

Homosexuality Is Not a Disease

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Homosexuality remains unaccepted in many societies, illegal and punishable, with some countries even retaining the death penalty for it.[\[i\]](#) It is often the topic of heated discussions or reactions in many countries and Azerbaijan is no exception. Despite the long lasting debate, scientific research and millions around the world protesting against the violation of human rights and gender based discrimination, many continue to see non-heterosexuality as a threat, disapprove and refuse to accept or understand it. Any attempt to raise the issue of estranging humans with different sexual orientations brings restrictions, confrontations and even violent reactions. These are often ignored at many levels. Continuing ignorance helps to fuel the catastrophic fire of hatred towards homosexuals and their movement to have the same freedoms as others. It also results in high rate of suicide attempts among the LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex) adolescent community in Azerbaijan. A general principle of equality is embodied in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan and is further manifested in specific legislation. Nevertheless, sexual orientation and gender identity are not protected under anti-discrimination laws as they are currently interpreted.

Today many in Azerbaijan are unaware of what homosexuality is and what homosexuals stand for. That not only causes societal pressure and denials, but also potentially fatal outcomes. Four years ago, Isa Shahmarli, a young activist who chaired the LGBT group *Azad* (Free), committed suicide by hanging himself from a rainbow flag in Azerbaijan. As of January 23, 2014, BBC News Azərbaycanca described the denial, discrimination, and pressure from his family and society which 20-year old Isa faced.[\[iii\]](#) Unfortunately, Isa is not the

first, nor the only young person to take such desperate measure for the reasons stated above.

It is also partially because the majority do not know or understand the differences between sex and gender. The factors contributing to an individual's same-sex sexual orientation or sexual preference also remain poorly understood and not well researched by the majority of psychologists and psychiatrists in Azerbaijan. The topic does not receive enough attention from local academics, doctors, and scientists, nor from politicians. Dennis van der Veur in his joint ILGA-Europe (European region of International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) and COC (Center for Culture and Leisure) report from 2007, which is the first of its kind to be published about same-sex relationships and LGBTI people in Azerbaijan, points out that many psychologists are not well informed about homosexuality. The report is based on information gathered before, during and after a fact-finding mission in January 2006. It also indicates that many are even unaware of the fact that the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1987, and that from 1993 the World Health Organization (WHO) removed homosexuality from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD).[\[iiii\]](#) Nevertheless, one can also argue that they might pretend or ignore that fact to avoid societal pressure, mistrust, or denial towards them and their work. Ignorance or denial can also be the result of personal beliefs that coincide with public opinion, which is mainly sceptical for misconstrued reasons. That said, this article aims to disclose some of the unwritten yet common and biased arguments against homosexuals that reside inside and outside of Azerbaijan to update those who are interested in learning about the nature of the current subject and situation. In this article, I have provided selective and crucial insights that ought to keep us on guard against facile and homogeneous generalizations about gender and homosexuality.

The article is divided into four sections, with the first two parts providing information on how societal reactions can have a negative impact on the physical and mental health and well-being of LGBTIQ youth to highlight the extreme importance of the issue. I proceed with describing the general situation of the LGBTIQ community in Azerbaijan, referring to available resources, news, and international reports on that matter to indicate the context. In addition, statistical data from a short multiple-choice survey conducted by me and shared on social media from October 15, 2018 for this piece demonstrates how citizens feel towards homosexuality in Azerbaijan today. The article then elaborates on what homosexuality is, to present some background on the issue, starting with the distinction between two concepts: gender as socially constructed and sex as biologically given. It spells out a framework for thinking about masculinity and femininity. This part of the article concentrates on the foundational debate of whether homosexuality is congenital or an acquired behavior. It compares the biological and socio-cultural explanations stemming to the question whether homosexuality is a result of nature or nurture.

The next two parts deal with the importance of dismantling the commonly used argument on the issue of sexually transmitted diseases, which are ascribed to homosexuals. This is widely used to emphasize the depravity of homosexual behavior and relations in Azerbaijan. In this part, I will also describe homosexual relationships in other parts of the globe and the virtues that many homosexual couples display despite many others believing that they can or will threaten the foundations of family life. To reach some shared understanding I conclude with the question of how homosexuality has persisted over evolutionary time if the individuals carrying the 'genes' are not reproducing, and whether denials, violence, and hatred are ever justified by moral implications or even scientific research. The approaches collected and reproduced here are only a few of the many of those that

scientists have investigated and constructed and others that have not yet been imagined or analysed. My idea of challenging the notion of homosexuality in Azerbaijan is to bring the work and ideas of leading scholars and emerging new critics into productive dialogue.

Fatal Outcomes of Societal Reactions. Understanding Homosexuality

In January 2014, Isa shared a Facebook post before he committed suicide, where he blamed “everyone” for his death. *“This world is not colourful enough to accept my colour too”* the message reads. [\[iv\]](#) Isa’s act and message can make anyone feel extremely sad as one can instantly feel a person’s long-lasting pain and daily sadness from being invisible and rejected for who he was by most people. People develop an underlying darkness and sadness when are subjected to a hatred day after day that they cannot logically understand. It becomes personal. It affects your life and it destroys your education and morale. In the end, it makes you feel helpless, weak and subordinate to something that is arbitrary and not even within your control, and that is the kind of discomfort that can truly break a person. It is reminiscent of a historical zeitgeist when black people were discriminated against based on the colour of their skin and makes you think of injustices that happened not that long ago. Not long ago, black people were discriminated against, exploited and killed. Not long ago marriage between white and black persons was illegal. My question to readers is: *What if history is repeating itself as it did with black people?*

For some in Azerbaijan this comparison might sound very unusual or contrary, but Isa’s message where he blames the world echoed Martin Luther King’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. King noted that: “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny, whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” [\[v\]](#) The message highlights the fact that we are destined to live together and

whatever we do or say directly or indirectly affects the lives of people around us. Therefore, as much as people are quick to say something was not their fault or we should not feel guilty, the reality of life is that peoples' reactions and judgement can lead to a person's death, which immensely contradicts the idea of humaneness. It could be as small as something hurtful we say, or something meaningful we failed to say.

Suicide is always alarming and painful and Isa's act has sparked debate about LGBTIQ rights in Azerbaijan, mainly by international organizations. In 2017, [ILGA-Europe](#) declared Azerbaijan as the worst country in the whole of [Europe](#) for LGBTIQ rights, with the country receiving a final score of 5 percent.[\[vi\]](#) In September 2017, reports emerged that at least 100 members of Baku's LGBTIQ community were detained as part of a crackdown on prostitution. Activists reported that those people were subject to beatings, interrogation, forced medical examinations and blackmail.[\[vii\]](#) The authorities' statement claimed that some of those who were detained had AIDS, syphilis and were HIV-positive. The statistical data and claims provided by the authorities quickly became confused, as reports emerged that AIDS centres were denying having conducted any medical examinations.[\[viii\]](#) In 2017, a small rally by activists in support of gay rights was organised in Baku to protest violence and discrimination against the sexual 'minorities'. A similar event failed to take place in Tbilisi, instead replaced with a religious counter-rally named 'Family Purity Day'. To avoid civil confrontation, the rally was cancelled.[\[ix\]](#) In his article for Eurasianet, January 2014, Lomsadze points out that hate crimes and hate speech are widespread in the region. As he states "being liberal is a highly relative concept in the South Caucasus."[\[x\]](#)

According to the Danish Institute for Human Rights report, local laws and lawyers do not properly address these concerns either.[\[xi\]](#) In the ILGA-Europe/COC fact-finding report *Forced Out: LGBTIQ People in Azerbaijan* (2007), Dennis van der Veur

states that same-sex acts were decriminalised in Azerbaijan in 2000, since it was a pre-condition for membership to the Council of Europe.[\[xii\]](#) But despite the decriminalization on paper, the reality of the situation is that this decision was not followed up with any actions/plans to eliminate or reduce discrimination against homosexuals. The Constitution of Azerbaijan says that everyone shall have a right to marry upon reaching the age specified by law: 18 (17 for women in exceptional circumstances). However, the Family Code of Azerbaijan specifically describes marriage as a voluntary union between a man and a woman for establishing a family.

To demonstrate the general attitude and opinions of people on LGBTIQ in the country, I developed and shared a special survey for the purposes of this article. Two hundred thirty seven (237) people, ranging in age from 19-50, answered the questions. The survey helps to show the different attitudes towards homosexual behavior in Azerbaijan. In addition, the survey exposes the differing attitudes of young males and females with the latter supporting it more. [\[xiii\]](#)

In response to the first question on whether they know what homosexuality is, 77 percent said that they do. To the question on what factors they think can lead to an individual becoming homosexual, the respondents gave various answers. 34 percent replied that they were born this way, with others believing in the complexity of the subject and saying that it is a combination of many factors both environmental and inborn. Nevertheless, to the question of whether they ever spend time researching homosexuality to better understand the subject; only 22 percent gave a positive answer. 72 people said that they cannot accept homosexuality, but would not interfere in the lives of others. I see that type of neutrality to be “trendy” among people in Azerbaijan. That way, the majority believe that they demonstrate maximum respect to those “others” who destabilize all the local morals and ideals. Considering the conservative society of Azerbaijan, mostly uneducated on the topic, this alternative

approach is neither good nor bad, but one should contest contemporary constructions of compulsory heterosexuality and the aberrant subject of homosexuality. In contrast to this approach, 9 persons claimed that homosexuality is morally incorrect and is something that we should punish/take action against. A few people also provided their opinion stating that they considered it a psychological problem/disorder and believe that people with homosexual behavior are the result of genetic defect. On a more positive note, 152 respondents agreed that there is no difference between different kinds of love. Love involving relationships that are homosexually oriented should be praised and/or respected just as much as a legal and heterosexually oriented relationship. They accept homosexuality and believe that they have no right to interfere in other people's lives.

It is worth mentioning that love cannot be claimed to be a disease in the context of same-sex relationships. I would also like to share a short story that my Turkish student told us in my Interpreting Gender class last year. The story was about a well-known Turkish General who received medals for his long military service. The General decided to publicly 'come out' [\[xiv\]](#) as gay and consequently was humiliated by the public and stripped of his rank by the Turkish authorities. In an interview after this backlash, he said the following: "I was praised and awarded for killing many men but was punished for loving just one." All the students went silent and did not add anything to what had been said.

Finally, to the question "Do you think that an LGBTIQ person that you know has influenced your opinion/perception on the topic?" 27.5 percent indicated that it had. This survey demonstrated the general feeling of the public, particularly the youth of Azerbaijan, towards homosexual behavior, which can be considered comparably positive. Nevertheless, this is only a limited look at the attitude and thoughts of people, especially parents who strongly oppose the idea of LGBTIQ topics being embedded in the curriculum or generally

discussed.

During the Henrich Böll Foundation conference of 2012 on the LGBTIQ situation in Azerbaijan, participants stated that while there is a certain degree of tolerance for men with feminine appearances in beauty salons and show business; homosexual individuals are forced to live in a suffocating environment of discrimination and rejection, where the stereotypes prevail. [\[xv\]](#)

What is homosexuality?

Before answering that question, to counter biological determinism or the view that biology is destiny, it is worth reminding readers about the differences between such terms as gender, gender identity, sex and sexual orientation.

Feminist scepticism has operated as a crucial corrective to unitary and universalizing notions of identity, perspective, and voice that came from early gender theory. Feminist scholars made a clear distinction between gender and sex, where 'sex' denotes human females and males depending on *biological* features (chromosomes, hormones, sex organs and other physical features). It is assigned at birth based on the genitals a person is born with or the chromosomes he/she has. On the other hand, 'gender' expresses women (femininity) and men (masculinity) depending on *social* factors (social role, characteristics, position, behavior, or identity). Social role is variable and depends on many societal factors, whereas sex is biologically given but can be also changed with modern surgical methods. For example, transsexuals change their genitals as they identify themselves with the opposite sex and gender, whereas transgender people change their gender identity only, without having any surgeries. They dress and behave (not necessarily) as the opposite sex. Masculinity and femininity are thought to be products of nurture or how individuals are brought up and according to Haslanger they are causally constructed. Sexual orientation is about who you

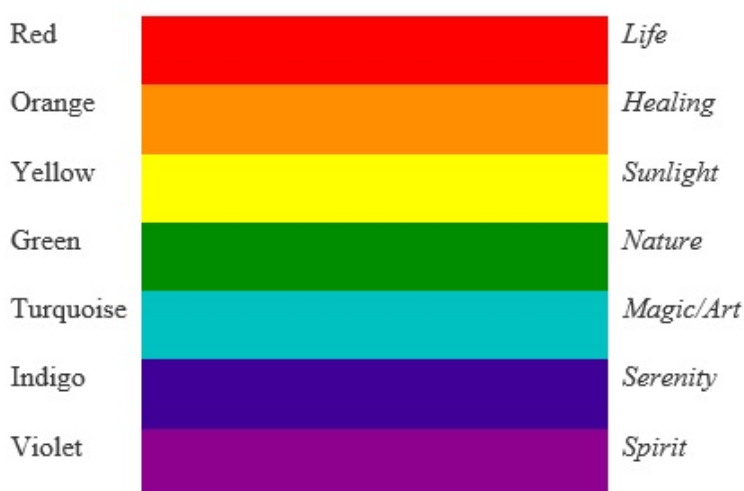
are attracted to and whom you feel drawn to romantically, emotionally, and sexually.[\[xvi\]](#)

Gender identity, on the other hand, is about who you are – female, male, transgender, genderqueer, etc., and not whom you are attracted to. In contrast to biological determinism, feminists have argued that behavioral and psychological differences do not have biological but rather social causes.[\[xvii\]](#) For instance, Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, and that “social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature”.[\[xviii\]](#)

Sexual orientation is distinct from other components of sex and sexuality, including biological sex (the anatomical, physiological, and genetic characteristics associated with being male or female), social gender role (adherence to cultural norms defining feminine and masculine behavior) and gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female, outward expression of maleness or femaleness).[\[xix\]](#) Cisgender is a term for gender identity that matches person’s sex that he/she is assigned at birth. For example, someone who identifies herself as a woman and was assigned female at birth is a cisgender woman. Opposite to it are transgender individuals. Transgender people are individuals who feel that their gender is different from their biological sex; their gender identity does not match their anatomic or chromosomal sex. Transgender person can be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.[\[xx\]](#) Numerous clinicians and researchers with theoretical backgrounds agree that sexual orientation and sexual expression relate to the interaction of many factors – inborn, psychological, social, cultural, and situational.[\[xxi\]](#)

A German psychologist, Karoly Maria Benkert coined the term ‘homosexuality’ in the late nineteenth century.[\[xxii\]](#) Although the term is relatively new, homosexuality has existed in most societies for as long as recorded descriptions of sexual

beliefs and practices have been available.[\[xxiii\]](#) The most common terms for homosexual people are *lesbian* for females and *gay* for males. *Gay* also commonly refers to both. The famous acronym LGBTIQ stands for [lesbian](#), [gay](#), [bisexual](#), and [transgender](#), and also the recently added gender intersex and queer. The LGBT+[\[xxiv\]](#) community has adopted certain symbols for self-identification to demonstrate unity, fidelity, pride, and shared values. When Harvey Milk, an influential gay leader, met Gilbert Baker, an openly gay activist, in 1974, he challenged Baker to come up with a symbol of pride for the gay community.[\[xxv\]](#) Baker designed and sewed the flag that originally comprised 8 stripes and assigned specific meaning to each of the colours:[\[xxvi\]](#)



Version with hot pink removed due to fabric unavailability (1978–79). Since 1979 indigo and turquoise were changed to royal blue.

The rainbow flag is now used as a symbol of LGBTIQ pride and social movements.

While homosexual behavior can be found in all societies, moral and political interpretations and perceptions can vary in each. *Homosexuality is an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction or sexual behavior between people with the same sex or gender.*[\[xxvii\]](#) Subsequently two

major categories of scientific explanations have been proposed to unravel the nature of homosexuality: **biological and psychosocial**. Back in the nineteenth century, the question of whether homosexuality has a biological basis or not was related to whether it was a 'sickness or a sin', and hence whether or not it should be tolerated.[\[xxviii\]](#) Thus, it was attributed first to insanity and later to a 'congenital anomaly'. In the early twentieth century, Hirschfeld put forward the idea of 'hormonal alter sex', which posed the idea of whether sexual orientation can change, and hence potentially be susceptible to 'treatment.'[\[xxix\]](#) His evidence of its mutability made it a subject of moral culpability, again placing it in the list of sins and establishing the grounds for imposing treatment.

Mental Health and Sexual Orientation

In 1950, when homosexuality was still listed in psychiatry manuals as a mental disorder, Evelyn Hooker decided to study the mental differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals.[\[xxx\]](#) She developed several psychological tests for straight and gay people, and asked experts to identify homosexuals and rate their mental health. The experiment, which other researchers subsequently continued and repeated, proved that homosexuality is not a mental disorder, as there was no detectable difference between homosexual and heterosexual men in terms of mental adjustment. This finding led the way to the eventual removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.[\[xxxi\]](#)

Despite this being proven, denial is still widespread with stories of parents in Azerbaijan and around the world cutting children off and/or even putting them into psychiatric clinics and trying to change their sexual orientation through conversion and hormone therapy. Many LGBTIQ people move to capital cities to become less visible and survive. There are known cases where family members beat up their children or

siblings when they found out about their sexual orientation. Thus, many are scared to be found and change their phone numbers; some people live double lives and do not disclose their sexual orientation to their family.

Jurisdictions in Asia, Europe, Oceania, and the Americas have passed laws against conversion therapy because there is no scientific validation of any conversion-type therapy for the countries to approve this practice. In contrast, the data shows that it has harmed more people it has helped. The American Psychology Association conducted a review of sexual orientation change efforts in 2009 and concluded that there is a paucity of adequate research, but detected that “attempts to change sexual orientation may cause or exacerbate distress and poor mental health in some individuals, including depression and suicidal thoughts.”[\[xxxii\]](#) Scientists found no inherent association between any of the sexual orientations and psychopathology. *Both heterosexual behavior and homosexual behavior are normal aspects of human sexuality.*[\[xxxiii\]](#)

It should be noted that people with a homosexual orientation can see psychologists for the same reasons as straight people (stress, relationship difficulties, difficulty adjusting to social or work situations, etc.); their sexual orientation may be of primary, incidental, or no importance to their issues and treatment.

Among scientific studies exploring the nature of homosexuality, many have focused on the possible influence of genes and hormonal factors. Experiments concluding the high presence of homosexuality among monozygotic twins and the clustering of homosexuality in family pedigrees support biological models. Some evidence, for example, shows prenatal androgen exposure influences the development of sexual orientation, but that postnatal sex steroid concentrations do not vary with sexual orientation. William Rice, from the University of California, Santa Barbara together with her colleagues claim that: “Female fetuses employ an epimark that

makes them less sensitive to testosterone. Usually it's not inherited, but occasionally it is, leading to same-sex preference in boys".[\[xxxiv\]](#) Some research has shown the neuroanatomic similarities between gay men and heterosexual women and between lesbian women and heterosexual men. Dr Gazi Rahman, an academic at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, indicates that gay men appear, on average, more "female typical" in brain pattern responses and lesbian women are somewhat more "male typical".[\[xxxv\]](#) Differences in brain organisation mean differences in psychology. Thus, Rahman claims that gay differences are not just about who we choose; they are also reflected in our psychology and the ways we relate to other people.

In contrast to the biological explanations for sexual desires, advocates of social constructivism support the idea that social conditions still play a major role. Adherents are guided by Michel Foucault's ideas from *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault writes about the social conditions and discourse that strongly affect the lives and attitudes of people throughout the history. In his work, he explains the diverse forms of human sexuality that are brought into being through discussions. He shows how the biological basis of human sexuality has been elaborated and shaped by the language we use to describe it, and that the very concept of someone having a "sexuality" did not exist before the eighteenth century.[\[xxxvi\]](#) Blumstein and Schwartz argue that our preference for male or female sexual partners is created by cultural understandings of sexuality.[\[xxxvii\]](#) One of the historical examples of the cultural factor is Ancient Greece, which was noted to be one of the most open societies when it came to male homosexuality. The acts were "the most praiseworthy or Godly forms of love."[\[xxxviii\]](#) The researchers conducted two large studies in the 1970s and 1980s of "bisexual," "gay," and "straight" couples, which concluded that sexual attraction is fluid and not fixed, and sexuality is a product of socialization and interpretation.[\[xxxix\]](#) In

addition, they found out that people with exclusive sexual orientation also reported to have same sex erotic partners during their lifetime.[\[xli\]](#)

Social constructionists describe various non-Western cultures to demonstrate that sexuality is culturally defined and unique, and that there are as many sexualities as cultures. Interestingly, adherents of the social constructionist idea do not dispute the idea that sexual attraction has a biological core, but assert that sexual tastes and behaviors can vary across cultures despite sexual attraction being biological. The research also shows that homosexual behavior has been observed in 1,500 animal species.[\[xli\]](#) Among those are bears, monkeys, and even fish. These observations also suggest that homosexuality is a biological matter. As of February 6, 2015 on BBC Earth, Melissa Hogenboom described various homosexual attitudes and relations in the animal kingdom, thereby showing that animals engage in homosexual behavior. However, she also wrote that whether they are truly and exclusively homosexual is another matter.[\[xlii\]](#) Quick fact: Research on animal behavior helped overturn Texan sodomy laws – though scientists caution that human homosexuality may be quite different.[\[xliii\]](#)

Heterosexual orientation might be advantageous in evolutionary terms but have you ever asked yourselves if humanity needs to procreate so much? That being said, I do not mean that people should stop having or rearing children, but I question why they believe that everyone around should choose to do so. According to Worldometers, the human population has reached 7,645 billion.[\[xliv\]](#) On a similar note, Paul Vasey from the University of Lethbridge in Canada questions from an evolutionary perspective the paradox of how a trait like homosexuality, which has a genetic component, can persist over evolutionary time if the individuals that carry the genes associated with that trait are not reproducing.[\[xlv\]](#) Scientists do not yet know the answer to this puzzling question, but there are several theories that try to provide

some sort of explanation based on the research of male homosexuality. The evolution of lesbian relationships is understudied in comparison, which means that it may work in a similar way or be completely different.

The biological research does not have adequate findings on female sexuality. In 2006, Linda Garnets and Anne Peplau found that females potentially have a fluid sexual orientation, shaped by such social and cultural experiences and factors as their education, social status and power, economic opportunities, and attitudes about women's roles.[\[xlvi\]](#) Kitzinger and Wilkinson's research suggested this perspective with women who experienced both heterosexual and homosexual lives.[\[xlvii\]](#) They interviewed 80 women who entered into lesbian relationships after at least 10 years of heterosexual behavior, the majority having been married. The researchers found that the transition, a decision taken freely, made sense to the interviewees.

This long-lasting debate can be concluded with the fact that scientists do not know for sure how sexuality is developed and why some people end up with different sexual desires than others. It peaks at different times and ages for people. It is also worth keeping in mind that meaning of sexuality and sexual orientation for women and men differs in important ways. In addition to the biological controversy, there is also no scientific evidence that abnormal parenting, sexual abuse, or other adverse life events influence sexual orientation. Current knowledge suggests that sexual orientation is usually established during early childhood.[\[xlviii\]](#) One of the most obvious risks has to do with genetic testing, especially of children. Given the modest contribution of genetics to same-sex orientation, no genetic test is likely to reliably predict whether a child will grow up to be gay. Studies also conclude that somewhere between 3% and 10% of the adult population is gay or lesbian, and perhaps a larger percentage is bisexual.[\[xlix\]](#) So far, findings from genetic studies of homosexuality in humans are confusing,

being either contradictory or indefinite – with no clear, strong, compelling evidence for a genetic basis for homosexuality.[\[1\]](#) Qazi Rahman, a co-author of *Born Gay: The Psycho-biology of Sex Orientation*, believes that sexuality involves tens or perhaps hundreds of alleles that will probably take decades to uncover.[\[1i\]](#) Biology runs throughout our sexual and gendered lives and those differences and that diversity are surely to be celebrated.

These arguments are not intended to imply that biology has nothing to do with human sexuality. The two are inevitably intertwined. The claim that biological factors have an immediate, direct influence on such things as sexual identity, behavior, or orientation remains unproven.

Do Homosexuals Actually Spread HIV and Consequently Infect People with AIDS?

HIV-related stigma within communities of gay men is widespread. HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes AIDS, or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and people believe that it is spread by and among male homosexuals and drug users only, whereas it affects people of both genders and from all walks of life. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence and data on that issue in Azerbaijan, thus I refer to research carried out in the U.S. According to Elizabeth A. Rider in *Our Voices: Psychology of Women*, approximately 1 in 800 women in the USA have AIDS.[\[1ii\]](#) She showed that nearly 40% of AIDS cases in women were contracted through heterosexual contact. In her work, she demonstrates that it is usually transmitted from male to female with only 2% of cases vices versa. The remaining cases of AIDS can result from infected needles and syringes. It is not a secret that some gay and bisexual men get HIV through intimate relations by not using condoms or medicines to prevent or treat HIV. Stigma, homophobia, and discrimination put gay and bisexual men of all races/ ethnicities at risk for many health issues and may affect whether they are able to get quality health care.[\[1iii\]](#)

HIV diagnoses in the U.S. and 6 dependent areas in 2016 showed that 26,844 (67%) out of 40,324 were among gay and bisexual men. I would like to highlight the remaining 13,480 (33%) that people ignore when it is alleged that gays are the only people who spread HIV. The point here is that the HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases are widespread in both homo and heterosexual relations. The best protection from infections is to have protected sex and not to use contaminated needles.

It is worth mentioning, that the big taboo on sexuality and HIV/AIDS in Azerbaijan has contributed to a lack of accurate information on the spread of HIV in Azerbaijan, as well as on how many people have ever reported or sought help to fight or prevent the disease. Dennis van der Veur in his report from 2007, mentions that some organisations have produced 'safer sex' materials targeting different communities and the general public, but the mission did not find 'safer sex' prevention information targeted specifically at the LGBTIQ community. [\[liv\]](#) Dennis van der Veur shows that with regard to HIV/ AIDS, the official statistics as of January 2006 are: 928 registered cases of people diagnosed with HIV, of whom 100 had died, 108 had developed AIDS and 720 had HIV. [\[lv\]](#) The report shows that it is known to be 10 % of total cases, while a spokesperson for an organisation of people living with HIV and AIDS suggested that the real number of HIV + persons is 30 times higher than the official statistics. The main transmission routes for HIV are via injecting drug use (47%) and unprotected heterosexual sex (26%).

In addition, many people I personally met in Azerbaijan believe that LGBTIQ people are disgraceful and are always involved in sex work, which is wrong and is a generalization again. However, one should also consider that no one denies the fact that people with different sexual orientations are among sex workers. It is also worth mentioning that sometimes due to societal pressure and stigmatization people are forced to be sex workers to earn money to sustain themselves. In her interview for the same report, Gulnara Mehdiyeva, an activist

from *Nəfəs*, states that: “We (activists) don’t deny that there are many transgender people among Azerbaijan’s sex workers. However, they are often obliged to get involved in it,” continues Mehdiyeva, noting that LGBTIQ people are often excluded from many sectors of the labor market.[\[lvi\]](#) Indeed, many people are denied of work opportunities for their gender identity and are forced to be silent. A majority of those LGBTIQ who work or look for a job in Azerbaijan conceal information on their sexual orientation or gender identity from their potential employers to avoid bias. This should raise important questions about employment discrimination and a need to adapt policies to be more inclusive. One in four LGBTIQ employees report experiencing employment discrimination in the last five years and over one quarter of transgender people who held or applied for a job in the last year reported being fired, not hired, or denied a promotion due to their gender identity.[\[lvii\]](#)

Do homosexuals disrupt the “idealized nuclear family”?

There is strong belief that homosexual relationships threaten the foundations of family life and destroy the ‘very essence of the human being’. Nevertheless, there are many children who suffer living in so called “normal” families and there are millions who live in orphanages. Tragically, many of the children confined to orphanages are growing up in utter silence. No bedtime stories, no hugs, no reassurance from parents at lights out, no music – none of the laughter and chatter that is part of daily life and growing up in a loving family. Finding permanent homes for sibling groups and disabled children has also been very challenging. After some countries legalised same-sex marriage, couples became keener to care for children despite the continuously challenging circumstances. One of the couples that I would like to introduce you are Garry and Kyle Ratcliffe, labelled ‘superheroes’ who adopted four children with special needs to give them a better start in life. With the help of Nick Knowles and the *DIY SOS* (a television program in the UK) team

their home was re-built and ready to welcome Haydn, 13, who has cerebral palsy; Bella, 11, who has Down's Syndrome; Curtis, six, who is severely epileptic, blind and also has CP; and Phoebe, six, who is physically healthy but suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.[\[lviii\]](#) Over 100 volunteers in the UK came together to help the couple who takes care of these children, and built a home with state-of-the-art medical technology, and cameras that will help the parents monitor their children around the house.[\[lix\]](#)

Tor Docherty, chief executive of New Family Social, points to the broader encouraging signs around LGBTIQ adoption and a growing evidence base – notably a landmark piece of research published in 2013 by researchers at Cambridge University – that children adopted by same-sex couples thrive and do as well as those placed with heterosexual couples.[\[lx\]](#) APA believes that it is unfair and discriminatory to deny same-sex couples legal access to civil marriage and to all its attendant benefits, rights, and privileges. In addition, in its “Resolution on Sexual Orientation, Parents, and Children”, the Association recognized that “there is no scientific evidence that parenting effectiveness is related to parental sexual orientation: lesbian and gay parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive and healthy environments for their children.”[\[lxi\]](#)

Conclusion

To conclude I would like to remind the readers about the changing gender relations in the world and growing progress in the research as well as the successful integration of LGBTIQ in various communities. Although the fight for the same rights is continuing and is painful, and the debate is ongoing among the scholars who have not agreed on biological or social explanatory models, one thing has been revealed: there is no inherent association between any of the sexual orientations and psychopathology. Both heterosexual behavior and homosexual behavior are normal aspects of human sexuality. Nevertheless,

it is worth reminding yourselves that denials, violence, and hatred are never justified by moral implications or even scientific research. Moreover, questioning how homosexuality can persist over evolutionary time if the individuals carrying the 'genes' are not reproducing is another topic for a thoughtful conversation. Selective and subjective "norms" should not threaten people's everyday lives. We always "see" from points of view that prevail at a certain time or correspond with our social, political, and personal interests, inescapably subjective in one way or another. Thus, I believe the nature vs nurture debate will help to emphasize the differences stemming from contrasting patterns.

My short collection and analysis of the debates on the nature of homosexuality suggests a complex and diverse dialogue that needs attention from local scholars, psychologists, politicians, and society in general. The situation in Azerbaijan, with many suicide attempts, death, and persecution of LGBTIQ is alarming, and while technologies are ever evolving, the economy is being reconstructed and explanatory models are becoming more sophisticated, the confounding issues of morality and the politics of repression in the country have changed very little. Challenging these values and practices implies working with communities, at the policy and programme level, to mobilise constituencies for change in which gender equality goals are integral to movements and partnerships for social justice for all.

Many tend to hate what they do not understand, or do not understand the things that they hate. Hate prevents us from understanding something because our emotions guide how we see things. However, as one becomes more objective, then understanding is more possible. I would refer to Charlie Chaplin's words this time to conclude my writing on a more emotional note: "We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that. We want to live by each other's happiness – not by each other's misery. We do not want to hate and despise one another. In this world, there is room for everyone. And the

good earth is rich and can provide for everyone.” [\[lxii\]](#)

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