

Local government policies on sexual and gender diversity in Spain. Experiences from Alt Empordà

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Abstract

In recent years, local government administrations in Spain have strengthened their commitment to putting into effect policies that favour the well-being of LGBTQ+ people. This has happened not only in large cities, but in small rural municipalities as well. Based on the discourses, representations and practices of professionals in health and social services, this article is organized around two interrelated axes of analysis. First, we assess the extent of knowledge regarding public policies among professionals and LGBTQ+ people. And second, we examine the rural area as a specific setting for the application of LGBTQ+ policies. This leads us to the conclusion that such legal changes are important but not sufficient in themselves to ensure the well-being of LGBTQ+ people. Moreover, LGBTQ+ policies need to consider local contexts and avoid transferring the rationale of the big city into rural environments.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; sexual diversity; local government policies; Spain; small towns; rurality

Introduction

In 2014, the Government of the Spanish region of Catalonia approved Law 11/2014, which sought to guarantee the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersexual people and to eradicate homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. This law, which is regional in character, provides legal protection for LGBTI¹ people throughout Catalonia, while promoting specific actions to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity in all walks of life, and throughout all stages of life. In the same way, it also provides for administrative sanctions for discriminatory behaviour towards LGBTI people (*criminal* sanctions are regulated at the state level, via the Penal Code). There are other state-wide regulations approved by the Spanish Government covering a number of particularly significant issues, such as same-sex marriage (Act

13/2005 of 1 July 2005 which modifies Article 44 of the Civil Code); changes in official documentation regarding gender (Law 3/2007, of 15 March, which regulates the rectification of official registry entries of a person's sex), as well as various legal instruments governing hate crimes.² However, Law 11/2014 is important because it facilitates the deployment of specific legal protection for LGBTI people, with special implications for local government policies in Catalonia.

Monro and Richardson (2014) recommend involving local administrations in the implementation of policies that favour the well-being of LGBT people. In line with such thinking, one of the consequences of Law 11/2014 coming into force is that regional and local governments have had to activate public policies regarding sexual and gender diversity, whereas previously, the task of promoting policies of diversity, increasing public awareness, creating groups for preventing and reporting of violence, and protecting victims, was carried out mainly by LGBTQ+ organisations. Thanks to this new law, these new policies have also become incorporated into the local administrations of town councils and the county councils that regulate the smaller municipalities³. This has demonstrated the existence of an LGBTQ+ issue that goes further than the big city, and one which is the vehicle of specific needs and rights, that also includes small towns and villages.

That said, since the first studies on sexual and gender diversity appeared, the big city has long been presented as the place *par excellence* for LGBT people to live their lives (Castells 1983; Weston 1995). As is the case in other Western contexts, in Spain, representations, discourses and practices involving LGBTQ+ have been concentrated in large cities, mainly in Barcelona and Madrid. Both cities have occupied the socio-cultural panorama of 'what LGBTQ+ is': they have been the preferred settings for the production of LGBTQ+ literature in the country; they have been set up as the reference points of

LGBTQ+ leisure activities and they have also been the focus of the political demands of the sexual liberation movement (Calvo Borobia 2017; Domínguez Ruiz 2018; Enguix Grau 2019; Huard 2014; Mérida Jiménez 2016).

Although the rural/urban dichotomy has generated understandable controversy among researchers (Champion and Hugo 2016; Woods 2012), in symbolic terms it has become a practical distinction for LGBTQ+ people when constructing their own experiences and life stories (Butterfield 2018; Kazyak 2011). That is why in this article, when we talk about *rurality*, we are not referring simply to a particular geographical configuration characterised by low population and/or the domination of the primary sector, but rather to the set of discourses and representations that are organised in such areas, in stark contrast to the urban setting that is typically imagined in a context of much greater resources and possibilities of all kinds. Rurality cannot be thought of in a homogeneous way; it is the product of countless interrelated factors - material and symbolic – which need to be analysed in their local contexts, without ever losing sight of how they fit into the global dynamics (Boellstorff and Leap 2004).

This article presents the results of an investigation into the relationships between the spatial dimension (a rural environment), various non-hegemonic forms of sexuality, expression and gender identity, and professional practice in this environment. This has led us to focus on two elements of analysis. First, we look at the degree of awareness of government policies among both professionals and LGBTQ+ people, which will allow us to explore the main difficulties faced by local administrations when it comes to applying LGBTQ+ policies, as well as to review the central importance of the judicial apparatus in anti-discrimination measures. And second, we will focus on the rural space as a specific setting for the implementation of LGBTQ+ policies, in comparison with the hegemony

of the big city as a more privileged location for experiences related to sexual and gender diversity.

The context: Alt Empordà

This study focuses on the *comarca*, or county, of Alt Empordà, which is in the north east of Catalonia. According to data provided by the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (IDESCAT), the population of Alt Empordà, in 2019, was 137,951, distributed in 68 municipalities. The population density is much lower (104 inhabitants per km²) than in Catalonia as a whole (239 per km²), whereas the percentage of foreign population (24.2%) is almost double the Catalan average (15.1%). In terms of age groups, 12.4% of the population is between 18 and 29 years old, while 18.2% are over 65 years old. The mean per capita family income in Alt Empordà is 14,000 euros, which is notably lower than the Catalan average of 17,200 euros. The largest economic sector is the service sector. Specifically, tourism is the most significant activity, with the coast of Alt Empordà making up a sizeable stretch of the Costa Brava, one of Spain's largest and most popular national and international tourist destinations. Tourism has a major demographic impact, with the total population increasing by 13% in the summer season. This phenomenon must be taken into account when analysing the social reality in the area, particularly that of LGBTQ+ youth, since it produces a marked difference between summer and winter life.

[Figure 1]

Figure 1: Location of Alt Empordà in Spain. Google Maps.

Hence, in the case of Alt Empordà, the interviewees agree that LGBTQ+ visibility, despite being generally low-key, is accentuated during the summer. The Costa Brava is not known as an area that explicitly promotes LGBTQ+ tourism, but even so, there are

LGBTQ+ visitors and the opportunities for socialisation, relationships and the expression of other social and cultural representations regarding sex and gender are expanded. Likewise, there is an increase in the possible aggression faced not only by LGBTQ+ people from the area, but also by those who are visiting and/or working temporarily in the tourism sector. It should also be pointed out that the social impact of tourism is heavily concentrated in the coastal area and not spread evenly throughout the region. Thus, the villages and small towns in areas further inland and further from the coast do not experience this increase in opportunities for sexual-emotional socialisation that occurs on the coast.

The visibility of LGBTQ+ people is very low in the region. In recent years, according to Manel (LGBTQ+ activist. Gay man), the only active LGBTQ+ organisation (*Violeta*) consisted of two full-time members and has since been dissolved. There are no social venues for LGBTQ+ people, except for an openly LGBT-friendly bar in the coastal town of Empuriabrava, which is not particularly popular, and a men's sauna in Figueres, the capital of Alt Empordà. Moreover, local media coverage of sexual and gender diversity is sparse. In fact, in the digital newspaper Empordà, the last two stories concerning homosexuality date from 2018 and refer to an incident involving a civic warden who reprimanded with a gay couple who were kissing in a public park.

The implementation of Law 11/2014 that seeks to guarantee the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersexual people and to eradicate homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, has led the *Consell Comarcal de Alt Empordà*, the administrative body that manages policies at the county level, to implement a number of measures necessary to make effective the right to equality and non-discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression. Given this mandate, in 2017 the *Servicio de Atención Integral LGBTI (SAI)* (Comprehensive LGBTI Care Service) was

created, based in Figueres, in order to carry out campaigns for LGBTI awareness, information, and visibility and the prevention of LGBTI phobia. The aim of this new service is to respond to specific situations of discrimination, as well as meeting the needs for accompaniment and/or support related to sexual and gender diversity. It is the local LGBTI centre of reference from which local government policy is deployed. The SAI, which has been implemented in all the counties of Catalonia as well as in municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants, has become the centre of reference in those areas where, previously, there had been no discernible public initiatives in matters of sexual and gender diversity.

This development is especially worth noting when we consider that the public administrative bodies in small municipalities have little experience in implementing this type of policy. To this we must add that the socio-political context in such communities lacks the interlocutors from civil society with which to develop this type of action. As we have said, in Alt Empordà, there are no LGBTQ+ organisations strong enough to either challenge local government or to collaborate with it.

Putting effective policies into action becomes even more complex when we consider that public policies tend to be broken down into separate sectors such as education, health, the labour market, etc., and intervention is fragmented in that it is aimed at specific population groups, such as the elderly, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, etc. (Platero 2012). All of which makes it difficult to establish a transversal, intersectional perspective capable of confronting the overlapping mechanisms of inequality that operate in the multifarious areas of social life.

Likewise, although some reference material and recommendations have been published by the regional administration of Catalonia, such as the guide *Indicant el camí* [Pointing the Way] (Pineda Lorenzo 2019), and some LGBTI-oriented plans are

beginning to be approved by local governments, we are still faced with the fact that these emerging LGBTQ+ policies do not have sufficient specific rural references or representation, and lack the contribution of the situated experiences required to structure effective policies. Nevertheless, identifying such deficiencies brings with it the opportunity to deploy innovative initiatives, promote changes and activate new policies that can contribute to counteracting situations of inequality and help guarantee the well-being of the population.

Methodology

This research work employed a qualitative approach in which in-depth interviews were the main technique for obtaining the information that is analysed. A total of 20 people were interviewed: 10 young LGBTQ+ people and 10 representatives from social organisations and professionals involved in social and health intervention. The diverse sociodemographic characteristics of the participants were taken into consideration in selecting the interviewees. In the case of LGBTQ+ youth, this meant diversity in terms of place of residence, as well as age, felt gender and sexual orientation. Similarly, attention was paid to the field of work, professional discipline and the geographical area of intervention in the case of professionals and representatives of social organisations.

Despite these efforts, the town of Figueres is over-represented, being home to half of the interviewees from both groups (young people, and professionals and organisations). That said, the population of Figueres does, in fact, represent 34% of the entire region of Alt Empordà, and a large part of the regional services are concentrated there. Furthermore, it is the symbolic reference point for the inhabitants of Alt Empordà, and recognised as the nerve centre of the region. Therefore, despite this over-

representation, the social importance of Figueres makes it a space of special interest in this research.

The interviews, all of which were transcribed, were conducted in either Catalan or Spanish. Two data analysis methods were employed. First, the ethnographic content analysis method was used to study the impact of legislation and protocols for professionals who assist LGBTQ+ people in public services (see Altheide, 1984). Second, thematic content analysis was performed with the support of Atlas.Ti software; this method allows researchers to interpret the interview data (Clarke and Braun, 2014). In this sense, and in line with the ethnographic tradition, the aim of the analysis was to find significance rather than representation.

All those interviewed in the course of this research were of legal age and had a full capacity to act. Given the legitimate legal autonomy of all the people involved, requests to third parties for permission to participate were unnecessary, although consent was requested from all the interviewees. Moreover, this research has followed the ethical guidelines of social science research, guaranteeing the well-being, safety and protection of the participants, the safe storage of data and the confidentiality of all the participants, as well as anonymity, except when they have expressly stated their wish not to be anonymised.

[Table 1: Details of the professionals interviewed]

[Table 2: Details of the LGBTQ+ people interviewed]

Results and discussion

LGBTQ+ policies outside the big city

The professionals working in public administrations of Catalonia must, according to Law 11/2014, build a favourable social environment for LGBTQ+ people. However, the results of this research show that many of these professionals are largely unaware of the priorities, resources and responsibilities of public workers regarding LGBTQ+ issues:

Interviewer: Do you know of any specific action by the administrations in favour of LGBTI people?

Núria: No. Beyond allowing us to demonstrate, one day in the streets, I don't know of any.

Interviewer: Have you heard of Law 11/2014, known as the law against homophobia?

Núria: Oh yes! The law about hate crimes. That's it, isn't it? The one that says that if someone insults me on the street, I can report them. It's all I know about the subject. (Núria; teacher. Lesbian).

In her own words, the informant's difficulty in identifying her own rights as a lesbian and her obligations as a public worker is evident. On the one hand, she does not know the powers the administration holds, since hate crimes are regulated via the Penal Code, at the national level, while Law 11/2014 is regional in nature and its system of sanctions is administrative. But also, she reduces civil and social rights to the level of punitive actions, with the focus on the penalties incurred. When the technically-complex initiatives promoted in the political sphere are not correctly transferred to front-line professionals, it becomes difficult to implement them directly and effectively in a way that would guarantee their impact among citizens:

There's quite a bit of ignorance on the part of the professionals on the ground, day-to-day. They're always ringing up 'I've got a situation, what should I do?'

Once they find the way to intervene, it's easy, but at first, when they find

themselves face-to-face with a transgender person, and they have to refer upwards, for hormone treatment, or whatever, well in that case they don't know what to do. (Arantxa, health professional. Heterosexual)

On the other hand, as shown in the interviews, there are professionals, even frontline healthcare workers, who have difficulties when it comes to identifying specific situations of discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ people. This difficulty – or ignorance – is evident if we compare what our interviewers said with data from the 2019 Survey of the LGBTI population by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), which reveals a significant contradiction: while some of the professionals interviewed in this research have difficulty identifying, or are unaware of, specific situations of discrimination, 15% of the LGBTI people surveyed by FRA in Spain had felt discriminated against in the previous 12 months when using health care and social services – along with 19% in educational institutions, 25% in a café, bar, restaurant or nightclub, and 21% at work or looking for work (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020).

Similarly, the narratives of the LGBTQ+ people interviewed reveal different experiences of discrimination in response to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity:

From an early age, they called me *marimatxo* [tomboy] (Paula, lesbian woman).

The abuse is constant: ranging from conversations with my grandmother, to my brother (Lucas, gay man).

I have been very lucky. Let's see, there are always some moments in high school where, in the hallway, I was insulted by being called a transvestite. [...] But that was said by people who didn't know me. With people close to me, I've been very lucky. (Jude, transgender man. Asexual).

This leads us to think that it is not a question of the non-existence of situations of abuse or discrimination, but rather that the professional and institutional view is biased by cis-hetero-central logic which makes it difficult to identify situations of abuse. In this sense, one of the professionals interviewed points out that: 'The abuse, in broad terms, or homophobia, in broad terms... people are figuring that stuff out. The fine line stuff, the subtle stuff, *that* really goes unnoticed. And I believe it's just as harmful, or more so, than the other'(Pau, psychologist. Gay man). This shows that, in general terms, although explicit abuse is duly identified and generates specific mechanisms of intervention, the symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1998), which is much more subtle but no less harmful, since it forms the core of daily life for LGBTQ+ people, as well as the work of professionals, is much more difficult to identify because it forms part of the 'natural' order of things. Along these lines, the following comment from an interviewee reinforces the idea of the lack of professional skills, as well as the (re)production of the cis-hetero-centric structure among professionals through a specific experience:

A co-worker will come up and say to me, 'A boy's come here; tell me if he's gay. I mean, like, you're gay; you've got that sixth sense... tell me if...' But a sixth sense, for what? Why do you need to find out whether that man is gay or not? And me; why are you getting me involved? (Manel, LGBT activist. Gay)

Although the discourse, generally speaking, on the part of the professionals was one of acceptance, their perspective of LGBTQ+ people is one of sexual and gender otherness. The interviews show that there is a mental framework based on a norm (heterosexual and cisgender) and an otherness. And although this otherness is, in general terms, made invisible, or tolerated through a discursive acceptance of 'diversity', it is also sometimes subject to prejudice or pejorative comments. In fact, some professionals recognise that, in their teams, there may be prejudice among their colleagues:

Interviewer: Do you think that service professionals can be a bit prejudiced in some way towards LGBT people?

Ricard: Not us, but there are some that are, I'm sure.

Interviewer: Might there be one or two professionals who would reject a young person because they are LGBT?

Ricard: Yes. That's how it is, because I hear it in comments... Here, and everywhere. For whatever reason; because of religion, because it's what they have seen all their lives, or whatever. (Ricard, health professional. Heterosexual)

In this regard, professionals with the most awareness and personal commitment to issues related to gender and sexuality are also the ones who best identify situations of discrimination. Therefore, raising awareness is a key step towards recognising the abusive situations produced by the cis-hetero-centric model.

Interviewer: Does this abuse become obvious, is it visible or ...?

Arantxa: Oof! ... really, I don't know what to tell you. I don't know what to say.

But, for example, we have changed; by way of example, we've changed the idea of how we ask things a lot, like, when we have a person in front of us, right? A girl, who comes to ask us for advice about X, or whatever. Why should we assume she is a heterosexual person? So we've really changed the way we interact with the people we deal with. So we ask things like, are you taking care of yourself? In case you wanted to have children, or you didn't want to have children, or...? (Arantxa, health professional. Heterosexual)

It needs pointing out that a large proportion of anti-discrimination policies have been developed from the paradigm of hate crimes, with the response to acts of discrimination firmly focussed on the Penal Code. This generates at least three problems. First, as pointed out by Spade (2015), it means discrimination is defined as an act, deemed

criminal, which is perpetrated by an individual and not the result of a cis-hetero-centric social structure. Second, such acts are presented as anomalous and exceptional, when in reality, they are a logical component of social life based on sexual and gender hegemonies (Perry 2001). And finally, not all forms of discrimination are classified as a crime in the Penal Code (Langarita, Albertín and Sadurní 2019) and, as such, are not subject to legal redress.

If the responses of institutions to situations of discrimination are channelled only via the Penal Code, community-level interventions, as well as local government policies, are seriously affected and the capacity to act is limited. And if LGBTQ+ policies consist only of legal action based on the Penal Code, then the demands of LGBTQ+ people are not adequately addressed, and the structural roots of abuse are not being dealt with. What must be taken into account in this regard is the wide variety of daily contexts in the lives of LGBTQ+ people, all of whom have needs in multiple areas of their social lives (work, health, education, safety, etc.) which, in turn, require a wide variety of professionals. But in addition, this criminalistic perspective serves to define LGBTQ+ individuals as victimised and vulnerable, with no recourse to emancipation and agency, since intervention is firmly in the hands of the police and the lawyers, and is directed towards a victim who is regarded as a passive figure (Albertín 2017; Arensburg and Pujal 2014).

Obtaining rights does not always mean that justice is done (Ettelbrick 1997). One needs to look beyond the logic of legislative change in order to contemplate the experiences that real people have and which, when viewed from a legal rationale, are unrecognisable or even unintelligible (Browne, et al., 2021). The legal rationale contributes to the construction of a State imaginary which entails the preservation of sexual citizenship (Lamble 2014) – albeit one which operates within the logic of the heteropatriarchy as a necessary part of the reinforcement of nation states (Arvin, Tuck

and Morrill, 2013). Sexual citizenship and the nation state walk hand in hand in the narrative of modernity, and their consolidation has been articulated fundamentally through legal logic. In the case of Spain, first, through equal marriage rights, secondly through the individualization of discrimination regarded as hate crimes, and in a third stage, in which we currently find ourselves, via the implementation of LGBTQ+ social policies.

Having said that, the professionals are not the only ones who are ignorant of public policies; the same is true among the young LGBTQ+ people who participated in this research, many of whom showed considerable ignorance of the political interventions, rights and resources that they have at their disposal. And in their case too, the rationale of the interviewees is based on legal principles.

I know there's an LGBTI hate crime law, but I know hardly anything about it
[...] I don't know what they do or what they've stopped doing. (Paula)

I've not heard anything about the policies that exist at the moment. (Jude, transgender man, Asexual).

It was also apparent that many of the young people interviewed consider current political and legal initiatives ineffective, and they feel that they do not respond to their real needs. Therefore, a lack of confidence must be added to the lack of knowledge of the existing resources, such as complaint procedures and specific care services. This is especially worrying if we take into account that, during the interviews, the vast majority of the interviewees reported discrimination or fear because they are LGBTQ+: "I have a partner and I don't hold his hand out of fear, for fear that someone will give me a slap" (Sergi, gay man). With respect to the relevant laws, Aniol (a gay man) declares: 'I know that we can get married; that we can't be beaten up on the streets, and little else.'

All this shows that it is not enough to legislate, to generate anti-discriminatory protocols and deploy actions that favour the well-being of LGBTQ+ people, but rather, in order to make fundamental rights effective, it is also necessary to establish strategies for the re-signification of sex and gender in society as a whole, with active participation in this task by LGBTQ+ people, who not only must know and exercise their rights, but must also contribute towards a signification of citizenship, and of sex and gender, that overcomes the stagnant logic regulated from a judicial point of view.

Political initiatives in the rural context

There were recurrent references to Barcelona, and comparisons were made, throughout all the interviews. For example, Manel (LGBT activist, gay) argues that ‘The whole setup they have in Barcelona has to be brought here, and applied here [Alt Empordà]’, by which he is referring not only to the wide range of private services, such as bars, restaurants and pubs that exist in the city, but also to publically-funded resources, such as the LGBTI Centre run by Barcelona City Council, which is housed in more than 1,250m² of office space, with services specifically aimed at LGBTQ+ people. Similarly to what McGlynn (2018) found in a study centred in the south of the United Kingdom, the professionals in Alt Empordà tend to organise their discourse along rural versus urban lines: ‘I think that in rural counties, the thing is more hidden. We don’t speak out until there’s an attack, or something makes us jump.’ (Carles, professional youth carer. Heterosexual)

In any case, it is impossible to faithfully replicate the services and resources of Barcelona in Alt Empordà without taking into account the local context, which is to say, the public resources and the social fabric. LGBTQ+ policies in rural settings cannot use the big city as a reference model, since the social organisation, the symbolic constructions

about sex and gender and the life experiences in rural areas are permeated by different spatial, cultural, social and economic factors.

However, other mechanisms can be activated that enhance the well-being of LGBTQ+ people through different strategies in key areas of intervention: community outreach, education, health, culture, public space and institutional communication. In the case of Alt Empordà, LGBTQ+ meetings – organised by local LGBTQ+ people – have been promoted to generate a local social network; sexual diversity issues have been expressly incorporated into health and school programmes; sexual and gender diversity has been incorporated as an area of intervention in the region's sexual and reproductive health programme; cultural spaces with LGBTQ+ content have been created (conferences, film societies, etc.), and training sessions have been set up for professionals who serve the public.

Implementing such initiatives locally in rural areas such as Alt Empordà may have political costs that elected officials will have to accept, since not all the population agree with the proposed anti-discriminatory measures or the promotion of sexual and gender diversity: 'When you want to put one of these things into action, you have to tread very carefully because there are many people who are just not ready.' (Carles, professional youth carer. Heterosexual). Misgivings like these can coexist with political interests that try to present such initiatives as a sign of tolerance towards LGBTQ+ people, and a measure of democratic maturity in the territory. In the case of Alt Empordà, political activity is evident in public pronouncements in favour of sexual and gender diversity, on certain dates of the year, which do, indeed, reinforce the innovative and tolerant image of local administrations, although the cisgender and heterosexual hegemony is never called into question (see Image 1). It is possible to reduce the analysis of such actions to

homonationalist interpretations (Puar 2007), but this would be entirely misleading, since the implications and repercussions of these types of actions can be very diverse.

In this sense, analysing public policies requires attention not only to public discourse, but also to professional practice, local actions, specific programmes, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the territory. Only then can we make more rigorous interpretations, aligned with local contexts. Local policies in favour of sexual and gender diversity can, while proving uncomfortable for the more conservative positions, have an effect of reinforcing an image of democratic maturity and also contributing to the well-being of LGBTQ+ people. Thus, for example, although some of the rhetoric promoted in the region could, from certain perspectives, be categorised as not entirely disinterested, as would be the case of institutional messages via social networks on dates close to the commemoration of LGBTQ+ Pride, there are also specific services aimed at the LGBTQ+ population, such as the *Servei d'Atenció Integral* (SAI), or the incorporation of sexual and gender diversity in social and health intervention programmes that favour the well-being of the LGBTQ+ population at a community, group and individual level. At the same time, some sectors of the population speak out against such initiatives because they consider them to be of low priority or because they are linked to sexual practices and gender identities that they consider to be illegitimate. In this regard, some of the professionals we interviewed declared that they have colleagues who are opposed to the promotion and preservation of sexual and gender diversity.

On the other hand, support from higher institutions, such as the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (The Autonomous Government of Catalonia), as well as the existence of legal mandates, such as Law 11/2014, is crucial for the success of initiatives that will undoubtedly generate a certain degree of social rejection. Success, however, does not only depend on other, higher institutions supporting and promoting political initiatives;

the commitment to LGBTQ+ policies in rural areas also requires the determination of local administrations and acceptance by civil society. Support from higher institutions in Alt Empordà has provided both economic resources to LGBTQ+ policies, as well as legitimizing the discursive resources available to people in elected office who can rely on an institutional narrative that is markedly supportive of sexual and gender diversity from the whole body of the Catalan administration. This support has generated legitimacy and expectation among local politicians, who have added their voices to the discussion on sexual and gender diversity. The impact of all this on LGBTQ+ people has, however, yet to be evaluated.

[Figure 2: 'In Alt Empordà, diversity enriches us all. Happy Pride Day, today and every day'. Tweet published by the Area for Social Inclusion of the Alt Empordà County Council on June 28th 2020.]

Conclusions

Establishing legal mechanisms and promoting specific policies to protect LGBTQ+ people is a necessary strategy for fostering the well-being of those who do not follow sexual and gender norms. However, in itself, it is not enough. The case of Alt Empordà shows that although we have at our disposal a framework of legal safeguards and proactive political action, it is also necessary to remove heterosexuality and cisgenderism from their central role in political and professional action. Although the professionals interviewed in this work present a general lack of knowledge about the legal and political implications of sexual and gender diversity in their work, and although most of them express respect for the different forms of gender expression or identity, and of non-heterosexual sexual orientations, what stands out above all is that they are unable to identify the specific needs that such people may have. And this fact is decisive when it

comes to guaranteeing the success of public policies that provide comprehensive safeguards for LGBTQ+ people. The data presented here shows that the professional gaze is biased by heterosexual and cisgender thinking which must be countered in order to achieve emancipatory political action.

Moreover, local institutions have to invest in identifying the needs of LGBTQ+ people in the territory and address these needs from a situated perspective that can deal with the specific issues of the group in a given environment. That is why it is necessary to construct LGBTQ+ policies centred on local circumstances, based on local points of reference and in accordance with the social, political and cultural contexts that enable recognition of a complex social phenomenon; policies that are capable of locating this phenomenon in the space, the experiences and the emancipatory options that rural settings can offer. This implies thinking about sexuality and gender beyond the big city and the symbolic spaces that the metropolis generates. In this sense, public policies – but also LGBTQ+ people themselves – must aim to build alternative spaces of local reference that can prevail against the pre-eminence of the big city, which is where most LGBTQ+ policies are constructed. In Alt Empordà, steps have been taken to do this, but it is still necessary to consolidate these actions in the local environment, as well as to evaluate the experiences arising from them and the impact they have had.

LGBTQ+ policies in rural settings are a recent area of intervention in Catalonia. The paucity of experience among professionals and the practical absence of successful references in similar environments can feed the temptation to reproduce, in rural areas, the LGBTQ+ political structures and logic of large cities. When this happens, the ability to adapt to local environments with characteristics and needs that often differ from those found in large cities, is lost. To this we must add the trend towards sectorialisation and the fragmented intervention that often characterises public policies, divided into areas

such as education, social services, housing or health, and aimed at homogenised groups: children, the elderly, or the disabled, among others. This trend limits the scope of measures that require transversality and intersectionality in order to be really effective and to have a real impact on the lives of LGBTQ+ people. However, although the difficulties and challenges detected are significant, so is the potential way forward offered by environments in which the proximity between the administration and the public facilitates the identification of needs, the dialogue between the public sector and civil society, and the assessment of the impact of the measures being implemented. We find, therefore, a fertile environment for innovation that involves truly participatory policies based on the real needs of citizens.

Finally, it is important to highlight that a work of this nature will need, in the near future, to incorporate comparative analyses that allow us to study the impact of LGBTQ+ public policies in different political contexts and geographical settings. Such a comparison would reveal the impact of these policies and also identify the best strategies for promoting the well-being of LGBTQ+ people. This is especially significant if we consider the range of political responses within the European framework concerning sexual and gender diversity: while on the one hand, the European Parliament declares the European Union an 'LGBTIQ Freedom Zone'⁴, on the other, anti-gender policies continue to spread throughout the entire territory (see Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). This demonstrates the lack of consensus on the approach to sexual and gender diversity in Europe but also, it endangers the well-being of LGTBQ+ people and continues to delay their complete integration into society.

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Notes

¹ Throughout this work, our acronym of choice shall be LGBTQ+ when referring to the set of sexual and gender identities and expressions that are neither heterosexual nor cisgender in order to capture the subjectivities beyond lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identities. In this regard, we decided not to use the “I” of intersex because no intersex people were interviewed in this research. If we had done so, some intersex people might have been uncomfortable at being grouped together with “LGBTQ” because its variance refers to sexual characteristics rather than gender identity or sexual orientation. However, when other authors, organizations or our interviewees use acronyms, the order or even the categories and identities included in them frequently change, as is the case with LGB, LGBTI or LGBT. In such cases, we have kept the acronyms as they are referred to in the original documents or as expressed by our interviewees, the aim being to use emic language throughout the article.

² The Spanish Criminal Code does not refer specifically to ‘hate crimes’. Nonetheless, several articles take into consideration bias-motivated offences, such as Articles 22, 134, 511, 512, 170.1 and 173.

³ The administrative organization analysed here is formed by Spain, at the state level, by Catalonia at the regional level and, between the regional and the municipal level (town council), there is a second-level local administration, analogous to a county council, called a *consell comarcal* (also known as *mancomunitat*). These are municipal groupings within a *comarca* (roughly equivalent to a *county*) which jointly manage local government policies among neighbouring municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.

⁴ On March 11th, 2021, the European Parliament (in response to the proclamation of more than one hundred ‘LGBTIQ-free zones’ in Poland) voted in favour of a resolution that declared the European Union to be an area of freedom for LGBTIQ people. See: the European

Parliament <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press->

room/20210304IPR99219/parliament-declares-the-european-union-an-lgbtq-freedom-zone

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