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POLICY ANALYSIS

Key recommendations for the implementation of policies concerning LGBTIQ+ children

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Abstract

The Colourful Childhoods project, funded by the European Union, has been implemented in six European Union countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain) between 2022 and 2024. The project aimed to contribute to the development of effective strategies to prevent and combat all forms of violence against LGBTIQ children in vulnerable and post-COVID contexts. This text discusses the relevance of policies targeting LGBTIQ+ children, identifies some of the primary needs of LGBTIQ+ children to inform the development of public policies that enhance their well-being, presents the requirements of professionals working with children to provide effective support, and highlights political and legal needs. Additionally, the text provides recommendations that can contribute to the well-being of LGBTIQ+ children.

KEYWORDS

gender policy, transgender rights, LGBTQ+ rights

1 | INTRODUCTION

At present, LGBTIQ+ children in Europe—who already face potential disenfranchisement as a result of intersecting factors of age, gender and sexuality, as well as shortcomings in social support—grow up against a backdrop of rising anti-LGBTIQ+ discrimination (Langarita et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2023). In turn, they are themselves at risk of suffering such discrimination, and their chances of growing up in a safe environment are often compromised, negatively impacting upon their overall well-being. In this regard, the needs of LGBTIQ+ children must urgently be addressed, in order to better appraise the political and social actions which can be carried out to improve their wellbeing.

The European Union-funded project *Colourful Childhoods – Empowering LGBTIQ children in vulnerable contexts to combat violence across Europe* has been implemented from 2022 to 2024 in six countries, each with their own social and legal particularities: Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain. The primary objective of this project is to prevent and combat all forms of violence against LGBTIQ+ children in situations of risk.

From a child-centered perspective and using an intersectional approach, Colourful Childhoods has worked on increasing children's agency as well as their community resilience.

In this regard, the project's target groups are children and teenagers as primary beneficiaries, as well as professionals working with children in situations of risk, decision-makers at international, national, and local levels, the general public, and academics at a national and international level.

The implementation of the project has followed four different stages: Stage 1 focused on qualitative and quantitative fieldwork; stage 2 focused on assessing the experience of children with service providers and professionals; Stage 3 focused on developing the competencies of professionals working with children; and stage 4 focused on dissemination and communication of project results. As a transversal action across the project beyond the development phases, the Colourful Childhoods project also created three stable groups that have supported project development from the beginning: a permanent seminar group of professionals working with children in each country (two in Spain), following up the implementation of the project with front-line professionals; a Children's Council in each participant country where this was legally possible (Italy, Portugal, and Spain), to discuss the results with the principal beneficiaries of the project; and an International Advisory Board made up of academic experts in the field.

The aim of this policy brief is to communicate the main findings of the project to decision-makers and practitioners who play a key role in promoting and ensuring the wellbeing of children. We seek to share the insights drawn from this international study, as well as existing knowledge on LGBTIQ+ children and childhood, and present a set of policy recommendations grounded in the findings of this project.

2 | WHY ARE POLICIES CONCERNING LGBTIQ+ CHILDREN IMPORTANT?

The latest survey on the situation of LGBTIQ+ people in Europe, published in 2020, included people under 18 years old in its target group for the first time. The results show that this younger age group has experienced higher levels of violence than others (Agency for Fundamental Rights, European Union, 2020). Other studies also show that violence against LGBTIQ+ children is higher than that against their non-LGBTIQ peers (Blondeel et al., 2018). The well-being

of LGBTIQ+ children is lower than that of their non-LGBTIQ+ peers (Clark et al., 2014; Garcia et al., 2020), and the discrimination faced by LGBTIQ+ children contributes significantly to lower levels of mental well-being (Lothwe et al., 2020; Russell & Fish, 2016). Violence, discrimination, and their effects also mean that LGBTIQ+ are overrepresented in the child protection system (López López et al., 2021), among young homeless people (Ormiston, 2022; Rhoades et al., 2018) and among substance abusers (Fish et al., 2019; Kann et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2020), and they report higher prevalence of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Marchi et al., 2022).

The existing knowledge also shows that supporting LGBTIQ+ children is a key strategy for their well-being and successful development (Beasy et al., 2023; Kosciw et al., 2015). Professionals working with children can be essential in providing this support (González-Álvarez et al., 2022; Mallon, 2010; Paul et al., 2023). However, in order to achieve this, these professionals also need cultural competencies in addressing LGBTIQ+ issues (Baiocco et al., 2022), and they frequently express a need for training in this regard (Greeno et al., 2022). Policies for supporting LGBTIQ+ children are also fundamental, since they constitute the umbrella that protects children and provide support for the professionals who work with them.

3 | CHILDREN'S NEEDS

Although legal and social contexts differ significantly across all the participant countries of this research project,[1] we have found an overarching similarity in the core needs of LGBTIQ+ children. Nevertheless, there are important differences among countries in the way these needs are expressed, as well as the strategies used to meet them, and thus on the social and legal situation in relation to LGBTIQ+ matters. The main challenge in meeting children's needs across participant countries is that policies are still not focused enough on children, and even in those countries where there is legal support for LGBTIQ+ people, children are still not taken sufficiently into consideration in several domains. In this regard, the main specific needs of LGBTIQ+ children that have been identified are the following:

1. The need for safe spaces, to be able to develop and grow without having to change or hide who they are. Such spaces can help them cope with and challenge wider anti-LGBTIQ+ discrimination.
2. The desire to be heard by adults, and being heard without being judged. They believe that their opinions, expressions, and perspectives are often not taken into consideration, especially when those concern their body, sexuality, or gender identity.
3. Having policies that are built and designed through consultation with children, and without overlooking their opinions. This guarantees their right to participate in society, particularly regarding the issues that affect them.
4. Some participant children consider age as an obstacle to achieving more direct participation in the decisions that concern them, including key decisions in their lives related to gender and sexuality.
5. Support with mental health issues. Approximately half of the survey participants reported a mental health issue caused by discrimination and lack of acceptance from their loved ones. This situation worsened as a result of the Covid-19 measures (social isolation, increased tension within families, closure of schools and youth services, being away from those that support them, etc.) and with the rise of anti-LGBTIQ+ actors and discourses.

While a number of LGBTIQ+ children's needs remain to be addressed, they are deploying a range of strategies for resisting the cisheteronormative framework in their own environments. These strategies are contingent on the context in which discrimination arises, and, as such, the options that children have to reach out and react to LGBTIQphobia will depend on their immediate context. For instance, in Catalonia (Spain) each county and town with more than 20,000 inhabitants offers a specific service for LGBTIQ+ people, including children. In other countries, such as Hungary and Lithuania, the only services that are available are provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and are much more limited. In all cases, children's immediate environment is the site of most of their support, whether it is friends, family, neighbors, or professionals working with children. Drawing from the project's research, children report tending to rely more on their friends in comparison to any other people or resources available to them, whether public or private.

When surveyed about who supported them the most during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns and restrictions (3.88 points out of 5), children were most likely to cite their friends—except for in Portugal, where partners scored higher (by 0.09 points out of 5). From the fieldwork data, we can assert that LGBTIQ+ young people's resilience is principally focused on their close circle, chiefly, their friends. In Hungary, Italy, and Spain, the idea that the peer group is the main support was particularly stressed by participants, including the fact that, when it comes to insults, name calling, hate speech, and comments from those around them, they tend to reach out to their friends. This is particularly the case when their friends are also LGBTIQ+, although data also shows that friends (and classmates) are not always supportive of LGBTIQ+ issues. In markedly LGBTIQphobic contexts, such as the case of Lithuania, turning to friends is not reported as a common practice, and hence, the contextual capacity for resistance to LGBTIQphobia by children is more limited. These results imply that, in many cases, LGBTIQ+ young people remain isolated on the grounds of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics.

The project research also shows that the Internet is often key to both socializing with friends and other people and learning about LGBTIQ+ issues. Nevertheless, the internet can also be a significant source of anti-LGBTIQ+ violence; consequently, closed contexts should be reinforced as safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ children.

4 | PROFESSIONALS' NEEDS

Professional practices also vary depending on context. Although it may appear that professional practice is superior in more legally or socially favorable contexts, the results show that committed professionals are able to access resources in all examined countries and that these resources are also contingent on the context. Furthermore, the fact that some countries appear to be more legally and socially accepting on LGBTIQ+ matters does not mean that professionals are better trained; most of them lack basic training on LGBTIQ+ issues and, more particularly, on how to properly support LGBTIQ+ children.

The majority of good practices have been identified in educational settings. It is important to highlight that our research has uncovered tensions in all participant countries between the determination of certain teachers to carry out activities on LGBTIQ+ rights with their students and the resistance from families or even other teachers. Even in countries with a legal framework that is supposed to protect LGBTIQ+ children, many schools are afraid of carrying out LGBTIQ+ awareness-raising activities through fear of families' negative reactions.

Most of the good practices identified in education constitute small, everyday good practices, such as activities during breaks. This shows that, although bigger projects that tackle LGBTIQphobia in education exist, the majority of the good practices are in fact small gestures or approaches by professionals, rather than more overarching institutional or organizational efforts to tackle violence against LGBTIQ+ people. Among the most important of these are using the students' chosen pronouns, eliminating dress codes that penalize girls, creating trusting relationships with students, and openly discussing matters of gender and sexuality.

Other good practices, more specifically related to contexts in which the legal framework allows for them, are the existence of protocols and guidelines against anti-LGBTIQ+ discrimination (Spain and Portugal), the creation of an LGBTIQ+ club with teachers and students (Spain), and teachers' gender and rapport commissions in schools responsible for ensuring equality (Spain). Some participant countries offer more overarching projects, like the Alias Careers at university level (Italy).

Our research has also identified a number of good practices in healthcare services. Small actions also stand out in this area: being welcoming toward children, actively listening to children during medical consultation, and involving other professionals and the children's family in any process as part of a joint effort with the aim of helping the child. Additional good practices include the youth hotline *Kék Vonal – Child Crisis Foundation*, which provides an inclusive helpline as well as online counseling services to young people, including on LGBTIQ+ matters (Hungary); an LGBTIQ+-exclusive group for children, as a safe space in social work (Lithuania); and the existence of the SAI joint support service, which provides inclusive helplines and online counseling services to young people in need, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, or sex characteristics, which also stresses the importance of LGBTIQ+ inclusion in their staff training (Spain).

Analyzing professionals' needs and competences, we have identified the key areas where there is room for improvement, in order for them to provide better guidance for LGBTIQ+ children. Many professionals hold an adultist view of children. For instance, it remains common in most participant countries for teachers to hold frontal lectures instead of using more participatory methods that could better involve children in the learning process. Similarly, children's demands are often dismissed as behavioral problems, including their expressed wish to change their name and affirm their gender. In this sense, the intersection between adultism and a lack of LGBTIQ+ knowledge on the part of professionals aggravates the discrimination faced by LGBTIQ+ children in situations of risk. Drawing from these findings, the main needs identified in relation to professionals are:

1. Awareness and basic training on LGBTIQ+ children's needs and the violence and discrimination they face.
2. Discussing and sharing existing resources and tools available both locally and globally (such as books, webpages, videos, etc.).
3. Learning and developing specific strategies, techniques, and tools to create a safe environment for LGBTIQ+ children.
4. Learning how to work with families, as many interventions focus on individual intervention, while many families may need assistance to improve their support.
5. Acquiring tools to promote children's empowerment in anti-LGBTIQ contexts, allowing for children's experience to be the center of the action taken.

6. Addressing LGBTIQ+ children's mental health needs with affirmative services, insofar as this was identified as a major unaddressed issue at the heart of many of the obstacles and barriers they encounter.

5 | POLICY AND LEGAL NEEDS IDENTIFIED

The Colourful Childhoods project highlights several avenues for change to public policies and legal provisions that would improve the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ children.

1. There is a need to create a narrative framework that supports diversity, not as a problem that professionals have to deal with, but rather as an innate characteristic of our societies that should be acknowledged and made visible. Comprehensive support for diversity contributes to creating a safe environment for LGBTIQ+ children and their families (and, indeed, for LGBTIQ+ professionals). To this end, policy initiatives that focus on developing and promoting positive narratives on diversity should be fostered. This includes creating specific social awareness campaigns which involve LGBTIQ+ children, as well as education materials and a public discourse of support for LGBTIQ+ children.

2. Public discourses of support need to be accompanied with adequate resources for children's services professionals. In this sense, there is a need for decision makers to allocate a specific budget for national, regional, and local public administrations in order to increase their ability to foster the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ children, both by reinforcing or creating services that can help them and improving the skillset of front-line professionals.

3. There is a need to create a legal framework for the protection of children's sexual and gender diversity. A strong legal framework must explicitly protect diversity and include protection from bullying and violence, recognition of one's chosen name and gender, and access to justice in case of grievance. Legal provisions should ensure that the specific needs of LGBTIQ+ children are included in the general provisions to support LGBTIQ+ people. Finally, the needs and challenges specific to children must be included in policies for LGBTIQ+ children. Policymakers should address current gaps in meeting the needs of LGBTIQ+ children. This includes creating dedicated policies for LGBTIQ+ children, creating dedicated sections in policy documents that address their needs, and emphasizing the participation of LGBTIQ+ children in the policymaking process.

6 | POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Fostering the right to participation of LGBTIQ+ children.

    Decision makers should ensure that the voices of LGBTIQ+ children and young people are heard, and they should work from a situated knowledge standpoint to protect them from anti-LGBTIQ+ violence.

2. Comprehensive training for in-service and pre-service professionals.

    Training should include basic knowledge on LGBTIQ+ matters, as well as the specific needs of LGBTIQ+ children, and provide tools to properly support LGBTIQ+ children and young people.

3. Support structures for professionals.

Policymakers should establish support structures that allow professionals to create a joint network that enables access to resources and offers opportunities for collaboration.

4. Development of protocols.

Protocols are especially important in situations in which an LGBTIQ+ child's rights may be at risk. This notwithstanding, the development of protocols should be approached with caution, as they cannot account for the only steps taken toward the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ children. A context-specific approach will help build more useful protocols, and appointing staff members responsible for the implementation of these protocols will ensure they are fully put into practice.

5. Promotion of positive discourse.

As public discourse on diversity grows, there are greater opportunities to increase public support of LGBTIQ+ children. LGBTIQ+ children's voices should not be left out from their own discourse.

6. Legal support and an effective fight against discrimination.

Legislation and its application is key in ensuring the rights of LGBTIQ+ children are respected. Policymakers belonging to more progressive governments should take a stand at a European level to ensure the rights of LGBTIQ+ people in general, and especially children, are respected in all Member States of the European Union.

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ENDNOTE
[1] For more information, see Colourful Childhood Transnational Report.

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