

National analysis on violence against LGBTI+ children

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Contents

Introduction – research design and sample	4
Demographic data about interviewee sample	4
How did the recruitment go?	5
How long were the interviews?	6
1. Legal and political context regarding LGBTI+ rights.....	6
1.1.	6
Historical evolution and/or backlash regarding the formal recognition of LGBTI+ rights	6
1.2. Timeline of LGBTI+ rights in the country	10
1.3. Relevant statistical data about LGBTI+ situation in Belgium	11
2. DaC Areas of intervention: schools, health, family, public spaces, media.....	13
2.1.	13
Education	13
2.1.1. Needs related to children	13
2.1.2. Good Practices	13
2.1.3. Training Needs	14
2.1.4. SWOT related to Education	14
2.1.5. Exemplary quotes	15
1.2. Family	16
2.2.1. Needs related to children	16
2.2.2. Good Practices	16
2.2.3. Training Needs	17
2.2.4. SWOT related to Family	17
2.2.5. Quotes	18
2.3. Public Space	19
2.3.1. Needs related to children	19
2.3.2. Good Practices	19
2.3.3. Training needs	20



- 2.3.4. SWOT related to Public Space 20
- 2.3.5. Exemplary quotes 21
- 2.4. Media..... 22
 - 2.4.1. Needs related to children 22
 - 2.4.2. Good Practices 22
 - 2.4.3. Training needs 23
 - 2.4.4. SWOT related to Media 23
 - 2.4.5. Quotes 24
- 3. Overall evaluation: identify tendencies and absences 25
 - 3.1 Persistence of the gender binary 25
 - 3.2. Discrimination and violence prevalent 26
 - 3.3. Lack of representation 26
 - 3.4. Lack of training and information 27
- 3. Concluding Remarks 27



Introduction – research design and sample

Demographic data about interviewee sample

Age: ranging from 24 to 55

Sexual orientation: 5 participants identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, 6 as heterosexual. 2 participants preferred not to answer this question.

Gender identity: 6 participants identified as male, 6 as female, 1 participant preferred not to answer this question. Of the participants who did disclose this information, 11 participants identified as cisgender, 1 as transgender.

Geography: 11 participants live and work in an urban context. 2 participants live and work in more rural areas. All participants originate from Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium).

Institution: universities, hospitals, elementary schools, NGO's, a popular restaurant chain, law enforcement agency, governmental agency, national newspaper

Media:

- Communications officer LGBTI+ NGO (JB)
- Communications officer law enforcement (EH)
- Editor in chief national newspaper (BT)

Health care

- Clinical child psychologist at genderteam in university hospital (GVC)
- Clinical child psychologist at genderteam in university hospital (RH)
- Policy worker mental and physical wellbeing at LGBTI+ NGO (TJ)



Public space

- Coordinator provincial LGBTI+ center (JM)
- Police officer (EH)
- Employee fast food chain (HL)

Education

- Kindergarten and elementary school teacher in a public school (HC)
- Researcher and professor at university (faculty of psychology and educational sciences – department of experimental and clinical health psychology) (AD)
- Doctor in sociology focused on educational sociology and equal opportunities (MVH)
- Teacher elementary school and former educational worker at LGBTI+ organization (SDB)

Family

- Child rights commission
- Parent

Dutch-speaking and French-speaking associations have taken their own courses in Belgium, there has never been a unified movement. For this reason and because of the language barrier, it was very hard to find respondents from Wallonia. As such we have to state that our research was limited to Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of the country.

How did the recruitment go?

In looking for interviewees, çavaria focused on finding people whose personal and professional lives held a multidisciplinary relevance for the project Diversity and Childhood. For instance, a professor at a renounced university who is also researching the role of gender in education, a communication officer at a law enforcement agency who's also the parent of a gender creative



child, and multiple participants with professional relevance and experiences in coming out themselves in a family and educational context.

In doing so, we made sure that we covered all working fields of DaC but didn't always have to restrict someone's involvement to one particular field.

6 of the interviewees' work focused specifically on the topic of gender and gender diversity. 4 interviewees worked with children specifically. 2 worked directly with children on the topic of gender diversity. There are 4 academics among the interviewees, 2 teachers, 3 employees of LGBTI+ organizations, and 1 policy worker on wellbeing of LGBTI+ persons.

Most of the interviewees didn't request to remain anonymous, although for consistency I am using only the initials of the interviewees in this report.

How long were the interviews?

Most interviews landed at a little over an hour. Some interviews lasted longer, with a duration of up to 1h45min.

1. Legal and political context regarding LGBTI+ rights

1.1. Historical evolution and/or backlash regarding the formal recognition of LGBTI+ rights

Looking back at 70 years of organized LGBTI activism, you could say the gay and lesbian movement was one of the most successful activist movements in Belgium, contributing to Belgium becoming the second country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. In contrast to most other countries in the world, the movement was started in the 1950's by a woman (Susan Daniel). Despite the fact



that the loss of political power of the Catholic party was the biggest propeller of equal rights for the LGBTI community (in '99)¹, the movement also has some Catholic roots¹².

The institutionalized LGBTI movement received its first financial grants from the Belgian government in the '70s, albeit relatively limited at the time³. Today however the umbrella organization *cavaria* receives stable and comprehensive funding, enabling the organization to employ a staff of over 30 people⁴.

The legislative progress includes marriage equality, adoption equality (both nationally and internationally and including single LGBTI people), automatic parenthood for lesbian mothers, easy and affordable access for lesbian parents to reproductive recognition, an extensive anti-discrimination law that includes sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and as of recently, sex characteristics. The latter considerably exceeds the requirements set by the EU directives in regards to anti-discrimination.

But it hasn't always been this way. In the 1950's, homophiles (as gay men were called back then), had to behave as inconspicuously as possible, preferably even disappear into the wider society. Gender expression had to be uniform and binary, with anyone deviating from this becoming subject to serious societal and legal scrutiny. This cisnormativity⁵ was so engrained in society that it became internalized by the gay and lesbian population itself⁶, firmly believing this was the only way to gain sympathy and acceptance⁷.

The global political climate changed in the 1960s, with civil rights movements, ecological movements, and feminist and LGBTI movements alike. This was no different in Belgium, with many

¹ I am indebted to Paul Borghs' article, "*The Gay and Lesbian Movement in Belgium from 1950's to the Present*". which appeared for the first time in 2016 at Michigan State University. QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking 3.3 (2016): 29–70. ISSN 23271574. I will refer to this article on many occasions throughout this article.

² Catholic priests and nuns played a key role in the Belgian movement (Wilfried Lammens, Piet De Haene, and Denise Burton).

³ Borghs, *The Gay and Lesbian Movement in Belgium from 1950's to the Present*.

⁴ www.cavaria.be/medewerkers

⁵ the belief or assumption that a person's gender identity matches their biological sex, otherwise known as being cisgender.

⁶ Here referring to Gay and Lesbian population due to the movement at that time not being the diversified LGBTIQ+ population Belgium knows today.

⁷ Borghs, *The Gay and Lesbian Movement in Belgium from 1950's to the Present*.



organizations fighting for equality in a conservative society. The 70s knew an upsurge in gay and lesbian groups (separate from each other). Most of them fell apart after quickly, but not without rioting, protesting, and setting the stage for activists to come⁸. One of the organizations that was successful, was the FWH (Federatie Werkgroepen Homofilie). It was established in 1977 and grew out to be the biggest umbrella organization in Belgium – çavaria.

Two events slowed down the fight for equal opportunities in the 80s: the AIDS epidemic⁹ and the economic crisis that shifted the political climate to the right, and with it homophobia regained momentum in society¹⁰. These two forces caused a lot of gay groups to dissolve and volunteers to withdraw their engagement, either from fear of losing their jobs in the midst of an economic crisis, or from being affected by AIDS themselves.

There were however some legislative breakthroughs in 1985. Article 372bis was removed from Belgian law, bringing the age of consent for homosexual contacts in line with that of heterosexual contacts, and the first draft of the anti-discrimination law was submitted to the Chamber of Representatives¹¹.

The 90s were characterized by the rise of subgroups within the LGBTI movement. Themes like ethnicity, age, disability, parents of LGBTI children,... started emerging in the community. The focus shifted to a demand for equal rights, which meant a more pragmatic approach to activism that was broad enough to be endorsed by policy makers of all political and ideological colors¹².

“Pink Saturday”¹³, organized in Antwerp on May 5th 1990 became an annual event in Brussels . The collective term ‘holebi’ was coined, to include homosexual men, lesbian women, and bisexual people. ‘Gay marriage’ became a recurring discussion point, both in parliament and in the general public, although still controversial. The federal law on legal cohabitation in 1998 introduced some

⁸ Borghs, *The Gay and Lesbian Movement in Belgium from 1950's to the Present*.

⁹ See on the AIDS epidemic in Belgium, Borghs, *Holebipioniers*, 136– 43. See also Bart Hellinck, 1981– 2006 25 jaar strijd tegen aids in Vlaanderen (Ghent, Belgium: Fonds Suzan Daniel, 2006)

¹⁰ In 1991 the extreme right party “Vlaams Blok” broke through in the whole of Flanders on so- called “Black Sunday”. This party held an extremely conservative morality and was explicitly homophobic.

¹¹ Borghs, *The Gay and Lesbian Movement in Belgium from 1950's to the Present*.

¹² Borghs, *The Gay and Lesbian Movement in Belgium from 1950's to the Present*.

¹³ Borghs, *Holebipioniers*, 205– 9.



basic legal rules for cohabiting couples, but it could not be enforced due to a lack of political agreement on implementation¹⁴.

The mid to late 90's saw the emergence of the regional "Pink Houses" (Roze Huizen) in different provinces to host and facilitate local organizations. By the end of 2002 the FWH changed its name to "Federation for Holebi Persons" (Holebifederatie) and turned into the main umbrella organization for the Flemish Holebi community (the precursor to çavaria).

The long awaited window of opportunity came in 1999, when the Christian Democrats were no longer a part of the government for the first time in 40 years. This enabled the liberal, socialist and ecological parties to focus on ethical issues. The 1998 law on legal cohabitation was implemented a few years later and in 2002 the Belgian anti-discrimination law was approved (17 years after its conception). Marriage equality was a fact at the beginning of 2003, making Belgium the second country in the world to legalize same-sex marriages. The demands to legalize adoption by gay and lesbian couples bore fruit in 2006. A law on medically assisted procreation for lesbian couples was approved, as well as a law on the official gender registration of transgender people, even though in case of the latter infertility treatment was still a prerequisite.

In 2005 the Holebifederatie decided to include the trans topic in their mission. The name Holebifederatie was no longer appropriate and 2009 it changed to çavaria, the name it still has today.

Despite the progress, a lot of laws were still discriminatory. The procedure for co-motherhood (essentially a lengthy and cumbersome adoption procedure) became the next lobbying priority for the LGBTI movement and on January 1st 2015 "automatic parenthood" was achieved¹⁵, meaning that lesbian co-mothers had the same rights as fathers in heterosexual relationships¹⁶. In 2018 the law on gender registration was passed, removing the condition of enforced infertility on transgender people looking to officially change the gender marker and name on their passport. Minors starting at the age of 16 will need permission of their parents and also need a certification from a psychiatrist.

¹⁴ Borghs, *The Gay and Lesbian Movement in Belgium from 1950's to the Present*.

¹⁵ This progress in legislation was broadly supported, with 114 votes in favor and only 10 votes against (and one abstention) coming from the extreme right-wing political party Vlaams Belang (formerly Vlaams Blok).

¹⁶ Loi du 5 mai 2014 portant établissement de la filiation de la coparente, *Moniteur Belge*, July 7, 2014: 51.703.



Finally in February 2020, the criterion "sex characteristics" was included into the anti-discrimination laws¹⁷, meaning that from this point onwards, intersex people will be explicitly protected by Belgian law against discrimination. To this day there is no legal framework for surrogate motherhood, leaving the choice to allow it up to individual hospitals' discretion.

Paul Borghs: "[Belgium] started as a moderate homophile movement in the 1950s, became more radical in the late 1960s and 1970s, collapsed in the 1980s, and finally developed into a diverse GLBTQ movement with a major focus on equal rights." (Borghs, 2016).

1.2. Timeline of LGBTI+ rights in the country

1953: Suzan Daniel erects first organization for gays and lesbians in Belgium (CCB – Cultuurcentrum België)

1965: legislation 372bis is approved, penalizing homosexual contact younger than 18 (for heterosexual contact the age was set at 16)

1971: GOC (gespreks- en Onthaalcentrum) is established and branches out to the different provinces (GOC Limburg, GOC Antwerp,...)

1977: FWH was established (Federatie Werkgroep Homofilie)

1985: Article 372bis was removed from Belgian law, bringing the age of consent for homosexual contact in line with that of heterosexual contact

1990: First "Pink Saturday" organized in Antwerp

1998: law on legal cohabitation (became implemented a few years later)

1999: Christian Democrats became opposition party, clearing the stage for ethical issues

¹⁷ <https://www.beout.be/2020/02/02/antidiscriminatiewetgeving-uitgebreid-met-seksekenmerken/>



2002: FWH changed its name to “Federation for Holebi Person” (Holebifederatie)

2002: Approval of the Belgian anti-discrimination law

2003: Marriage equality established

2005: Holebifederatie and includes the trans topic in its mission

2006: Legalization of adoption for same-sex couples (both nationally and internationally)

2009: Holebifederatie changes its name to çavaria

2017: Gender registration law removing medical and infertility demands from making administrative gender marker changes. The law came into effect on January 1st 2018¹⁸

2015: automatic parenthood for lesbian co-mothers achieved

2017: çavaria celebrates its 40 year anniversary

2020: the criterion ‘sex characteristics’ was included in the Belgian anti-discrimination law

1.3. Relevant statistical data about LGBTI+ situation in Belgium

Today LGBTI people in Belgian society are accepted to a large extent. LGBTI people are mostly accepted as long as they’re not too visible¹⁹. Heteronormativity and cisnormativity remains the rule, meaning that most homophobia, transphobia and intersexphobia occurs in an implicit manner or in cases of (indirect) discrimination. However, violent attacks do still occur. In April 2012 two gay men – Ihsane Jarfi and Jacques Kotnik – were murdered in an anti-LGBTI hate crime. Ihsane Jarfi’s father started a foundation (Stichting Ihsane Jarfi) in 2014 with the aim of fighting LGBTI-phobic crime in Belgian society.

¹⁸ https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/themas_en_dossiers/personen_en_gezinnen/transgenders

¹⁹ https://www.cavaria.be/call_it_hate



Attitudes with regard to gender identity or gender expression lag behind attitudes with regard to sexual orientation. According to the Eurobarometer²⁰, 61% of respondents would feel comfortable or indifferent seeing a gay male couple showing affection in public, which is much better than the European average. In the case of trans people, attitudes are only marginally better than the European average: only 36% would feel comfortable with sons or daughters in a relationship with a trans person.

According to a Flemish survey in 2017²¹, no less than 41% of LGBT students is feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation. Almost one in four avoids toilets and dressing rooms at school. And one in five missed at least one day of school in the month preceding the survey because of feelings of unsafety.

These results are similar to the FRA 2020 survey. According to FRA, 51% of respondents hide their LGBTI identity at school. In the age group of 15-17, 53% have personally felt discriminated against due to being LGBTI in the year preceding the survey. Reasons stated for not reporting the last incident for this age group were: the belief it's not worth reporting because it happens all the time (59%), the belief nothing would happen or change (51%), not wanting to reveal LGBTI identity (35%), concern over not being taken seriously (34%), distrust in authorities or not knowing where to report (both 32%). About 13% of this group had experienced physical or sexual attacks in the five years preceding the survey (compared to 14% across all age groups).

In 2020, Belgium came into second place on ILGA-Europe's Rainbow Index for the third time. It meets 19 criteria on the Trans Rights Europe & Central Asia Index 2020, published by Transgender Europe. While these indexes are tools that mostly reflect the legislative situation, they present a contrast with the social conditions that are depicted in the mentioned surveys.

Between January 1993 and September 2019, a total of 2193 persons changed their gender marker²². In recent years the average age of this group has decreased.

²⁰ Eurobarometer 437/2015

²¹ Flemish LGBT+ school climate survey (2017)

²² IGVM 2019 report, https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/downloads/cijfers_transgenders_rr_2019.pdf



2. DaC Areas of intervention: schools, health, family, public spaces, media

2.1. Education

2.1.1. Needs related to children

Stakeholders expressed children's needs to feel accepted, and see themselves represented in books and to have role models. They also stressed the importance of the school as a safe haven.

This was apparent during the workshop. When presented with the hypothetical situation of a boy doing ballet in a pink outfit for a school talent hunt, children attending our workshop mentioned the possibility of the boy being laughed at, some suggesting he'd do ballet in a "more cool outfit". They themselves would not have a problem with this issue, but nevertheless were very aware of sensitivities regarding gender expression in school settings. For this reason, stakeholders point to the importance of an open mind of teachers and an open school culture in order to put such sensitivities on the table.

While several stakeholders mentioned that some children will react differently towards negative comments or bullying depending on how self-confident they are, one teacher said that instead of telling children to anticipate negative reactions by conforming their gender expressions, parents and teachers should **make them feel more confident about the validity of their expressions while at the same time helping them prepare to counteract negative reactions** (in other words, make them more resilient).

2.1.2. Good Practices

The "Genderteam", the multidisciplinary team of the university hospital of Ghent, specializes in care for transgender people, including teenagers starting from the age of 9. Everyone with questions about their gender identity can contact the center. They will be guided by a psychiatrist or psychologist throughout the process, who will coordinate the (possible) treatment necessary. This treatment can range from psychotherapy to gender reconfirming surgery. Within the



Genderteam is the Transgender Information Point (TIP), for everyone with questions about the transgender topic.

While several interviewed stakeholders mention this good practice, they also point out that this form of specialized service has so much demand that they need to work with waiting lists, which can take up to two years.

2.1.3. Training Needs

None of the healthcare professionals in our survey have had a specific training on gender diverse children (however only one respondent worked directly with children).

Stakeholders we interviewed on this topic agree that more training is needed among healthcare professionals. They find that there is no lack of motivation to improve the care for gender diverse children, but there is a lack of knowledge. This could be improved by providing practical support (brochures, information on specialized services, ...) and more knowledge and sensitization on how to approach gender diverse children and what standards/directives to adhere to.

2.1.4. SWOT related to Education

Internal factors

Strengths:

- Specialized services exist, such as the Genderteam in Ghent, which are well respected and have a high level of expertise.
- General willingness among psychologists to learn about gender diversity, although this does not translate (yet) into a pro-active professional attitude.

Weaknesses:

- Long waiting lists for gender diverse children and overall complexity of physical and mental health structures.



- Only a limited amount of specialized health care sessions are paid for by the health care system, meaning that visits to, for instance, the Genderteam, have a financial barrier.

External factors

Opportunities:

- Since more general practitioners are organizing in group practices, this means that such practices can have more specialized GP's as they can distribute specializations among themselves.

Threats:

- Complexity of governmental structures in Belgium (health being a federal issue and wellbeing a regional issue) means that you have to involve a lot of different governmental stakeholders in discussions about gender diversity.
- Time constraints and multitude of health issues means it's not feasible for a health professional to become an expert in everything related to health.

2.1.5. Exemplary quotes

I never experienced active unwillingness to learn about gender diversity in other psychologist, rather inexperience. But they try to get more informed. (Child and youth psychologist)

A positive evolution to me is that general practitioners are organizing in group practices more and more. You get a more interdisciplinary approach – the GP works with the psychologist, works with a social assistant,... this widens the expertise and makes referral easier. You can't expect a GP to be an expert about everything. (University researcher)

We [a gender clinic] have 600 people on the waiting list right now, a third of them younger than 18. In practice this means that if you call today, you will have to wait two years before you get your first appointment. (Child and youth psychologist)



General health practitioners will always need a push or a reminder that gender is not always straightforward for everyone. There is no pro-active work yet. (Child and youth psychologist)

1.2. Family

2.2.1. Needs related to children

Children that attended our workshop, were aware that parents could have negative reactions towards LGBTI+ children, but **expressed the need for acceptance within the family** (e.g. two boys or two girls in love). Children for instance said that, if they would be a parent, they would allow their son to wear a pink ballet outfit "if that's what he wants". Moreover, children were very much aware that there are a lot of different kinds of families in society, including those with two fathers or two mothers, although they were not always aware of the family situation of each classmate.

Interviewed stakeholders mentioned that children at a young age are being socialized into traditional gender norms, for instance because they are presented with a limited (gendered) choice of toys or because they reproduce adults' gender norms. Children should not be forced into a particular way of expressing themselves (as one stakeholder expressed, this includes forcing them into non-traditional gender norms as well).

2.2.2. Good Practices

On the international day against homo- and transphobia (IDAHOT), the city of Ghent worked together with several Ghent-based organizations and NGO's to organize a public street event in which differences in families are welcomed and celebrated.

"We are all a family, we are all Ghent" encouraged everyone to be themselves and live their lives the way they want to, free from discrimination. The participation of several LGBTI NGO's made sure there was diversity in gender identity and gender expression. There were information stands for parents and relatives, and fun activities for children, like bouncy castles, circus animation, bubble blowers,...



2.2.3. Training Needs

One in five respondents (family-related professionals) in our survey reported to have followed training on gender diversity.

For professionals supporting families (e.g. family counselors):

- More knowledge on the issue of gender diverse children and their experiences and more specifically how to raise awareness on this topic with other people;
- How to be supportive as a professional and how to bring up this topic with other children;
- Information on specialized services for these children and adolescents.

For parents:

- How to be supportive as a parent;
- Specialized services for gender diverse children.

For professionals providing LGBTI-specialized services:

- Training on children’s perspectives, as these services can often be geared towards adult experiences.

2.2.4. SWOT related to Family

Internal factors

Strengths:

- Better normalization of gender diversity has decreased pressure on children and their parents to “explain” themselves to others.
- Good practices and services that are supportive of LGBTI families.



Weaknesses:

- Families are generally not knowledgeable enough about gender diversity (even where there is a willingness to keep an open mind to it).

External factors**Opportunities:**

- Better representation of gender diversity in the media.

Threats:

- What parents can carry and how they react to their children, will also influence how children will receive support through other channels such as their teachers.
- Learning inclusive attitudes and behaviors may be more readily available to families who have the resources and time (e.g. socio-economic factors may influence families' abilities to deal with this topic in a constructive manner).

2.2.5. Quotes

It's difficult to find a balance between what the child needs and what the parents can carry. Also taking into account that we don't live on an island. How will school react, grandparents, youth movements,... Finding the balance here is not easy. (Child and youth psychologist)

When I became aware of what was going on with my child, I was mostly worried about bullying and that she would have an unhappy childhood. But that never happened. Maybe because we told her she could be whoever she wanted, she transferred this attitude to the outside world? The more of a non-issue it is at home, the more it will be a non-issue outside. (Parent of a gender creative child)

Offering toys to your kids as a parent is already structuring gender roles in a way. From very early on adults will do small things that steer kids in a certain gendered direction. What's important is that there needs to be a variety of options, offered in a neutral way. (University researcher)



I believe many parents would accept their gender creative children if they would know more about it. (Coordinator LGBTI NGO)

2.3. Public Space

2.3.1. Needs related to children

Children attending our workshop were aware of **sensitivities towards non-conforming gender expressions and even possible bullying**, even when they themselves did not have a problem with certain gender expressions. It was also apparent that they seemed to notice more restrictiveness in settings such as sport activities and less restrictiveness in whimsical dress-up situations.

Most (61%) interviewed stakeholders believe that antidiscrimination **legislation can protect children and adolescents against discrimination and violence**. However, most commented that they do not see legislation as the ultimate solution. Instead, they see it as a framework (e.g. for schools and organizations), a driver for societal change or for setting a standard. Those who are more skeptical, mention the lack of effective sanctions, the need for prevention, the inherent and systemic discrimination and the fact that children do not take legislation into account.

Some interviewed stakeholders brought up **the issue of gendered toilets**, either as a good practice of having a school with gender-neutral toilets, or as a general need to rethink gendered public spaces such as toilets, dressing rooms in sports clubs and swimming pools, etc.

A few times stakeholders hinted at the **lack of children's perspectives in services** (including those provided for by LGBTI-specific social organizations) **and certain legislation and procedures** (such as antidiscrimination legislation and relevant procedures).

2.3.2. Good Practices

Belgian Quidditch Federation (sports made up by J.K. Rowling in the Harry Potter books): since its inception, quidditch has sought gender equality and inclusion on the pitch. One of the most important requirements within the sport is its 'four maximum' rule. A quidditch game allows each team to have a maximum of four players who identify as the same gender in active play on the field at the same time. The gender that a player identifies with is considered to be that player's



gender, which may or may not correspond with that person's gender assigned at birth, accepting also those who don't identify with male or female. This makes Quidditch the only official sports discipline that doesn't only encourage gender diversity within teams, but is explicitly open to non-binary gender identities as well.

The umbrella organization Youth and Scouts in Flanders (Scouts en Gidsen Vlaanderen) added a section to their vision and mission about 'gender conscious scouting' mid 2017. This section acknowledges that the binary gender division in society doesn't work for everyone, and that Youth and Scouts in Flanders wants to make sure that those who don't feel like they belong in either the 'male' or 'female' category feel welcome as well.

2.3.3. Training needs

As one stakeholder noted, research has made clear that being gender-nonconforming can potentially lead to more instances of discrimination and violence. So in order to create safe public spaces, gender norms need to be addressed. So sports, youth and other organizations would need to be made aware of the effect of gender norms on the safety of gender diverse children.

Stakeholders mentioned the need for training on how to intervene in situations of bullying and discrimination and to create safe spaces and on antidiscrimination legislation. They also mentioned that schools and sports organizations needed support in accommodating gender creative children with regards to gendered spaces (such as toilets and dressing rooms), including official regulations. Finally, they mentioned it as a training need for police, specifically on how to deal with gender diversity (for instance when dealing with cases of anti-LGBTI hate crime).

2.3.4. SWOT related to Public Space

Internal factors

Strengths:

- Greater awareness in certain settings on the issue of bullying, discrimination and hate crime.
- Awareness among some professionals of the need to rethink gendered spaces.



Weaknesses:

- Bullying, discrimination and hate crime towards LGBTI people.
- Gendered and/or adult-centered ways in which certain settings are structured and/or organized.
- General lack of information on gender diversity issues.

External factors**Opportunities:**

- Increasing visibility and better representation in media.
- Anti-discrimination legislation as a driver for change in the mindsets of professionals.

Threats:

- Positive change in attitudes does not occur (equally) among all demographic groups in society.
- Heteronormative and cisnormative thinking still dominant throughout society.

2.3.5. Exemplary quotes

Both from personal experience as well as in research I have seen clear proof that boys who are more feminine, and girls who are gender atypical are confronted more with sexual violence, discrimination,... all forms of violence. There is no doubt about it that that's the case. (University researcher)

The fact that kids have nowhere to go is a form of structural, societal violence. This is not something that a child should go through on their own. In fact, it's not something a family should have to go through alone, without any source of information available to them. (Coordinator NGO)



A gender creative 10-year-old without any adults in their environment who have information, concrete information, not static, that's one of the biggest challenges. (Communications officer NGO)

2.4. Media

2.4.1. Needs related to children

Several stakeholders mention the media (including the internet) as a place where children should **find information about gender diversity** and where they would **have role models**. This is particularly important when they can't rely on adults in their immediate settings to provide them with guidance. Generally, media are viewed as an important source of influence in the same ballpark as teachers or peers.

Stakeholders believe that better media representation of gender diverse children would benefit children in two ways. First, by normalizing gender diverse children so that children, and their parents, would **not have to explain themselves towards each person that is unfamiliar** with this theme. Secondly, by making **this topic more visible and information more readily available to professionals** that come in contact with these children (such as educational and health professionals).

2.4.2. Good Practices

De Dokter Bea Show is a Flemish educational television show (on public broadcasting channel "Ketnet") for viewers between 9 and 12 years old. Its purpose is educating children about puberty and sexuality. Every show starts with a question of a child or teenager to which Dr. Bea provides an answer over the course of the episode.

Interviewed stakeholders are very positive about the Flemish public broadcaster's programs and their inclusiveness. Success factors include: an overall diversity policy, house psychologists to screen programs for their appropriateness for children, an internal diversity service that awards journalists and production houses and an expert database to stimulate the appearance of experts from more diverse backgrounds.



“Thuis” (“At Home”) is a soap opera that started airing in 1995 and quickly grew to the number one soap, with 900.000 viewers. A character called ‘Franky’ was a recurrent character, a rebellious teenager who came out as gay during puberty. After several years it becomes clear that Franky is transgender. In 2016 the character Franky returns as a transgender woman named Kaat.

Mainstream fiction like this has been praised for how they portray the characters. One stakeholder stressed how one can intervene very actively in what needs to be shown but that it is as important to passively or implicitly show gender diversity (where it is portrayed more than it is discussed).

2.4.3. Training needs

We did not have any respondents from the media in our survey. One stakeholder we interviewed, was skeptical about training journalists or TV producers. He claimed that it was better to show by example and to reward results that have an intellectual added value in this field.

On another note, this stakeholder mentioned that some journalists will cover gender diversity topics more regularly (for instance, out of a personal interest) and will do a better job than those who are willing to engage with this topic but only do so sparingly. Also editors might have negative impact on the outcomes (even if a journalist wrote a good piece) if they are not familiar with such topics (e.g. by choosing sensational headlines or images). Training is more beneficial to those groups than to those who are more familiar with gender diversity.

2.4.4. SWOT related to Media

Internal factors

Strengths:

- Making gender diversity more relevant in society stimulates media to more readily discuss or portray such topics (even when there might be an impulse to sensationalize such topics, which might not necessarily be entirely problematic).
- Production houses working with the public broadcaster can in turn change how commercial broadcasters represent gender diversity.



Weaknesses:

- Underrepresentation of gender diverse people within media work.

External factors**Opportunities:**

- More money for investigative journalism could benefit themes such as gender diversity.

Threats:

- Beliefs in objectivity or time constraints may hamper any efforts to train journalists, editors, producers and other media professionals.

2.4.5. Quotes

Media can contribute by depicting gender diversity in a normalized way. For instance, I saw a talk show with kids about sports and family and one kid said: 'my two dads...', or another kid 'when I go to ballet class...' It's casual. It's mentioned. It's just normal. (Communications officer NGO)

You can't underestimate how important media is (sex education, Sabrina,...). In my talks with children, depending on their age, these shows always come up. And they always make a difference. (Child and youth psychologist)

I feel like in media there is more and more an open-mindedness about gender that makes kids realize that they're not necessarily abnormal. Being different from others, sure, they can sense that, but I notice that when gender creativity or diversity is touched upon in a kids show, that it helps. I find this very important, because if there never are any gender diverse characters on TV, kids will very quickly feel that they deviate completely from the norm, and that they don't belong. This is a good evolution. But it can be better, and more. (Parent of a gender creative child)



3. Overall evaluation: identify tendencies and absences

On a legislative level, Belgium has been a frontrunner within Europe regarding LGBTI issues. It was the second country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. Attitudes towards LGBTI people in Belgium have also been better than in most other European countries (see, for instance, the Eurobarometer and FRA LGBTI survey).

That being said, issues specific to transgender and intersex people have always been lagging behind, both on a political (e.g. legislation) and a societal (e.g. attitudes) level, let alone issues pertaining gender diverse children.

3.1 Persistence of the gender binary

Our research shows that genderbinarism is still prevalent within society at large, within families and the professional world. For instance, one in five respondents in our survey still sees gender as a male-female binary. One in three does not think gender is a social construct. Interviewees and respondents also gave several examples of situations where people struggle to understand basic diversities on the gender spectrum.

At the same time, however, many interviewed stakeholders say that they believe that many professionals have a willingness to keep an open mind on gender diversity. Similarly, several interviewees also believe many parents that don't deal adequately with their gender creative child, mostly do so from a lack of understanding, not necessarily because of an unwillingness or deliberate close-minded attitude towards their child.

There's also a context to this, however. Professionals (such as teachers or health professionals) often have many different social issues that they need to master, or at least get a basic understanding of. Because of administrative overhead and time constraints, often sharp priorities need to be established, often to the expense of issues such as gender diversity. Unless an experience with a gender creative child forces them to rethink their work practices and/or policies.

The same goes for parents. A generally favorable societal attitude towards gender diversity will benefit parents in two ways. Firstly, it will become easier for them to find specialized services to



support them and their children. Secondly, it helps them mitigate inquiries from the outside world, as well as deal with possible negative or hostile reactions from their immediate networks. Having said that, the extent to which these two statements are true, might depend on the socio-economic situation of families. Families will only benefit from positive societal attitudes in so far as they also have the resources (intellectual, economical,...) to adapt to the situation of having a gender creative child.

3.2. Discrimination and violence prevalent

The experiences of our interviewed stakeholders and survey respondents are in line with other research on LGBTI-phobic attitudes and behaviors, showing that, while open and hostile forms of discrimination and violence are widely condemned in Belgian society, less overt forms of discrimination and violence persist throughout society. A lack of training and awareness, of policies and of pro-active measures help foster this climate of “apparent tolerance” and mostly marginalized LGBTI identities.

More than half of survey respondents believe that gender creative children fear rejection by family, friends or peers. Half also believed adults wouldn't understand gender creative children. A bit less than half believed children would be afraid of their safety. This is consistent with the awareness that the children in our workshop had about possible rejection and retribution for gender expressions that fall outside of mainstream norms.

So even when attitudes towards LGBTI identities are shifting in a positive sense, they haven't shifted enough for mainstream norms to become inclusive of gender creative children.

3.3. Lack of representation

Almost 60% of our survey respondents believed that there is a lack of representation of gender creative children in school books. The issue of representation (in school materials, media, etc.) also returned in many of the interviews.

On the one hand, there are several clear examples of good practices, and several stakeholders see a positive evolution. On the other hand, it's clear from the survey and the interviews that representations are still largely cishetero-centered. School books still largely reflect such norms. There still need to be more role models for gender creative children and when gender creative



children are represented in our media, such representations should be framed in ways that do not treat gender creative children as otherness, as some topic that deserves sensationalization.

3.4. Lack of training and information

Across all DaC areas, we've found examples of a lack of training and information. About 84% of professionals in our survey admitted never to have had a specific training on how to work with gender creative children (although 29% did have some training on LGBTI-specific topics). About two thirds of survey respondents believe that a lack of training is one of the challenges when working with gender creative children.

So our research findings suggest that there should be more specific trainings on gender creative children aimed at professionals in all these areas. In fact, this would be a key factor in creating safe spaces for those children. While more than 4 out of 5 participants in our survey said that they intervened in a situation of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, about a third of those who witnessed such a situation, believe they could have been helped by better knowledge or skills.

Still, as we learned from several interviewed stakeholders, even when there is a willingness among professionals to be more knowledgeable or skilled with regard to these topics, this does not necessarily equate to a preparedness to be trained. If circumstances are not right, professionals might feel that such trainings can become a burden or even an intrusion into their working habits.

3. Concluding Remarks

We still face challenges on our way to create safe spaces for gender creative children and to include them into our policies, services and public discourses. We need to capitalize on positive evolutions that are already emerging and good practices that are already being developed across all DaC areas in our society. Otherwise we risk missing opportunities to create meaningful change and condemn gender creative children to the margin.





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