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Discrimination of Sexual Minorities in Emerging Markets: Can the Needle Be Moved?*

Recent advances in rights for lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals (LGB) have varied substantially across the world. In the United States, for example, LGB rights have increased at a rapid pace: same-sex sexual activity was fully decriminalized in 2003, legal access to same-sex marriage was granted in 2015, and employment discrimination protections were granted in 2020. Likewise, India decriminalized same-sex sexual acts in 2018 while Taiwan granted same-sex marriage in 2019. Yet, in many other parts of the world, LGB rights have advanced more slowly or not at all. As of 2019, 70 United Nations member states (35 percent of all members) still criminalize same-sex sexual conduct. In six UN member states, same-sex sexual activity is even punishable by death. Anti-LGB attitudes are particularly strong in Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, and anti-LGB policies have recently been adopted in Hungary, Poland, Russia, Tanzania, and Uganda (Mendos 2019).

In Aksoy et al. (2023) we provide new evidence on the determinants of support for sexual minorities in Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine—three emerging markets with some of the lowest rates of social acceptance of sexual minorities in Europe. Figure 1 shows the share of respondents in 33 countries who agree that gay men and lesbians should be free to live their lives as they wish. Serbia, Ukraine, and Turkey score the 29th, 30th, and 31st lowest shares of agreement, respectively. These countries also have highly restrictive LGBT equality laws and policies. They score just 33, 4, and 18, respectively, on a scale where zero indicates gross human rights violations and 100 represents the greatest degree of legal equality (ILGA 2019).

SIMPLE INFORMATION TREATMENTS TO REDUCE DISCRIMINATION

To investigate whether and how LGB discrimination can be reduced, even in such strongly homophobic environments, we designed an information-treatment experiment that tests several theories. First, we are interested in whether rational economic self-inter-

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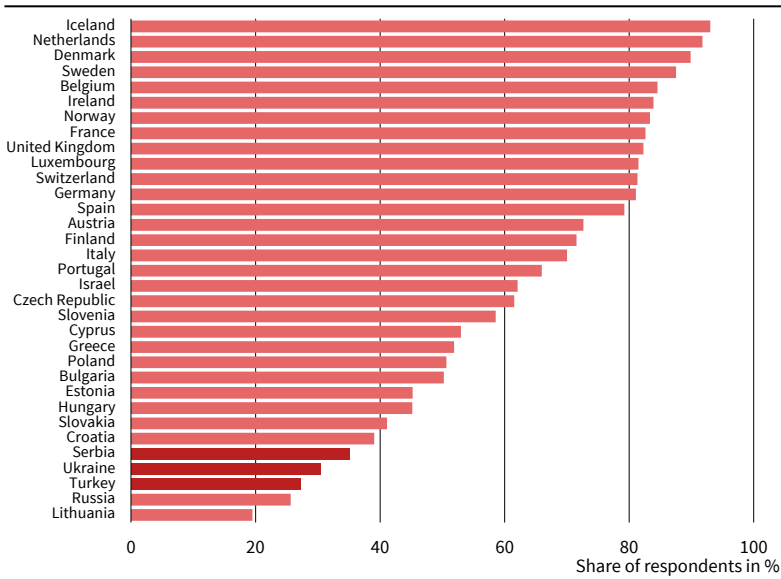
KEY MESSAGES

- Providing information about the economic cost of sexual orientation discrimination significantly increases support for measures to safeguard equal employment opportunities for lesbians and gays
- Treatment effect spills over to support for equal employment opportunities based on ethnic origin, religious beliefs, nationality, gender, and disability, but not to LGB support in other aspects of life
- Informing people that according to the WHO homosexuality is not a mental disease does not cause more support for equal employment opportunities, but does result in improved attitudes about sexual minorities in non-economic aspects of life. Effects are concentrated among those individuals who trust the WHO
- Political actors wanting to achieve the policy goal of expanding non-discrimination employment protections should consider information campaigns that stress the costs of discrimination as opposed to trying to change more fundamental views about homosexuality

est might overcome personal distaste for LGB people. Thus, in one arm of our experiment we inform people about the direct economic costs to their country from discrimination against sexual minorities, using estimates of per capita income changes from Badgett et al. (2019). We hypothesize that this information induces some self-interested individuals to set aside

Figure 1

Support for Sexual Minorities across Countries



Note: Share of respondents that agree or strongly agree that “Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish”.
Source: European Social Survey, 2002–2018. © ifo Institute

negative personal views to support non-discrimination in LGB employment.

Second, we want to understand whether narratives about homosexuality being a mental illness drive anti-gay sentiment. In another treatment arm we try to ‘debunk’ this narrative by informing individuals that the World Health Organization (WHO) does not consider homosexuality to be a mental illness. We hypothesize that this information induces more favorable views about homosexuality. We test these hypotheses through a randomized survey experiment in which one-third of respondents receive the “discrimination cost” information, another third receive the “myth debunking” information, and the final third receive placebo information unrelated to LGB people.

MAIN FINDINGS

Our experiment yields four main results. First, providing information about the economic cost of sexual orientation discrimination significantly increases support for measures to safeguard equal employment opportunities for lesbians and gays. Individuals who

received the discrimination cost treatment were 1.49 times more likely to support such equal opportunities compared with individuals randomly assigned to the control group.

Second, we find that this discrimination cost treatment spills over to support for equal employment opportunities based on ethnic origin, religious beliefs, nationality, gender, and disability (the left panel of Figure 2). However, each of the discrimination cost treatment effects in these other domains is quantitatively smaller than the effect for sexual orientation-based employment equality—although they are all statistically significant.

Third, the impact of the discrimination cost treatment does not spill over to LGB support in other aspects of life. After adjusting for false discovery rates, there are no effects on opinions concerning the moral acceptability and justifiability of homosexuality, as well as on whether sexual minorities should be able to live their lives freely, or whether sexual minorities bring shame on their families (the right panel of Figure 2).

Fourth, informing people that according to the WHO homosexuality is not a mental disease does not cause more support for equal employment opportunities, but does result in improved attitudes about sexual minorities in non-economic aspects of life. Specifically, this myth-debunking treatment increases support regarding the moral acceptability and justifiability of homosexuality and the idea that sexual minorities should be able to live their lives freely. It also reduces the likelihood that individuals report that a gay or lesbian relative would bring shame on their family. Interestingly, these effects are concentrated among those individuals who trust the WHO.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our results have two important implications for the expansion of LGB rights in parts of the world where anti-LGB attitudes are widely held and deeply ingrained. First, they clearly suggest that individuals in countries with strong views about the immorality of homosexuality can—when informed about the economic costs of sexual-orientation discrimination—still voice support for non-discrimination policies. This



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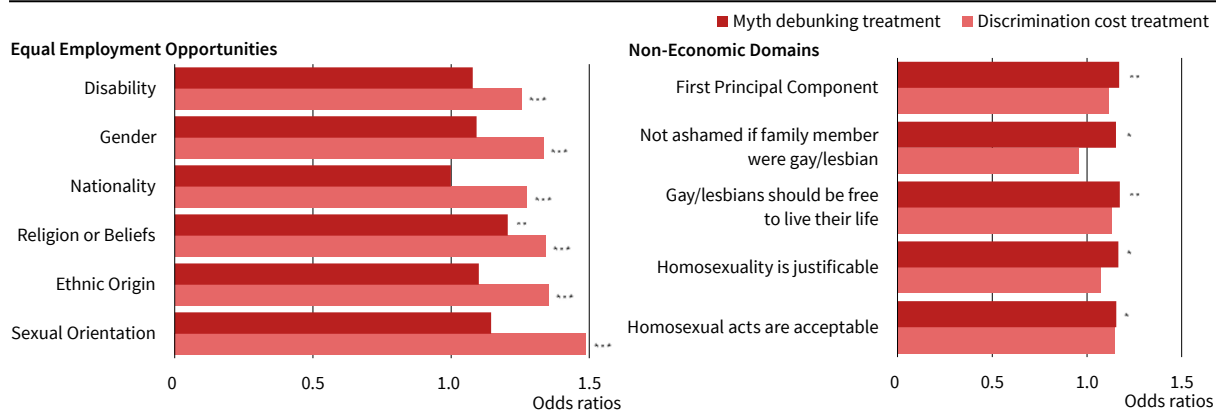


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Figure 2

Effects of Information Treatments on Support for Equal Employment Opportunities and LGB-Related Views in Non-Economic Domains



Note: Odds ratios are displayed. All models include controls for age and its square; a male dummy, dummy variables for tertiary education, secondary education; a dummy for being in any kind of partnership; a dummy for living in an urban area; survey date dummies; survey country dummies; number of adults above and below 65; religion dummies (Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox, other religion) and labour market-related controls (whether the individual works at a state-owned enterprise, foreign firm or international organization, and unemployed dummy). * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. Source: Aksoy et al. (2023).

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indicates that advances in LGB rights in socially conservative places may be more effective if they appeal to the economic costs of anti-LGB discrimination instead of trying to change the underlying views themselves. Second, our results also indicate that views about the acceptability of homosexuality itself can be modestly affected by the provision of basic information, particularly when framed in the context of institutions that people trust.

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