

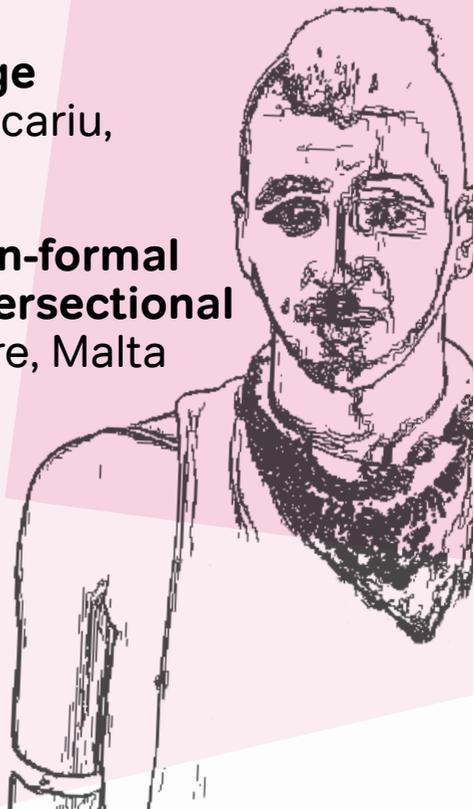
# IGLYO ON NORM CRITICISM

SUMMER 2014  
ISSUE 25



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Government of  
the Netherlands

This publication has been supported by the Civil Justice Programme of the European Union, Council of Europe European Youth Foundation, and the Government of the Netherlands

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# INTRO

This issue of IGLYO ON brings together several articles from across our membership to explore the idea of norm criticism. Norms are those societal powers that give value to the ways we act — or fail to act. Norms help us give order to our world, and make sense of ourselves and others.

However, norms often operate along systems of power and privilege. Those who conform to the norm gain social status, while those that do not follow a norm receive stigma. Transgressing a norm may carry a form of social punishment — and depending on where in the world norms are transgressed, that punishment can range from social stigma to violence, even death.

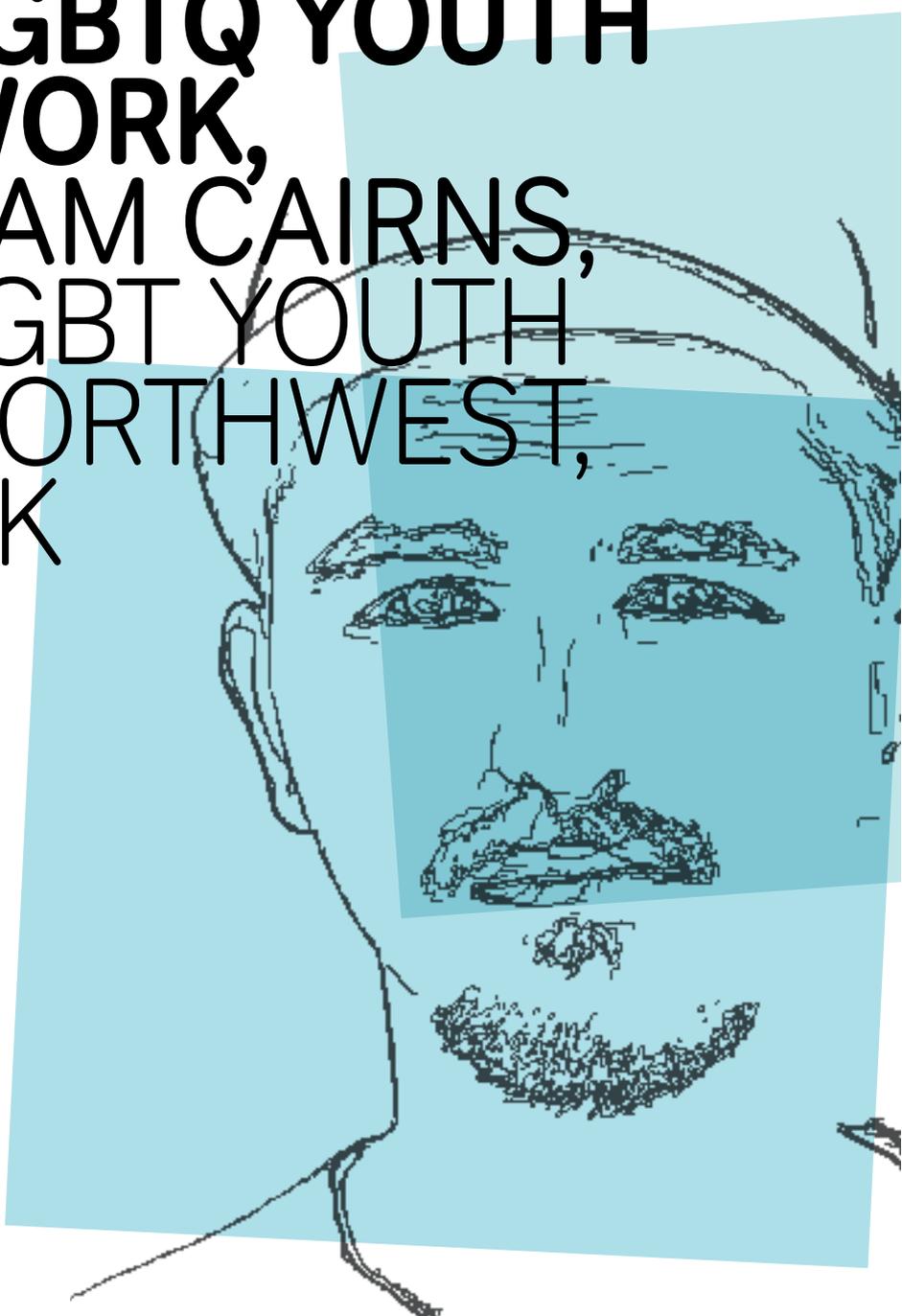
The articles in this issue take the time to criticize norms. Criticizing a norm is the first step in unlocking their power. The articles take the reader through the concept of normativity. They also offer concrete steps to challenge norms, both within organisations and within society. And finally, our contributors talk about their own experience of transgressing norms as individuals.

We hope you enjoy these introspective articles, and that you think a bit more about the norms at work in your own life.

The IGLYO Executive Board



**NORM  
CRITICISM IN  
LGBTQ YOUTH  
WORK,  
SAM CAIRNS,  
LGBT YOUTH  
NORTHWEST,  
UK**



What is a norm? A norm is something that can be expected on a daily basis. This can be as simple as getting water from a tap, having biological parents, or sleeping when you are tired. We can safely assume that these will happen during the course of our lives. They do not cause harm. They are 'safe' norms.

So when are norms 'dangerous'? When are they harmful? Norms tend to become dangerous when they are applied to personal identity and/or expression. For example, societal norms on gender and sexuality can be harmful. These views tell us that if you are wearing pants you must be a man; if you fancy boys you must be a girl; if you don't fit into the rigid binary system that pervades our lives you are abnormal. These are the norms we, as youth workers, must challenge.

As is the case with most beliefs, these ideas of what is normal stem from a person's upbringing. Influence comes from all around – the media, family, friends, religion, society as a whole. We are taught to believe that a certain way of life is best. We are taught this from our first breath. As soon as a medical professional sees our genitalia we are assigned our role in life: boys must wear blue, play with dinosaurs, and grow up to be astronauts; girls must wear pink, play with dolls, and grow up to be ballerinas. Our formative years are dominated by the constraints of what we should and should not do, always according to our assigned gender and the roles associated with that gender. These are the years which define who we are going to be as adults.

Through this process of learning norms, some young people can end up in a strange place. A place where, from the outside, the young person seems comfortable, but internally something causes discomfort. It's the fact that the young person does not conform—or want to conform—to gender norms. It's like the story of the princess and the pea. For all intents and purposes the princess should have been the most comfortable she had ever been, yet the small pea still caused more distress than she could handle. The princess then challenged the image of comfort, removed the cause of her dismay and then experienced exactly what she should have had all along.

We need to give young people the opportunity to remove their proverbial 'pea'. We must enable young people to challenge these norms so that they grow up to be the best possible versions of themselves.

We cannot expect the youth of today to achieve as much as they are capable of if they don't have access to all opportunities, including the ones they have been actively excluded from since birth.

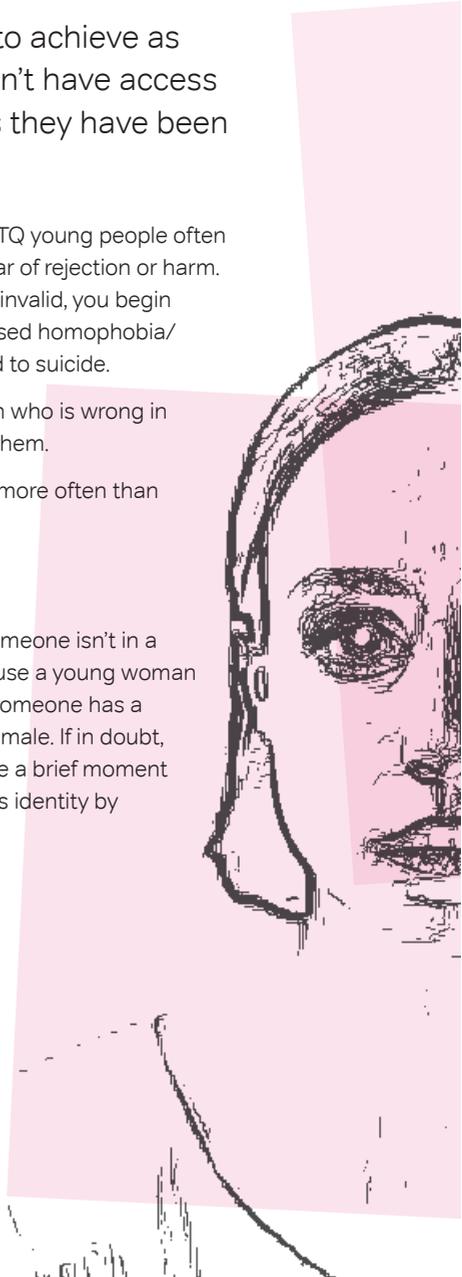
This is commonplace in LGBTQ-specific youth work. LGBTQ young people often feel that they should not express their true identity for fear of rejection or harm. When society tells you that your emotions are somehow invalid, you begin to believe that this is true. This leads into denial, internalised homophobia/transphobia, and in very extreme circumstances can lead to suicide.

We need to challenge the idea that it is the young person who is wrong in some way. We need to dispel the norms that stigmatize them.

The task of norm criticism falls to parents, teachers and, more often than not, youth workers.

**There are many ways to break down these ideas:**

**Never assume anything about anyone.** Just because someone isn't in a wheelchair doesn't mean they aren't disabled. Just because a young woman likes sports doesn't mean she's a lesbian. Just because someone has a stereotypically male name doesn't mean they identify as male. If in doubt, ask. While this may feel intrusive, it is much better to have a brief moment of awkwardness than it is to constantly belittle someone's identity by using incorrect pronouns or terminology.



**Give every young person the opportunity to participate in every activity, regardless of subject matter.** Young people thrive when they are given the chance to experience things which are usually out of their usual experience. They are able to see a world which was not open to them before.

**Be a possibility model.** Show young people that breaking the norm doesn't make you a bad person. It can actually make you a better person.

This is not an exhaustive list, but in the end it all comes down to one thing, inclusion:

- include every possibility in your assumptions of a person.
- include every young person in every activity.
- include examples of norm criticism in your life.

The challenge is making sure that the idea of norm criticism stays in the minds of young people. Like in all youth work, we won't change everyone's mind. But we just might change people who will change people. And together, we can change the world.



**NORM  
CRITICISM AS  
A CHANGE OF  
PARADIGM,  
DANIELA  
PRISACARIU,  
ACCEPT,  
ROMANIA**





Until we are all free, we are all prisoners.

In my own context, but probably not exclusively mine, the fight for human rights is like a pie cut into different slices: Roma rights, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, disability rights... the list goes on. Although we come from the same pie, we are independent, fight our own fight and rarely come together. Furthermore, we often not only ignore each other but we reject the other's fight and cause.

Homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, ableism are so entrenched within us to greater or lesser degrees that we often fail to recognize the norms that we perpetuate ourselves as human rights activists in our daily lives and in the work we do. Even though we have common experiences of being "the other", we can easily fall into the trap of only seeing our oppression but not our privileges.

Yes, there are Roma gay men, and yes, there are disabled lesbians and homeless trans people and much more. The intersections of identity abound in our societies. Does our activism take these identities into account? Do we nourish inclusive spaces and discussions so that everybody can participate?

It is time that we recognize that identities overlap and intersect, and these identities are more complex than we can imagine or describe in words easily. In this way we can build inclusive and strong movements, bring real change and critique both our work and the current system that makes "the others" second class citizens, outcasts and scapegoats.

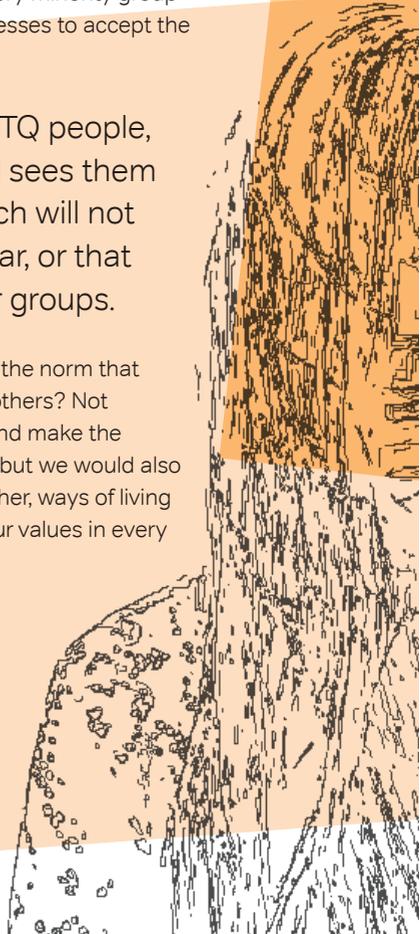
A norm critical approach means that while I realize that I have privileges, I also realize that I am oppressed due to parts of my identity. I work towards creating a space of dialogue in which we question the norm based on which we are both privileged and oppressed.

Classical methods of talking about diversity have benefits but they also have gaps. A norm critical approach can be a great tool for discussing intersectionality.

The methods that I have used for a long time are based on putting the “vulnerable group” into focus and explaining to “the majority” that those people are ok; they too are part of this world, working, loving and sometimes feeling sad. Using storytelling to get emotional stories of acceptance, struggle and loss to the public, one-on-one discussion with “human books” or interviews about “how it is to be gay in Romania” can of course bring advantages. People who have never seen a gay person can start to think about this topic and maybe in time challenge their prejudices, make LGBTQ friends and accept them as equal human beings. But what if this person is also racist? You have to start all over again and make them understand that yes, Roma people are also people that live lives similar to theirs, have families and friends, love and struggle with electricity bills and bad neighbors as you do too. The process can repeat itself for every minority group that exists and each person has to go through different processes to accept the other which can take forever.

Even if a person meets one hundred LGBTQ people, and then two hundred Roma people, and sees them in all their diversity, this exposure approach will not guarantee that the prejudice will disappear, or that they will not have prejudice against other groups.

Instead of exposure to those who are “different” we focus on the norm that makes some identities more desirable and acceptable than others? Not only would we involve everyone in a multilateral discussion and make the conversation be about us as a whole and not “us and them”, but we would also highlight the values that govern our attitudes, and find, together, ways of living responsible lives in which our actions are coordinated with our values in every aspect of life.



A lot of times people fail to see the invisible norms and act as if their reality is everybody else's as well. In Romania, most people take pride in being hospitable and preaching love for others, but they fail to see that when they say that "Roma people should leave the country" or that they wouldn't want to have a relative that is lesbian or gay, these statements are in contradiction with what their purported core values.

Highlighting norms would not only help people see difference in a new light, by relating to themselves and to their own experience, but it would also give more flexibility in having an intersectional discussion on human rights, norms, privilege and oppression in society.

The process might be uncomfortable; in fact, it should be. But it is worth it.

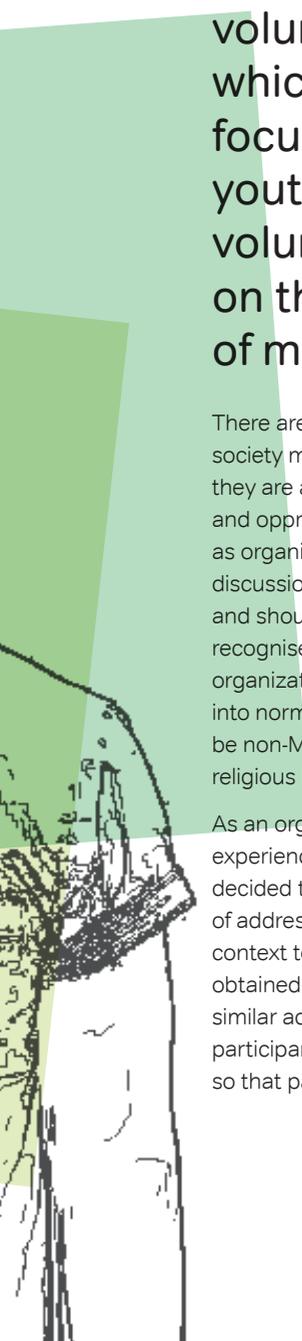
I want to lend with some questions that can be a starting point for changing the paradigm in which you and your organization work.

- Does your organization have staff, members or volunteers that are of different ethnic background, with different abilities, ages, and socio-economic status? If not, why not? If yes, how have you achieved that and how will you maintain that?
- When you choose somebody from your organization to give a TV interview, do you make the choice because that person is the closest to what society perceives as the norm or because they are the best in what they are doing?
- Do you tolerate opinions based on prejudice of other groups in your organization just because you want to keep your volunteers and partners close? Or do you work with them in challenging their stereotypes?

Nobody is perfect, and we all have our own stereotypes. It is important that we recognize them and work on challenging them. A norm critical approach and recognizing intersectionality are both works in progress and are tools that can be improved by any one of us. Share your practices with others, because this is the best way in which we can learn from each other and change the paradigm.

**PUSHING  
BOUNDARIES:  
A NON-FORMAL  
APPROACH TO  
EXPLORING  
INTERSECTIONAL  
PRIVILEGE,  
LUISA TOLU,  
WE ARE,  
MALTA**





For the past four years I have been a volunteer with We Are, an organisation which has four key aims. All of the aims focus on improving the lives of LGBT+ youth and students in Malta. I have also volunteered for organisations working on the integration and empowerment of migrants in Malta.

There are other activists who, like me, have contributed to a variety of civil society movements that are often classified as distinct and separate although they are all, in essence, addressing the same or similar systems of inequality and oppression. This separatist approach can be frustrating and limiting as organisations like We Are can be made to feel like they have no place in discussions about racism, or accessibility, because we don't 'own' those causes and should stick to what we know best. But as active citizens we can still recognise and speak out against oppression when we see it. As an LGBT+ youth organization, recognise that for some of our members, identity does not fit neatly into normative fixed categories of what it means to be LGBT, and that they may be non-Maltese or non-European, and/or diversely abled, and/or have a range of religious beliefs.

As an organization, we wanted to start addressing the fact that people's experiences do not necessarily fit neatly into separate categories. The way we decided to do this was with an activity which, despite not quite achieving the aim of addressing intersectionality, did address how privilege can change from one context to another. The activity was followed by a discussion and the feedback obtained has been incorporated into a toolkit which can be used to organise similar activities. Here I'd like to describe the activity and the experience of the participants, and then discuss how the activity can be expanded and improved so that participants learn about intersectionality and privilege, first-hand.

On the 18th March, following 2 weeks of preparation, We Are invited four participants to push their boundaries in a treasure hunt at the University of Malta. The participants were simply told that they would be participating in a two hour treasure hunt taking place on site at the University. They were told that they'd have to go to six different checkpoints and collect clues, and at the end of the activity join us for a discussion of their experience.

In the two weeks preceding the event, We Are had gathered a group of volunteers to assist with the activity. We prepared the props which would be used by the participants and spoke to different departments and offices at the University of Malta so that we could use them as checkpoints. In fact the University Chaplaincy, the Gender Studies Department, the Institute of Digital Games, the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences and the Youth and Community Studies Department all agreed to assist in the event by being checkpoints. We Are's office acted as the final checkpoint.

On the day of the event, the participants were given a sheet of paper with a story on it. They were told that they were on their first day at University and had to visit different offices (those listed above) to get some paperwork done and get to know about some of the services offered. They were then randomly given different situations.

One participant was told he could only move around the campus in a wheelchair, another was given crutches, the 3rd participant was given a music player which only played white noise to restrict her ability to hear and understand conversations, and the last participant was themed up with a volunteer and they were asked to pretend that they were a lesbian couple.

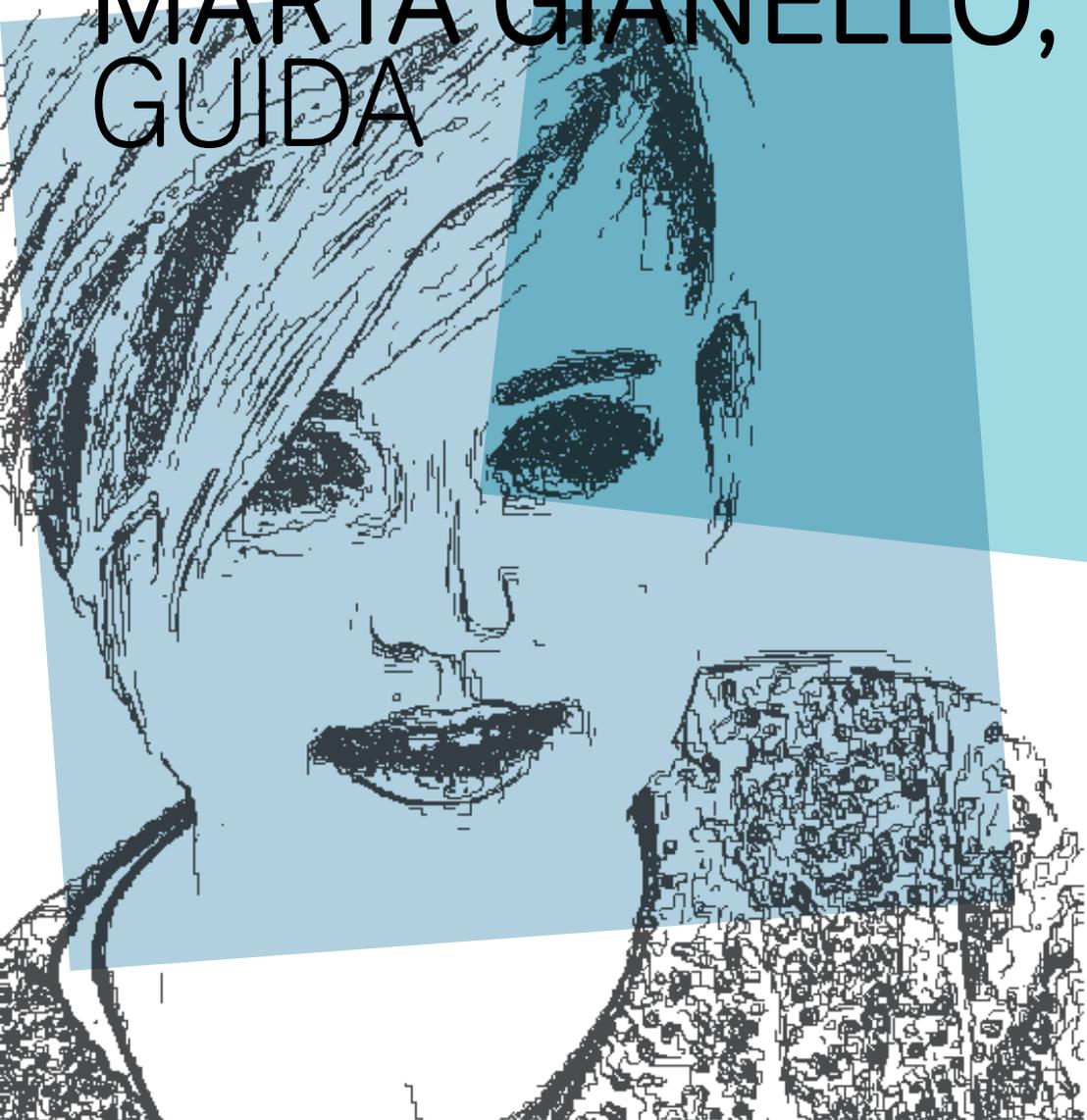
The feedback we got from the event was great, and we were asked to repeat it on a larger scale. The person who was wheelchair bound did not complete all the checkpoints because some were simply inaccessible. He felt like people spoke to him differently just because he was in a wheelchair. The person who was on crutches also had difficulty moving from checkpoint to checkpoint and was actually offered to be carried by two strangers at a particularly steep set of stairs. The person given temporary hearing impairment shared how awkward it was to not know when to open doors she had knocked on given that she couldn't hear

whether the person on the other side had said 'come in' or not. For the 'lesbian couple' the boundaries pushed were internal rather than external tangible ones. However the fact that different participants experienced different challenges was in itself one of the messages we hoped would emerge.

In hindsight it is clear that the activity could have been improved on to include more intersectional aspects by changing the 'story' given to the participants, and some of the props. It would be exciting to organise a similar event in the future which incorporates more intersectional experiences. Giving participants fictional identification documents would be one way of achieving this as these documents could describe their country of origin, and their gender which could render it difficult or impossible to complete a form in specific contexts. The activity is a to examine how within our university community, assumptions and expectations about students exist at every turn. However, there is no 'normal' student, and when we change the system based on equality, we make it better for everyone.



**THE  
LETTERS  
IN THE  
MIDDLE,  
MARTA GIANELLO,  
GUIDA**



As you can see, my name ends with the “a” of Marta and starts with the “M” of Marta. I don’t actually know how many letters there are in the middle of my name. Lately, as much as I have asked my self who I am, I just as much cannot find the answer. I get other answers instead, in the eyes of people staring at me.

I see a girl in the mirror, but I don’t know what this means. This world makes me an actress on unknown stages, every time a new stage, every time a stage not chosen by me. I am an unaware actress and my storyboards are compiled with someone else perceptions. I am a suspicious guy. I am a shy girl. A little 16 year old boy. A 26 year old girl that is looking for a job. I am a boy who could be some mom’s son. I am a very cool guy. A very cool girl. But, I am not normal, if being normal means to act, to be, in a certain ‘right’ way that is unknown to me. So I am a ‘not-normed’ person, as I live the only way I know, the only one direction I can go. The direction that my mohawk is following.

I know that sometimes I straighten my shoulders and walk tough and unafraid, with my rogue face. With a man’s face, even if I have no beard. But I have wide shoulders, man shoulders. I pick up a gender and I play it because the roles everyone around me is playing around as well. And who knows why my body chose to be a man. In the meantime my hair acts like it doesn’t care. It is waiting to become a girl again. Fear. Fear of dying in the end. It would be much more brave to be a girl while I am walking along that empty bridge.

Once, they shouted at me: “you faggot boy!” I think it would really take the cake if they beat me ‘cause they think I am a gay boy, a “faggot” boy.

I have realised that my risk perception has changed. I have always been visible, despite my gender bending. I knew there was a risk, but I felt like it was very small and lesser than other risks. I start feeling like one choice is not the same as other choices. And now I feel the risk under my skin, and life becomes resistance.

It becomes a very specific choice to resist. And to be. Anyhow, my choice crumbles in my hands as those around me choose despite my choices. When I am in the market, guys treat me as a guy and tell me “go young boy, your girl is waiting for you”. Actually this is true, but who are they talking to? To the picture of me. I become a puzzle that changes in relation to who counts its pieces.

But who am I in this? Who are we and who can we be? We are seen and watched by normed eyes. I don't feel angry, and I actually know that my eyes are also normed. The fact, I think, is to be aware of this. It's not the problem that people staring at me think that I am boy and address me with a stubborn and persistent “he”. The very curious thing is how people react when they realize I am girl, at least physically. Because the broken-norm scares. Audre Lorde taught me not to be scared of the self, to look inside. To give ourselves untouched to those who try to scratch us. To give ourselves with clarity and openness until death do us part from our body and our purpose is to live life fully. I am deeply moved when I find myself in someone else words. When someone else tells me that I can be and so I am.

My identity was built as a denial: you are not like that, neither like that, nor that, nor... So then, who am I?  
Denial identities are the actual living proof of norm-critical lives.

When I was a child I wondered why trees were called trees, and not apples, for instance. It bothered me to have to respect rules, especially those I didn't have any role in designing. I seem like this, but I am something else. I seem something else, but I am like this. And what kind of shape should I choose for my body? I see myself and I don't recognize myself. How to let my body smile without feeling trapped? I tried to answer when I decided to wear my new boxers: not to be a “real man”, just to be myself. And it's funny that a girly body would choose a male shaped body to feel comfortable. It's funny that my body felt more feminine than before, that my body started to understand what “female” meant to itself. And what “male” meant.

Self-determined bodies are an example of norm criticism, not necessarily because they are out of the norm, but because that norm has been processed and the relation between the self and the norm is clear. This represents a critical approach to a norm system that sees almost only one direction to follow: to take for granted gender. Am I a lesbian because I am with a girl? Am I with a girl because

I am a lesbian? And still, am I a boy because I behave like a man, or am I simply a girl who's behaving like a man. I still don't know. But this reflection and this confrontation with myself as a person and as an activist is meaningful because it helps me to understand how not to take these things for granted, how to see the "scratches on the surface" and the spaces where our pieces of self meet in the intersectional puzzle of identity.

If words are just words and in the meantime if they are actually valuable, why not fill them with our experience? Change will not scare us anymore if we will be able to transform ourselves together and to act in advance. Maybe we will be able to understand what really changes and what actually stays the same. A tree is always a tree even if one day I'll bite it and I'll discover that it tastes like an apple. And those are all the letters that I have in between, at least for now.



**CRITICIZE  
THE NORM,  
UGLA STEFANIA  
JONSDOTTIR,  
ASSOCIATION Q,  
ICELAND**





When it comes to the norm of gender and sex, we have very firm ideas on how people are supposed to behave and act, what they are supposed to wear and want, and who they desire—all based on the genitals they have. The thought that gender and biological sex are two things that are entwined together is a very consistent thought that has been created through discourse and has established a system that we call the gender binary.

The gender binary aligns two categories: men and women. These categories carry a range of expectations and assumptions about men and women. And these expectations and requirements are very precise, firm and limiting for individuals. As soon as a person steps violates those expectations that are based on their biological sex, they are somehow punished or called out. A simple example is that if a man wears nail polish, a lot of people would consider the act a violation of his identity as a man.

As a trans person, these roles and expectations have become very apparent to me. They are something that I have battled with every day, and they are something that I seek to eliminate with every fiber of my body. I was assigned male gender at birth based solely on my genitals, though I have always identified as a woman. People tried as hard as they could to shove me into the direction of masculinity. Their efforts, and mine as well, fell short very early on as my gender expression was nowhere close to being masculine, even though my genitals were what we consider “male.” I had many years of consistent bullying, name calling, even violence because my gender expression did not fit into societal norms of how “men” should behave.



Not only was I bullied my straight people, but also gay and bisexual people. People accused me of being too afraid to come out as gay, as they claimed I was obviously gay because of my feminine gender expression.

I never came out as gay because I have never considered myself gay. To consider myself gay, I would have had to think of myself as man.

When I came out as trans, something strange happened. It became apparent to me that people in society accepted me because of my gender expression and my identity now matched—especially after I (physically? medically?) transitioned. People said that now they finally understood what was missing, and that I now was a complete person. Now all the pieces fit; at least the pieces of gender expression and sexual attraction. And to begin with, I ravished in this idea and in these positive reactions. Finally, people accepted me and I belonged somewhere. I rejoiced the role of a feminine woman, and I did everything in my power to fit even better into that box. I experienced the gender binary in a very real way, as I moved from one category to the other.

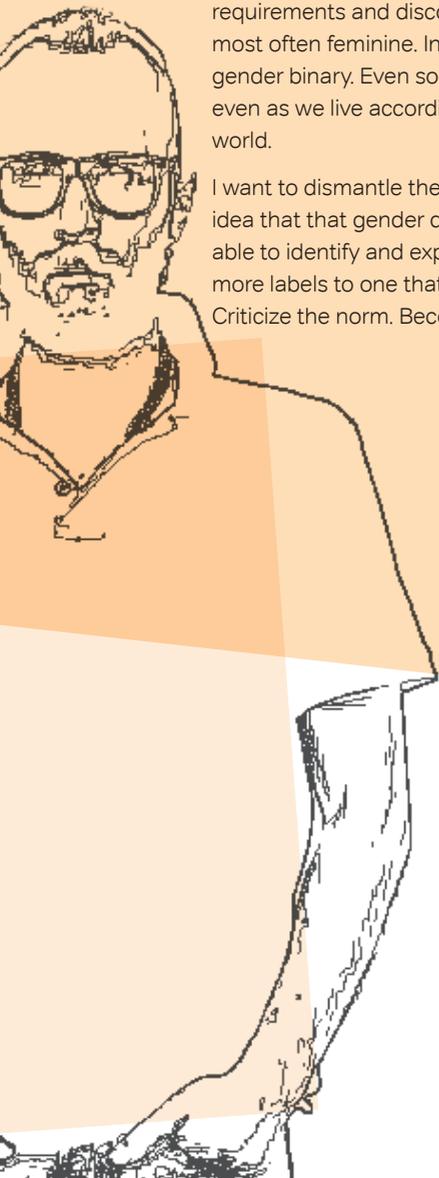
Now, I recognize that simply moving between the polar opposites of man and woman is not so simple. After I transitioned, I met people's expectations for being a woman quite well. These expectations are based on stereotypical ideas on how women look like and how they behave. As the years went by, I realized that those who did not fit so easily into this box had more trouble. People did not accept their gender identity simply because they didn't meet the standards of the gender binary. Society is fine with accepting trans people who go from one end of the binary to the other, as long as they fulfill the requirements for that given box.

The strict rules of the binaries do not only apply to trans people. Those whose bodies or expression do not fit into those boxes—by choice or not—are not accepted. They are pushed out, marginalized and discriminated against on a daily basis. As soon as any steps outside this massive system that rules our very being as people, we are punished.

And that is where the discourse on norms comes into play. The one thing that we do when we meet a person for the first time is consider whether they are male or female. And once we've made a decision, the assumptions fall into place. These are the rules and requirements of the gender binary. And if we can't decide, we get extremely uncomfortable and try our very hardest to fit people into that box.

Today, I do my best to defy this gender binary and challenge its ideas, requirements and discourses. I identify outside the binary, but my expression is most often feminine. In some contexts, it can be dangerous to live outside the gender binary. Even so, recognizing and challenging the gender norm can occur even as we live according to it—indeed, norms enable us to make sense of the world.

I want to dismantle the power structure behind norms. I want to challenge the idea that that gender dictates us anything else about a person. We should all be able to identify and express ourselves the way we want, without society attaching more labels to one that happens to correspond with our gender. Defy the binary. Criticize the norm. Become a part of the revolution of gender.



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30 years of LGBTQ activism

The International LGBTQ Youth  
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