

Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual &
Trans Young People in Ireland



BeLonG To Youth Services submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality 2020

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Introduction

BeLonG To Youth Services is the national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) young people in Ireland. Since 2003, we have worked with LGBTI+ young people, between 14 and 23 years, to create a world where they are equal, safe, and valued in the diversity of their identities and experiences. We also advocate and campaign on behalf of young LGBTI+ people and offer a specialised LGBTI+ youth service with a focus on mental and sexual health, alongside drug and alcohol support. We respond to the needs of LGBTI+ young people in Ireland and we help them thrive.

We as an organisation recognise the vastness of themes, topics and issues raised within the terms of references utilised to guide members of the assemble in their assessment of the issue of gender equality in Ireland these being:

- Challenge the remaining barriers and social norms and attitudes that facilitate gender discrimination towards girls and boys, women and men.
- Identify and dismantle economic and salary norms that result in gender inequalities, and reassess the economic value placed on work traditionally held by women.
- Seek to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in the workplace, politics and public life.
- Recognise the importance of early years parental care and seek to facilitate greater work-life balance.
- Examine the social responsibility of care and women and men's co-responsibility for care, especially within the family.
- Scrutinise the structural pay inequalities that result in women being disproportionately represented in low pay sectors.

As an organisation BeLonG To Youth Services has expert experience in challenging the remaining barriers and social norms and attitudes that facilitate gender discrimination towards people of all gender identities and expressions. As a result, we will commit our submission to focusing on theme 1 in relation to gender norms and stereotypes. Our role as an organisation in Marriage Equality, Gender Recognition legislation and the LGBTI+ Youth Strategy 2018-2020 as well as our consistent commitment to a youth practice that is led by young people places us in a unique position to provide perspective, feedback and recommendations on challenging these barriers. Speaking from a position of experience in practice and supported by our recent research output we will speak predominantly to the role of social norms, stereotypes and attitudes in relation to education and LGBTI+ bullying. We will however preface our understanding of the unique experience of women in relation to gender equality and discrimination nationally and globally and will concede with the recommendations of our fellow organisations who are more appropriately placed to speak to these themes.

The international human rights law framework prohibits gender stereotypes and stereotyping which undermine the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. States have an obligation to eliminate discrimination against individuals in all areas of their lives. This obligation requires States to take measures to address gender stereotypes both in public and private life as well as to refrain from stereotyping. Through our extensive youth work practice and over 15 years of advocacy, we have as an organisation been compelled to challenge overt and covert gender norms and stereotypes in the context of education, law and services. Harmful stereotypes can be both hostile/negative (e.g., women are irrational) or seemingly benign (e.g.,

women are nurturing). While the majority of national and international literature on gender norms and stereotypes speaks to the effect they have on cisgender men and women, we as an organisation acknowledge that all individuals are harmed by gender roles and norms. However, gender non-conforming people and trans people are often subjected to a higher level of surveillance, policing and punishment for their deviation from gender norms and stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes compounded and intersecting with other stereotypes have a disproportionately negative impact on certain groups of people, such as people from minority or indigenous groups, people with disabilities, people with lower economic status, migrant people and LGBTI+ people etc. Wrongful gender stereotyping is a frequent cause of discrimination against people and a contributing factor in violations of a vast array of rights such as the right to health, adequate standard of living, education, marriage and family relations, work, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, political participation and representation, effective remedy, and freedom from gender-based violence.

Ireland has made commitments to the full realisation of gender equality under a range of national strategies and international treaties. These include:

- National Strategy for Women and Girls 2016-2020
- Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2016 – 2021
- National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy 2018-2020
- National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021
- Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)
- UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)
- UN Sustainable Development Goal's 2030 (SDG's)

While we want to recognise the particular impact gender norms and gender stereotypes have on LGBTI+ young people. We also want to name that these restrictions on gendered presentations, actions, roles and mannerisms make life difficult for all genders and sexualities. An example of recognising this relationship to harm, gender stereotyping and all genders are significantly represented within The Fawcett Society research published in 2019 is which highlights the lifelong impact of gender stereotyping in childhood. The key findings are outlined as follows:

- 45% of people said that when they were children, they experienced gender stereotyping as they were expected to behave in a certain way.
- More than half (51%) of people affected saying it constrained their career choices and 44% saying it harmed their personal relationships.
- Half of all women affected (53%) said gender stereotyping had a negative impact on who does the caring in their own family. Older women were particularly affected by this.
- 7 in 10 younger women (18-34s) affected by stereotypes say their career choices were restricted
- 46% of people agreed the government should take action to challenge gender stereotypes.

- Parents with new babies and young children inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes creating a ‘gendered world’ through toys, play, language and environment.
- Teachers differently reward boys’ and girls’ behaviour, and representations in children’s stories are often stereotyped.
- By age two children are aware of gender and, as early as six years old, children associate intelligence with being male, and ‘niceness’ with being female.
- Children whose friendship groups emphasise traditional gender stereotypes have lower wellbeing.

This particular research highlights how gender stereotypes are made manifest in the minds of children and young people from an incredibly young age and can have adverse effects on their relationship to education, employment, interpersonal relationships and equality.

We have in the context of our work and our research witnessed the detrimental effect gender roles, norms and stereotypes can have not only specifically on LGBTI+ young people but in restricting the rights and equality of all individuals. The public consultation has named gender norms and stereotypes as a barrier to gender equality. Harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping are one of the root causes for discrimination, abuse and violence in manifold areas and can lead to violations of a wide array of human rights and equality. These issues must be addressed. An existing body of literature has drawn the connection between how gender norms and stereotypes have adversely effected LGBTI+ young people in their ability to come out, feel safe and negotiate numerous spaces in their life and as a result, has detrimental effects on their educational outcomes, employment opportunities and psycho-social adjustments (Consult bibliography).

Based on findings within national and international research in relation to gender norms and LGBTI+ young people, we have situated some essential barriers to gender equality in relation to LGBTI+ young people within the context of education and the repercussions victimisation based on gender stereotyping creates in the lifetime of an LGBTI+ young person.

Discussion, Research and Important Issues

BeLonG To Youth services recently conducted our first School Climate Research with Columbia University which sought to assess the lived experience of LGBTI+ young people with Irish post-primary schools. Many of the results highlighted the unsafe school climate in which LGBTI+ young people were consistently victimised within the school community as a direct result of their LGBTI+ identity or another marginalised aspect of their lived experience.

The *BeLonG To School Climate Report 2019* was conducted online from May to August 2019. To obtain a representative national sample of LGBTI+ young people, we conducted outreach through national, regional and local organisations that provide services to or advocate on behalf of LGBTI+ youth, liaised with our education partners, network of parents/guardians, professionals and young people. We utilised social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat to advertise and disseminate the survey. The final sample consisted of a total of 788 students between the ages of 13 and 20. Students were from all 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland and all four provinces. Participants had an average age of 15.9 years old. Half of the sample are female, about one-fifth are male (21.9%), with the rest choosing other gender identities (trans 12.4%, non-binary 7.8%). Two-fifths of the sample identify as bisexual (45.2%); one quarter identifies as gay, and one-fifth identify as lesbian (26.4% and 21.1% respectively). The rest identify as queer, pansexual or questioning (17.1%, 15.4% and 12.1% respectively).

Some of the key findings related to student safety and protect were:

- 73% of LGBTI+ students felt unsafe at school. 47% because of their sexual orientation and 27% because of their gender expression.
- 3 in 10 LGBTI+ students missed at least one day in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
- The majority of LGBTI+ students (86%) felt deliberately excluded by peers with 74% experiencing being the focus of rumours or lies.
- 77% of LGBTI+ students were verbally harassed (e.g. name calling or being threatened) based on their sexual orientation, gender, gender expression or ethnic origin.
- 38% of LGBTI+ students were physically harassed (e.g. being shoved or pushed), 25% because of their sexual orientation and 18% based on gender expression.
- 11% of LGBTI+ students were physically assaulted (e.g. punched, kicked or injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation, 8% because of their gender expression.
- 43% of LGBTI+ students were sexually harassed (e.g. unwanted touching or sexual remarks).
- 39% of LGBTI+ students experiencing cyberbullying via social media, telephone and email over the past year.

Discrimination, violence and stigmatisation based on gender stereotypes in post-primary schools

An essential finding from the report was the specific victimisation that gender non-conforming young people experienced or young people who challenged stereotypical roles and norms (e.g. masculine lesbians or effeminate gay men). These young people were subjected to higher levels of bullying, victimisation and scrutiny than their heterosexual

cisgender peers *and* their LGBTI+ peers who maintained gender normativity through their engagement with gender norms, roles and stereotypes.

Society and culture shape norms for what is considered an appropriate expression of one's gender. Those who express themselves in a manner considered to be atypical may experience criticism, harassment and sometimes violence. Within the school climate survey, we asked students two separate questions about hearing comments related to a student's gender expression. One question asked how often they heard remarks about someone not acting masculine enough, and another question asked how often they heard comments about someone not acting feminine enough.

Findings from this survey demonstrate that negative remarks about someone's gender expression were pervasive in schools. LGBTI+ students reported hearing remarks about someone's gender expression often or frequently at school (43.6% and 31.3%, respectively). Remarks about students not acting "feminine" were as common as remarks about students not acting "masculine" enough. It was evident from the findings of the report that LGBTI+ young people who did not conform to gender norms and stereotypes were subjected to some form of scrutiny by almost 75% of their peers. When asked how much of the student population made these types of remarks, over half (51.9%) of students reported that most or some of their peers made negative remarks about someone's gender expression. In addition, 11.0% of LGBTI+ students reported that they heard these types of remarks from teachers and other school staff "sometimes", "often", or "frequently". Not only were students who were LGBTI+ experiencing identity-based bullying because of their sexual orientation and/or their gender expression some were also experiencing violence and victimisation because they did not fulfil gender norms and stereotypes.

An anonymous quote from one of the young people who participated in the survey captures the extent to which gender norms and stereotypes are impacting the educational environment and outcomes of LGBTI+ young people:

"I was physically and verbally harassed while I was in school based on my sexual orientation and because I was more masculine than other girls. I got yelled at by one student who used dyke and lesbian in a negative way towards me, then repeatedly punched and kicked me while other students watched this happened on two occasions."

It is important to recognise that a considerable amount of the violence, stigmatisation and discrimination towards LGBTI+ people is compounded in people's perceptions of how men and women should look and behave. This heteronormative belief system does not allow for the existence and expression of alternative genders outside of the binary.

The *BeLonG To School Climate Report 2019* had the following finding in relation to gender expression:

- More than two fifths of LGBTI+ students (44.1%) were verbally harassed at school because of their gender expression.
- About one in five LGBTI+ students (17.8%) had been physically harassed at school because of their gender expression.
- 7.9% were assaulted at school because of their gender expression.

The impact of these instances of gender stereotype based bullying effects students' educational outcomes, their aspirations and their sense of belonging to their school and their community. In order to examine the relationship between school climate and educational outcomes, we asked students about their aspirations with regard to post-secondary education, including plans to graduate versus dropping out of school, as well as their highest level of expected educational attainment and intended field of study beyond post-primary school. When asked about their aspirations with regard to post-secondary education, about one third of LGBTI+ students indicated that they did not plan to pursue any type of post-secondary education. We found that students who reported frequent verbal harassment because of their gender expression were less likely than other students to aspire for a post-secondary academic degree (66.3% vs 73.7%). Victimization also forced students to miss days of school in order to avoid distressing or unsafe environments. Students were more likely to have missed school in the past month if they had experienced higher levels of victimisation related to their gender expression (43.3% vs 18.7%).

The degree to which students feel accepted by and a part of their school community is another important indicator of school climate and is related to a number of educational outcomes. Students who experience victimisation or discrimination at school may feel excluded and disconnected from their school community. Students who experienced victimisation based on sexual orientation or gender expression had lower levels of school belonging than students who experienced did not experience victimization in school. For example, more than half (56%) of students who did not experience victimisation based on their gender expression reported a positive sense of connection to their school, compared to two-fifths (33.6%) of students who experienced victimisation based on gender expression.

It is evident from the findings of the *BeLonG To School Climate Report 2019* in relation to LGBTI+ young people, gender expression and victimisation that the perpetuation of gender norms and stereotypes have detrimental effects on young people. Young people have endured verbal, physical and relational violence and aggression simply because their gender expression does not mirror the expectation of their sex assigned at birth. Often homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are inseparable from the rigid heteronormative binary understanding's society holds about gender roles, norms and stereotypes.

Based on these findings, our practice and international research we have outlined the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report we have developed a key set of recommendations for both the government and schools to address some of the pressing issues which have presented themselves throughout the report.

The Government should:

Renew, implement, demonstrate, evaluate and monitor the actions in the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy with increased resources and investment (2018).

Implement the recommendations to the Gender Recognition Act (2015) as per the 2018 review.

Create a more supportive and inclusive environment for LGBTI+ young people in formal education settings. This includes actions such as:

- Review and update professional development support for teachers. Encourage schools to develop whole-school LGBTI+ inclusion policies.
- Develop and pilot student-centred peer support for LGBTI+ and their allies within post-primary schools (gender-sexuality alliances).
- Conduct a thematic evaluation of Social Personal Health Education (SPHE) including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).
- Provide specific prevention initiatives for LGBTI+ identity-based bullying in schools.
- Review the feasibility of provision for gender-neutral/single-stall bathrooms and changing rooms in the design guidelines for schools.
- Provide resources to schools across Ireland to engage in a whole-school community model of LGBTI+ inclusion.

Review the National Action Plan on Bullying (2013) informed by recent policy, research and legislative developments in the area of anti-LGBTI+ bullying.

Schools should be supported appropriately to:

- Develop and implement effective school LGBTI+ inclusion policies and plans.
- Implement a curriculum that supports diversity and respect for LGBTI+ people.
- Ensure that staff are LGBTI+ aware and equipped to address LGBTI+ issues and support vulnerable students.
- Provide direct supports to LGBTI+ young people through the appropriate school structures including responding appropriately and supportively when an LGBTI+ young person comes out.
- Signpost LGBTI+ young people as appropriate to outside agencies and supports.

We also wish to highlight that we actively endorse the following recommendations as they speak to the other thematic elements of the terms of reference:

- Holding a referendum to replace Article 41.2 of the Constitution with a gender neutral and inclusive statement on the value of care to Irish society
- Funding a comprehensive, affordable and accessible childcare infrastructure
- Placing Equality Budgeting on a statutory footing
- Setting the minimum wage to the Living Wage

- Benchmarking social welfare rates to the Minimum Essential Standard of Living
- Introducing quotas on women's representation in local government, business, and the governance bodies of publicly funded institutions
- Establish a National Rapporteur for gender-based violence and exploitation

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