

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression-Based Violence in Catalan Universities: Qualitative Findings from University Students and Staff

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Abstract

Background

Hate crimes have raised in Spain and the gender and sexuality-based conflict persist worldwide which leads to this problem having an effect on health and wellbeing. Following a focus of transforming Higher Education Institutions (HEI), this research focusses on analysing how this problem affects undergraduate students in six Spanish universities. The goal of this study is to improve the quality of life of LGBTQI+ University students, breaking the silence that exists about the violence that this group suffer in Catalonia, Spain.

Methods

Following the Communicative Methodology, this study has identified violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression in the target universities and provided guidelines to improve anti-discrimination protocols. A qualitative method has reached experiences of university students, heads of equality commissions, professors and administrative staff regarding this conflict. Focussing on the qualitative research tools, 30 half-structured interviews were conducted with university students, staff and professors around issues related to LGBTQI-phobic violence: 1) perception of violence and discrimination, 2) institutional measures, 3) actions against violence. An analysis of exclusionary and transformative dimensions was used to identify emergent themes.

Results

We have identified two dimensions for the analysis: exclusionary -those that maintain the problem-, and transformative, -those that contribute to transform the problem of LGBTQI-phobia-. On the one hand, exclusionary facts have been described by participants in the study as a wide range of forms of violence against the LGBTQI+ community perpetrated at university, mainly verbal and psychological. Moreover, equality commissions have not received reports of LGBTQI-phobic violence, and university staff and professors show certain unfamiliarity regarding measures and politics to prevent and intervene in cases of violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. On the other hand, in the study of variables that contribute to overcoming this conflict, actions of LGBTQI groups against violence and the professors' commitment to intervene show relevant changes in student's wellbeing. An improvement and implementation of anti-discrimination protocols with mandatory measures has also been documented.

Conclusions

Findings highlight the need for evidence that contributes to the improvement of protocols, measures and politics to protect the LGBTQI community at university. A better understanding of violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in HEI's may guide national and international governments to improve the LGBTQI collectives' health and well-being. This study provides relevant

information regarding this pressing challenge and presents an important impact achieved contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of the LGBTQI+ community.

Trial registration

Not applicable

Background

Violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression is present in our society and it also exists within the university community. Numerous international studies have shown that lesbian, gay, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) community have more risk and probabilities to suffer sexual discrimination or harassment during their university trajectory (1–3) and the risk of being object of violence increases in the case of transgender students (4–6). National politics and international agendas have prioritized the legislation and regulation to end with LGBTQI-phobia (7, 8), even though the risk of suffering sexual harassment is still higher in the case of sexual minorities (1, 6, 9, 10). The case of Spanish universities reflects the international panorama in relation to the LGBTQI+ community (11). Given the limitations of this regulation in the identification of LGBTQI-phobic violence and the cases that do not approach police reports and the reality of the violence towards de LGBTQI+ community in the territory is totally invisible. Regarding educational institutions, educating in diversity, tolerance and acceptance towards diversity is crucial, but international reports demonstrates that in Spain this is still a pending subject (12). It is disturbing the lack of literature and research at HEI's, generating a significant silence towards the situation of LGBTQI+ groups and the consequences of LGBTQI-phobia in their personal, academic and health status. As a response to this reality, the research *Uni4freedom* aimed to break the silence that goes along the LGBTQI+ community at HEI's, improving the life quality of all university members and struggle against violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in the Catalan context.

The main challenge of studying the conflict against the diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions is the diversity of violence's representations. In the last years, it has been demonstrated that there has been a change in the manifestation of violence against LGBT groups towards more subtle and unnoticed manifestations (6). Verbal forms of violence (9, 13, 14), homophobic jokes (10, 15, 16), anti-LGBT paintings, graffiti and threatens (3, 13), social distance (10, 15, 17) and not-inclusive or acceptance spaces (18) have been identified as advanced forms of violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. On the one hand, the case of hostile environment is conditioning to the free expression of the felt gender identity and sexual orientation (9, 18–21). On the other hand, all these forms and manifestations of violence can generate a response of internalization and normalization of the homophobic actions, perpetuating the violence and affecting negatively in the life quality and wellbeing of LGBT students (3, 16, 22–24).

All these forms of violence and signs of conflict at HEI's affect students in different ways. Following the scientific literature's findings, violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity

and expression has consequences in three spheres of LGBT university student's life. Firstly, it affects the health status physically and mentally. It has been shown that LGBT students presents higher symptoms of depression and anxiety (9, 13) and that hearing discriminatory comments and exclusion feelings is related to suffering various forms of physical ache (10, 16). Secondly, it affects their academic performance, presenting a lower grades in average in comparison to hetero-cis students (25) showing the lack of social cohesion of university students. This difference of academic results has been analysed as an aftereffect of LGBT stigmatization creating difficulty of focussing in their studies (19), having further consequences in their future possibilities and academic success (23). Thirdly, these realities of LGBT-phobia in HEI's promote exclusionary climates and affects negatively to the cohesion and relationality of sexual minority students (21). The seen or suffered experiences of harassment or discrimination can generate a feeling of isolation and exclusion (6, 25) and these feelings can be reinforced by the institutional invisibility of LGBT perspective and referents (13).

Given the immediacy of the problem of LGBT phobia at HEI's, evidences demonstrate six different axes to prevent and intervene violence based in sexual orientation and gender identity and expression within university institutions. Visibility of the LGBTQI+ collective and their situation in the university scope is key to prevent LGBT-phobia. Besides, it is necessary a deep sensibilization of university members to be able and face the problem of LGBT-phobia (1, 26). In order to make this sensibilization effective and reach all university members, it has been shown that the inclusion of LGBT literature in academic curriculums has the highest impact in the reduction of LGBT-phobia (18, 26). Another protective factor for the prevention and intervention in cases of violence based in sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression is the explicit institutional support towards the LGBTQI+ groups through the implementation of politics and strategies towards the reduction of hetero-sexism (6, 9, 27, 28).

This article intends to generate qualitative evidences on how to overcome this form of gender inequality in a very relevant social institution. Furthermore, this contribution is grounded on the voices of the own protagonists to this reality, members of the university community, in order to achieve strategies that influence university spaces and members for its transformation.

Methods

This article has been focussed it research methodology for social impact. The voices of the end-users of the research have been incorporated in all phases of the research, ensuring the social impact and social transformation of the conflict (29). To make that possible, the design of the methodology has been through Communicative Methodology of Research (hereinafter, CMR) (30), which stands out for its capacity to identify successful actions that contribute to overcoming inequality and to generate social politics based in this actions. CM stands for generating scientific knowledge through the contrast of the scientific evidences (contributed by the researchers) and the contributions of the social agents' participants in the research, defined as *world of life* (31–33).

Though this perspective, this study aimed to picture the violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression take place at HEI's, in order overcome social inequality based on gender and identify successful practices and decisions for the eradication of this violence. For that, the study was designed to understand how, why, in which forms and circumstances takes place this form of violence at HEI's affecting to university students' life, health status and future. Given the scientific evidences on LGBTQI + violence prevalence and the aims of the research, the main research objective is to improve the quality of life of LGTBIQ university students, breaking the silence that exists about the violence that this group suffers.

Following the communicative perspective, Uni4Freedom has implemented mixed research (35) of which for this article we will focus on qualitative evidences. Half-structured interviews with communicative orientation have composed the fieldwork of the study taking place in six universities of the Catalan region. The fieldwork has been designed in order to, firstly, make an approach and a diagnose of the reality that LGBTQI + people face at Catalan universities and, secondly, deepen the perspective of university staff and professors, exploring the possibilities to implement and propose transformative actions for the inclusion and non-discrimination. The population target of the study are university students enrolled in different disciplines within the six Catalan universities partner of the project¹, students, university professors, administrative staff and heads of equality commissions or units at these institutions.

Communicative organization of the research

In order to ensure the social impact of the research, the voices of LGBTQI + groups and LGBTQI + organizations have been included in different forms and phases during the study. Their participation has been indispensable, contributing with reciprocity, advice and follow-up to the guarantee of the research objectives ensuring methodological ethics. The Advisory Board is a follow-up and supervising body which have been formed by representatives of referent organizations on LGBTQI + rights in the territory². In two different stages of the project and face-to-face meetings in 2018 and 2020, this board has debated and reviewed the methodological plan, research technics, findings and proposals. Their contribution has let us follow the ethical principles as well as ensuring the work and results for the improvement of the situation of LGBTQI + groups at Catalan HEI's.

Fieldwork

We have conducted 12 half-structured interviews with communicative orientation to LGBTQI + university professors and staff from the partner universities of the project. As well, we have conducted 4 half-structured interviews with communicative orientation to heads of equality units or commissions from the partner universities of the project. And finally, 12 *communicative daily life stories* with University students. These technics have gathered the communicative orientation of the methodology by implementing reflective dialogues between participant and researcher on the incidence of violence due to sexual orientation, identity or gender expression in their career as a university professor/staff or student and

proposals to make university a more LGBTQI + friendly space. The distribution of research tools and participants has been as it follows:

Table 1
Fieldwork distribution

Research tool	Participants	Institutional affiliation
Semi-structured interviews	12 active university professors or staff.	Belonging to the participant Universities in the study.
Semi-structured interviews	4 active heads or professionals working at the University Equality Unit or Committee.	Units belonging to the participant Universities in the study.
Communicative daily life stories	12 university students starting from second year of the BA degree until last year of the PhD.	Belonging to any Catalan University.

Source: Own Elaboration

Research tools

The guidelines of the interviews have been designed following the communicative perspective, attending to the results of the literature review and contrasted with the Advisory Committee. This combination in the design process has allowed us to developed complex guidelines that makes possible finding situations, characteristics and circumstances that enhance or aim to transform the conflict of violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression at HEI's. We have identified three sections that have let us build the data collection process of the interviews:

1. The description and presentation of general aspects of the research method, theme, explore different perspectives and ideas in relation to the reality of the situation of the LGBTQI + community at University.
2. To study the experience or perception of violence based on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression at University or spaces related to the institution attending to the results of the literature review.
3. Approach the perception of institutional strategies to detect, prevent and intervene in cases of LGBTQI-phobia by the research participants attending to their different roles in the community.

Ethical validation

The study has received the ethical validation of the ethical committees of Girona University and Lleida University on 2019. After submitting a detailed protocol for the fieldwork, containing consent forms and guidelines of interviews, the Ethics and Biosafety Committee of the University of Girona approved the start of the fieldwork. For the second ethical approval, the Committee for the approval of research studies at the Faculty of Nursing and Physiotherapy of the University of Lleida approved the fieldwork plan, consent forms and guidelines for interviews under the ethical requirements of confidentiality and good praxis without objections.

Consents forms were systematically signed by all research participants and researchers implementing the tools in order to ensure their rights in the research. These forms helped us to protect their right to confidentiality, anonymity, wilfulness, possibility to pause or leave the study at any moment and receive all necessary information for their involvement by the researcher.

Apart from the institutional validation, the research counted with an Advisory Board which supervised, followed-up and advise the research team in three different phases: approbation of the literature review, fieldwork plan and preliminary results of the study. This board was composed by members of the LGBTQI + community, university students and representatives of active organizations for LGBTQI + rights of the territory⁴. Their belonging to the targeted community was due to the need of including the voices of the end-users of the research throughout the whole process of the research. The role of the board has been to ground the theory and scientific evidences to the daily reality of the LGBTQI + community, reinforcing the transformative role of the research through their contributions in the study.

Data Analysis

The analysis chart has been designed to collect contributions from interviews and communicative daily life stories taking into account of all dimensions and categories selected (Table 2 – Analysis chart). Dimensions are located in the rows and refer to the two sorts of results depending on their contribution or transformation of the target conflict, referring to the Communicative Methodology. Categories are the concepts that are being use in the research process to analyse the results of the fieldwork and they are located in the columns (Table 2 – Analysis chart). The categories have been defined through a deductive method of definition, meaning that they have been determined before fieldwork through the study of scientific literature regarding LGBTQI-phobia in HEI's. The categories resulting from this study are: LGBTQI-phobic violence, actions against the violence and university politics and measures against the violence.

Table 2
– Analysis chart

	Violence against the LGBTQIA + groups	Actions against the violence	University politics and measures
Exclusionary dimension	1	2	3
Transformative dimension	4	5	6

Own resource

The research team has processed the qualitative results of the fieldwork ensuring the anonymity of the participants in all phases of the study. Members of the research team have transcribed the interviews and daily life stories verbatim. Then, the research team has coded the transcription by using the numbers of the designed analysis chart (Table 2 – Analysis chart), identifying results and matches between the

targeted categories and dimensions on the transcriptions. We have not made use of any software or program for the systematization of this process.

¹The partner universities of Uni4Freedom are: Rovira i Virgili University; University of Barcelona; University of Girona; University of Lleida; Ramón Llull University and University of Vic.

²Participant entities and organizations on the Advisory Board:

- Col·lectiu H2O · Gais, Lesbianes, Bisexuals i Transsexuals del Camp de Tarragona.
- SAI Tarragona - Servei d'Atenció Integral a les Diversitats Sexuals i de Gèneres de Tarragona.
- Xarxa Solidària de Vctimes de Violència de Gènere a la Universitat.
- Gènere Lliure.
- Col·lectiu de gèneres i sexualitats dissidents (GSD).

³The participant universities in the study are:

- Rovira i Virgili University.
- Girona University.
- Lleida University.
- Vic University.
- Barcelona University.
- Ramón Llull University.

⁴The participant entities in the Advisory Committee have been:

- Col·lectiu H2O (Gais, Lesbianes, Bisexuals i Transsexuals del Camp de Tarragona).
- SAI Tarragona - Servei d'Atenció Integral a les Diversitats Sexuals i de Gèneres de Tarragona: suport social, informació i atenció psicològica i jurídica.

Results

In this section, we have made a deep approach to the research target: studying violence against LGBTQI + groups at HEI's. On the one hand, we have analysed the results that do not contribute to overcoming the problem of violence based in sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, also called exclusionary. On the other hand, we have analysed those contributions that have an influence in transforming and overcoming the targeted violence at HEI's, also called: transformative. All of the presented results belong to the research tools and research participants already mentioned fieldwork subsection (Table 1 - Fieldwork distribution)

Violence's normalization and internalization

Firstly, findings on *violence against LGBTQI + groups* at university have shown that the normalization of discriminatory comments, normalization and internalization of LGBTQI-phobia are the most present consequences of the violence at HEI's. These results make evidence the need to promote measures of awareness-raising to promote respect to diversity. Under this category, we highlight the normalization on violence in the daily discourses at universities as a consequence of the constant violence against LGBTQI + people. The normalization of violence is funded on naturalizing discriminatory comments towards LGBTQI + groups, which can happen even within classrooms as stated by a professor in an interview:

Then inside the class, let me think... at the break and when we leave and so on, I've seen someone say to another "hey fagot, you didn't get the work done today!" maybe they did it and, I don't know, I have it so incorporated that I don't pay attention to it either.

In this sense, students have also shared in everyday life stories experiences that prove the naturalization of discriminatory discourses towards LGBTQI + groups, as stated by the following student in a communicative daily life story:

Well, I don't know, if in class or between classes, we are talking or they are talking, so in a group, and they want to refer to a boy as being a freak or weaker than the rest they refer to him as a fagot.

The LGBTQI + students' participant in the research have claimed the consequences of the normalization of the violence. Following their discourse, they have found that reproduction of homo and lesbo-phobic comments and the self-internalization of the violence are results of having received a LGBTQI-phobic socialization. As one of the states in a communicative daily life story:

Many times, I think they overlook these comments because we are used to them. For me what happens to me is like, if one day I hear someone say butch or something, it's not hard for me to pass but I guess I would think that he's an asshole, you know? But then I would think that, he's silly and that's it and I wouldn't take it as something personal, but as something more social that looks normal.

Transgender vulnerability in the conflict

Research have shown that transgender people are the most probable to have difficulties and more probabilities to suffer violence or discrimination at HEI's (4-6). This form of vulnerability in the university context is even more disturbing when the results show the complexity and accumulation of forms of violence that only transgender studies suffer. There can be specific circumstances and milestones that transgender students live, such as the social transition and the bodily changes, elements that can make their educational process at university even harder when belonging to the LGBTQI + community. As a transgender student state in a communicative daily life story:

Then I made the transition and it's like that, with the medication and that I was like super confused with many things, I was relocating mental issues, because in the end I didn't know many things either, because the medication numbed me and I don't know. Of course, I did notice suspicion and misunderstanding and

a feeling of being something weird, disgust, by some colleagues and I realized it but well, as I'm saying I tried to ignore it because I have enough problems.

The exclusionary discourses, looks and refusal perception is clear in the voiced of the interviewed people, making evidence the need of promoting measures of sensibilization that advocate the respect to diversity and differences. In this sense, it is especially relevant the need of intervention and respect towards the transgender groups, as it has been shown in the interviews' fragments.

Unfamiliarity of institutional mechanisms and interventions

Secondly, findings on *university politics and measures* have pointed at the lack of actions, university politics and measures to fight violence and, at the same time, the disregard of professors and staff on mechanisms to prevent and intervene in cases of LGBTQI-phobia. As well, the lack of cases of violence due to sexual orientation, gender identity or expression at equality office indicates the complexity of this form of violence and the possible ignorance about violence based on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression by officials at universities. It is relevant the fact that some Heads of University Equality Offices claim not to have received complaints regarding violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, as one of them shared in an interview:

The truth is that no. I have not dealt with any cases at the observatory, no petitions or expositions have been received of violence based on gender identity or sexual orientation. We haven't realized. it. For me, it hasn't come directly to me as a teacher or as a college. It hasn't reach me. I know it's a college reality, but the truth is I can't say it's a reality for me because I haven't seen it.

The figure '0' of cases at university of violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression at universities could be explained by the lack of mechanisms and abilities by university professors and staff to identify and detect the violence (6, 36, 37). As well, it could also be justified by the attempts to generate safe and friendly spaces for the LGBTQI+ community to make easier the process of filing a complaint of LGBTQI-phobia as it proves the communicative daily life stories with trans students:

I think that a trans person should not go through an equality unit to request a name change, right? But I think that this could already be done in a much easier process of administrative access, that is, how you do your... You fill out your application for the first time, that is, in that database, what if there were what is called a chosen name?

The lack of knowledge from university professors, staff and officials about measures, resources and heads of reference in cases of LGBTQI-phobia has been stated in the interviews as a constant reality as commented by a university staff in an interview: "I'm not responsible. I don't know if within the management team there is someone in charge of this politics in case there is a problem."

We have identified other indicators apart from ignorance which could response to the lack of support network for victims of LGBTQI-phobic violence within HEI's. Many university politics and educational protocols for the prevention and intervention in cases of violence based on sexual orientation, gender

identity or expression have been developed in the last years from Equality Units and Commissions and other spaces towards equality and against discrimination at HEI's. The ignorance on the international scientific evidences on these politics carries a limitation in the struggle against the violence towards the LGBTQI+ community. This is due to the lack of knowledge and training on the measures and the roots of LGBTQI-phobia for the implementation. In order to understand the notions on institutional measures to intervene in conflicts based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, we can see a university professor's discourse in which they present their thoughts on the transgender name-change process as it follows a fragment of an interview:

The doubt that I was holding is the legal part. Without a doubt the university has to support immediately and if it's necessary to change, it changes [referring to name], if you have special needs, it has to be attended, they have to be listened and we have to see what can be done, of course. What confuses me a little is the legal issue. (...) To the official lists, they appear with the birth name, but they can be changed and it seems viable, and they are comparable because at the end, that's the name that you identify with. "I do not identify with Antonio José... I identify with Toni." And it seems very comparable. If this person wants to change the name of Maria to Pere because he identifies as Peter, so Peter and that's it. What I find most complicated is at a more internal level, for example in the records, that you have the name changed because there would probably be a conflict of legal identity.

In this sense, students agree in recognizing that ignorance complicates the process identification and support in particular situations of LGBTQI-phobia at universities. For that reason, training and sensibilization on LGBTQI+ issues are considered very necessary towards turning all university members into agents of change, being or not part of the LGBTQI+ community, as a student point out in a communicative daily life story:

I think so, I have not experienced these situations, and I don't know these types of situations. I'm sure it happened. I think that it should be known both for those who do not know it and for those who suffer it or have seen it, to know that they are not alone that someone is aware of the issue and that they take measures against these situations and that there are those points of help. There are also people who do not want to come out of the closet and they may have problems but they will not ask for help because they have not yet come out of the closet so it would be good for them to know that there are actions that can help them without anyone knowing anything and keeping their secret. It is an option for those people to have help.

University as a safe space

Secondly, on the variable *LGBTQI+ actions against violence* findings point at the existence of three protective factors that lead to overcoming violence and discrimination: HEI's perceived as safer spaces than others, compromise and predisposition of professors to prevent and intervene in cases of violence successfully and university protocols and measures of intervention including all university community. This is due to the role of Equality Units, their familiarity, respect and openness has an important effect in the prevention and intervention of cases LGBTQI-phobia. We have identified that HEI's offer a very wide

window of possibilities for intervention, acceptance and respect in comparison with other spaces, as a head of an Equality Office comments in an interview:

Sexual diversity is more comfortable at university than in other places and that's why I also think it's sometimes easier to make more demands within university, right? Because as there is this freedom or this friendly climate, right? Friendly to make claims, to make demands for improvement, so it's easy to get it and therefore I think that precisely freedom encourages more freedom of expression, right? And more diversity.

Another protective factor within HEI's towards LGBTQI+ victims and for the transformation of the violence and discrimination is related to the compromise of professors to prevent and intervene. The alliance between students and professors is especially valuable when having the support of a more powerful group in terms of decision and action within the educational institution. This particular support can be offered for different reasons, firstly for the training, sensitivity and activism in terms of rights by professors. Following the case of a professor, they make explicit in an interview the importance and urgency of intervening in order to transform and stop the conflict:

Just having a victim is enough to talk about it and explain that these things are happening, anonymously. If not, we have to orient ourselves differently, lead it in a way that if things happen socially, we try not to let them happen here. Obviously, they shouldn't take place anywhere. We protect the space; I think we have to find a balance in that so as not to create an alarm.

The compromise to intervene in cases of violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression has been expressed in different forms in the discourses of LGBTQI+ professors. The following case goes further, apart from being openly compromised with LGBTQI+ issues, they pose that this social conflict as an objective of their own teaching praxis. Then, we can see how it generates a safer space in their classrooms, when making sexual and gender diversity an issue in their own lectures as they shared in an interview:

No! Not in class, maybe that's because as we criticize it and make people think and everything, they are politically correct... let them see their experiences based on that and think how they act... Of course, in class I guess that they are aware that it would not look very good to do it so we are working on the issue of them not doing it in their own environments.

When breaking the silence on the issue of LGBTQI-phobia and the topic becomes a recurring theme in classrooms, students become active upstanders to pose themselves and intervene when facing cases of violence (38). In this sense, another professor highlighted in the interview the need of breaking the silence and generate mechanisms to make possible that people dare to complain:

It may also be that things are happening and we don't know it because there aren't protocols, so this is also a way to encourage people who are going through things to report it. Because violence is always

hidden actions. If this is given them a little encouragement to report and explain what is happening, even if the violence is not physical, that is verbal, that is behavioural, exclusionary...

Receptiveness and alliances' value

Thirdly, on the variable *university politics and measures* we have identified evidences of the openness towards sexual and gender diversity by university professors, having into account the need of prevention and intervention devices and measures of high quality in order to transform the reality. This is the case of protocols and measures of intervention generated by Equality Units at HEI's who have been interviewed. They highlight the quality and connection with the reality of LGBTQI+ groups of their regulations and intervention measures in their own Units. This is due to the success of negotiation processes between HEI's and Equality Units, thanks to the sanctions in the case of not implementation and the inclusion of gender identity and sexual orientation perspectives in the regulations. As one of the Head of an Equality Office comments in an interview:

We have a regulation for the prevention of gender violence. The difference between regulation and protocol is that all other universities have protocols, ours has sanctions. The others do not have it typed. We in our regulations which is one of the first to be done, but which had two years of negotiation with the University, is a comprehensive regulation because it covers the entire university community (officials, staff, professors, students) and it is also a regulation that has and entails fails and penalties that many of the university protocols do not have. Then what we have done is the adaptation of it, when we already made the regulation, we put for example everything that was harassment due to sex and sexual orientation, we added all the sexual orientation tag.

The interviewees have shown willingness to learn the measures and implement them in the Catalan University contexts, even though if they have not received any training in LGBTQI+ issues. The following fragment refers to a university professor's interview referring to the measures of trans-inclusion at their institution:

Of course, as the number does not change, so there is no problem and everything is linked to the ID number and instead you can change the name. I think it's ok, if there is a real need for it and it is a request from individuals or the community itself, I do not see it difficult and do not see a problem. I think it would bother me to call this person by the name with which they do not feel identified. If they tell me to change the name, I tell them that way, because otherwise there is not an effective dialogue, so I think that if possible, I think it's perfect and go ahead.

Predisposition and interest by professors have appeared in the qualitative fieldwork together with the claim of need of scientific evidences as well as inclusion of voices of the own community and of experts in the field. Then they could advise and orientate regarding measures and politics at HEI's. A university professor claimed it during the interview as it follows:

Totally, but I think that the experts here are somehow the ones who have to take the lead because I do not consider myself an expert on the subject, I am a total ignorant, because I find it hard to find the right

words to talk about this community, if we are referring to differentiated groups. Mm, I feel I can talk about certain things, but when I think about it, I think that maybe I had not realized it. Normality doesn't affect me, but there can be people who do and then if the needs exist and the university has the measures to order them, not to control them, it's supposed to be ordered, to make it feel normal, so that it feels part of normality, then I would be happy to go to the necessary training because for me it is also an exciting topic, not morbid, but to know. Because it is becoming more and more visible.

In the same way that this professor commented, another student also claimed the need of measures and politics to with have some support in case of suffering violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. The following statement is a fragment of a student's communicative daily life story, reflecting clearly on the need of feeling institutional protection in order to feel integrated at University:

That people feel safer, better, that they have a real moral and psychological support because until now, they are not considering themselves part of anywhere. Having such a policy would help us a lot to feel that we are part of something and that we are considered part of something because of course, we are having these LGTB-phobic behaviours and they have to be counteracted with something, right?

Discussion

Challenges in identifying violence

There is plenty evidence of how the conflict of violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression it is a current reality, visible and it has become subject to international policies and agendas in Europe (39). Furthermore, scientific literature describes how this conflict can permeate social institutions, affecting subjects in different spaces, dimensions and degrees. The main challenge identified in the struggle against this social conflict is its identification and detection in institutions, as it has been muting and changing its form to avoid its detection (6).

Our study has, not only proved the variety of forms of direct violence that take place in HEI's, but it has also gone further in the approach by identifying more subtle and unnoticed forms of violence. Verbal forms of violence, such as homophobic and transphobic comments and jokes, paintings and not-inclusive spaces and classrooms are just the more evident forms of violence resulting of the research (10, 13–16, 18, 40). What has complexified the situation in the Catalan context is the generalized reaction of internalization that LGBTQI + victims and other agents have shown. As the literature highlights, this response of normalization and naturalization of the violence against sexual or gender diversity contributes in the reproduction of the violence against the LGBTQI + community (3, 16, 22–24).

Besides from the reaction of the victims and the LGBTQI + community, it is especially significant the responses from the rest of agents of the institutions facing the conflict. As the research has mapped, the role of other students, professors and staff is a key when approaching cases of LGBTQI-phobia at university, as the relationality, authority and influence is compelling (8, 18–21). As the findings have

shown, their availability, openness and attitude towards the LGBTQI+ community and sex and gender diversity can have an impact in the perception of classrooms and university campus as a free and safe space. Additionally, we have found how previous debates or workshops of LGBTQI+ issues at university classrooms can prevent some forms of LGBTQI+ to happen. As well, these previous experiences on discussing gender could facilitate processes of social transition, reception of reports of violence or discrimination, improving the perception of the university as a more friendly and safe space. In addition, the figure of heads of Equality Units entails two different roles: as social agent and worker as well as a representative in terms of equality and no-discrimination at the institution. Anyway, this readiness and preparation can not be enough when numbers show that there are no cases of LGBTQI-phobia arriving to institutional instances in some of the participant HEI's.

Damage on wellbeing of LGBTQI + students

Given the findings on the prevalence of violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in Catalan universities, negative impact in the well-being and life quality of LGBTQI+ students are a fact as scientific evidences state. If the existence of violence against sexual and gender diversity in university spaces is a reality, the probabilities of having students suffering physically and mentally presenting symptoms of depression, anxiety and various forms of physical ache are a worrying reality for the institution (13, 16, 16, 40). Furthermore, this problematic affecting only a group of students would generate gap in the access, quality and success in the academic performance in comparison with the rest of the community due to their health status (25). All of this results from the lack of social cohesion of the university community and students, with a high impact in the present and future of LGBTQI+ students in Catalonia. Besides, LGBTQI+ stigmatization also results in impediments for LGBTQI+ students to reach the same level and success than the rest of the students (19, 23).

Findings on the damage of the LGBTQI+ students at University has made visible the risk of the LGBTQI+ community in suffering and affecting their wellbeing. This evidence sets an alarm on the need generate successful strategies to prevent, detect and intervene in cases of violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. This emergency lies on the institutional duty of offering quality higher education for everyone outside of any type of discrimination. Working to eliminate any form of discrimination requires the elimination any form of distinction of students and developing effective anti-discrimination strategies based on scientific evidence.

University politics and measures towards the LGBTQI-phobia

Given the results on the implemented strategies to fight and prevent forms of violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, there are still pending issues on the evaluation, quality and follow-up of these measures. The evidences demonstrate that the current strategies to fight, prevent and intervene in cases of LGBTQI+ realities in Catalonia have a momentary character and are configured as responses to concrete and specific situations. This conception of the LGBTQI+ reality as a transitory conflict and circumstance involves forms of intervention that only take into account the

specific conflict, without paying attention to a reality that is present in all spheres of the university. This can response to the lack of continuous and more transversal actions that educational systems implement to carry out more equitable actions for the inclusion of LGBTQI + realities within HEI's.

Visibilization and sensibilization of the LGBTQI + reality is a very current issue in both literature and results of the research, as it can prevent different forms of LGBT-phobia. Those actions are identified as protective factors in the prevention and intervention of discrimination and violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, as well as for the improvement and help in generating feelings of belongingness to LGBTQI + students at HEI's. More in depth, literature and participants have identified the need of training university staff and professors on LGBTQI + perspective (1, 26). This could impact on the way of managing conflicts and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression with professionals, ensuring safe follow-up and accompaniment processes by educators and staff who would be trained on the situation of LGBTQI + groups through scientific evidences.

In order to translate this process of making LGBTQI + issues a closer reality to the university community, the inclusion of LGBT + perspective literature in academic curriculum has been identified as having the highest impact for the reduction of violence and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression (18, 26). Its implementation would require HEI's to take to classrooms the LGBTQI + issues transversally to all university degrees, understanding the need of ensuring freedom of living and expressing sexual and gender diversity an institutional duty. Another way of institutional protecting LGBTQI + groups is by explicitly supporting the community as the literature points out (6, 27, 28, 40). Lastly, the urgency of the transgender issues at universities are present in both results and literature (41), pointing at the need of articulating successful practices and accompaniments to transgender students. This would require that universities start conceiving the transgender reality a continuous, individual and changing phenomenon that goes beyond the name and gender change in the identification documents, affecting the live of students in different stages, social circles and intensities.

Altogether, the complexity of assessing and reviewing the success and impact of university protocols, measures and strategies to intervene is both a scientific and socio-political issue, attending to the changing political circumstances that affects the European and Spanish panorama.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates the urgency of the conflict taking place at HEI's on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Following our research goal of improving the quality of life of LGBTQI + University students, through the CM and breaking the silence that exist about this kind of violence, the study has been able to find protective and exclusionary factors in the reality of University LGBTQI + students in the Catalan region that could have a high impact in their life quality. This innovative and transformative focus has provided the dialogue-based methodology on the study of the conflict of gender and sexual diversity in the most relevant educational institution. As well, it has provided with the

scientific and protagonists' discourses by bringing to discussion how scientific literature and protagonists of reality match and complement when thinking conflicts, needs and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Furthermore, the study has contributed through an evidence-based approach and successful cases for the improvement protocols and strategies to struggle the problem of LGBTQI-phobia. The complementation of both the generation of evidences and proposals of paths for improvement of current protocols, politics and measures towards the inclusion of the LGBTQI + community sets a precedent on how to transform HEI's into more LGBTQI + inclusive institutions.

The need of studying the conflict of LGBTQI-phobia at universities lies on the importance of higher education in the lives of their students and in their future possibilities in the Catalan context for professional and personal success. It also falls on the strong impact of suffering violence and discrimination for several years when it is not a right and freedom to be able to express and live sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression freely. All of this shows how gender and sex norms permeates in educational institutions, making visible the current positioning of Catalan HEI's against LGBTQI-phobia and towards a more inclusive and diverse university community.

New focusses and research targets on this matter could contribute with newer needs and axes of actions that could be essential in the struggle against LGBTQI-phobia. On the one hand, investigating the positioning of professors in classrooms and their previous training on gender and LGBTQI + perspective with a base on scientific evidence could open new lines of research for the prevention of violence, inclusion of LGBTQI + literature in classrooms and the impact of normalizing gender and sex diversity in educational institutions. Our study highlights the importance of the alliance of university professors in the struggle against LGBTQI-phobia as upstander in the conflict, issue that must be paramount in new research lines and actions against violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. On the other hand, studying the case of transgender needs and trajectories in HEI's is still a pending subject. The need of understanding transgender identities and non-binary gender expressions within the institutional framework would contribute by detecting forms of violence yet to be identified which would be key for picturing this form of violence and conflict prevention.

Abbreviations

CM: Communicative Methodology.

HEI: Higher Educational Institution.

LGBTQI+: Community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual and other groups with non-conforming and dissident identities, orientations or expressions.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

All study protocols were approved by the Ethics Committee of Girona University on December 19th of 2018 and the Committee for the approval of research studies of the Nursing and Physiotherapy Faculty of Lleida University on May 17th of 2019. As well, all participants gave assent to complete the research tools. Development and monitoring of these protocols involved a study advisory group, which included LGBTQI+ university members and LGBTQI+ organizations of the local territory.

Consent for publication

Consent procedures permitted use of verbatim quotations from participants in suitably anonymised form.

Availability of supporting data

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

The first author EMGN contributed to the writing of the manuscript. The second author AGG contributed with the methodological review of the manuscript. The third author RGC participated in the analysis of the results of the study. The fourth author MMRS contributed to the review of the manuscript offering feedback on editing and stylistic issues. All the authors read and approved the manuscript.

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