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National Report on the Needs and Realities of Young LGBTQI+ Members living in Romania

Over the past years, the surge of hate crimes against LGBTQI+ community has proved to be an imminent issue on the pathway to a more integrated society in Romania. The purpose of this study, thus, is to focus on and put forward the needs and realities of young LGBTQI+ people living in Romania, through the lenses of youth workers and social workers who are working with young people of diverse backgrounds, with essential experience needed to provide insights to the complex landscape of LGBTQI+ members in Romania. This study aims to address the gap of lack of data and insights regarding the realities of LGBTQI+ communities through the insights of those that are working closely with LGBTQI+ communities.

Literature Review

Even though the existing literature providing grassroots level insights to the needs and realities of LGBTQI+ communities in Romania is limited, there has been a gradual expansion of the body of literature on the topic in recent years. Popescu et al. in 2018 provided data on discriminative structures and social behaviors towards LGBTQI+ members in Romania, revealing the social stigmas and lack of awareness in the public towards LGBTQI+ communities.

Ionescu (2020) listed existing legal protection mechanisms available for LGBTQI+ individuals in Romania, highlighting that even though the legal frameworks provide a certain level of protection, the application of the procedures often fall short, especially regarding hate crimes and discrimination at workplaces.

In another study, Radu and Vlad (2019) pointed out the unique challenges that young LGBTQI+ individuals face, such as lack of family support, bullying, limited access or problems in healthcare.

As for healthcare accessibility, Dragomir et al. (2017) emphasized the lack of educated staff and awareness in healthcare personnel towards LGBTQI+ members, pointing out the cultural biases obstructing the access to essential care for LGBTQI+.

European Commission against Racism and Intolerance issued a report in 2018, highlighting the lack of inclusive practices for LGBTQI+ community members in education system in Romania, which was also echoed highly by the local activists.

On the other hand, some NGOs that are working on the needs of LGBTQI+ communities in Romania, such as ACCEPT published some reports with insights on the community support structures, safe spaces, approaches and counseling services for LGBTQI+ in Romania (ACCEPT, 2021).

The literature on the field reveals a complex and multifaceted set of challenges that LGBTQI+ young individuals face in Romania. However, there is still a need for a more elaborative understanding, particularly from those that are working directly with LGBTQI+ youth. Therefore, this report aims to address this gap by providing insights from youth workers to uncover the needs and realities of young LGBTQI+ members in Romania, to provide a meaningful resource and pathway for projects, initiatives and policies that are to be undertaken in the future.

Methodology

The primary aim of this study was to comprehend the challenges, needs, and lived experiences of young LGBTQI+ individuals in Romania, from the perspective of NGO workers and social workers.

A qualitative research design was employed to allow for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences and perceptions of participants.

The study's participants were drawn from various NGOs in Romania that work directly with or advocate for the LGBTQI+ community. A purposive sampling technique was used to select knowledgeable participants, including youth workers and social workers.

A structured, open-ended questionnaire was disseminated to targeted NGOs. The questionnaire covered topics ranging from legal challenges and protections, healthcare needs, educational challenges, and general societal attitudes.

The data gathered from the surveys were transcribed and analyzed thematically. A coding system was developed to identify and categorize emerging themes, patterns, and insights. The analysis process utilized qualitative software tools to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness.

Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and their rights. To guarantee participant privacy, all identifying information was removed or altered during the transcription process. The data was stored securely with access limited to the research team.

Participants were made aware of the study's objectives and the potential implications of the findings. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Results

The results of this study are categorized under ten sub-topics, in line with the nature of obstacles that young LGBTQI+ face in their daily life. The sub-topics include

challenges, legal protection mechanisms, healthcare needs, education and awareness, family and community support, workplace equality, safe spaces and social integration, political advocacy and policy making, intersectionality and inclusivity, and research and data collection.

1. Challenges

Challenges that young LGBTQI+ community members face in their daily lives are complex and multi-faceted, however, the study surveys showed a number of overlapping aspects, such as education, family rejection, employment, safe spaces, and mental health issues.

1.2 Family Rejection

Family rejection was identified as another painful reality for many LGBTQI+ youth. Several respondents shared stories of young individuals being ostracized or even abandoned by their families due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. "The traditional family values in some Romanian communities make acceptance harder," noted a social worker.

1.3 Employment Discrimination

Young LGBTQI+ individuals also face challenges in accessing equal employment opportunities. Some participants recounted instances where openly LGBTQI+ individuals were passed over for job opportunities or faced harassment in the workplace. A respondent remarked, "Without adequate laws protecting them, LGBTQI+ youth are often at a disadvantage in the job market."

1.4 Lack of Safe Spaces

The absence of safe spaces where LGBTQI+ youth can express themselves and find community support was highlighted. One youth worker explained, "Community centers and support groups are scarce, particularly outside urban areas, leaving many LGBTQI+ youth isolated and vulnerable."

1.5 Mental Health Struggles

The cumulative effect of these challenges has a substantial impact on the mental well-being of LGBTQI+ youth. Many participants stressed the need for accessible mental health support tailored to LGBTQI+

individuals' unique experiences. "The depression and anxiety rates among LGBTQI+ youth are alarming and require immediate attention," stated a mental health professional working with an NGO.

2. Legal Protections and Challenges

2.1 Existing Legal Framework

Romania's legal framework regarding LGBTQI+ rights includes anti-discrimination laws, but participants expressed concern about their effectiveness. One participant stated, "Laws protecting LGBTQI+ individuals are on paper, but their enforcement is inconsistent at best."

2.2 Hate Crimes and Discrimination

Several respondents pointed to the lack of legal action against hate crimes and discrimination. A youth worker shared a poignant observation, saying, "I've seen cases where verbal and physical assaults went unpunished, even when reported."

2.3 Workplace Discrimination

Workplace discrimination emerged as a particular concern, reflecting a gap in the legal protections offered to LGBTQI+ individuals. A social worker noted, "There's no specific law that effectively protects LGBTQI+ individuals from discrimination in the workplace. Many feel helpless and unprotected."

2.4 Challenges in Legal Gender Recognition

Legal recognition of one's gender identity is a significant issue for transgender and gender-diverse individuals. An NGO representative stated, "The process of legal gender recognition is fraught with bureaucratic hurdles and lacks clear guidelines. It's a demoralizing experience for many."

2.5 Marriage and Partnership Rights

Same-sex marriage and civil partnership rights continue to be debated issues in Romania. A participant remarked, "The absence of legal recognition for same-sex relationships leaves couples without rights and legal protections that heterosexual couples take for granted."

2.6 Awareness and Legal Support

Many participants noted that a lack of awareness about existing legal protections and accessible legal support hinders LGBTQI+ individuals from seeking justice. A legal advocate working with an LGBTQI+ organization explained, "Even when rights are violated, people don't know where to turn or fear further discrimination."

3. Healthcare Needs

3.1 Lack of Specialized Services

Participants frequently mentioned a critical shortage of healthcare services tailored to LGBTQI+ individuals' needs. One social worker lamented, "Finding professionals who understand LGBTQI+ health needs is a challenge, especially outside big cities."

3.2 Mental Health Support

The mental health struggles of LGBTQI+ individuals, particularly youth, were underscored. A youth worker stated, "Access to mental health professionals trained in LGBTQI+ issues is rare, leaving many to cope alone with depression and anxiety."

3.3 Health Insurance and Affordability

Some respondents pointed to problems with health insurance coverage and affordability of specialized care. An NGO representative noted, "Insurance often doesn't cover therapies or treatments specific to LGBTQI+ needs, making them financially out of reach for many."

3.4 Gender-Affirming Care

Access to gender-affirming care, such as hormone therapy or surgeries, was identified as a significant gap. A transgender advocate explained, "The path to gender-affirming care is filled with obstacles, from medical gatekeeping to social stigmatization."

3.5 Discrimination within Healthcare Settings

Several participants described instances of discrimination and insensitivity within healthcare settings. A healthcare provider who works with LGBTQI+ patients remarked, "I've seen colleagues treat LGBTQI+ patients with disrespect or even refuse care due to personal biases."

3.6 Education and Awareness among Healthcare Professionals

Many respondents called for better education and awareness among healthcare professionals regarding LGBTQI+ health needs. One participant emphasized, "Medical curricula should include LGBTQI+ health competencies to ensure that all patients are treated with dignity and understanding."

3.7 HIV/AIDS Prevention and Treatment

Specific mention was made of the need for improved HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment services tailored to LGBTQI+ individuals. An NGO worker specializing in this area said, "Focused prevention, testing, and treatment programs can help address the disproportionate impact of HIV/AIDS on the LGBTQI+ community."

4: Education and Awareness

4.1 Inclusive Education in Schools

The need for LGBTQI+ inclusive education in schools was a recurrent theme. A teacher working with an LGBTQI+ support group explained, "Our curricula lack representation of LGBTQI+ figures and themes. This absence perpetuates ignorance and prejudice."

4.2 Teacher Training and Sensitization

Several participants highlighted the need for comprehensive training for teachers to address LGBTQI+ issues sensitively. One education expert noted, "Teachers often feel ill-equipped to handle LGBTQI+ topics, leading to missed opportunities to foster acceptance."

4.3 Anti-Bullying Initiatives

The importance of specific anti-bullying initiatives targeting LGBTQI+ youth was raised by many. A youth worker stated, "Without clear policies and enforcement against bullying, LGBTQI+ students suffer in silence."

4.4 Access to Information and Support

Several respondents emphasized the importance of accessible information and support for LGBTQI+ students. A school counselor said, "We need dedicated resources, like counseling and support groups, that are openly available to students struggling with their identity."

4.5 Community Awareness and Sensitization

Beyond schools, participants discussed the broader need for community education and awareness. An NGO representative working on public awareness campaigns shared, "Widespread misconceptions and stereotypes persist. We need public campaigns that humanize LGBTQI+ experiences."

5. Family and Community Support

This section explores the dynamics within families and communities, focusing on acceptance, support, and outreach. Participants stress the importance of community centers, counseling, and awareness programs aimed at fostering acceptance and understanding within families and local communities.

6. Workplace Equality

This article highlights the challenges and opportunities within the workplace. Participants discuss the need for clear anti-discrimination policies, diversity training, and support networks within companies to ensure LGBTQI+ employees are treated with dignity and respect.

7. Safe Spaces and Social Integration

Exploring the creation and maintenance of safe spaces for LGBTQI+ individuals, this section emphasizes the importance of community centers, social groups, and events that cater to LGBTQI+ interests and needs. Participants call for more public and private support for such spaces.

8. Political Advocacy and Policy-making

This article addresses the role of political activism and policy-making in advancing LGBTQI+ rights. Participants discuss the importance of collaboration between NGOs, activists, and lawmakers in shaping inclusive policies, as well as the need for sustained advocacy to maintain momentum.

9. Intersectionality and Inclusivity

Focusing on the diverse experiences within the LGBTQI+ community, this section explores the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Participants emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing these diverse experiences in all LGBTQI+ support efforts.

10. Research and Data Collection

The final article underscores the need for ongoing research and accurate data collection on LGBTQI+ issues in Romania. Participants call for collaboration between academic institutions, NGOs, and government bodies to ensure that policies and interventions are evidence-based and targeted.

Overall Conclusion

The study offers a comprehensive view of the multifaceted needs and challenges faced by the LGBTQI+ community in Romania. Drawing on the insights of youth workers, social workers, educators, healthcare providers, activists, and various other stakeholders, it provides a roadmap for creating a more inclusive and supportive society. Collaboration across sectors, sustained effort, and a commitment to understanding and respecting the unique experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals emerge as key themes in shaping a better future for all.

Tips & Tricks for Youth Workers and Social Workers Working with Young LGBTQI+ Members

Working with young LGBTQI+ individuals, especially in a context like Romania, presents both unique challenges and opportunities. Given the societal, legal, and cultural intricacies of the country, youth workers and social workers must be equipped with specific strategies to support this vulnerable group effectively. The following "Tips & Tricks" serve as a comprehensive guide, drawing upon recent research findings and best practices in the field. These suggestions aim to promote inclusivity, understanding, and effective advocacy, ensuring that every LGBTQI+ young person feels valued, protected, and empowered. Whether it's understanding the nuances of Romanian laws, addressing mental health concerns, fostering peer connections, or leveraging the digital realm, these pointers are designed to be both practical and impactful, laying the foundation for a more supportive and affirming environment for LGBTQI+ youth.

1. Cultivate a Safe Environment:

Tip: Prioritize creating a non-judgmental, inclusive, and confidential space for LGBTQI+ youth.

Trick: Display symbols of LGBTQI+ inclusion, such as rainbow flags or safe space stickers, to visually affirm your support.

2. Understand Legal Landscape:

Tip: Familiarize yourself with Romanian laws concerning LGBTQI+ rights.

Trick: Keep a pocket-sized summary of the legal rights of LGBTQI+ individuals to refer to during discussions or crises.

3. Prioritize Mental Health:

Tip: Recognize that LGBTQI+ youth face heightened emotional and mental challenges due to societal pressures.

Trick: Maintain a list of LGBTQI+-friendly therapists or counselors for referrals.

4. Continuous Education:

Tip: Regularly update your knowledge on LGBTQI+ issues, terminologies, and best practices.

Trick: Attend workshops, webinars, or seminars focused on LGBTQI+ inclusivity and rights. Share your learnings with your colleagues.

5. Actively Combat Discrimination:

Tip: Address any discriminatory behaviors or comments immediately, ensuring that young LGBTQI+ individuals feel defended and valued.

Trick: Develop role-playing exercises to simulate real-life situations, helping peers and other professionals understand the impact of their words and actions.

6. Understand Healthcare Needs:

Tip: Recognize that LGBTQI+ youth have unique healthcare needs, especially transgender youth.

Trick: Collaborate with LGBTQI+ health organizations to develop informative resources and guidelines.

7. Foster Peer Support:

Tip: Encourage the development of peer support groups where LGBTQI+ youth can share experiences and build resilience.

Trick: Facilitate mentorship programs by pairing LGBTQI+ youth with older LGBTQI+ mentors.

8. Involve Families:

Tip: Understand the pivotal role families play in the well-being of LGBTQI+ youth.

Trick: Organize family support sessions or workshops that educate on LGBTQI+ issues, aiming to foster understanding and acceptance.

9. Utilize Online Platforms:

Tip: Leverage social media and online forums to reach, educate, and support LGBTQI+ youth.

Trick: Create safe online communities or discussion groups, moderated to ensure positive interactions.

10. Advocate for Systemic Change:

Tip: Use the insights from this report and personal experiences to advocate for policies that better support LGBTQI+ youth.

Trick: Collaborate with NGOs, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to create a united front for policy change.

Activity Plans for Youth Workers and Social Workers Working with Young LGBTQI+ Community Members

1. **Activity:** "In Their Shoes" Story Circle

Introduction (15 minutes):

Setting the Stage: Begin by explaining the purpose of the activity: "Today, we'll be delving deep into real-life experiences of LGBTQI+ youth. This is not just an exercise in listening but one in understanding, empathy, and introspection."

Icebreaker: Have each participant share a story or memory from their teenage years without revealing if it's true or made up. This primes them for storytelling and piques curiosity.

Explaining the Objective: "Each of you will receive a story that reflects a lived experience of an LGBTQI+ individual. As we read these stories aloud, our goal is to understand, empathize, and later, reflect on our reactions."

Process (20 minutes):

Distribution: Hand out the printed short stories or experiences of LGBTQI+ youth to each participant. Ensure there's a variety of stories representing various challenges and aspects of LGBTQI+ life.

Reading Aloud: Ask for volunteers to begin. As each participant reads their story, encourage others to close their eyes and visualize the narrative, immersing themselves in it.

Silent Reflection: After each story, pause for about a minute to let the narrative sink in, allowing participants to process their emotions.

Debriefing (20 minutes):

Personal Reflection: "Now that we've heard all the stories, I want each of you to think about the one that resonated with you the most. Why did that particular narrative stand out?"

Group Sharing: Allow participants to share their reflections. This isn't just about the content of the story, but also about the feelings it invoked.

Guided Questions:

"How did it feel to step into the shoes of an LGBTQI+ youth?"

"Were there any stories that challenged your existing perceptions or beliefs?"

"How can understanding these narratives influence your work with LGBTQI+ youth?"

Connecting to Practice: Encourage participants to discuss how these insights can be applied in their roles. "Having heard these stories, what might you do differently in your interactions with LGBTQI+ individuals?"

2. Activity: "Rainbow Mosaic: Exploring Identities"

Introduction (15 minutes):

Setting the Context: Begin by explaining the diverse spectrum of LGBTQI+ identities. Mention, "Just as colors come together to form a rainbow, various identities come together to form the LGBTQI+ community. Each color, each identity, is unique yet interconnected."

Icebreaker: "Color of My Day": Ask participants to share a color that best represents their day or current mood and explain why. This will get them thinking about symbolic meanings and personal connections to colors.

Explaining the Objective: "In today's activity, we will use colors to explore and understand the diverse identities within the LGBTQI+ community. We aim to gain a deeper appreciation for each identity and explore our personal connections to them."

Process (25 minutes):

Materials Setup: Spread out large sheets of paper, colored markers, colored pencils, crayons, and any other artistic materials you might have.

Group Division: Divide participants into small groups. Assign each group a specific LGBTQI+ identity (e.g., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, etc.)

Mosaic Creation: Each group creates a mosaic (a pattern or image made of small regular or irregular pieces) representing their assigned identity. Encourage them to think symbolically. For example, if the group is focusing on 'Bisexuality,' they might think of color combinations, patterns, or symbols that reflect this identity.

Identity Dive: As they work on their mosaics, each group should also discuss and write down:

What they know about the assigned identity.

Common stereotypes associated with it.

Questions they might have or areas of uncertainty.

Debriefing (20 minutes):

Mosaic Presentation: Each group presents their mosaic, explaining their design choices, what they discussed, and any questions they raised.

Group Reflection: As each group shares, note down common themes, stereotypes, and questions on a board.

Personal Connection: Ask participants to think about the mosaic colors and patterns. "Which color or pattern did you personally resonate with and why?" This can be based on personal identity, feelings, or simply aesthetic preference.

