



Colourful Childhoods

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

National Report Lithuania

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Introduction: Research design and sample

The purpose of this national report is to provide a brief overview of the legal and sociocultural situation of LGBTIQ people in Lithuania, with a particular focus on children. To this end, primary and secondary research was conducted including (a) desk research, (b) an online survey, and (c) interviews.

First, a comprehensive literature review was conducted and compiled. The desk research was conducted based on information about LGBTIQ rights collected by the LGL, the National LGBTI+ Rights Organization. Over nearly 30 years, the LGL has prepared many reports and publications detailing the situation of LGBTIQ adults and children in Lithuania, and has a wide range of resources that were used for the desk research.

Second, an online survey with a total of 606 participants was conducted in July-November 2022 to identify children's needs in combatting LGBTIQ-based violence and children's strategies for resisting LGBTIQ-based violence. The average survey participant was 16.28 years old.

32.3% of those surveyed said that their highest qualification is compulsory secondary education, while 28.1% only had a primary education. 27.6% of those surveyed had a post-secondary education. 5.5% of the survey participants said they had no formal qualifications.

In terms of gender identity, 67.8% of the survey respondents identify as women, 12.9% identify as men, 10.6% identify as non-binary, 5.8% would rather not disclose their gender identity, and 2.5% have a different gender identity.

When asked about their sexual orientation, 39.4% of the survey respondents identify as bisexual, 20% identify as gay or lesbian, 19% would rather not disclose their sexual orientation, and 18.2% have a different sexual orientation.

The LGL posted an invitation to participate in the survey on its social media accounts. The posts that included links to the survey were boosted with ads running on Facebook, Instagram and Messenger that specifically targeted 15-17 year olds. The LGL initially encountered problems in trying to boost the survey posts due to changes in the Facebook advertising policy, but these issues were later resolved and a successful ad campaign was launched, attracting a total of 606 survey participants.

Third, the LGL conducted 10 interviews with stakeholders – professionals working with vulnerable children. The interviews were designed to identify best practices in empowering LGBTIQ children to combat violence, as well as the professionals' training needs. The interviews were conducted in August-September 2022.

The LGL sent out personalised letters to its partners from equality bodies and schools, as well as to healthcare professionals and emotional support NGOs for LGBTIQ children and youth, making sure that stakeholders working with vulnerable children participated.

The Ombudsperson for Child's Rights, a specialist from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, psychologists, social workers, a school principal and a teacher participated in the interviews.

Since areas related to children are still considered gendered in Lithuania, nine interviewees identified as female and one interviewee identified as non-binary. The average interviewee was 35.4 years old.

The interviews lasted for about an hour, and all interviewees were encouraged to contribute to the research with their knowledge and experience.

Before the beginning of the interview, the interviewer provided the interviewees with information about the project in the state language. The interviewer also asked the interviewees to sign a consent form, which was also in the state language. The interviewees did not provide the interviewer with any other personal data and/or contact details. The consent form was also signed by the interviewer. Each participant was given one countersigned copy of the consent form.

Once the consent of the interviewee was obtained, the interviews were sound recorded to facilitate transcription as well as to enhance the validity of the research.

The interviewer encouraged the interviewees to express their views and thoughts openly, and made every effort to create a friendly and safe environment to aid the discussion. However, the interviewer did not pressure the participants and respected their right not to answer a question.

The interviews were held in a quiet environment (with no distractions, such as other people, telephones, loud music, etc.). The interviewees selected the interview location that was most convenient for them.

1. LGBTIQ rights: Legal and political context

1.1. Context

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and other (LGBTIQ) people in Lithuania face legal and social challenges that non-LGBTI+ citizens do not. Homosexual sexual practices are legal in Lithuania, but neither civil partnership nor marriage is available to same-sex couples, so there is no legal recognition of same-sex couples. Hence, LGBTI+ people do not enjoy all of the rights that non-LGBTI+ people have, and same-sex couples are not granted the same legal recognition that is given to opposite-sex couples. Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1993, but due to the historic legacy, the rights of LGBTIQ people are limited at best. Legislation providing for the prohibition of discrimination was introduced as part of the criteria for European Union accession, and in 2010 the first LGBTIQ pride parade took place in Vilnius.

Between 2012 and 2018, the Lithuanian authorities did nothing to comprehensively address the tendencies of social, legal and institutional discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In fact, certain aspects suggest that respect for the human rights of LGBTIQ people in Lithuania is actually deteriorating.

Firstly, the Law on the Protection of Minors Against the Detrimental Effects of Public Information has been used three times to censor LGBTIQ-related public information. The Lithuanian authorities claim that this discriminatory interference with the right to freedom of expression is necessary to protect the “emotional, spiritual and psychological development and health of minors”, thus creating a chilling effect on talking publicly about LGBTIQ issues in Lithuanian society.

Secondly, Lithuania remains one of a few jurisdictions in the European Union without any legal recognition of same-sex relationships. Not only did the Seimas (parliament) of the Republic of Lithuania dismiss a bill on introducing gender-neutral registered partnerships – now it is considering a legislative motion on cohabitation agreements that would strip same-sex couples of family status altogether. Article 38 of the Constitution explicitly states that “marriage shall be concluded upon the free mutual consent of man and woman”, while Article 3.339 of the Civil Code foresees a separate law to establish the procedure for registering a partnership between a man and a woman. Even though the Civil Code was adopted in 2000, the law on registered partnerships (for opposite-sex couples) was never adopted.

In 2011, the Lithuanian Constitutional Court provided a progressive interpretation of the constitutional concept of “family life” by concluding that: “[it] does not mean that ... the Constitution does not protect and defend families other than those founded on the basis of marriage, inter alia, the relationship of a man and a woman living together without concluding a marriage, which is based on the permanent bonds of emotional affection, reciprocal understanding, responsibility, respect, shared upbringing of the children and similar ones, as well as on the voluntary determination to take on certain rights and responsibilities...” While the Constitutional Court did not mention same-sex families in its judgment explicitly, the legal reading of the judgment indicates that same-sex families potentially fall under the ambit of the constitutional concept of “family life”.

Thirdly, the Lithuanian authorities have systematically failed to investigate reported instances of hate speech and hate crimes on grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In some cases, law enforcement officials simply refused to launch pre-trial investigations, thus leaving the members of the local LGBTIQ community without any options for legal redress.

Fourthly, Lithuania remains one of the few European jurisdictions without an administrative procedure to ensure legal gender recognition or a gender reassignment system. Since gender identity is not covered by Lithuanian anti-discrimination and hate crime legislation, transgender people remain disproportionately affected by instances of discrimination, harassment and violence. In April 2017, through strategic litigation, national courts were granted the right to legal gender recognition without the sterilisation requirement, i.e. based solely on a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and self-identification.

Finally, from 2012 to 2018, the Seimas considered nine openly homophobic and/or transphobic legislative initiatives, effectively seeking to limit the rights and freedoms of LGBTIQ people.¹ The vivid public debate around these legislative proposals has negatively impacted the social climate for LGBTIQ people in Lithuania, because it was

¹ The homophobic and/or transphobic legislative initiatives pending before the Seimas as of 1 June 2018 include:

(a) **Amendment No. XIIP-17 to the Civil Code**, which was meant to place a total ban on gender reassignment surgery. This bill was included on the Seimas agenda on 23 May 2013 and has not been considered since;

(b) **Amendment No. XIIP-687 to the Criminal Code**, which was meant to establish that criticising homosexuality and attempting to change someone's sexual orientation do not qualify as discrimination or harassment on the grounds of sexual orientation. This bill was included on the Seimas agenda on 12 September 2013 and passed the first hearing on 19 June 2014. The Seimas Committee on Education, Science and Culture temporarily postponed adoption of the bill on 16 December 2014 by returning it to the initiators for "further improvements";

(c) **Amendment No. XIIP-940 to the Law on Meetings**, which proposes that the organisers of public assemblies should cover all costs related to ensuring security and public order during the event. This legislative motion was introduced as a retaliatory measure to "Baltic Pride 2013 – The March for Equality". The Seimas has not yet voted on adding this bill to its agenda;

(d) **Amendment No. XIIP-473 to the Law on the Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child (together with amendment No. XIIP-472 to the Civil Code)**, which stipulates that "every child has the natural right to a father and a mother, emanating from the differences between the sexes and the mutual compatibility of motherhood and fatherhood." This bill was included on the Seimas agenda on 21 May 2013;

(e) **Amendment No. XIIP-1469(2) to the Law on the Fundamentals of Protection of the Rights of the Child**, which attempts to establish that "it is forbidden for same-sex couples to adopt citizens of the Republic of Lithuania." This bill was included on the Seimas agenda on 15 September 2015;

(f) **Amendment No. XIIP-1217(2) to Article 38 of the Constitution**, which seeks to redefine the constitutionally protected concept of "family life" as emanating from a traditional marriage between a man and a woman, and stipulates that a family arises from motherhood and fatherhood. This bill was included on the Seimas agenda on 10 December 2013 and the amendment was accepted for consideration by the Seimas on 28 June 2016;

(g) **Amendment No. XIIP-4490(3) to the Code of Administrative Offences**, which introduces administrative liability for any public defiance of the constitutionally established "family values". This would mean that making public speeches, displaying posters, slogans or audio-visual materials, and organising public events like LGBT pride would be against the law. This bill was included on the Seimas agenda on 21 January 2014. The Seimas postponed the final adoption phase on 13 March 2014, and once again on 12 November 2015;

(g) **Amendment No. XIIP-750 to the Civil Code**, which was designed to introduce a cohabitation agreement that would allow two or more cohabitants to exercise certain property rights without the intention to create a family. The proponents of this bill claim that the cohabitation agreement would be a suitable form of legal recognition for same-sex couples. However, it effectively prevents same-sex couples from enjoying the status of "family members". This bill was included on the Seimas agenda on 30 May 2017;

(h) **Amendment No. XIIP-1327 to the Civil Code**, which places a total ban on both medical confirmation and legal gender recognition in Lithuania. The bill was registered in the Seimas on 10 November 2017, but the Seimas has not deliberated the proposal yet.

as if fundamental rights and freedoms of LGBTIQ people could simply be revoked on a whim of political opportunism or discriminatory animus.

Timeline of LGBTIQ rights in Lithuania

1993: Same-sex relationships were decriminalised.

2004: Age of consent was equalised.

2005: The Law on Equal Treatment, which bans discrimination based on sexual orientation in the areas of employment, education and access to goods and services, came into effect.

2009: Ban on hate crimes based on sexual orientation.

2010: The Law on the Protection of Minors was passed and has since been used against the LGBTIQ community on numerous occasions.

2010: Baltic Pride, the annual LGBTIQ pride parade, was organised for the first time in Vilnius.

2019: The Constitutional Court ruled that foreign same-sex spouses must be granted residence permits.

1.2 The LGBTIQ situation in Lithuania: Key statistics

Even though Lithuanian legislation, in theory, provides for relatively extensive legal guarantees against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, its implementation in practice could be described as ineffective, at best. Instances of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation remain highly underreported. The Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson, i.e. the public body responsible for the implementation of the Law on Equal Treatment, received four complaints regarding alleged instances of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in 2009, followed by three in 2010, four in 2011, two in 2012, none in 2013, four in 2014, five in 2015, three in 2016, and three in 2017.

Taking into account the widespread phenomenon of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation shown by international surveys and opinion polls (see paragraph 8), it can be concluded that the national equality body is not perceived as an effective remedy in terms of addressing the injustices experienced.

Even though there are no comprehensive national surveys on the situation of LGBTIQ people in Lithuania, various international surveys and opinion polls indicate that Lithuania remains one of the most socially hostile countries in the European Union (EU) towards the LGBTIQ community. According to a survey on LGBTI+ people conducted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Lithuanian respondents admitted to feeling downhearted or depressed all the time (14%) or most of the time (20%). Moreover, 55% of Lithuanian respondents personally felt discriminated against in eight areas of life due to their LGBTI+ identity. These rates are the highest among all EU countries (FRA, 2020).

The survey results also spotlighted the lack of openness in Lithuania. 51% of Lithuanian respondents confessed to not being open about being LGBTI+ at work, and 59% admitted to not being open about it at school. 44% of the Lithuanian survey participants

said that they avoid holding hands in public with their same-sex partner for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed.

The FRA survey also confirmed that education on LGBTI+ issues at schools remains critical – respondents said that LGBTI+ topics are discussed in a negative way (19%) or are not discussed at all (65%).

Compared to the 2012 survey results, the 2019 survey results showed little overall progress over the past seven years (FRA, 2022).

The 2020 ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map revealed that compared to the 2019 results, there was no positive change in Lithuania in the field of LGBTIQ human rights. Lithuania is ranked 34th among 49 European countries (ILGA-Europe, 2020).

According to a 2019 Eurobarometer survey on discrimination, only 30% of Lithuanians are in favour of allowing same-sex marriages throughout Europe.

The Eurobarometer results also revealed that Lithuanians are very intolerant to LGBTI+ people in the workplace. The survey showed that only 44% of respondents in Lithuania would feel “comfortable” having a lesbian, gay or bisexual co-worker. The numbers are even lower for the same question concerning a transgender person (40%). Meanwhile, 53% of Lithuanians agree with the idea that sexual minorities should enjoy the same rights as heterosexuals (Eurobarometer, 2019).

2. Children’s rights and LGBTIQ diversity in childhood: A brief overview

2.1. Context

The Law on Education (2016) calls for measures to address cyberbullying, including cyberbullying based on sexual orientation. Cases can be reported online.

The Law on Equal Treatment (2013) prohibits discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation, but does not cover gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (GIGESC).

The Law on the Protection of Minors Against the Detrimental Effects of Public Information (2002) prohibits the dissemination of any materials that incite bullying or humiliation on grounds of sexual orientation. The law also bans the dissemination of information that counters “family values”, which has led to a perpetuation of prejudice and negative attitudes towards LGBTIQ people. In practice, it has deterred teachers from addressing LGBTIQ issues in school settings.

The Health and Sex Education and Preparation for Family Life Programme (2016) prohibits discrimination based on the sexual orientation and gender identity of children and their parents or foster parents. However, it does not outline specific steps to tackle discrimination or to make schools more inclusive.

Schools are required to have anti-bullying policies, but are not required to include LGBTIQ-specific information. There are no national human rights or civic education curricula. The national curriculum includes sex and relationship education, but is not LGBTIQ-inclusive.

There is no mandatory teacher training on LGBTIQ awareness. On the contrary – teacher training material often includes harmful content, such as describing homosexuality as “mentally unhealthy behaviour”. In 2018, a group of NGOs called on the Ministry of Science and Education to eliminate this material. However, no changes have been made.

There is no law on legal gender recognition (LGR) in place in Lithuania. LGR is accessible through the court system. In recent years, several transgender people have managed to change their legal gender without fulfilling surgery or sterilisation requirements.

LGR is not available to minors, and no information is available about policies or practices allowing transgender children to use their correct name and gender at school.

The government does not collect data about LGBTIQ students in schools. Only NGOs collect this data.

Neither the government nor schools provide targeted support for LGBTIQ children or their families. In September 2020, the LGL launched an online support platform for LGBTIQ young people who are victims of bullying, as well as for parents and teachers. The Youth Line is available for young people in general.

LGL’s 2015 publication entitled *Homophobic Bullying in Lithuanian Schools* provides recommendations for teachers and other professionals working with young people on how to combat bullying and violence at school.

Discrimination and violence against LGBTIQ people remain commonplace in Lithuania. NGOs like the LGL have documented numerous cases over the past years and have helped victims with legal support. Due to the Law on the Protection of Minors, LGBTIQ-related content on TV or in printed media is often censored.

In 2020, the LGL shed light on the negative impact of the covid-19 pandemic on LGBTIQ youth, who now feel even more isolated and alone than before. In 2021, the LGL also spoke out about the situation of transgender youth in the country, who find little support and are unable to access transgender-specific healthcare services.

Lithuania has ratified eight of the nine core UN human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which enshrine the right to education. Lithuania is a member of the European Governmental LGBTI Focal Points Network (as of April 2022) but has not yet signed the 2016 UNESCO Call for Action (IGLYO, 2022).

2.2. The situation in childhood: Key statistics

In the summer of 2017, the LGL conducted a survey where the respondents (580 LGBTI+ school children between the ages of 14 and 18) elaborated on what is taught during

moral education lessons, and what LGBTI+ adolescents who are still figuring out their sexuality and gender identity face in Lithuanian schools. The survey revealed that when schoolchildren struggle with bullying in the school environment due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, they are forced to deal with it on their own. 82% of the LGBTI+ schoolchildren who participated in the survey reported being bullied due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the last year, and of these respondents, 90% reported feeling unsafe at school for this reason. 50% of the survey respondents also stated that their teachers did not respond appropriately to homophobic bullying, if they responded at all (LGL, 2018).

IGLYO, an international LGBTIQ youth and student organisation, launched its LGBTI+ Inclusive Education Index and Report in 2018. The LGBTI+ Inclusive Education Index ranks all of the Council of Europe Member States. Lithuania ranks 30th out of the 47 Council of Europe Member States (IGLYO, 2018).

3. Findings

3.1 Children's needs in combatting LGBTI+-based violence

Most LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania who participated in the survey claimed that they spend their free time with friends (64.6%). 10.3% spend their free time with their family, while 22.8% spend it alone. Consequently, some LGBTI+ young people face a higher risk of social isolation.

45.7% of LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania stated that they are dealing with economic hardship, while 11.6% face violence at home and 3.8% are homeless. This suggests that some respondents have difficulties at home, and that their parents do not accept their LGBTI+ identity.

While most respondents do not consider themselves disabled, 56.7% of the LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania say that they are dealing with mental health issues. These mental health issues may lead to self-medication and substance abuse.

27.9% of the LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania used tobacco in the past week, while 23.5% used alcohol and 4% used marijuana.

When asked about the covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions, the majority of LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania stated that the most effective support system was their friends, partner and mother. Respondents listed their neighbours and teachers as being the least supportive.

When asked about their needs during the covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions, most respondents claimed that they felt like they could be themselves with their friends and siblings. When asked how well their needs were met in terms of their gender and sexuality, the average response was 2.34 (where 1 means "not at all" and 5 means "completely").

When asked whether they feel that they had a harder time during the covid-19 pandemic than their non-LGBTI+ peers, the average response was 2.19 (where 1 means “not at all” and 5 means “completely”).

Most LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania stated that social networking sites played a part in them learning about LGBTI+ issues and conveying them to their friends.

While most respondents have not experienced any physical violence for being LGBTI+ since the covid-19 pandemic started, some LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania did experience psychological violence, mostly from strangers (2.19), parents (2.00) and peers (1.82) (where 1 means “not at all” and 5 means “completely”). Some LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania experienced online bullying, mostly from strangers (2.06) (where 1 means “not at all” and 5 means “completely”).

When asked whether they personally felt discriminated against for being LGBTI+ during the last 12 months, 37.4% of the respondents claimed that they did at school, while 31.4% said they did on the street and 29.1% said they did at home. This indicates that some LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania feel that they are singled out in their everyday environment because of their LGBTI+ identity.

Importantly, most respondents experienced anxiety (4.15), loneliness (3.98) and depression (3.70) during the covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions (where 1 means “not at all”, 2 means “a little”, 3 means “somewhat”, 4 means “quite a bit”, and 5 means “completely”).

3.2 Children’s strategies for resisting LGBTI-based violence

When asked about their resilience strategies, the LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania who participated in the survey showed very pessimistic attitudes regarding their support system options when compared to other countries.

Only 32.6% of the respondents think that their inner circle might be open to receiving advice on LGBTI+ issues from other people. Only 26.5% of the respondents think that their inner circle would want to protect them against LGBTI+-phobia. Only 26.1% of the respondents have a sense of belonging in their inner circle. Only 6.6% of the respondents said that their school offers counselling that might help them with any issues regarding them being LGBTI+.

These negative tendencies indicate that most LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania feel that they can only count on themselves when facing LGBTI+-phobia and other issues related to their LGBTI+ identity. Lithuanian society is very homophobic, and most adults are not keen on changing their negative attitudes towards LGBTI+ people. Unfortunately, this means that most LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania remain isolated and have no sense of belonging.

When asked about their expectations for possible support on issues of sexual and gender diversity, most respondents said they were most likely to receive support from LGBTI+ associations (4.51), friends (4.22) and intimate relationships (3.77) (where 1 means “not at all”, 2 means “a little”, 3 means “somewhat”, 4 means “quite a bit”, and 5 means “completely”).

When asked if they thought that violence against LGBTI+ youth will increase, decrease or remain the same in the next 10 years, the respondents had the highest expectations for a possible decrease in violence at universities (41.3%), in intimate relationships (34.8%), and in social relationships (29.1%).

3.3 Professionals' best practices in empowering LGBTI+ children to combat violence

Professionals' best practices in empowering LGBTI+ children to combat violence vary depending on their area of expertise. The child psychologists who were interviewed claimed that they try to ensure that LGBTI+ children feel safe and accepted. One of the interviewees stressed the importance of anonymity in providing emotional support. The child psychologists also said that all children should have access to inclusive education and information about LGBTI+ issues.

Another interviewee claimed that at their emotional support service, all volunteers are trained to treat every child as equal, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or other. The service aims to provide a safe space where children can discuss difficult issues. The interviewee said that when recruiting volunteers for their service, all candidates are screened for potentially discriminatory attitudes, and candidates who demonstrate such attitudes are not invited to provide emotional support. She insisted that the service is vocal about the support they provide to LGBTI+ children and communicates that they are open to LGBTI+ children and provide a safe space free from discrimination. She also said that psychologists have an impact in changing negative attitudes among parents and teachers when it comes to LGBTI+ children. She stated that the organisation that she works for has various educational activities that allow the public to see the needs of LGBTI+ children.

The school principal who was interviewed acknowledged that teachers play an important role in providing knowledge on LGBTI+ issues, supporting LGBTI+ children, and mediating between children and their parents. The interviewee claimed that she came under the scrutiny of the local media after an event on LGBTI+ issues was held at their school. According to the principal, school staff often have to mediate when children want to learn about LGBTI+ issues but their parents do not approve. She insisted that teachers should receive training on LGBTI+ issues, and that their views should be screened before they are offered employment.

Another interviewee working in education said that during the summer camps that she organises, the campers are asked to give their preferred names and pronouns. She claims that the staff members always use the preferred names and pronouns. The interviewee said that during these summer camp, she makes a special effort to support LGBTI+ children, provide them with a safe space, and make them feel accepted. However, for some of these LGBTI+ children, this is the only time of year that they can be themselves.

The interviewees working in children's rights insisted that the rights of LGBTI+ children are not a priority for the Lithuanian government. According to one interviewee, the specialists who work with children lack knowledge of LGBTI+ issues, and society

continues to deny the existence of LGBTI+ children. LGBTI+ issues continue to be sexualised, and as a result, the needs of LGBTI+ children are neglected. The interviewee said that specialists who work with children should provide them with confidence and empower them to defend their rights. She stressed that the problem often stems from the parents of LGBTI+ children, who cannot accept their children's sexual orientation or gender identity. The specialist said that improving the situation of LGBTI+ children requires resources (both human and financial).

Another interviewee working in children's rights said that there is a lack of political will to make the rights of LGBTI+ children a priority in Lithuania. She said that the specialists who work with children lack knowledge on LGBTI+ issues, even though they often face situations where this kind of knowledge is essential. The interviewee claimed that specialists who work with children often have negative attitudes towards LGBTI+ people, and are therefore unable to function as professionals when resolving situations involving LGBTI+ children. Such specialists cannot effectively address the needs of LGBTI+ children.

According to the interviewee, if teachers, education specialists and education support professionals knew how to recognise and stop child violence based on gender or gender identity, they would not be afraid to talk about it and would be able to help children. This applies not only to families at social risk, but also during complex service projects. She believes that if specialists were able to identify children's needs as well, they could in a sense work with parents to change their attitudes, quell their unfounded fears, and help them accept their children.

The social workers who were interviewed said that support for LGBTI+ children is not very common in their work. They said that they have colleagues who are unable to separate their professional capacities and negative attitudes towards LGBTI+ people.

One interviewee mentioned that she had established a separate group for LGBTI+ children, providing them with a safe space and knowledge about their rights and the support system available. According to her, cases where LGBTI+ children face physical bullying are quite common, so children need to know who is responsible for solving these problems. The interviewee asserted that LGBTI+ children often face bullying in sports, so coaches need to be reminded that not all children are heterosexual and cisgender. The social worker is in frequent contact with schools regarding the bullying that LGBTI+ children face. She feels that LGBTI+ support groups should be established in every school.

Another interviewee said that social workers need to show children that they support them. According to her, LGBTI+ children are used to hostility and negative attitudes, and will not approach adults unless they see that they are supportive. The social worker claimed that she has faced negative attitudes at her workplace because she volunteers at an emotional support platform for LGBTI+ children.

Since she works with families at risk, she talks with LGBTI+ children, tries to create a safe space for them, and works closely with schools, children's rights specialists, public offices and psychologists. The interviewee said that there has to be a common system, so that specialists can simply work as a team, referring young people for psychological counselling if necessary.

3.4 Professionals' (training) needs to combat LGBTI+ violence against children

All of the professionals who were interviewed claimed that they need training to combat LGBTI+ violence against children. In fact, most of the interviewees claimed that the lack of such training for professionals is the reason for the poor situation with LGBTI+ children in Lithuania – their needs are not a priority and therefore are not addressed.

According to the interviewees, all professionals should be trained on LGBTI+ issues, as they lack general knowledge, have many misconceptions regarding LGBTI+ people, and often demonstrate a negative attitude towards LGBTI+ people. Since LGBTI+ people remain highly stigmatised and LGBTI+ issues are still taboo in many sectors – including education – professionals working with children are reluctant to discuss LGBTI+ issues with children. Specialists working with children tend to sexualise LGBTI+ identities, and consider talking about these issues as a form of “LGBTI+ propaganda”. These attitudes mean that many professionals cannot competently deal with LGBTI+ issues without expressing their personal views.

The situation of LGBTI+ children in Lithuania will not change unless professionals working with children receive training on LGBTI+ issues and work on shifting their attitudes. Specialists working with children often provide harmful advice regarding LGBTI+ issues. They urge children to be “normal” in order to avoid bullying and harassment. This is definitely furthering the negative effects of homophobia that LGBTI+ children experience.

3.5 Exemplary quotes from the interviews with professionals

“LGBTI+ children need inclusive education at schools, safe spaces, and youth groups. They need inclusive services and emotional support tailored to their specific needs.”

– Alberta (Lithuania, child psychologist, 38 years old)

“In fact, when it comes to needs, there is a huge lack of information and research to reflect their needs very clearly. Basically, we know those needs mainly from non-governmental organisations, for example, the LGL, from their activities, or from the media. We don't have direct meetings with LGBT children at our institution. And therefore, that naming of the need is indirect in essence, only to the extent that we hear it from the public space.”

– Roberta (Lithuania, child rights specialist, 45 years old)

“Well, I unequivocally think that there is often an unmet need for safety and acceptance. And children sometimes feel that it is not safe for them to reveal their LGBTI+ identity. And if you do disclose your identity, you often face certain safety

challenges and the corresponding issue of acceptance. Sometimes children get acceptance from their peers, but they may not get it from adults.”

– Monika (Lithuania, child psychologist and emotional support service employee, 40 years old)

4. Overall evaluation: Tendencies and shortcomings regarding empowering LGBTI+ children to combat violence in Lithuania

LGBTI+ children in Lithuania indicate that they spend most of their free time with their friends and family. However, some LGBTI+ young people spend their free time alone and face a higher risk of social isolation. Interestingly, but also alarmingly, LGBTI+ young people demonstrate a high level of pessimism when it comes to their expectations of their inner circle. Compared to other countries, Lithuanian respondents are very sceptical in their perception of the potential support systems provided by their inner circle, teachers, social services and healthcare providers.

Only 32.6% of the respondents think that their inner circle might be open to receiving advice on LGBTI+ issues from other people. Only 26.5% of the respondents think that their inner circle would want to protect them against LGBTI+-phobia. Only 26.1% of the respondents have a sense of belonging in their inner circle. Only 6.6% of the respondents said that their school offers counselling that might help them with problems related to them being LGBTI+.

These negative tendencies indicate that most LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania feel that they can only count on themselves when facing LGBTI+-phobia and other issues related to their LGBTI+ identity. Lithuanian society is very homophobic, and most adults are not keen on changing their negative attitudes towards LGBTI+ people. Unfortunately, this means that most LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania remain isolated and have no sense of belonging. This also means that LGBTI+ young people are not likely to seek help from professionals when faced with violence, because they do not expect to receive adequate help.

However, specialists working with children indicate that they welcome LGBTI+ young people. The interviewees claimed that they try to ensure that LGBTI+ young people feel safe and accepted. One interviewee said that psychologists have an impact in changing negative attitudes among parents and teachers when it comes to LGBTI+ children.

Most specialist working with children agree that professionals should be screened for potentially discriminatory attitudes, and should attend mandatory training on LGBTI+ issues. Specialists working in education claim that school staff often have to mediate when children want to learn about LGBTI+ issues but their parents do not approve. LGBTI+ inclusive spaces provided by some education specialists might be the only place where LGBTI+ youth can be themselves.

The LGBTI+ young people who participated in the survey are dealing with economic hardship, violence at home, and homelessness. More than half of the respondents said

that they are dealing with mental health issues, which sometimes leads to self-medication and substance abuse.

The covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions were difficult for the young LGBTI+ respondents. Most of them relied on support from their friends and their partner. This further confirms that LGBTI+ young people are not accepted by their family members and do not expect support from adults. Most respondents indicated that they faced anxiety, loneliness and depression during the pandemic. Most Lithuanian respondents said that they experience discrimination because of their LGBTI+ identity at school, on the street or at home.

Sadly, these negative tendencies do not mean that the rights of LGBTI+ children will be protected in Lithuania in the near future. One specialist who works in children's rights claimed that the rights of LGBTI+ children are not a priority for the Lithuanian government. The interviewee claimed that the specialists who work with children lack knowledge of LGBTI+ issues, and society continues to deny the existence of LGBTI+ children. LGBTI+ issues continue to be sexualised, and as a result, the needs of LGBTI+ children are neglected. The problem often stems from the parents, who cannot accept their children's LGBTI+ identity. However, according to specialists in children's rights, not enough resources (both human and financial) are allocated to improving the situation of LGBTI+ children.

Since there is a lack of political will to make the rights of LGBTI+ children a priority in Lithuania, specialists who work with children lack knowledge on LGBTI+ issues. According to one interviewee, most specialists who work with children have negative attitudes towards LGBTI+ people, and are therefore unable to function as professionals when resolving situations involving LGBTI+ children and addressing their needs.

According to the interviewees working in social services, specialists who work with children would benefit from training on LGBTI+ issues and the recognition of violence. If specialists were able to identify the needs of LGBTI+ children, they would be able to mediate between parents and children and shift the negative attitudes of parents.

Since LGBTI+ children are used to hostility and negative attitudes, they do not approach adults unless they see that they are clearly supportive. This statement is confirmed by the LGBTI+ youth who took part in the survey, as the respondents were very sceptical about receiving support from adults.

Most of the professionals who were interviewed claimed that the lack of LGBTI+ training for professionals is the reason for the poor situation with LGBTI+ young people in Lithuania – their needs are not a priority and therefore are not addressed.

The LGBTI+ young people who participated in the survey were not very optimistic about positive changes in the future. According to the respondents, it is most likely that in the next 10 years, the situation and attitudes will change at universities and in intimate and social relationships.

The situation of LGBTI+ children in Lithuania will not change unless there is political will to make the rights of LGBTI+ children a priority and to raise awareness and change the public attitude on LGBTI+ issues. As adults continue to sexualise children's LGBTI+ identities, LGBTI+ issues remain a taboo in our society, and the children are the ones who are affected the most. Professionals working with children on LGBTI+ issues need

to be trained, as they are the main support system that LGBTI+ children need. And even though LGBTI+ young people do not currently expect to receive adequate help and support, this might change as specialists become more LGBTI+ friendly and inclusive, and trained to recognise the specific needs of LGBTI+ children.

4.1. SWOT regarding combating violence against LGBTI+ children in Lithuania

STRENGTHS (+)	
Discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited in most sectors, including education.	Children's rights bodies are becoming more aware of the need to increase staff competence on LGBTI+ issues, and are generally proactive when it comes to participating in training.
WEAKNESSES (-)	
LGBTI+ issues are not included in the national education curriculum. Therefore, children do not have any objective information on LGBTI+ issues and rely on the internet and social media.	LGBTI+ young people do not expect to receive any support from their parents, specialists and adults in general. This indicates that LGBTI+ young people do not see supportive adults in their inner circle.
OPPORTUNITIES (+)	
Some specialists working with children are open to providing support for LGBTI+ children and youth, and voluntarily participate in training on LGBTI+ issues.	Since LGBTI+ NGOs have expertise on LGBTI+ issues, NGO representatives could provide training on LGBTI+ issues if there is political will to implement it.
THREATS (-)	
Since there is no mandatory training on LGBTI+ issues, specialists working with children often have negative attitudes towards LGBTI+ people and are unable to provide professional support to LGBTI+ children.	The Republic of Lithuania Law on the Protection of Minors Against the Detrimental Effects of Public Information that is currently in place creates a chilling effect on discussing LGBTI+ issues with minors and in the public space. Hence, LGBTI+ issues are still considered taboo in Lithuanian society.

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