



Implementing Youth Worker Networks to Achieve Social Impact in the Eradication of LGBTQIA-Phobia

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Abstract

Introduction The problem of LGBTQIA-phobia has been extendedly reported as a problem that threatens the quality of life and well-being, particularly for trans and intersex individuals. Scientific evidence points at the high presence of this form of violence and discrimination during adolescence and youth, negatively affecting the prospects of the victims. At the same time, there is a lack of evidence on the role and potential impact of Youth Worker Networks involved in analysing gender-based violence and finding strategies to improve the situation of LGBTQIA+ youth.

Methods This study has focussed on the reality of a network of youth workers through a mixed method approach belonging to a transnational project funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program (REC) of the European Commission. The implementation of 160 questionnaires and 5 semi-structured interviews in 2022 with the training participants provides evidence on the social impact that networking and evidence-based training may have in tackling LGBTQIA-phobia in youth environments.

Results The findings of the current study show how the implementation of Youth Worker Networks can provide relevant results to achieve more respectful youth spaces toward diversity. The presence of traditional dominant masculinities together with the lack of quality training seem to be an important barrier for youth workers to fight against gender and sexual discrimination. In contrast, the professionals' motivation and the group potential and support of the network appear to be a significant strength in overcoming forms of violence and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression in youth contexts.

Conclusions The results indicate that the role of youth workers, the quality of the training and environments are crucial in the work to identifying, preventing, and acting against any form of violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

Policy Implications Our findings point to the significant power of networks to overcome violence and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community. Our recommendation for achieving social impact is to provide evidence-based data and empower participants to become active upstanders against any form of violence or discrimination.

Keywords Social impact · Network · Youth worker · LGBTQIA+ · Violence · Discrimination

Introduction

Following the United Nations objectives to be achieved in 2030, “quality education”, “gender equality” and “reduced inequalities” appear to be a plan for the transformation to build a safer, more equal and free of poverty world (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, U. N., 2020). Together with this global strategy, national and international agendas point at gender-based violence as one of the main threats to a sustainable world (Ávila, 2022; United Nations, 2018). In this time of profound change, struggling gender inequality and violence are framed under the urge to end the scourge of structural forms of discrimination and fostering dialogic

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societies (Flecha, 2022). This research targets the problem caused by two systems that affect the lives of LGBTQIA+ children and youth with an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 2017; Nash, 2017): (1) the imposition of the sexuality and gender system that unequally transfers privileges and attributions to subjects depending on their biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and affective expectations (Gregori Flor, 2008; Herdt, 1996; Nieto Piñeroba, 2008; Rubin, 1984), and (2) the adult-centric system of power that establishes hierarchical relationships between adults and children and which relates young people to immaturity, incapacity and transience (Campbell, 2021; Flasher, 1978; Langarita et al., 2023). The combination of these two socio-cultural systems sustains the hetero, cis-normative and adult-centric models as the most legitimate, “natural” and stereotypical forms, causing discrimination and exclusion of diverse sexual and gender forms during childhood and youth—forms and consequences of violence against LGBTQIA+ youth.

Apart from strategic and national plans, scientific evidence demonstrates the existence and high scope of the problem of violence on the ground of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Recent studies point to the familiar context, peers and youth workers¹ as the main subjects that may either execute violence or protect the victims (Alessi et al., 2016; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Gill & McQuillan, 2022; Hillier et al., 2019; Lanham et al., 2019; Reisner et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). Taking all these actors into account, youth spaces seem to be especially vulnerable spots for gender or sexual minority individuals. The most usual forms in which violence may be exerted in these spaces are triggered when someone starts displaying a non-conforming gender expression (Alessi et al., 2016; Gallardo-Nieto & Espinosa Spínola, 2021). In the familiar context, the forms of homophobia and transphobia are materialised in relation to the power that parents have in the children and youth development. Most usually, violence is exerted through suppressive attitudes, unsupportive behaviours and verbal or even physical abuse (Alessi et al., 2016; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Gallardo-Nieto & Espinosa Spínola, 2021). In other youth spaces such as schools, the most common forms of violence are related to either their peers or educators (Alessi et al., 2016; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021a, b; Hillier et al., 2019; Lanham et al., 2019). On the one hand, peers and classmates become perpetrators of violence most often when identifying a gender expression that does not fit in the binary and is perceived as a threat or abnormal alternative to the traditional norms of femininity or masculinity. This form

of non-conformity is usually attacked either verbally, physically or even by exerting sexual abuse (Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Hillier et al., 2019; Reisner et al., 2020). On the other hand, educators and other forms of authorities in youth spaces become relevant actors in violence detection, intervention or even it is worsening it, for instance, when forming ‘alliance[s] between perpetrators and teachers’ (Alessi et al., 2016, p. 7).

The most significant problem followed by this form of inequality entails is the number of consequences that it has on the life, well-being and quality of life of lesbian, gay, trans, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) youth. Scientific evidence has shown that gender and sexuality minority youth have more odds of experiencing school bullying (Alessi et al., 2016; Do et al., 2020). The reasons for this vulnerability and higher odds of suffering violence for gender and sexuality minorities are related to how their identities and expressions are distanced from (1) the binary gender roles and (2) heteronormative sexual-affective practices or sexualities. These two variables, even prior to being discovered or identified by the person, may be the cause of forms of rejection or hatred for the environment, which we know as forms of LGBTQI-phobia (Cover, 2012; Langarita et al., 2023; Miller, 2016; Platero Méndez, 2014). In addition to this higher probability and the effects that bullying can have on young people, homophobic and transphobic violence has particular consequences related to the stigmatisation and internalisation of discrimination, to a level where the victims feel guilty of suffering violence (Baiooco et al., 2016; Bockting et al., 2013; Cover, 2012; Guz et al., 2020; Missé & Parra, 2023). Besides, relevant consequences have been detected as risks linked to this problem: the loss of trust and confidence in their surroundings to express themselves freely and share the suffering (Alessi et al., 2016; Aparicio-García et al., 2018); experiencing and coping with various and complex forms of distress or mental health affectations (Guz et al., 2020; Herrmann et al., 2023; Lanham et al., 2019; Magalhaes et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2017); and having feelings or desires to end with their life to escape the anguish (Austin et al., 2020; Lange et al., 2022; Lanham et al., 2019).

Upstander Intervention Perspective

Recent evidence has proven not only the existence of the structural problem of LGBTQIA-phobia but has also made evidence of the limited approaches when studying this matter. Current trends direct attention to the negative experiences of LGBTQIA+ subjects, forms of manifestations and consequences. Therefore, protection and preventive measures in the European context match this perspective and focus on the safety and suffering of the victims. This, although extremely necessary, reproduces invisibility on experiences of self-improvement and overcoming violence by LGBTQIA+ children and youth.

¹ This article refers to ‘youth workers’ as the professionals involved in youth work, leading children’s groups or somehow involved in facilitating children and young people their personal, social and educational development—also called youth facilitators, trainers or group leaders.

We aim to go beyond this anti-LGBTQIA-phobic violence policy and frame our work into a more comprehensive perspective that generates ideal, inclusive and safe institutions for all, cultivating the values of solidarity, empathy and diversity (Sadowski, 2020). This approach matches the whole-of-school, the bystander/upstander perspectives and the dialogic model of problem resolution, which centres the attention on shared responsibility to take action due to the systemic character of the problem (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Botton et al., 2005; Duque et al., 2021; Farley et al., 2020; Rios-Gonzalez et al., 2023). These perspectives proposed a set of areas of actions to transform youth and education environments into more supportive, inclusive and affirming spaces, such as philosophy, policies, leadership, practices, language use, resources and training, school community, curriculum and transgender-specific initiatives (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). Within these, our focus has been the assessment of an initiative of training bystanders to act as upstanders, which contributes to both the reduction of violence and the reduction of the negative consequences for the victims (Abreu et al., 2023; Caravita et al., 2009; Hammack et al., 2022; Salmivalli et al., 2011). Safe spaces, anti-bullying policies, LGBTQIA+ safe zones and gay/queer-straight alliances are some of the several actions that have been implemented as foundations of these perspectives (Sadowski, 2020).

To achieve the objective of transforming and generating social transformations for equality and respect for diversity, this study has been transversally guided by the perspective of social impact as a fundamental part of the scientific task (Aiello et al., 2021). This orientation has been enhanced by the involvement of the relevant stakeholders, end-users and local LGBTQIA+ organisations in the study's lifespan. Besides, to achieve a complete assessment of the Network's potentiality, the research plan has been designed to capture the way in which its implementation can make changes to overcome and prevent violence and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ communities. To this end, the effects on the professionals' knowledge, behaviours and personal and professional upstanders actions will be the target of study, to grasp the potential of the Network to transform the lives of young people through the actions of education and social professionals. The following aspects have been identified as keys to studying the capacity of the network and training actions to make youth professionals get involved and implement upstander actions against LGBTQIA-phobia:

- Overall satisfaction: participants' contentment, considering their expectations and needs, in relation to the contents and methodology of the events and materials.
- Quality: assessment of the training events and materials in terms of scientific content, language, and presentation. The training events' gathered data and scientific-based knowledge on the following themes:

1. LGBTQIA+ conceptualisations and legal framework,
 2. Cyberbullying and digital violence,
 3. Upstander intervention: how to intervene in defence of LGBTQIA+ youth,
 4. What is behind violence: the preventive socialisation of gender-based violence,
 5. Community involvement in preventing violence; successful strategies.
- Utility: the ability to transform materials, learning, and knowledge into practices to prevent and combat forms of violence and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community.
 - Applicability: possibilities of being able to transfer and implement successful practices and knowledge in professional environments of professionals.
 - Personal upstander actions: motivation and interest in developing personal active and protective actions towards the LGBTQIA+ community.
 - Upstander actions in the organisation: motivation and interest in creating and/or getting involved professionally in upstander strategies to prevent and combat forms of LGBTQIA-phobia.
 - Upstander actions in digital environments: motivation and interest in developing personal active and protective actions towards the LGBTQIA+ community in digital environments.

Current Study

This paper focuses on the case of a European Network of Youth Workers created in the core of a REC project funded in 2022, which has offered a space to explore evidence-based knowledge, tools and successful strategies allowing participants to prevent and act against gender-based violence in their environments. The main character of this action has been its participatory and dialogic approach to achieving maximum social impact (Coyne & Carter, 2018; Denzin, 2017; Gómez et al., 2019). Concrete encounters were developed with participants following the dialogic and evidence-based theoretical framework. On the one hand, six online masterclasses were created to provide with international and horizontal training spaces with experts in the field, providing knowledge on the main challenges of being upstanders against violence. They delved into the following topics: (i) becoming upstanders of LGBTQIA+ subjects, (ii) standing up against forms of violence and discrimination in digital contexts and (iii) achieving social and political impact in favour of the LGBTQIA+ community. On the other hand, two conferences were organised to equip youth workers with follow-up events to present successful experiences,

innovative approaches and results and allow them to interact. The content and structure of the training action were designed having the aim of achieving the maximum scientific, politic and social impact. Thus, the research objectives have been:

1. To explore possible barriers in promoting more egalitarian, inclusive and affirming youth environments.
2. To study how Youth Worker Networks can contribute to ending violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

Methods

The current study lasted 2 years (2021–2022), and the research team employed a mixed methodological approach to (1) allow an explanatory interpretation of the quantitative data and (2) provide strong explanations of quantitative findings with the participants' discourses. The Communicative Methodology has guided this research and intervention providing a focus on social impact, the target on structural forms of discrimination in educational and youth environments and the dialogical and egalitarian principles in the research (Duque et al., 2021; Flecha, 2021; Flecha & Soler, 2014; Gómez et al., 2019; Puigvert et al., 2012). The implementation of participatory and dialogic principles translated in the current study in the design and implementation of practices to ground the research on the needs of the LGTBQIA+ youth. This ensured the respect of research procedures that respect sexual and gender diversity with two main actions. First, an Advisory Committee was created to monitor and review all stages of the study and grounded the project in the needs of the community and end-users of the study. This supervision body was gathered online in two different stages with the research team, and it provided the experience, needs and feedback of LGTBQIA+ youth and youth professionals from all over Europe. Second, stakeholders and end-users of the study were direct participants in the implementation of the study, the creation of the network and the training actions. In all stages of the project, relevant stakeholders and members of the LGTBQIA+ community have been part of the research team, collaborators and active partners of the Network and training actions and in the present study. They have been indispensable members of the team in the design of the research instruments, ensuring the co-creation of the research instruments and methods.

Besides, all research procedures were conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and European legislation in relation to scientific correctness and ethics, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The study was ethically reviewed by the board of the European Commission during the approval and follow-up of the Up4Diversity project (REC—project number 881918).

Quantitative Method

The present study combined the use of qualitative data with a communicative and dialogic orientation (Aiello et al., 2021; Flecha & Soler, 2014; Gómez et al., 2006, 2011). These perspectives provided the objectives of (1) achieving social impact; (2) identifying transformative results in violence and discrimination prevention; (3) the inclusion of stakeholders and end-users in the research process and (4) combating power relations in the study between participants and researchers. An online form was used to administer the survey and the instrument was designed considering findings from the literature reviews in the Web of Science and SCOPUS databases (Almeida et al., 2009; Caravita et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2022; Salmivalli et al., 2011; Toomey et al., 2010) and the assessment of the learning actions. The literature review was guided by search criteria which combined a set of keywords enriched after preliminary research. Keywords focussed on three main areas: (1) LGBT, (2) violence and bullying against the LGTBQIA+ community and (3) the role of youth and professionals as bystanders and upstanders. Keywords were translated in five other languages to broaden the scope and increase the chances of collecting successful experience in other languages. The instrument was divided into six blocks of questions, and it consisted of a total of thirty questions of multiple choice, Likert scale, dichotomous and open. The first bloc (A) *demographic details* was designed to collect sample characteristics information such as the country of residence, gender identity and sexual orientation. The second block (B) *identification of the LGTBQIA-phobic violence* aimed to evaluate the level of knowledge that participants achieved after the implemented events. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth blocks were (C) *overall satisfaction*, (D) *quality*, (E) *utility*, and (F) *applicability* aimed to gather evidence on the potential of the Network to both provide knowledge and learning to participants and to monitor and follow up on the Network's development and social impact, as it was a fundamental scientific goal in the present study.

The questionnaires were implemented in four phases following a pre-test and post-test plan to assess the social impact of the action.² On the one hand, two phases were implemented and designed to assess the celebration of the first Conference of the Youth Worker Network in 2021.³ On the other hand, the two lasting phases were conducted to assess the second Conference of the Network in 2022. The pre-test questionnaires were implemented right before each Conference and the post-test questionnaires were

² Find the appendix the implemented questionnaires.

³ Find the appendix the program of the first Conference of the Network celebrated in 2021.

implemented after the celebration of each event. A total of 160 responses were collected, 54 responses from the pre-test and post-test from the first Conference and 106 responses from the pre-test and post-test of the final Conference. The age range of the participants was between 24 and 71 years old, with a mean age of 37.70 years. More than 50% of the sample were living now of the survey in Spain and the rest lived in other European countries. Denmark, Belgium, Cyprus and Ireland were the main origin countries of the sample after Spain. More than 65% of the sample identified as cisgender and heterosexual. Three percent of the sample identified as Trans* and Non-binary. Eighteen percent of the sample identified as homosexual, 10% as bisexual and almost 2% as asexual or pansexual. Most of the sample provided experience as trainers, educators, and youth group leaders committed to act against any form of LGBTQIA-phobia or any type of discrimination.

The data was encrypted by the researchers to guarantee the safe custody of the data. The questionnaire included an introduction, which contained an explanation of the response format for the different questions. The form presented the consent info which explained that the data would be anonymous and confidential and that only consortium members could consult the information for scientific reasons. The participants had to accept beforehand the survey conditions before participating.

Qualitative Method

The qualitative instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview designed to gather the discourses of members of the Youth Worker Network and identify concrete evidence of the impact of the Network in the participants. Attendance and active participation in the Network's activities were essential to the participant selection for the interview. The selection of interviewees was made aiming to achieve representative profiles of participants of the Network, and we considered their participation in the training events and considering their experience and involvement to developing successful actions to protect the LGBTQIA+ community in youth context. They had a formal and contractual relation to youth spaces in their own country. The interview was conducted with five youth workers (educators, social intervention professionals) from Cyprus, Belgium and Spain and who were members of the Network in 2022 after all Masterclasses and Conferences were celebrated. The selection process of participants was motivated by their enthusiastic engagement with the network and masterclasses, and having a previous interest and commitment to ending with inequalities was a priority to be selected as informant. The gathered

data from the interviews provided evidence from active and sensitive youth workers committed to act against any form of LGBTQIA-phobia in European countries.

The instrument was designed with a communicative orientation (Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021a, b; Puigvert et al., 2017; Roca-Campos et al., 2021; Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2020), and it aimed to gather deep information regarding the informants' path through their participation in the Network and its training actions. The instrument was a semi-structured interview and it consisted of six blocks. The first and second blocks (A) *initial questions*, and B) *network meetings and conferences*) were designed to contextualise the participant's involvement in the action as well as gather some information regarding the experience of the Network. The third, fourth and fifth blocks (C) *personal upstander actions*, D) *upstander actions in the organisation*, E) *upstander actions in digital environments*) were designed to gather data on the impact of the Network's meetings and conferences on their future personal and professional actions to prevent and intervene against violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. By last, the sixth block (F) *success of upstander intervention*) was designed with an only open question to let participants reflect and share regarding what the potentialities and characteristics of successful actions by active bystanders are. Such qualitative instrument aimed to complement the qualitative and statistical results of the surveys and allow researchers to find possible reasoning and interpretations of the issues dealt with in the quantitative instrument.

The interviews were conducted online, recorded and transcribed by the researchers. The research team decided to implement the interviews online to gather diverse experiences and discourses in relation to their context. As well, it allowed researchers to adapt to the need of interviewees. On the other hand, it presented limitations related to the preparation, atmosphere and trust of during the conversation. Conditions of participation were explained by researchers on the anonymity and voluntary character of their contribution. Informed consent was given by the participants before the interview started.

Results

The research findings will be presented following the communicative orientation attending to the exclusionary, barriers to overcome this problem, or transformative dimension, strengths and opportunities to overcome it. Qualitative and quantitative results will prove the way in which Youth Worker Networks can provide a new scene to actively position and act against any form of violence and discrimination for youth.

Exclusionary Dimension

1st R.O: To Explore Possible Barriers in Promoting More Egalitarian, Inclusive and Affirming Youth Environments

Results have pointed at three main areas that worsen the situation of the research participants aggravating their changes to actively get involved and respond against gender-based violence.

Prior (Quality) Training and Capabilities Previous training and awareness on discrimination, structural forms of violence and sexual and gender diversity seem to be significant in the way subjects act and consider the problem (Ávila, 2022; Ratts et al., 2013; Riley, 2018; Totura et al., 2019). There is an evident lack and familiarity with the issue of gender and sexual diversity and successful strategies to end this structural problem. Results not only demonstrate an absence of training on LGBTQIA+ issues during academic training but also the alternative pathways that youth professionals articulate to train themselves on this matter. For instance, the main learning pathways of respondents on the issue of LGBTQIA-phobia were for 20% social media and for 15% other initiatives and projects. Only 39.4% of the research participants received teacher training that targeted the problem. Apart from social media (20%) and other initiatives (15%), other experiences such as support to youth groups (12%) seem to be mostly a more recurrent youth resource to learn about the LGBTQIA+ reality than teacher training (12.5%). This result evidences the lack of, not only training, but the quality of the main sources of information for youth in Europe, as social media is the first education source on LGBTQIA+ issues for youth workers. These findings resonate with the problem of lack of scientifically based knowledge and co-creation training and curricula on LGBTQIA+ issues, as stated by the European Commission and the IGLYO, the international organisation of LGBTQI+ youth (Ávila, 2022; European Commission, 2020).

Work Environment Apart from educational and familiarity with gender and LGBTQIA+ perspective, other circumstances and contexts such as the professional can be relevant in the role a subject takes during a conflict or when facing a form of discrimination or violence. In general, results point to how most participants perceived their work environment as poorly trained and unaware of the structural problem of violence or discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Concretely, 36.4% of participants affirmed that their workmates (who work with youth in different areas) are insufficiently trained and have inadequate training and tools to deal with problems affecting the LGBTQIA+ community. Besides, other barriers have been

identified as impacting the way in which professionals' picture, detect and act against discrimination. For instance, the lack of implication of other professionals in providing space for youth to think about gender and LGBTQIA+ issues can be an obstacle for other professionals to deepen and work on a friendly, accepting and open atmosphere in classrooms. As argued by a research participant, the lack of work in classrooms on these issues with a clear focus and approach, having only explanatory and anecdotal experiences, can be a problem for achieving impactful and successful outcomes:

I think so because it is in those aggressive and violent environments that it generates friction by raising the debate openly and you see that you cannot achieve anything because they also join and reinforce each other. For this reason, sometimes it has been suggested that this should not be taken to the classroom because it will not be used for anything other than to give them more food because, in addition, well, you know, as workshops on this type of subject usually are, well, well people come from outside and they pose it in such a way that in the end nothing is achieved. (P-1)

Moreover, the professionals' perceptions and understanding of the problem and the prevention and intervention strategies can also have a huge impact on the opportunities and barriers to overcome it. Results have also pointed to how youth workers have a narrow approach to how to successfully act and intervene in cases of LGBTQIA-phobia. Even though all professionals suggested an area that is key for intervening in situations of violence or discrimination on these grounds, answers have evidenced the simplicity and straight understanding of the problem and their role as professionals, with most focus on attending to the victim exclusively. Looking at the results, 93.9% of respondents answered that their role in prevention and intervention was to support the victim, 97% of respondents answered that they needed to engage the youth group to intervene and 72.7% of respondents to report it to the organisation. Of the sample, 45.4% referred to speaking and working with the aggressors, 3% to setting out prevention policy, 3% speaking to parents and the broader community and 3% to changing the environment of the public domain or around the organisation.

Traditional Dominant Masculinities In all previously identified barriers and contexts, there was always a common conditioning on how subjects conceive the problem, perceive themselves and consider others. The role of masculinities has been identified as extremely significant given the importance that the social construction of masculinity and femininity has in relation to sexual orientation, gender identity

and gender expression (Connell, 2003; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Flecha et al., 2013; Missé, 2018). The dichotomous system of sex and gender and how alternatives to the traditional options appear in different contexts can directly represent a threat to the stability and privileges of traditional dominant masculinities. This result has been argued in the qualitative results, pointing at what types of masculinities are more prone to develop discriminatory behaviours against non-hetero or cisgender subjects. Thus, insecure, unemotional and violent masculinities can be a barrier to prevent and overcome gender-based violence:

There is a profile of a man who is, on the one hand, some who are very insecure and others who I know make use of this type of thing by attacking. They try to stay above. And with some it works well, and it is an issue that is a super challenge that we have, but it is true that it works a lot among some boys, and it does not matter what age they are, it does not matter in what situation or sexual affective relationships be. (P-5)

We need to change the way that we view masculinities. A man [understood as] violent has no emotions. That's what you mean. I 100% agree that we need to change that and not only the LGBTQIA+ community will benefit from that, but also women. You know, in the training workshop, we also talked about it, someone mentioned it: "the toxic masculinity". I say sometimes boys having troubles expressing their feelings because they fear that by being emotional or being attaching, giving a hug to your friend or something like that will make them feel less of a man. (P-4)

Transformative Dimension

2nd R.O: To Study How Youth Worker Networks Can Contribute to Ending Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression

Knowledge, Skills and Motivation The implementation of the Youth Worker Networks in the European context for preventing and intervening against cases of bullying and discrimination in youth has had many positive and transformative outcomes. Given the results gathered in the fieldwork, the opportunity to fight violence that the Network provides is related to the participants' prior commitment to transform and make the work a better place for all. Most of them made explicit in the interviews their compromise with social justice and equality, which was their professional driving force. The following quotation reflects how participants referred to this and may suggest that the Network can be a positive strategy to attract committed people and promote inclusive values in youth environments:

Well, I was early on committed to doing extra stuff concerning anti-bullying. Visibility of diversity, LGBTQIA issues, so that was. It was always the main topic for me and wherever I worked, whichever school I worked in, I tried to implement it. (P-3)

Participants not only stated their commitment to social transformation and protection of the LGBTQIA+ groups. They went beyond and proved their awareness of the problem of youth violence displayed in educational institutions as it follows:

I would say that it is very important to be very clear, that the problem exists and that it is very prevalent, and this must be shared. (...) Being very aware that this exists, that it is very likely and that it causes a lot of damage that is very, very harmful specifically for LGBTQIA+ people. But also, one of the things they said about the alliances, is that when a person feels this way, they feel safer. The space is much safer, on the one hand, because people are very clear about it, that it is for specific people and, if that person is better, we are all better. And I think that's important, that is a total win-win. And then, on the other hand, it is very important to work on prevention. And how does prevention work? (...) We need to have many dialogues. (P-5)

Even though the Youth Workers Network may have been an opportunity for those implicated with social transformation, it became a beneficial asset specifically for youth workers who never had contact with social justice, transformation and the gender perspective. Some participants referred to how the access to participatory dynamics of learning and reflection with a diverse group of participants in the Network may have provided the opportunity to explore key issues they never had knowledge about or access to, which enriched their professional and personal life:

Well, I think that the good thing about participating with very different people is that it makes you critical of what you are doing because sometimes you see other points of view and it also makes you enrich what you are doing because people ask questions. From ignorance, for example, not from curiosity or whatever. (P-1)

The Network, apart from contributing to the participants' motivation for social transformation, also helped them raise their knowledge, awareness and familiarity with successful educational actions to prevent violence: the ones based on scientific evidence. Comparing the results collected before and after the conferences of the Network, their response to their understanding and expertise on preventive educational

practices increased by more than 10%. This alteration resulted in having most of the Network participants, around 70%, with clearer information and further knowledge on how to avoid forms of violence and discrimination in youth spaces. Besides, the learning dynamic, the diversity of participants' backgrounds and perspectives and, the openness towards the topic were perceived as beneficial on the improvement of the participants' awareness of the problem of violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. All these factors allowed all participants to enhance their personal and professional perspectives, providing them with keys to overcome forms of gender-based violence. All participants answered the survey affirming that the Network and the conferences were significant factors in reassuring their motivation, and social justice commitment, and provided them with effective knowledge to overcome problems of LGBTQIA-phobia in the youth environments.

Upstander Actions How all previous assets have become into action in youth environments is one of the most relevant issues to assessing how transformative Youth Worker Networks can be. Researchers have investigated the translation of those factors into reality through actions, practices and values for making youth spaces affirming, inclusive and supportive ones. In this way, results have pointed out how this strategy can respond to the problem of gender inequality and be a successful strategy to prevent forms of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

The first finding indicating the effectiveness of upstander actions is related to how educational and youth spaces are usually perceived as safer and more friendly than others. Few participants referred to how the level of acceptance towards diversity in youth is higher. Thus, such spaces become optimal contexts in which bystander and upstander actions may impact more deeply. One of the interviewees referred to this issue as follows:

Yeah, it's it seems like we have to start at a different level there. For other people that are or have been discriminated against, I got the impression that in society and in school, in university, etcetera, there's at least a higher level of acceptance [towards the LGBTQIA+ community] and that these people are considered normal as everyone. (P-3)

Findings also pointed to some of the most useful inputs that the Network and the Conferences provided. One of the most estimated assets is matching the target on LGBTQIA+ visibility by providing with preventive educational strategies, including knowledge on violence prevention. In their own words:

Combining knowledge of prevention with the visualization of the LGTB collective is key because it is the group that has been, I think, less visible throughout history and almost taboo. (P-2)

All these factors in combination have resulted in the boost of their confidence to engage with and implement upstander actions in youth environments. Thereby, 100% of respondents to the survey affirmed that the Network and Conference helped them gain trust in having active roles against LGBTQIA-phobic violence and protecting the victims. By last, the Network and the dialogic model have been identified as advantageous to opening youth spaces towards gender and sexual diversity, essential for violence prevention. Having new discussions and horizontal conversations on gender and sexuality in youth allowed youth workers to discover and explore key values for accompanying and affirming LGBTQIA+ youth with a protective and preventive approach. In their own words:

With the dialogic model, we have seen the promotion of friendship and dialogue and the exchange of ideas and opinions. Well, normally not in an open way, but indirectly through the gatherings of interactive groups. In the end, that makes the perspective change because it doesn't become more open with the person next to it. In a more staggered way, step by step, a person is more open with whoever is next to them because it no longer causes them rejection. (...) This goes beyond the issue because if there is an openly homosexual student who dresses freely, this model of dialogic learning and exchange helps you understand it and learn how to live with diversity. (P-1)

The Group's Potential in Upstander Intervention By last, the results informed on the impact of implementing the Youth Worker Network with the aim of ending violence and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. To elaborate on this matter, the qualitative data has shed light on the two ways in which the Network can positively affect youth environments towards more egalitarian and free spaces: (1) equipping youth with accessible and deep knowledge on how to prevent and act against gender-based violence, and (2) combining the evidence-based learning with a group action that supports reflection, learning and mutual support.

On the one hand, participants of the Network and conference referred repeatedly to how the learning materials were a great strength. It provided them with different paths to learn about LGBTQIA+ issues and understand the need for gender and LGBTQIA+ perspective in education and youth contexts. The researchers centred the participants' experiences and learning trajectory in the core of the Network to

boost its accessibility and adaptation to different contexts. Moreover, it contributed with clear and reachable steps to implement in youth environments which was perceived as engaging. In the words of one of the interviewees:

As commented, [the network] provided participants with like basic material or material that they can use to go further or to implement in their institution. That's very helpful. Because, I mean, apart from the theory and sharing thoughts and creating networks, this is what every participant needs in their everyday life, is like concrete steps to take. They might need some material, some theoretical support, in order to not start from scratch. (...) And I'm looking forward to it as I might need that. (P-3)

In addition to the quality of the gained knowledge, participants also suggested that its combination with the Network, as a shared and participatory action, clearly helped them generate bonds and relationships that grounded their learning process by having the support of the group. The association between these two components had an explicit incidence in making participants become upstanders against violence and helping them detect forms of second-order violence.⁴ One of the participants spoke about this in their interview as follows:

I think that what is very important in the network is, on the one hand, that it creates awareness and, on the other, the fact of already being on the network makes a person feel accompanied whether they are acting to help a victim as if they are a victim themselves or to prevent her from arising. (P-2)

On the other hand, all participants mentioned how the group dimension was enlightening for their own process of learning and positioning against violence. In some cases, this action reaffirmed the participants' upstanding motivation and triggered the need of continuing learning and working to build safer spaces in their work environment. In their own words:

It (meetings, network, events) keeps you going, reinforcing, and enriching what you're doing. Sure, you know it's not over yet. Well, it's a road that always continues. It's never reached, so that's very positive, you

know? It is a reason to continue perfecting, improving, and introducing things because, in the end, it is a working model in which you work as in society and as society advances, you have to advance. (P-1)

All the participants agreed that the collective process made them feel part of the group and supported, and it allowed them to freely assess their actions as leaders in youth communities, free of judgment. As one of the participants explained:

Well, I think there are different aspects. The first thing is that it is always interesting and fascinating the aspect of networking. So, we are all doing great jobs every day and we are all usually like part of a bigger network and it always helps to see that, in a lot of different countries, many people are doing the same as you do and have the same objectives and the same goals. One of the key moments or one of the key objectives of participating in such a project is to get support and support others, so be in it emotionally, but also and, of course, content-wise. (...) And because it's kind of networking in a way, to fear to not feel alone emotionally, but also to critically evaluate what you have done. (P-3)

Lastly, some members of the Network share in the fieldwork their commitment to the group and highlighted its healing character. They mentioned it adding how it allowed them to share their experiences as active upstanders fighting LGBTQIA-phobia:

And lastly, another strong point for me I think that it was a very nice healing place for the people who are upstanders to talk about their experiences. (P-4)

Discussion

Research on the prevention of LGBTQIA-phobia is typically focused on identifying forms of manifestations and on the profiles of perpetrators of violence. This concrete approach is limited to a further impact on the life of LGBTQIA+ youth navigating institutions. As pointed out by the Sustainable Development Goals, further steps need to be taken for profound change ending gender inequalities and violence. Thus, this study has centred on the experiences of professionals working with young people—also called youth workers—in a concrete training action for a preventive approach to LGBTQIA-phobia and to successfully identify paths for ending forms of violence. And it showed a successful strategy to improve the lives of youth and reduce

⁴ Second-order violence or isolating gender violence are terms that referred to the form of violence that attacks bystanders of violence, those who witness and/or intervene to defend the victims. This has been identified as an important barrier to overcoming gender-based violence and LGBTQIA-phobic violence as bystanders are key for intervening and preventing violence against vulnerable groups (Flecha, 2021; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021b; Melgar et al., 2021; Vidu et al., 2017, 2021).

the consequences of gender-based violence through a Youth Worker Network.

Consistent with previous evidence on violence against LGBTQIA+ youth (Alessi et al., 2016; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Do et al., 2020), the study demonstrates the importance of the role that educators and youth workers have in acting against and preventing violence. In addition, it has explored negative circumstances that can negatively affect victims and their surroundings when facing violence on these grounds, in accordance with previous research (Baiocco et al., 2016; Cover, 2012; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021a, b; Lanham et al., 2019). First, the absence or low-quality training on LGBTQIA+ perspectives for educators and youth workers has been part of participants' background, which could have been one of the causes of their lack of knowledge and capabilities to detect and act against violence. In some cases, interviewees manifested alternative sources of knowledge on sexual and gender diversity, such as social media, which affected their access to knowledge on discrimination, violence and gender-based violence. Second, the work environment was manifested as relevant for participants. It somehow configured the way they understand, act and prevent forms of inequalities. For example, reticence, poor training on gender/sexual diversity of workmates or the lack of coherence and comprehensive actions disturbed their actions against violence. Last but not least, the role of masculinities seemed crucial in how gender is read, felt, and perceived for youth workers and how they deal with gender-based inequality, as posed in recent studies (Connell, 2003; Flecha et al., 2013; Gregori Flor, 2008).

Furthermore, the present study has found a positive impact in implementing Youth Worker Network to not only end LGBTQIA-phobia but to gain inclusive and safe institutions, in accordance with the bystander/upstander and the whole-of-school approaches (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Botton et al., 2005; Duque et al., 2021; Farley et al., 2020). The Network offered transformative results that stand out. The strategy provided an all-inclusive approach in which participants became leaders and main characters of change. What had come out most strongly was its success in contributing knowledge, strategies and possibilities to the participants to start the transformation in their environments. Studying these results according to short, medium and long-term impact, in the first place, the study suggests that the knowledge provided helped youth workers to understand the roots of the systemic problem of gender inequality and to position themselves against violence. In the second place, results imply great potentialities that youth and educational contexts must fight gender-based discrimination and violence. The different stages of training and group learning process allowed them to gain confidence, navigate possibilities to overcome this problem and have clear values and motivations to not only fight discrimination but to

actively affirm and accompany LGBTQIA+ youth. In terms of the results of the long-term impact, the present research shows how the experience of the Network—as a knowledge and a group action—could successfully equip youth workers with knowledge and committed to overcoming forms of inequality.

Lastly, our results suggest that the creation of dialogic and group relationships to potentiate preventive relations and training actions can be positive to act against LGBTQIA-phobia. In this sense, results may lead to some implications for policy makers and stakeholders who are relevant in the lives of young people. On the one hand, in the Spanish context, there is very limited content on policies and action plans (mostly anti-violence protocols and guidelines) to target the problem of violence and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community in educational and health institutions and organisations (Ávila, 2022). This context, although valued as favourable in the fight against LGBTQIA-phobia at a formal level, may be insufficient as it is not present or binding in many cases with its execution. Policy makers should include protective and preventive approaches in the current anti-violence protocols and guidelines to tackle gender inequality and LGBTQIA-phobia. Besides, youth workers, group leaders and educators have a key role in guiding, supporting and moderating problematic behaviours in youth. For this reason, they should have access to quality and evidence-based knowledge on the prevention of gender discrimination and promote and engage in initiatives to make youth spaces safer for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Conclusion

The present study presents results on how the experience of a network of youth professionals with training actions can be a positive strategy to maximise the role of educators and social intervention professionals against forms of inequality and structural discrimination. Concretely, the experience presented in this study maximised the capabilities, motivations and engagement of youth workers to provide affirming, protective and safer practices to prevent and intervene in cases of LGBTQIA-phobia in youth. Providing quality and up-to-date training and knowledge for educators and other agents may be significant in reducing cases or consequences of discrimination and violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Particularly, the access and commitment of youth workers to the legal framework and protocols on the protection of LGBTQIA+ rights and to scientific-based knowledge are considered key to achieving more inclusive youth environments.

The present study had its strengths. It has provided a pioneer transnational experience, having diverse backgrounds in origin and professional profiles in the experience of the network

and in the sample of informants. As well, the experience of workers involved in youth groups allowed the analysis from the perspective of leading roles in youth and assessing the quality, applicability and utility of the action aiming for social impact. Despite this, the present study had several limitations. The present study performed a qualitative methodology, and it aimed to gather concrete evidence on participants of the action. As such, causation could not be inferred. As well, the sample consisted of five informants, all of them youth workers and members of the networks. Future studies may use larger and more diverse samples to replicate findings and achieve further results.

The present study was able to identify a transformative strategy to fight a form of inequality that permeates our society and all institutions. Considering the vulnerability of children and youth, the results suggest that implementing youth worker networks may be key for using the voices and impact of workers and youth leaders in identifying, acting, and preventing gender-based violence and discrimination. Thereby, the present study extended knowledge on successful and upstanding actions to prevent and fight violence and discrimination affecting LGBTQIA+ children and youth.

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Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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