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When the gay village is somewhere else. Reflections on LGBTQ+ public policies in Catalan rural areas.

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The big city has been conceptualized as the preferred space for LGBTQ+ experiences and policies, being seen as the territory that facilitates socialization, anonymity, leisure and the political struggle for sexual and gender diversity (Weston, 1995; Abraham, 2009). However, sexual and gender diversity in rural areas have been studied since the 1990s (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Bell, 2000). In recent years, these studies have multiplied and various voices have emerged that claim to think about LGBTQ+ beyond the big city, problematizing the double association established between the urban world and tolerance, on the one hand, and the rural world or small towns and hostility, on the other (Brown 2008; Gray Johnson and Gilley 2016; McGlynn 2018; Muller Myrdahl 2013; Wienke and Hill 2013, among others). As in other countries of the Global North, in Spain, social and human sciences studies on the LGBTQ+ universe have been located mainly in large cities such as Barcelona, Madrid or Valencia (*cf.* Enguix 1995; Guasch 1991; Huard 2014; Mejía 2006; Mérida Jiménez 2016). However, studies giving visibility to LGBTQ+ experiences and practices in small municipalities are also proliferating (*cf.* Aragón Navarro, 2020; Langarita 2020; Langarita et.al. 2019; Rodó-de-Zárate 2013).

The dichotomy between rural and urban has been widely discussed, and many studies have highlighted the limitations of both categories as elements of static analysis (Champion and Hugo 2004). The development of individual mobility and the

development of communication technologies allow that, ever increasingly, this polarization of the traditional rural-urban forms, becomes ever more diluted in a continuum, and that other forms of reconstruction of rurality, beyond the country-city bipolarity are possible (Ferreira and Zanoni, 2001). However, it is still significant that this dichotomy continues to operate in the dominion of the symbolic and in the social fabric. Despite the theoretical problematization of these two notions, their practical uses are still very widespread in society. That is why throughout this text, "rural" will be conceived not only as a physical space but, above all, as a place of symbolic construction. That is to say, we interpret "rural" from socio-economic and ecological markers such as low population density, the importance of the primary sector or the preponderance of a natural environment, but also as it constitutes a representation in the collective mind that is in direct contrast to the big city.

Following this trend, this text analyzes LGBTQ+ policies in the rural environment based on the discourses, representations and practices of the stakeholders. For this, two interrelated axes of analysis will be addressed: on the one hand, the knowledge and positioning of the stakeholders on the legislation, policies and services regarding LGBTQ+ matters; and on the other, their vision of LGBTQ+phobia and sexual and gender diversity in their scope of professional practice.

The data that have made this analysis possible come from two qualitative investigations carried out between 2018 and 2020 in the counties of the Alt Empordà and the Garrotxa, situated in the north of Catalonia. The main technique used was semi-directed in-depth interviews with stakeholders whose professional development has a direct or indirect impact on the well-being of LGBTQ+ people, such as policy-makers, public administration technicians, professionals from the education, health, culture, leisure and public safety sectors; the media, and also prominent members of civil society.

In total, 47 interviews were conducted (11 with local journalists and professionals from the public sector, such as the police or community workers; 8 with front-line professionals in contact with the public: concierges, receptionists and professionals within the social services; 15 medical professionals (doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists; and 13 professionals from the fields of education sports and youth leisure). The interviews were carried out by the author of this chapter and people helping with the research.

Brief notes on the Alt Empordà and the Garrotxa regions

Catalonia (in the northeast of Spain) is made up of 42 counties, two of which are the Alt Empordà and the Garrotxa. The Alt Empordà is located in the northeast of Catalonia and has 141,300 inhabitants, spread over 68 municipalities (with the capital in Figueres, with 46,600 inhabitants). It has a much lower population density (104 inhabitants per km²) than the Catalan average (239 per km²), and its per capita family income (14,000 euros) is also lower than that of Catalonia (17,200 euros). The service sector is the main economic sector, especially summer tourism. The Costa Brava is in this county and is one of the areas with the highest tourist activity in Spain. This fact generates a distinction - material and symbolic- between the coastal areas with intense tourism and the interior with a markedly rural character.

To the west of the Alt Empordà, is the interior county of the Garrotxa (57,590 inhabitants distributed in 19 municipalities). It has a much lower population density (78.4 inhabitants per km²) than the Catalan average, and a per capita family income of (16,600 euros) which is also lower than that of the region. This county stands out for its important primary sector, especially livestock farming. Its capital is Olot (35,200 inhabitants), which brings together most of the population of the county.

In both counties, the visibility of LGBTQ+ people is very low, and local discourses and representations on sexual and gender diversity are practically absent. In

the Garrotxa there is no markedly LGBTQ+ space for socialization, although there is a very active LGBTQ+ entity that frequently organizes social events or protests in the region. Regarding the Alt Empordà, there is no LGBTQ+ entity, but there are two places for socializing: a men's sauna in the regional capital and an LGBTQ+ friendly bar on the coast, although both businesses have very few customers.

Stakeholders facing LGBTQ+ policies and services in rural areas

In 2014, the Parliament of Catalonia passed Law 11/2014, which sought to guarantee the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersexual people, and to eradicate homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. With this law, both the regional government and local administrations are obliged to guarantee the principles of equality and non-discrimination in those areas that are within their competence, such as education, health, culture, leisure and public spaces. The passing of this law represents a turning point for local governments, since from now on they must assume responsibilities to actively promote the well-being of LGBTQ+ people (Langarita et al. 2021). The involvement of local governments in LGBTQ+ policies is fundamental for a real impact on people's lives (Monro and Richardson 2014), since they constitute the level of government closest to citizens.

As a result of the law, the regional government of Catalonia, in coordination with local entities, created the LGBTI Comprehensive Care Services public network (Serveis d'Atenció Integral LGBTI, SAI being the acronym in Catalan), among which are those of the Alt Empordà and the Garrotxa counties. These services, in addition to raising awareness and sensibility in favour of LGBTI people, also provide accompaniment and advice to LGBTI people and their families in the territory to meet specific needs, as well as respond to situations of discrimination (Generalitat de Catalunya nd). Since its

creation, the demand for the service has increased, both from LGBTI people and by family members who want advice on sexual and gender diversity, and by other professionals who have specific doubts about the care of LGBTI people. It is important to remark that , although some public services refer to LGBTI people, now including the “I” for intersexual, in our study we have used the acronym LGBTQ+ to refer to the whole group of entities and expressions on the margin of cisgender and heterosexual logics. It is in this way that we believe we can better embrace the subjectivities that go even further than the identity categories such as “lesbian”, “gay”, “bisexual” or “transgender”. In this sense, we have not used the “I” of intersexual because specifically, intersex people have not appeared in our research, and for that reason, by including the “I” without further explanation could even hide certain experiences with some special characteristics that should be taken into consideration. However, when referring to work by other authors, we use the same acronym that they themselves have used. It is for this reason that some changes in the order of the acronym, as well as some of the letters that it is composed of according to the way in which they have been named, may appear as LGB, LGBT, or LGBTI.

As well as accompanying LGBTI people, family members and professionals, the SAIs are also the space from which awareness-raising actions are centred, mainly focusing on actions of a symbolic nature, such as the raising of the rainbow flag on designated dates, institutional statements or art exhibitions. These types of actions are fundamental in showing the commitment of the public administration and to promote a change of representations in the collective mind. However, according to some people interviewed, such specific actions must be a complement to planned policies that transversally insert sexual and gender diversity in all areas of government.

The symbolic acts are important (...) But more things need to be done, because if you just raise the flag... (...) policies have to be activated too. (member of an LGBT association, Alt Empordà. Gay man).

The LGBT situation has been tackled with ends... I don't know if it's just for show (...) but actions have to be taken from a grass roots level” (media professional, the Garrotxa. Gay man).

Despite the fact that the professionals in charge of the SAI have specific training in matters of sexual and gender diversity, this knowledge is not widespread among the rest of the professionals in the territory. Most of them have heard about the 2014 law from the media, but do not know how the regulations affect their professional field. This lack of knowledge is especially significant in the case of professionals in areas directly regulated by law, such as health, leisure, the media or education: “I don’t know all the process there is since the law. Nobody has told me anything. I haven’t received this information” (Public attention professional; Garrotxa, Heterosexual man).

However, despite the low level of legislative knowledge, all those interviewed show an open predisposition to apply measures to promote sexual and gender diversity. This perspective is in agreement with perceptions regarding sexual diversity in Spain, in fact, in the 2015 special Eurobarometer on discrimination, 91% of people interviewed in Spain showed their agreement that gay, lesbian and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people. This percentage fell to 71% in the case of the European average (Eurobarometer 2019). The problem is therefore not the predisposition of the professionals, but rather their ability to recognize the special needs of the LGBTQ+ population and to provide good care that takes these specificities into account. This is the reason why many professionals demand more training and instruments to undertake their work correctly:

What pedagogical materials could we use? What is available to work on specific activities? (professional in the educational sector, the Garrotxa. Heterosexual woman).

We need to encourage more talks in schools (...) and help us to apply these sorts of protocols (on promoting diversity and against LGBTphobic bullying) (...) if not, we won't know how to do it (professional in the educational sector, the Garrotxa. Bisexual woman).

There are no clear directives that show us how to be inclusive (professional in the communications sector, the Garrotxa. Heterosexual man).

However, there are also professionals - especially from the health sector - who refuse to apply specific measures for the LGBTQ+ community, arguing that it is necessary to emphasize universal access to health and equal treatment of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, expression or gender identity. In this sense, they consider that all people should be attended to in the same way, otherwise, the principle of equality would be violated:

Health stands out because of how people are dealt with goes before everything. Regardless of sex, religion or any other type of belief or problem. We are universal and there is no kind of discrimination in any way (health sector professional, the Garrotxa. Heterosexual man).

We have to work in the same way regardless of sexual identity, gender or whatever. When they say, 'Let's formulate a protocol'... It could be what's needed, but doing lots of specific things, I disagree (health sector professional, the Garrotxa. Heterosexual woman).

The supposed neutrality that emanates from these words carries the danger of reproducing the cisheterocentric logics that permeate the discourses and practices of

professionals. Following the same lines as to what has been found in other recent studies (see Baiocco et al. 2021), this research shows that not doing anything specific means not acting against a way of serving users that (re)produces, both explicitly and implicitly, the principles of heterosexism and cisgenderism, a fact that generates discomfort and rejection in LGBTQ+ people when they interact with the health services (especially in the case of transgender people). This normative reproduction is recognized and fought against by some of the professionals interviewed:

For example, we have changed how we interact with the people sitting in front of us a lot (...) A girl who comes to us for a consultation about anything, before we would ask if she took any form of contraception. But now it's like ... well, perhaps she doesn't need it. Why should we presume that? Why should we suppose that a person is heterosexual? (health sector professional, Alt Empordà. Heterosexual woman).

In fact, not addressing the specificities derived from sexual and gender diversity can have consequences for people's physical and mental health. This is the case reported by one of the interviewees:

Until the day when you think about what a homosexual relationship is about, you won't think about the need for protection between women being necessary either. If you have never thought about it, evidently when a girl comes to you, you will say... "Don't worry, take it easy." I'm convinced that despite the fact that you are a doctor and you know the mechanisms of transmission of sexual diseases, sometimes you can't give good health advice (health sector professional, La Garrotxa. bisexual woman).

The cisheterocentrality of some professionals is the starting point from which care is contextualized and which limits the identification of the specific needs of LGBTQ+

people. Some of the professionals interviewed stated that: "I have never come across one" (referring to a patient or user who was LGBTQ+) (Health professional, the Garrotxa. Heterosexual man), or "In theory I know cases, but we have not treated cases like this here " (Health professional, La Garrotxa. Heterosexual woman). However, LGBTQ+ people are part of society, they are users of healthcare services and it is not very credible that a health professional has never met an LGBTQ+ person in a consultation.

Stakeholders facing LGBTQ+phobia and sexual and gender diversity in rural areas

In the mind of most of the people interviewed, a clear distinction is established between a big city (in this case, Barcelona), conceived as being conducive to LGBTQ+ expressions, and the Alt Empordà and the Garrotxa counties, which are understood as being less favourable towards sexual and gender dissidence. These territories are construed as rural environments, characterized by being less cosmopolitanism, more conservative and with higher social control:

The Garrotxa is a village. Here, everyone knows everyone else, so I think that there is the social pressure and the "what will they say" factors (professional of the leisure sector, the Garrotxa. Heterosexual woman).

In some LGBTQ+ people, this conception of rurality is embodied through inhibition, that is, avoiding public displays of homo-affectivity such as kissing, hugging or holding hands, in a clear example of bodily self-discipline (Foucault 1976) that is carried out to avoid injury (Eribon 2012) in a public space:

They've never made any rude remarks to me, it is also true that, for example, here in Olot, I never go hand-in-hand with my partner (health sector professional, La Garrotxa. Lesbian woman).

The public avoidance of homo-affectivity generated by the conception of the two counties as being unfavourable territories towards sexual and gender diversity can be understood in terms of the mechanism of a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Merton 1949). This concept is used in those cases in which a false belief about a certain reality, generates a set of reactions that end up making that mistaken original conception true. As Langarita et.al. (2019) point out, this is precisely what happens with expressions of sexual and gender diversity. The belief that the Alt Empordà and the Garrotxa counties are hostile towards LGBTQ+ public expression, generates self-censorship among these people, so there are no public displays of homo-affectivity and, therefore, the population cannot become accustomed to them.

But in addition, it is significant that the, -scarce- visibility of LGBTQ+ people in the public spaces of the counties is reduced to the displays of affection in gay or lesbian relationships. In other words, associating visibility solely with the displays of affection of same-sex couples in a public space unequivocally implies a reduction in the expressions of sex-gender diversity to couple logics that are not always shared by all LGBTQ+ people. In this way, other expressions of sexual and gender diversity are neither recognized nor recognizable. In addition, it is necessary to bear in mind that in the case of the Garrotxa, as stated by some people interviewed, displays of affection in public spaces are rare, even in heterosexual couples. Therefore, it would be difficult to argue that the invisibility of same-sex couples is the main characteristic feature with which to determine the conservatism or openness of a territory.

However, there are also voices that problematize the idealization of the urban / rural dichotomy. In this case, it is not only the assumption that Barcelona ensures full personal development and that the Alt Empordà and the Garrotxa are hostile towards LGBTQ+ expression is questioned. The unidimensional conception of experience is also

criticized, according to which sexual orientation and/or gender identity appear as the only vectors of personal well-being. The territories analyzed offer benefits that are not found in the big city (more affordable prices, a natural environment, less noise), which are valued by the people who live in them:

Sometimes, according to some studies, the poor homosexuals living in a village are victimised, and "how great it is to live in l'Eixample" or "How great it is to live in Chueca" [The Eixample is known as the LGBTQ+ friendly neighbourhood of Barcelona, Chueca is that of Madrid], and I think it doesn't matter too much (communication professional, the Garrotxa. Gay man).

Regarding violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender discrimination, while a good number of the professionals reject and clearly identify explicit violence, many of them do not identify the symbolic violence that permeates their work environments. This is understandable if, following Bourdieu (1998), we conceive symbolic violence as that inscribed in the natural order of things; that insensitive and invisible violence that is not perceived as such because it is based on shared beliefs. It is precisely for this reason that this implicit violence represents a great challenge for professionals, since they are not able to identify it, or recognize it precisely because of the cis-heterocentric view-point that we pointed out in the previous section.

Some of the professionals interviewed are aware of the need - and difficulty - of countering this elusive violence, especially those who work in the education sector. This violence has a great impact on the daily lives and on the identity construction of LGBT people, generating self-incrimination, shame, low self-esteem or concealment:

It should be much wider. In the same way that we talk about microsexism (...) All that is violence: violence is when they say you can't walk down the Rambla

holding hands if you are a man; violence is when they call you 'fags' and you can't even defend yourself (member of an LGBT association, Alt Empordà. Gay man). Because the violence can be total violence, "I might just smash him up", but also an insult, a nasty look or not wanting someone in the group. Everything is violence. All the rejections, big or small, are acts of violence. With a small one, maybe it isn't a problem, but when you start adding them up... (professional in the education sector, Alt Empordà. Heterosexual woman).

Those professionals who are more aware of combating violence and discrimination derived from the cisheterocentric universe, insist on the need to transform discourses and representations. As we said before, one of the fronts of the struggle consists of problematizing professional discourses and practices that, under the patina of neutrality, (re)produce cisheteronormativity on a daily basis. Taking for granted a certain socio-sexual order, excludes what does not fit it:

Since there is a constant heteronormativity, when you are building or giving information, you do it from the social norm (...) the monitors and educators should have more tools to be aware of the language we use and the symbolic violence that there is in our language (...) in a way, we are discriminating indirectly, maybe not voluntarily (...) I think there is no worse discrimination than not feeling included in the definition of the reality that exists in a space where, in theory, it is a protected space for you (professional in the leisure sector, the Garrotxa, heterosexual woman).

More specifically, for those who have children in school, one of the priorities for action in the order of discourse would be to prevent what we could call administrative heterocentrism, where all school records and documents presuppose the existence of two heterosexual parents:

All the forms that I have had to complete, but always, I have had to cross out "father" and add "mother 2". But with everything: "Father's phone number, mother's phone number" (...) Having to cross things out all the time (education sector professional, Alt Empordà. Lesbian woman).

In close connection with discourse, the other field in which to make efforts is that of representations. Both the discourses and the representations are essential because “it is the area where there is a place for both definition and resistance, stereotype, injury and demand” (Mira 2004: 21). It is precisely a change in the heterosexist representations that some of the interviewed professionals demand. It is about constructing alternative references that make the minority sexual and gender expressions visible, of showing new models that serve as a reference for LGBTQ+ people, while contributing to the social acceptance of such models:

I believe that it is important that there are powerful references for young people. It's important. It would've saved my life (...) I think that if I'd had an LGBT referent when I was young, things would've gone much better (professional education sector, Alt Empordà. Gay man).

I would like to take the brochures from the Tourist Office and count, from all the photos, how many there are from each type of family (...) the inputs that come to me is that they only opt for one model. So, if you don't see your life represented, it causes you a lot of worries, especially as a teenager. There should be a style book so that the public communications of the administration could be inclusive (communication professional, La Garrotxa. Gay man).

LGBTQ+ policies in rural areas. Challenges and opportunities

We have seen that LGBTQ+ policies in Catalan rural areas such as the Alt Empordà and the Garrotxa constitute an emerging field of action that presents some difficulties, but also potential. The limited resources with which the assumption of new responsibilities has been faced as a result of the 2014 law, explains the preponderance of actions of a symbolic nature, characterized by their simple implementation and their low cost. Although these dynamics should be understood as the administrative response to existing capacities and limitations, they outline the challenges to be addressed in the near future.

However, it is necessary to emphasize that the assistance service launched through the SAI in both regions has made it possible to recognize a new user of public services with specific characteristics and demands. This will gradually contribute to their recognition as well in other spaces of social and health intervention in order to take into account sexual and gender diversity as a key element for professional intervention.

In this sense, the professional capacity of the personnel in charge of LGBTQ+ policies, together with the planning of transversal policies capable of impacting on the different areas of government, constitute the main challenges for the local governments of small municipalities. In this sense, the training challenge has two dimensions. On the one hand, to create awareness in professionals so that they are able to overcome cis-heterocentric outlooks and recognize sexual and gender diversity as one more life experience. And on the other, to provide technical knowledge to professionals so that they can carry out professional accompaniment according to specific needs. This is the case, for example in the field of healthcare.

But it is not all just limitations. Rural areas have the advantage of the closeness between the administration and the community, which makes it easier for the measures implemented to respond to the real interests of citizens. In this sense, small municipalities constitute a favourable space for the implementation of active policies of citizen

participation, in addition to promoting fluid channels of communication between local powers and citizens. However, in the cases analyzed, the shortage of representatives from civil society in LGBTQ+ matters means that this advantage of proximity is not fully exploited.

On the other hand, in the minds of the professionals interviewed, the rural environment is configured as a territory which is not very prone to minority sexual and gender expressions. This conception is consolidated as a contrast to an urban environment seen as being tolerant towards LGBTQ+ expressions. However, the rural/urban dichotomy obeys an idealization that not only does not define the lives of all LGBTQ+ people, but also ends up (re)configuring the reality that it presupposes through public inhibition of homo-affective expressions. Apart from potential sectoral and transversal policies, the priority field of action for many of the professionals interviewed consists of discourses and representations, insofar as they establish the limits of what is possible, desirable and thinkable. In this sense, defining the LGBTQ+ person as being a subject of public policies, while this may be necessary to guarantee conditions of rights and social justice, requires, at the same time, a continuous questioning of these policies by those who implement them, in such a way that questions are asked, as Romero Bachiller and Montenegro Martínez (2018) point out, against the idea of essentialization (being LGBT as a permanent being, immutable in time and space), against homogenization (all people categorized as LGBT present similar practices and desires) and against normalization (where bodies, practices and desires become protected by law). Since the consequence of assuming these processes without criticism, produces mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination of the same group that it is trying to recognize and facilitate resources to. This formula, together with combating cisheterocentrism in administrative language, institutional imagery and public role models is a priority to arrive at the problematization

of what is presented to us as obvious and reasonable, and to show alternative forms of existence.

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