugees and asylum seekers was emphasised on several occasions. People who flee oppression and persecution due to their sexual orientation are entitled to protection in the Nordic countries, but in practice they encounter a system that makes its decisions on the basis of queer stereotypes drawn from Western culture.

During the debate in Reykjavik, Angel Buns O'hara spoke about her experiences as a queer asylum seeker. Because she does not have a stereotypical lesbian appearance, she experienced being questioned by the immigration authorities. Not all queer asylum seekers have the appearance, reflections or experiences that fit our Western perception of LGBTI people. O'hara believes there is a great need for education and training for those who interview asylum-seekers and process the applications.

Human rights lawyer Katrín Oddsdóttir said that it is urgent to get this area sorted out.

"We must ensure that we have the legal framework in place, so that asylum seekers who come here can fully place their trust in our legislation. It is a fact that LGBTI people who flee here do so because they know the social situation here is quite good. But if we look at the legislation, then the protection is not there. We must resolve this immediately."



Challenge #4

Only a small slice of the rainbow is visible

"I looked for representation in African books and films, but I found nothing. That makes it hard to know whether you are in fact an abomination or not," said Nigerian gay author Jude Dibia during the debate in Umeå. It could not be much clearer than that. Having someone to reflect yourself in is essential to understanding yourself, building your identity and knowing that you are part of something. Representation also expands the understanding of others.

The Nordic region has been the source of several film and TV productions with ground-breaking LGBTI depictions that we can be proud of, such as Swedish *Fucking Åmål*, Faroese *Vintermorgen* and Norwegian *Skam*. But it is far from all queer people that are visible in the media picture, as was discussed at the queer film festival MIX COPENHAGEN in Copenhagen. Festival director Andrea Coloma thinks the representation is too narrow, and that only a few of the LGBTI letters are seen on screen:

"There is no bisexual, trans or queer representation. Intersex just isn't there at all. It's just about lesbians and gay men – and really mostly gay men. And when I say gay men, we're talking about white, cis-gender, non-disabled men. That's what the media reality looks like today."

Wider representation exists – as at the mentioned film festival – but then most often in narrow-interest productions and short films. During the debate, questions were asked as to whether commercial channels and platforms simply do not dare to show more marginalised expressions of queerness, and whether the problem lies in the fact that they may not think it is marketable enough.

Lotte Svendsen, a film consultant at the Danish Film Institute, believes that the issue is one of awareness, and feels that more conversations and increased focus will be helpful. "The more we talk about this, the greater the awareness. In the end, telling queer stories will just be common sense."

Casper Øhlers, board member of LGBT+ Youth Denmark, believes that a portion of the state subsidies for film and media productions should be earmarked for queer representation.

"There should be a pool of project funds to ensure representation. The requirements for receiving funding should not just relate to the characters visible on the screen, but should also require LGBTI people to be involved in the development of the project. That will ensure that the stories we tell provide a true, all-round depiction."



Challenge #5

Family life is reserved for the few

"Within the four walls of our home, we were just happy and normal. But as soon as you took a step outside, not everything was quite as normal," said author Alexandra Sandbäck during the debate in Helsinki, about growing up in a rainbow family.

There are a number of obstacles in the way before LGBTI people in the Nordic countries can have safe and protected family lives. The attitudes in society to which Sandbäck referred are one of them, but there is also a lack of sufficient support, protection and opportunities, both in the legislation and in its implementation.

The legal system is designed for one type of family

Family law in the Nordic countries is based on heteronormative expectations of what a family should be, i.e. two parents who live with their children. But families are put together in many different ways and therefore have different needs – something the legislation must recognise. This was discussed during the debate in Helsinki.

"Queer families have to assimilate into a legal system built for someone else, and not for them. In general, the Nordic countries need family law that takes account of all types of families, in addition to specific solutions for special situations," said Anna Moring, advisor with Finland for All Families.

She also pointed out that many of the challenges a rainbow family encounters do not just apply to families with LGBTI members. At least one in three of *all* families deviate from the typical model of two cohabiting parents, for example because there is only one parent in the picture, or because of a stepfamily.

"We need to have support and security for everyone, no matter what the family looks like. Then the Nordic region can become the best place in the world to live for all types of families," said Moring.

The legislation should be strengthened within each country, but there is also a need for support and protection within the Nordic region as a whole. "It is not

unproblematic to move from one country to another as a rainbow family," Lina Antmann pointed out during the debate in Åland. "Suddenly you no longer have a legal relationship with your child in the new country."

Family law in practice

Some of the rights granted to LGBTI people work better on paper than in reality, according to Juha Jämsä, executive director of the Finnish Rainbow Families Association.

"How can we implement same-sex marriage in practice?" he asked. "Same-sex marriage is equal to other forms of marriage in law, but not in practice. This relates, for example, to the practices of various organisations, such as agreements between trade unions and workers, that are inadequate. There are many details that are not in place."

During the debate, it was also pointed out that you have to be quite privileged if you want to start a family as an LGBTI person. It requires considerable financial resources, you must have the belief that it is possible at all, and you must be able to navigate a challenging bureaucratic system.

"Our dream is that in the future, every LGBTI person will have a real choice of whether they want to start a family with children or not. But for both economic and cultural reasons, we're not there yet," said Jämsä.



Challenge #6

The health service lacks knowledge – and sometimes the will

In the health care system, LGBTI people risk encountering both a lack of knowledge and a lack of tolerance. A dangerous consequence of this is that some postpone, and even avoid, seeking the help they need. There is a need for a higher level of competence and better attitudes in the health care system, as well as building trust so that those who are queer can be confident that they will be taken care of when they need it.

Such measures must be taken even if the legislation in the country actually provides good protection, according to Benjamin Sidorov, patient and client ombudsman in Åland. "The Patient Act in Åland and in Finland states that every patient has the right to high-quality treatment, and that everyone must be met without violating their human dignity. Discrimination is prohibited. But still we see that encounters with the care services vary," he said.

Particularly vulnerable are intersex, elderly and transgender people:

Intersex

Throughout the Nordic countries, so-called corrective treatment, both surgical and hormonal, is still performed on children born with gender characteristics that do not unambiguously fall under the typical definition of male or female. The practice has been criticised by both the EU and the UN. Intersex activist Bríet Finnsdóttir has herself undergone this treatment, and called for change during the debate in Reykjavik.

"I think we can all agree that our children deserve the best they can get, so why not use the latest and best science from now on? How does outdated science based on

homophobia and prejudice fit into this?" they asked. "We are at the mercy of procedures that are outdated and harmful. This needs to be changed from a legal perspective."

The elderly

"'Can I belong here, can I be my whole self?' is a frequent concern voiced by older LGBTI people in their encounter with health and care institutions," said Janne Bromseth from the association FRI during the debate in Åland.

There is a need for more knowledge and understanding regarding older LGBTI people, who often have needs that are different from both non-queer people of the same age and from younger LGBTI people. Older queer people grew up in a time of secrecy and discretion, and for many of them being open has in the past entailed great risk. These factors may have left their mark. At the same time, we know that health professionals lack competence concerning the ageing conditions of queer people, and that negative attitudes can persist in the health care system just as they do elsewhere in society.

According to Bromseth, some elderly people may feel compelled to return to the closet when they move into a nursing home, while others may not wish to be open about their queer identity. This might be the case concerning those who are close to you, what you bring with you of experiences, and whether you wish to be open towards other residents. But in any case, healthcare professionals should know about a person's background in order to understand their needs and be able to treat them in the right way.

"Choosing to be open means trusting that you will be met positively and with knowledge and skill, and that you will receive treatment that is as good as that given to anyone else. This must be evident in both how health professionals communicate and their actions – and in this way, they can actively invite older LGBTI people to be open," said Bromseth.

Transgender

Transgender people may also hesitate to contact the health services.

"Let's say I'm sitting in my doctor's waiting room, waiting to be vaccinated or have a health check. They know very well that I prefer to be called Angelica, but two out of three times, they still call out the wrong name," said Angelica Löwdin, head of the trans association FPES, during the debate in Åland. "A few simply do not tolerate us. They are stuck in misconceptions and refuse to absorb knowledge about trans people. The fact that these people exist in the health care system – at all levels – is documented," she said.

Löwdin emphasised that lack of knowledge is a bigger problem than hostility in the health care system. But the consequences are the same – transgender people postpone or avoid seeking help. She believes that knowledge about sexual

orientation, gender identity and expression should be integrated into basic training for the care professions.

Throughout the Nordic region, there are also major challenges associated with the assessment and treatment of gender incongruence, i.e. the lack of correspondence between a person's assigned gender at birth and their experienced gender. "These are small patient groups that require highly specialised expertise," said Mattias Kolli, project manager at Regnbogsfyren, who called for a common transgender health service for the Nordic region.

Kolli has also had good experiences with a measure that ensures that LGBTI people gain confidence in the care services – namely certification for those institutions that have received training in LGBTI issues. This means that those who visit the institution can be confident that they will meet people who have both the competence and tolerance needed.



Challenge #7

We are dependent on the organisations of civil society – and they are dependent on reliable funding

"Those of us who are queer grow up as minorities in our families, in school and in society. That's why it is so important to find networks, support and communities with others who are like you. It helps to alleviate the feeling of exclusion and difference," said Inge Alexander Gjestvang, head of the association FRI, during the debate in Nuuk.

This is one of the many reasons why queer organisations do a vital job for people living queer lives; both for individuals, as Gjestvang mentions, but also politically, as Helga Eggebø, a researcher with the Nordland Research Institute, pointed out during the debate in Torshavn:

"In a Norwegian context, it is beyond all doubt that queer organisations have played a vital role in the fight to obtain important rights, such as the gender-neutral marriage law. The role of these organisations must not be underestimated," she said.

Several times during the series of debates, a desire was expressed for more comprehensive co-operation between organisations and associations, large and small, in the Nordic region. Although the Nordic countries have different demographics and geography, many of the challenges they face are the same, so the experiences and insights garnered can possess great transfer value across borders. Jan Joe Seidsen, a long-time activist in LGBT Greenland, asked for support from the larger organisations because he finds that his own lack the resources for a country that consists of many small communities where there is little contact with the outside world.

"Where do you go as a sixteen-year-old, alone in a small village, when you are suffering inside and feel completely isolated in the world?" he asked.

In addition to cross-border co-operation, there is a great need for better financial security. The organisations are dependent on state support, and would like to see greater predictability in this area in order to do a good job. Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir, head of Samtökin '78, said that she recently had to lay off all employees in the organisation because they did not know whether they would receive funding next year. She wants to see long-term financial support to ensure continuity and development.

"It's fine that our politicians paint rainbows in the streets and celebrate Pride. But it is something else to promote our cause, to protect us, to fight for our rights – even when it is not easy. One thing they should fight for is funding. Voluntary organisations need stability and security. So when funding is given to these organisations, it should be done via long-term agreements," said Þorvaldsdóttir.



The way forward

In other words - we still have a way to go before we reach the finish line. During the debates, it has been heart-breaking to hear about cemeteries filled with young men who were not allowed to be themselves, and about politicians at parliamentary level (!) who use gay slurs without blinking. There is no doubt that there are still many challenges left for LGBTI people.

But the debate series has also shown that the Nordic countries have the opportunity to become the safest place to live a queer life. In doing so, we can also become a beacon of hope – or a rainbow, if you will – in a world where progress in this area unfortunately can no longer be taken for granted. We now know what it will to get there, thanks to the activists, professionals and social actors who have contributed to these debates. And they are ready to elaborate when the politicians are ready to listen.

And this would actually benefit everyone, including the majority population – because, as it was pointed out in Torshavn: It has been proven that a diverse society expands the space we *all* have to be ourselves and do what's right for us. If everyone is respected, we become more content as human beings, whether you are queer or not.

It has also been pointed out that the countries and autonomous territories of the Nordic region have already benefited greatly from each other when it comes to progress regarding LGBTI issues. Each of us has made progress in different areas, and then we have looked to each other and become inspired by what it is possible to achieve in countries similar to our own. The progress of other countries has been used as leverage for political change. In this sense, the Nordic countries have been in a kind of friendly competition with each other – one in which we are all winners. I'm excited to see what we will be able to achieve when we work together as allies from now on.

Although we still have a long way to go, we have already come incredibly far, thanks to the efforts of the brave people who have paved the way for us. In the work ahead, we should keep this in mind. Because the enormous progress we have made so far says everything about the kind of change that can happen in the years to come, as well.

Gisle August Gjevestad Agledahl

About this publication

Seven challenges for LGBTI equality – and how the Nordic co-operation can solve them

Gisle August Gjevestad Agledahl

Nord 2021:013

ISBN 978-92-893-6937-4 (PDF)

ISBN 978-92-893-6938-1 (ONLINE)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/nord2021-013>

© Nordic Council of Ministers 2021

This publication was funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. However, the content does not necessarily reflect the Nordic Council of Ministers' views, opinions, attitudes or recommendations

Layout: Louise Jeppesen

Photos: #1 – Håkon Sandmo Karlsen #2 – Unsplash.com #3 – Unsplash.com #4 – Unsplash.com #5 – Johner.dk #6 – Scanpix.dk #7 – Johner.dk Veien videre – Unsplash.com

Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, the economy, and culture. It plays an important role in European and international collaboration, and aims at creating a strong Nordic community in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation seeks to safeguard Nordic and regional interests and principles in the global community. Shared Nordic values help the region solidify its position as one of the world's most innovative and competitive.

Nordic Council of Ministers

Nordens Hus

Ved Stranden 18

DK-1061 Copenhagen

www.norden.org

Read more Nordic publications: www.norden.org/publications