



# Colourful Childhoods

EMPOWERING LGBTIQ CHILDREN  
IN VULNERABLE CONTEXTS TO COMBAT  
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ACROSS EUROPE

## National Report Bulgaria

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## Introduction - Research Design and Sample

This report features the results of the Colourful Childhood survey for LGBTIQ children, completed by 193 participants from Bulgaria, and interviews with 8 educational professionals.

### Interview Respondents:

The interview respondents included four teachers, two school psychologists, one representative of school administration, and one inspector from the Regional Inspectorate of Education. All interview respondents were from different parts of the country. Seven of them self-identified as heterosexual women and one as a heterosexual man. The age range of the interview respondents was between 30 and 57 years, with an average age of 39. The interview respondents were recruited by our partner, the Education Trade Union of Podkrepa Labor Confederation, from among their members. The interviews were between one hour and one-and-a-half hours each.

### Survey participants.

The average age of the survey participants was similar across the project partner countries – 16, with the minimum age being 14 and the maximum 18 years old. 2.7% of the participants reported having no formal education. 43% attended only primary education. 45.2% attended compulsory secondary education. And 1.1% attended post-secondary education. 8% reported other types of qualification.

The majority of participants lived with their parents, or with their extended family, which was expected due to their age. However, 2.1% lived with flatmates and 2.6% lived alone.

The majority of the respondents (97.9%) had citizenship status.

25.1% of respondents identified themselves as men and 55% as women. 9.4% of the respondents as non-binary, and 39% identified as transgender. Almost half of the respondents identified themselves as bisexual, and one third as lesbian or gay. Among the transgender respondents, 1.6% self-identified as heterosexual. More than a half of the respondents reported being non-religious. The majority did not identify with an ethnic minority.

Most of the survey participants reported spending their free time with friends, but 27.1% reported spending it alone, which needs to be highlighted considering their age and the risks that are associated with social isolation.

33.7% admitted undergoing economic hardship, and one tenth had experienced domestic violence. Most respondents did not consider themselves a person with a disability. Neither did the majority of participants consider themselves to be physically unhealthy. 42.6% reported mental health issues. Almost half reported smoking and 50.8% reported drinking alcohol. The majority had no history of illegal drug-taking.

# 1. Legal and political context regarding LGBTIQ rights

## 1.1. Context

Although Bulgaria decriminalised homosexuality in 1968, the country has not made significant progress in recognition of LGBTIQ rights. According to the 2022 Rainbow Map of ILGA Europe, only 18% of all possible rights of LGBTIQ people are protected.

The progress of LGBTIQ rights recognition in Bulgaria includes only 4 significant milestones:

1968 – Decriminalisation of homosexuality in the Penal Code

2004 – Inclusion of sexual orientation in the Protection from Discrimination Act.

2006 – Equalisation of the age of consent for heterosexual and homosexual acts (Article 157 in the Penal Code).

2015 – Inclusion of "change of sex" (an ambiguous phrase which provides some protection from discrimination for trans people who have changed their legal documents) in the Protection from Discrimination Act.

Major gaps in the legal framework for the protection of LGBTIQ rights are as follows: the absence of sanctions against anti-LGBTIQ hate crimes and hate speech in the Penal Code; no legal recognition of LGBTIQ families (either as civil unions or through equal marriage laws); the absence of a clear procedure for legal gender recognition of trans and intersex people, resulting in many rejections and years-long legal cases; no legal ban on "normalising" medical procedures for intersex children; no specific provisions for protecting the rights of LGBTIQ refugees/asylum seekers.

In the last few years, the major driver for new legal proposals that can serve to improve access to rights for LGBTIQ people has come from the decisions of the European Court for Human Rights. The decision on the case of *Stoyanova vs. Bulgaria* 56070/18 (June 14, 2022) created an impetus for the Democratic Bulgaria Coalition parliamentary group, which reflects pro-EU values, to propose a draft revision of the Penal Code. This draft revision includes the provision for sanctions against anti-LGBTIQ hate crimes in cases of murder or bodily injury. Although very limited in scope, this is a promising step towards a wider improvement in the Penal Code. In a 2021 ruling, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) stated that if one EU country recognises a child's parental relationship, all other EU countries should recognise this as well, so as to guarantee the child's freedom of movement across the region, which is a right of all EU citizens.

One Bulgarian case that will have a long-term impact on rainbow families in the EU has come to be known as the 'Baby Sara' case. Decision from 14.12.2021 of the European Court of Justice obliged the Bulgarian authorities to issue an ID card or passport to baby Sara, the child of two mothers, on the grounds that they could not recognise two mothers on a birth certificate. However, the decision of the Highest Administrative Court of Bulgaria as of March 2, 2023, was that the baby could not get a passport because it was not a Bulgarian citizen. This decision will not put an end to the battle to recognize the rights of same-sex families and their children, but is a serious hurdle for LGBTIQ rights in

Bulgaria. In the case of *Y.T. v. Bulgaria* in 2020, Bulgarian courts dismissed an applicant's request for gender reassignment without providing sufficient reason. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that Bulgarian courts had breached the right to respect for private life (Article 8 ECHR). So far, this decision has resulted in no legal changes in Bulgaria.

The ECRI's report on Bulgaria (2022), identified the following main shortcomings in the sphere of LGBTIQ equality: no official data on the LGBTI population of Bulgaria; no public research on LGBTIQ status and discrimination, resulting in the absence of a solid basis for legal reforms; legal problems experienced by LGBTIQ people, especially in areas of day-to-day life such as family law, property and contractual law, inheritance, and healthcare; the absence of a law on gender reassignment in line with international human rights standards and expertise. The resultant recommendation to the authorities was to develop an action plan to combat homophobia and transphobia in all areas of everyday life, including education, employment, and health care. This is in line with Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which sets out measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity.

### 1.2. Relevant statistical data

Bulgaria is among the countries where homophobia, transphobia, and the lack of social acceptance of LGBTIQ people remains widespread, as evidenced by extensive research, both national and international (e.g. State Department's Human Rights Report 2016, ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map, and Special Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2019 among others).

In the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map (2022), a research project that compares the legal and policy human rights situation for LGBTIQ people across Europe, Bulgaria scored 18%, meaning that it ranked 27 out of 28 EU Member States. According to the same index, Bulgaria scored 24% in 2018, 23% in 2017, 24% in 2016, 27% in 2015 and 30% in 2014, which clearly shows a tendency towards regression over the past 7 years.

In their special research into discrimination and the social acceptance of LGBTIQ people in the EU, the Eurobarometer public opinion polling agency placed Bulgaria at the bottom of the scale. In Bulgaria, only 16% of the population believe that LGBTIQ people should have the same rights as everyone else, and only 20% agree there is nothing wrong with a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex.

A report from the Open Society Institute, Sofia (2018), demonstrated that between 2016 and 2018, the incidence of hate speech in Bulgaria against homosexual people doubled. In 2018, LGBTIQ people were the minority group second most affected by hate speech, after Roma communities. This result coincided with an intensive debate over the failed ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). In the wake of this debate, articles and news items were disseminated widely in the Bulgarian media, reflecting the dangerous and harmful view that discrimination against LGBTIQ people is a legitimate demand, one that is supported by tradition, religion, and nature. Further to that, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court voted on July 27, 2018 to declare the Istanbul

Convention unconstitutional, arguing in its decision that the term “gender”, used in the Convention, is misleading and introduces a concept that is incompatible with the Constitution's understanding of “sex”. The Constitutional Court reaffirmed the view that “sex” is a binary concept, with two rigidly fixed options: male or female. This decision had an immediate negative impact on legal practice for the gender recognition of trans people, while also reinforcing prejudice and undermining progress in public awareness-raising in relation to sexual and gender diversity.

Public education, and more specifically school education, was the sector most affected by the rejection of the Istanbul Convention. NGOs were banned from working at schools on any topic related to gender, and education on sexuality became taboo.

According to the FRA LGBTIQ survey from 2020, only 4% of the Bulgarian respondents were open about being LGBTIQ while at school before the age of 18 years. 65% preferred to hide their LGBTIQ identity. According to the same survey, 19% of respondents often considered leaving or changing schools because of their LGBTIQ identity. To the question, “Has your school education at any point addressed LGBTIQ issues?”, only 3% of the Bulgarian respondents stated that their school education addressed LGBTIQ issues positively, while 66% indicated that LGBTIQ issues remained unaddressed.

The most recent quantitative national research on the situation of LGBTIQ young people in educational settings is the school climate survey, conducted in 2019 by Single Step Foundation and Bilitis Foundation (Gabrovska, Dragoeva, and Naidenov 2020). This online survey generated 880 validated responses from students between the ages of 13 and 19, from all regions of the country. The overall results showed that for LGBTIQ young people in Bulgaria, schools are unsafe places. The reasons given were as follows: a high level of verbal harassment, with over 70% experiencing this personally; a low level of intervention – or no intervention at all – from staff / school personnel when witnessing verbal harassment; and a low level of reporting of incidents, with students reporting that they were confident effective action would be taken.

This research indicated that one of the main reasons LGBTIQ students felt unsafe at school was because of their sexual orientation, their appearance, or their gender expression:

- 48.3% of all students reported feeling unsafe at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation;
- 31.2% of them felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender;
- 22.5% reported feeling unsafe because of their body size or weight.

The majority (82.9%) of LGBTIQ students reported hearing other students make derogatory remarks often or frequently in school. In addition, 71% of all students reported often or frequently hearing the word “gay” used as a slur. More than half (57.4%) reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff. When teachers, for example, were present, students reported that they rarely showed any interest or empathy, and rarely intervened when such remarks were made.

The vast majority (70.6%) reported being verbally harassed at some point in the past year based on any of these personal characteristics. LGBTIQ students most commonly

reported experiencing verbal harassment at school because of their sexual orientation or how they expressed their gender:

- More than half of LGBTIQ students (60.2%) had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation; nearly one-fifth (19.3%) experienced this harassment often or frequently.
- Half of LGBTIQ students (51%) were verbally harassed at school because of their gender expression; more than one in seven (14.9%) reported being harassed for this reason either often or frequently.
- Although not as common, many LGBTIQ students were harassed in school because of their gender: 36.3% had been verbally harassed in the past year for this reason.

With regard to physical harassment, a third (34.2%) of LGBTIQ students had been physically harassed (e.g., shoved or pushed) at some point at school during the past year based on personal characteristics, in particular their sexual orientation or gender expression.

- 26.4% of LGBTIQ students were physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and 6.5% stated that this harassment occurred often or frequently;
- 23.1% of LGBTIQ students experienced a physical harassment at school because of their gender expression, with 6.8% experiencing this often or frequently;
- 16.1% of all LGBTIQ respondents were physically harassed because of their gender, with 17.8% of them experiencing this often or frequently.

LGBTIQ students were less likely to report experiencing physical assault (e.g., being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) at school than they were to report verbal or physical harassment. Nonetheless, 19.1% of students in our survey were assaulted at school during the past year because of their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender:

- 15.2% were assaulted at school because of their sexual orientation;
- 14% were assaulted at school because of how they expressed their gender; and
- 10.1% were assaulted at school because of their gender.

In 2020, Bilitis conducted qualitative research as part of the CHOICE project funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality, and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020). The CHOICE national report (Pisankaneva, Atanasova, and Dragoeva 2020) presents data from a study of the needs of students, parents, and school professionals related to improving measures to prevent and combat violence in Bulgarian schools. The research was conducted in three stages in the period November-December 2019. It consisted of desk research (comprising a review of existing research and secondary data collection), and an online survey among 106 adults (teachers, school principals and parents), 48



young people (students aged 14 up to 19 years) and 6 focus groups with students, teachers / school staff and parents in Sofia and Plovdiv.

The results of the study emphasised not only the role of teachers in combatting violence, but also that of school psychologists, and their insufficient level of competence in understanding the problems and needs of students.

Many LGBTIQ students who responded to the research stated that school psychologists could not be fully trusted. “At our school, everyone knows they can't go to the psychologist at school because he can't keep his mouth shut, and sometimes he accidentally shares things and sensitive information about someone with someone else.” They also added that only anti-LGBTIQ based bullying points are absent in the regulations of some schools.

Students who were part of “invisible minorities” in schools, that is to say, those whose minority status was not necessarily visibly recognisable, said they “live in fear and constant tension, and when they hear LGBTIQ-phobic statements, they try to defend themselves by hiding so as not to be exposed. Anti-LGBTIQ comments are made by everyone, constantly, every day, at any convenient time, both by teachers and students. There are isolated cases where management takes action against anti-LGBTIQ comments, but this happens more often when it comes to physical bullying rather than verbal abuse.” (Pisankaneva, Atanasova, and Dragoeva 2020).

## 2. Children's rights and LGBTIQ diversity in childhood

### 2.1. Context

Bulgaria harmonised its law on child protection with the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 2000. Although it has improved its policy framework, there are still many challenges at the level of implementation. An in-depth analysis of the Bulgarian Child Protection System was conducted by UNICEF in 2019, outlining the main deficiencies that need to be addressed if Bulgaria is to transition to a stable and professional child protection system for the 21st century (UNICEF 2019). The UNICEF report examines both the legislative and the policy framework on child protection, as well as the organisational structures and coordination mechanisms that ensure child protection on the ground. The analysis of the legal framework reaches the conclusion that the latter is to a large extent harmonised with international standards on child protection. The main gaps that exist are the absence of a legal basis for prevention of violence against children and provision of support to parents and caregivers to develop their parenting skills. Another major gap was identified in the area of children's access to justice.

The organisational structure of the policy coordination for child protection was evaluated as rather complex and ineffective. This structure includes two main bodies responsible for overseeing policy implementation, namely the National Council for Child Protection (NCCP), which acts as a supreme consultative body, and the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP), which reports to the Council of Ministers. The implementation of child

protection measures is in the hands of the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA), dependent on the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, other ministries, and municipal social services. This complicated structure creates a number of implementation issues. Among these, the most significant issues were identified as being: overlapping responsibilities for enforcement of compliance with standards for social services; prioritisation of administrative checks over substantive analysis of cases; and lack of capacity of municipalities to oversee social services.

On the policy level, a key achievement for child protection was the creation of the National Coordination Mechanism on Violence against Children, which came into force in 2010, and a number of public institutions committed to collaborating in the implementation of this Mechanism: the State Agency for Child Protection, the Agency for Social Services, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Health, and the National Association of Municipalities. All of these institutions agreed to collaborate for the creation of an effective response system in cases of violence against children, or in cases of children at risk of violence, where a crisis intervention is needed to protect children's rights. According to the provisions of the Coordination Mechanism, each case of violence against a child should be addressed by local multidisciplinary teams, which are created by the local structures of the Agency for Social Assistance, and which include a social worker, a representative of the police, or the unit on child delinquency, or the local prosecutor's office, as well as other relevant actors: psychologists, school administrators, health workers, etc. depending on the nature of the case. A representative of the local government is also included in the multidisciplinary team.

The State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) collects and analyses the reports on cases of violence against children, which the mandated institutions (the structures of the Agency for Social Assistance and the Ministry of Interior, and the Regional Administrations) submit every year, and creates one unified annual report. SACP reports from 2020-2022 show consistent challenges in the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism for Violence against Children. These are as follows: a) lack of technical capacity of the mandated institutions, i.e. lack of transport and sufficient personnel to take immediate steps of crisis intervention; b) lack of unified understanding of “crisis intervention” among the mandated institutions; c) misunderstanding of the nature of the problems with and around the child; d) a persistent problem in understanding who, and under what circumstances, has the right and obligation to convene crisis intervention meetings, as well as who has the leading role.

In 2019, the state opened public consultations on a strategic policy document, named Strategy on the Child (2019-2030) which was developed with the active participation of some national NGOs promoting the child rights-based approach. This strategy was the first of its kind comprehensive document on child safeguarding in Bulgaria, which aimed to improve different aspects of the child protection system in the country. However, a massive wave of disinformation and fake news led to the “freezing” of the strategy. The same forces that triggered the rejection of the Istanbul Convention then blocked the national strategy on the child by spreading fake news that it will deprive parents of their rights to raise children traditionally, and will lead to taking away children from their parents.

Chapter 2, Section II from the Law on Protection against Discrimination (2004) is especially dedicated to the prevention of discrimination in the sphere of education. It obliges the principal of a school to undertake effective measures to prevent all forms of discrimination in the school environment on behalf of pedagogical staff, non-pedagogical staff, and students. The principal of the educational institution is obligated to put the text of the law, as well as all specific internal policies relating to the protection against discrimination, in an accessible place. Furthermore, the principal of an educational institution who has received a bullying complaint from a student, or a report of bullying from a staff-member or student, is responsible for conducting an immediate investigation leading to further measures to stop the bullying, and potential disciplinary sanctioning.

In 2015, Bilitis researched how the text of the Law for Protection against Discrimination (2004) has been transposed into the Internal Regulation Documents of secondary schools in Sofia. References to the law were identified in the internal policies of only very few schools. Only 2 out of 72 schools based in Sofia, in their internal regulation documents published online, explicitly mentioned sexual orientation as a protected ground (Bilitis Resource Center 2015).

One important policy document for schools, which regulates the provision of support in cases of bullying, is the Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School and its annexes. An Order by the Minister of Education (RD09-611/18.05.2012) obliges every school to adopt such a mechanism and to design a plan for its implementation. The Mechanism includes a definition of bullying as “conscious negative acts, which are long-term, directed towards one and the same student and conducted by another student or a group.” The document sets out in detail the different types of bullying, including physical, verbal, psychological, and social (isolation, ignoring, etc.). Furthermore, the document lists signs that aid in recognizing physical and psychological bullying. It also addresses virtual (cyber) bullying, and describes the roles of all stakeholders in situations of bullying.

The Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School requires every school to develop and adopt preventive measures against bullying, and counteraction measures to effectively address existing cases. It is stressed that counteraction against bullying requires a holistic approach, encompassing persistent and coordinated efforts for prevention of bullying, as well as the creation of a safer school environment. The creation of a Coordinating Council for Counteraction against Bullying in every school is also recommended. The document also describes possible types of action that may be used in the classroom to address bullying. It calls for the creation of a space in which students can openly discuss bullying and form attitudes of empathy, tolerance, and respect for differences, as well as conflict resolution skills that prevent bullying. The Mechanism also lists possible activities at the school level, for example: the creation of a safety network, and it sets out the responsibilities of staff members in relation to possible bullying interventions. It also describes the links between the school and other institutions responsible for prevention and dealing with violence and bullying. Last, but not least, the Mechanism recommends involving parents in an integrated system for counteraction against bullying at school.

The review of the Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School has one important omission: there is no mention of “identity-based bullying”, nor is there an

enumeration of common grounds of bullying, similar to the enumeration of protected grounds included in the Anti-Discrimination Law. The lack of recognition of “identity-based bullying” contributes to low awareness of such bullying. As a result, some forms of identity-based bullying, for example, the mocking and verbal harassment of LGBTIQ students, are completely “normalised” and neglected at school. Plans for counteraction of bullying at school also lack the enumeration of the grounds which have been protected by the Law on Protection against Discrimination (2004). These grounds should be in focus when adequate measures for the preventing and dealing with bullying are being formed.

The most commonly mentioned grounds in school internal policies on which discrimination is prohibited are the following: race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, nationality, language, ability, social status. In the way that these policies are drafted, the use of “gender” rarely protects gender expression, or transgender and intersex identities.

The first step towards the development of a safe school environment for LGBTIQ students and staff is recognizing the scope of the problem. Former research conducted by Bilitis in 2015 and 2020 demonstrates that discrimination and bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity are not yet recognised in school internal policies and codes of conduct. As a first step, these policies should be updated to set out the responsibilities that the coordinating bodies engaged in preventing and responding to bullying at school have in respect of providing support to LGBTIQ students and other vulnerable groups.

Last, but not least, the school internal policies do not provide any alternative method of reporting discrimination, violence, and bullying besides face-to-face reporting. Best practice in many other EU countries includes the provision of an alternative, anonymous way to report violence and bullying at school. The absence of an anonymised means of reporting incidents discourages this reporting and contributes to the persistence of bullying.

## **2.2. Relevant statistical data - Childhood situation**

UNICEF-Bulgaria (N.d.) has published the following statistical data, which demonstrates the current gaps in child protection in Bulgaria:

**Health:** infant mortality is twice as high as the EU average. About 9.5% of all births are the result of teenage pregnancies. 13% of all births are by women without health insurance. Poverty deprives many children in their early years from adequate care and learning opportunities.

**Education:** each year, about 1,000 school-aged children do not enrol in school. 45% of Roma children do not attend preschool and 15% do not attend school. It is estimated that about 14,000 children with disabilities are out of school and kindergarten.

**Violence against children:** on average, over 3,500 reports of violence against children are received each year and around 1,000 actual cases are opened after investigation.

68% of parents accept the use of “reasonable violence” as a means of discipline. Over 4,200 incidents of violence against children occur every year in schools.

Children in legal proceedings: annually, about 5,000 children are investigated for committing various crimes in Bulgaria. Around 200 children are placed in closed institutions where they are deprived of freedom. On average, around 3,500 children become victims of crime each year and participate in criminal proceedings that are not adapted to their rights and needs. There is no reliable data on the number of children participants in civil and administrative proceedings, including in parental rights disputes and domestic violence cases.

Family separation: currently, over 11,000 children live separated from their families in various types of social care.

Children on the move: almost 100% of unaccompanied children intercepted by the police are attached to unrelated adults or recorded as adults and detained, in breach of the principle of safeguarding the best interests of the child, and the legal ban on detention introduced in December 2017. There are no services for appropriate temporary accommodation, and there is no effectively functioning guardianship system for unaccompanied and separated children in Bulgaria.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Children's needs to combat LGBTIQ-based violence

Psychological violence and online bullying were the most common forms of violence experienced by participants. The perpetrators were most commonly either unknown persons or peers.

The majority of the Colourful Childhoods survey respondents expected different groups and institutions to offer support to LGBTIQ students/youth. The greatest expectations were towards LGBTIQ associations, close friends of LGBTIQ persons, and intimate relationships.

The majority of the Colourful Childhoods survey respondents strongly believed with the statements that "Families should support their LGBTIQ children", "Professionals who work with teenagers should have relevant knowledge on intersex matters and their specific needs," and "Discrimination and attacks against LGBTIQ people should be punished by the law".

A focus group with LGBTIQ students from high schools conducted by Bilitis in 2020 within the EU-funded CHOICE project demonstrated that LGBTIQ students in Bulgaria were well aware of various forms of bullying and illustrated them through real examples from their own experiences. One student (male, 18 years old), said: "In my opinion, bullying at school is any kind of action, which somehow harms a person's dignity, and most often it happens because that person does not fit into the general picture. We are not just talking about sexual orientation, but also about appearance, etc." The participants in this

focus group were clearly aware of what bullying means because they themselves had often been bullied. They could therefore easily provide both a definition and examples of bullying at school. This in itself shows that LGBTIQ students are one of the most vulnerable groups in schools. Most of the participating students were not well acquainted with the national plans for action to combat bullying at school, but some of them shared about initiatives they had participated in, such as the Pink T-shirt Day – an event dedicated to combating bullying at school.

### **3.2. Children's strategies of resistance against LGBTIQ-based violence**

Two thirds of the respondents thought that their close circle of friends might be open to receiving advice on LGBTIQ issues. Also, two thirds thought that their close circle would be willing to protect them against LGBTIQ-phobia. On the other hand, only a few thought that schools could offer counselling that might help them with any issues they experience regarding being an LGBTIQ person.

The respondents stated that they received the most support from their friends and partners, and the least support from teachers and neighbours.

When it comes to online social networks, these were used by the participants for learning more about LGBTIQ issues and relating to their friends.

### **3.3. Professionals' good practices in empowering LGBTIQ children to combat violence**

The interviews did not identify any current good practices of support for LGBTIQ children. The professionals who took part in the interviews demonstrated a lack of awareness of such practices. Most respondents confirmed that they take into account the gender of children in their work, but of these respondents none could provide examples of how they did so. Although most of the respondents were aware that discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity exists in various settings, none of them could mention a specific case of such discrimination which they had witnessed. None of them were familiar with practices of providing support to children who are victims of this type of discrimination and intolerance.

With regard to institutional policies, these professionals were unable to mention any specific policies in their workplace that promote non-discrimination on the basis of SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity or expressions, and sex characteristics), but neither did they identify discriminatory policies/practices. The codes of conduct and policies where the respondents worked made no specific mention of “sexual orientation” or “gender identity” as protected grounds.

None of the interviewed professionals could mention any specific challenges that LGBTIQ children might face because of their SOGIESC, and were also not aware of any additional challenges resulting from covid-19.

The lack of awareness of the status of LGBTIQ children in school was pervasive. None of the respondents could say whether the voices of LGBTIQ children were taken into account when making decisions. They could also not say what changes were needed to ensure equal participation of LGBTIQ children and support for their specific needs.

When asked about the roles that professionals working with children could play in creating a safe environment for LGBTIQ children, the respondents gave the following examples:

- To consult individual students who need support, especially at times of crisis and crisis situations (school psychologist, 46, woman)
- To be supportive (teacher, 57, woman)
- To appoint a professional child psychologist to work with LGBTIQ students (school administration technical staff, 52, woman)

### **3.4. Professionals' (training) needs to combat LGBTIQ violence against children**

Only one respondent stated that she felt all professionals from her institution were sufficiently prepared to deal with LGBTIQ children (teacher, 42, woman). The need for training on good practices in dealing with discrimination, intolerance, and violence related to SOGIESC was recognized by some of the respondents, but they were not very enthusiastic about participating in such training. There was an overall reluctance to spend much time talking about the specific needs of LGBTIQ children, especially in relation to the specific challenges of covid-19. This was related to the belief that all children suffered from covid-19 (teacher, 46, woman).

The training needs identified during the interviews were as follows:

- The need for greater sensitivity towards diversity in relation to SOGIESC, and a greater understanding that gender is neither a binary - there are more than two genders - nor a purely biological concept.
- The need for greater sensitivity towards the common types of discrimination and intolerance, or violence/bullying, experienced by LGBTIQ children. The lack of awareness of specific cases was very much related to the relative “invisibility” of the issues, lack of reporting, etc.
- The need to for greater familiarity with practices and tools that can be used by various professionals (teachers, social workers, psychologists, health workers) to create a safe environment for LGBTIQ children and support their inclusion and wellbeing.

### 3.5. Exemplary quotes from interviews with professionals

*In Bulgaria, adolescents lack awareness of education and have low motivation, which diverts the educational process in another direction. In schools and the family, there should be more talk about “the different”, about the upbringing of children and their behaviour in public. — psychologist, age 46, Bulgaria*

*I think it is important to start talking about LGBTIQ people in earlier grades, so kids can know from a young age that these people are “normal” and part of society. — teacher, age 42, Bulgaria*

*LGBTIQ kids need to know that even when they do not feel safe at home or cannot speak about their identity to their parents, they still can come to us – the teachers and the school staff. That's why we as professionals have to be more educated on the subject and to be prepared to support them. — teacher, age 52, Bulgaria*

## 4. Overall evaluation: tendencies and absences re: empowering LGBTIQ children to combat violence in Bulgaria

There was a general lack of awareness of the status of LGBTIQ children among professionals who came in daily contact with them, such as teachers, school psychologists, and school administrators. The low level of knowledge of the issues these children faced led most professionals to conclude that they did not have specific needs different from those of other children. There was a very low level of awareness of the existing national policies on non-discrimination, and awareness of practices for making the school environment safe for LGBTIQ children was practically non-existent. All professionals interviewed were working at public schools, except one who worked at the regional inspectorate of education (a public body). There was also a general lack of interest in and enthusiasm for taking part in training that would raise awareness and create skills for providing targeted support to LGBTIQ students.

Conclusion: training should be offered only to professionals who demonstrate an interest in improving their practices. The core element of such training should be awareness raising. The training would focus on the provision of practical tools for addressing different issues and crisis situations, as well as offering specific examples of good practices that could be easily transferable. This would make a considerable difference to the work of interested professionals. The larger long-term task would be to persuade those who are not convinced that they need to develop a much greater awareness of LGBTIQ children and their needs.



#### **4.1. SWOT re: combating violence against LGBTIQ children in Bulgaria**

Combating violence against LGBTIQ children in Bulgaria can make use of the following pre-existing strengths:

- A child protection law that is in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The existence of a state-induced mechanism for combatting bullying at school, albeit one that can be improved.
- A coordination mechanism among state institutions in cases of violence against children. Again, this is already in place, but it can be further improved.

The weaknesses in the current context are the following:

- An increasing radicalisation and polarisation in society around the topic of children's rights.
- School internal policies that do not fully reflect the anti-discrimination legislation, and the absence of the recognition of identity-based bullying at school.
- A coordination mechanism in violence against children that does not pay special attention to LGBTIQ children as a vulnerable group, whereas it is specifically this group that is often the subject of domestic violence and anti-LGBTIQ hate crimes.

Opportunities are seen in working bottom-up for changing the status quo, and addressing the current neglect of the challenges faced by LGBTIQ children in vulnerable contexts. Many highly professionalised NGOs recognise LGBTIQ children as vulnerable and can advocate for their rights. In addition, many of these NGOs are allies of the LGBTIQ organisations that address this topic at every level. For example, the partnership between Bilitis and the Education Trade Union at Podkrepa Labor Confederation (SEP) is a bridge towards the delivery of high-quality training to professionals from the education sphere, with the aim of developing greater sensitivity towards the challenges faced by LGBTIQ children in vulnerable contexts.

The main threat is the absence of a coherent state policy on children that recognises LGBTIQ children as a vulnerable group. In addition, there is no evidence in the public sphere of a strong political will to address anti-rights movements that endanger the protection of children's rights.

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