

September, 2023

# JOINT POLICY STATEMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH & SUICIDALITY FOR LGBTQIA+ INDIVIDUALS

By The Global Alliance of Mental Illness Advocacy Networks (**GAMIAN-Europe**), The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Intersex Youth and Student Organisation (**IGLYO**), and the International Association for Suicide Prevention's (**IASP**) LGBTQIA+ Special Interest Group



IGLYO

# Executive Summary

This policy document focuses on the suicidality and grave mental health challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in Europe. The document is organised around the following key themes identified during workshops

- 1. Stigma and Discrimination:** LGBTQIA+ individuals are often marginalised and discriminated against, contributing to heightened levels of psychological distress. Some European governments, like Hungary and Poland, have policies that overtly or subtly discriminate against this community. Persistent microaggressions and even overt acts of discrimination exacerbate mental health struggles.
- 2. Shortage of Access and Inaccessibility to Care:** There's a glaring deficit of mental health resources specifically tailored for LGBTQIA+ needs. Many face long wait times and high costs, further burdened by a lack of professionals trained to address their unique challenges. In extreme cases, individuals resort to psychiatric hospitals, where they face coercion and overmedication.
- 3. Isolation and Lack of Support:** Cultural factors influence the prevalence of isolation within the LGBTQIA+ community, leading to worsened mental health outcomes. In many areas, especially smaller towns, there is a complete lack of support networks or safe social spaces for these individuals.
- 4. Role of Stigma:** The report delves into how stigma can become compounded when intersecting with other identities or situations. Internalized stigma within the LGBTQIA+ community itself can be particularly damaging, as can stigma encountered in mental health services.
- 5. External & Economic Factors:** Wars, armed conflicts, and public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have added layers of difficulty. Limited access to gender-affirming medications in conflict zones and isolation due to restricted movements impact mental health negatively. These coupled with inflation and unemployment rates have particularly affected the LGBTQIA+ community, making mental health services and treatments increasingly unaffordable, thus leading to heightened levels of distress and suicidality.



Given the complexity and intersectionality of these issues, there is an urgent need for comprehensive policy changes, targeted interventions, and specialised training for healthcare providers.

Policymakers, health organisations, and advocacy groups must join forces to ensure the mental well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals is not only prioritised but also effectively addressed. It is time for actionable, multi-level strategies to counter these systemic challenges and create a more inclusive and supportive healthcare landscape in Europe.

## Recommendations

- Multifaceted approach with diverse stakeholder involving awareness campaigns that prioritise LGBTQIA+ narratives
- Pathways to facilitate the entry of LGBTQIA+ individuals into professions
- Co-designed, tailored trainings to educate healthcare providers and professionals on LGBTQIA+ healthcare
- Strategic support to establish safe and inclusive spaces in LGBTQIA+ communities via collaboration with local governments and community leaders
- Promote open dialogue and initiatives that actively reduce stigma around suicidality and mental health issues



# I. Introduction

The complex interaction among different factors affecting mental health challenges and the severity of suicidality, particularly among LGBTQIA+ youth, creates a compelling power dynamic and intricate causal relationship. A range of societal and structural level factors places this specific population in an even more delicate position when facing issues like severe mental health challenges and heightened suicidality rates, surpassing those of their cisgender and heterosexual peers<sup>1</sup>. This highlights the need to urgently explore the escalating risk factors that contribute to worsening mental health challenges and suicidality.

To address these pressing challenges, a distinct and effective methodology has been developed and embraced. This involved orchestrating two online workshops, bringing together a diverse group of LGBTQIA+ individuals from various backgrounds, all of whom grapple with severe mental health issues and suicidality. The primary objective of these workshops was to delve deeply into the underlying risk factors, aiming to comprehend and analyze them comprehensively. Concurrently, the workshops sought to identify practical strategies for mitigating and preventing such risks. The culmination of these efforts has yielded a set of actionable policy recommendations tailored for stakeholders invested in addressing the significant disparities in suicidality and severe mental health challenges that disproportionately affect LGBTQIA+ youth.

## II. Methodology

This research employed a structured methodology involving two interconnected online workshops held on 11 and 27 July 2023. Conceived in collaboration with The Global Alliance of Mental Illness Advocacy Networks (GAMIAN-Europe), The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Intersex Youth and Student Organisation (IGLYO), and the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) LGBTQIA+ Special Interest Group, the workshops aimed to elicit comprehensive insights into the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals grappling with severe mental ill health and history of suicidality.

<sup>1</sup>di Giacomo E, Krausz M, Colmegna F, Aspesi F, Clerici M. Estimating the Risk of Attempted Suicide Among Sexual Minority Youths: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2018;172(12):1145–1152. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.2732



Designed as two-hour interactive sessions, the workshops engaged participants to share their personal perspectives and experiences. Selection criteria ensured a diverse representation, encompassing individuals aged 18 and above who identify as LGBTQIA+, possess firsthand knowledge of suicidality, and carry a diagnosis or self-reported diagnosis of mental ill-health.

The workshops pursued four primary research objectives: an in-depth exploration of mental health challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals with mental health conditions, an analysis of external factors influencing suicidal ideation, strategies to combat stigma, and an identification of potential policy initiatives. Participants, upon expressing interest, completed an application form detailing their experiences and availability.

## III. Findings

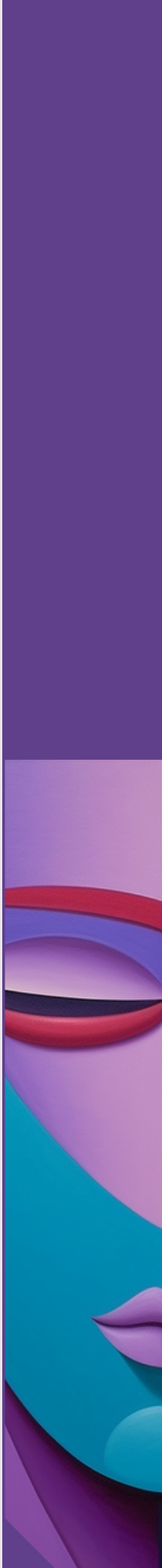
### 1. Sources of Mental Health Challenges

There are primary sources that contribute to an elevated suicide risk among LGBTQIA+ youth, which can be categorized into two main, preventable, and mitigatable factors: discrimination and stigma, and lack of accessibility to support.

#### A. Discrimination and Stigma

##### **Detrimental impact:**

Growing up with diverse sexualities and gender identities that do not conform to binary norms or heterosexual orientations in societies that label such variations as wrong, immoral, illegal, and punishable results in a range of profound psychological and emotional responses. These reactions quickly give rise to feelings of shame, anxiety, depression, and a loss of hope, to continue life. Consequently, the denial of an individual's LGBTQIA+ identity, the absence of acknowledgement or promotion of gender-affirming behaviour, care, or treatment, coupled with persistent acts of belittling, rejection, criminalisation, and shaming of LGBTQIA+ identities, collectively contribute to elevated levels of psychological distress and negative mental health outcomes.



Structural discrimination and stigmatizing attitudes stemming from neighbors, peers, colleagues, friends, family members, schools, social and sports clubs, media, opinion leaders, and even governmental institutions amplify feelings of low self-esteem, unhealthy coping mechanisms, desperation, and suicidal ideation. Therefore, eradicating the stigma associated with being LGBTQIA+ is pivotal in rekindling a sense of pride and self-worth.

Simultaneously, confronting discrimination across all spheres of society and life is essential for creating an inclusive world that embraces the diverse identities that constitute humanity. Cultivating a sense of belonging, acceptance, and the reversal of shame and discrimination, coupled with the promotion of pride and inclusivity, will collectively foster a healthier and more optimistic perspective on one's life and existence.

### **Compounded stigma:**

Stigma becomes compounded when various identities intersect. For instance, being LGBTQIA+ is already a stigmatized experience within itself. However, when this intersects with factors like mental health issues or other elements that amplify feelings of shame and stigma, the effects can be magnified.

Moreover, stigma reaches even greater levels when an LGBTQIA+ young individual faces rejection from the very communities they belong to. This rejection can stem from a myriad of reasons, such as not conforming to certain body ideals, not adhering strictly to expected gender expressions within the community, or possessing other identities such as being of a particular race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, educational level, or any combination thereof. This heightened layer of complexity drastically intensifies the impact and danger of stigmatization. Consequently, it gives rise to profound and harmful thoughts, ideation, and a distorted sense of self, leading to feelings of hopelessness, depression, and anxiety. This alarming progression can culminate in a heightened risk of suicide. The pain of rejection and stigma, in this scenario, is not limited solely to external sources but extends to the very communities that should ideally provide support and protection.



## B. Access to Support

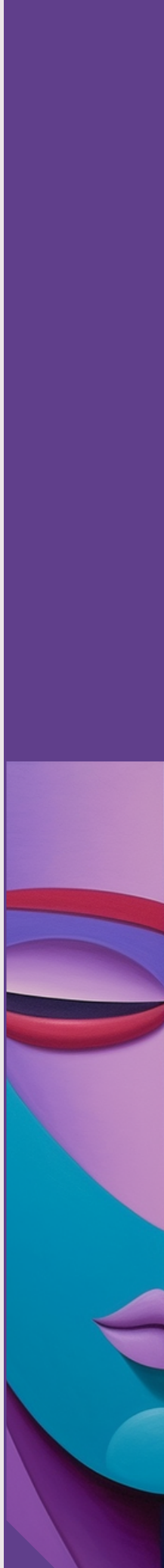
### **Barriers to Access Healthcare, Housing, and Livelihood Opportunities:**

The lack of essential mental health resources, including supports has a significantly detrimental impact on the mental well-being of LGBTQIA+ youth. This is particularly evident when crucial support systems, such as affirming care for transgender youth or general therapy for LGBTQIA+ individuals, remain out of reach. A parallel concern involves the inability (lack of) safe, secure, appropriate and nurturing housing, a predicament exacerbated by the disproportionately high rate of homelessness among LGBTQIA+ populations compared to their non-LGBTQIA+ counterparts<sup>2</sup>. Equally significant is the struggle to access livelihoods and job opportunities. This aspect holds paramount importance in influencing mental health, and fostering a sense of purpose, achievement, and agency over one's own life. The dearth of such opportunities not only obstructs personal growth and development but also hinders the ability to contribute positively within society at large.

### **Access to Similar Communities, Safe Spaces, and Support Systems:**

Another significant challenge that compounds difficulties for LGBTQIA+ is that they experience a significant lack of access to connecting with, and feeling a sense of belonging among peers who share similar identities. Whether in friendships, romantic relationships, or other forms of bonds like chosen families, these alternative human connections are crucially developed within LGBTQIA+ communities to counteract the rejection and isolation often experienced by biological or adopted families, as well as stigmatizing societal groups. Consequently, the repercussions are severe when obstacles hinder access to these vital resources and platforms, which serve as safe havens for authentic self-expression, empathetic understanding, and open sharing of thoughts and emotions. Deprivation of such access significantly amplifies feelings of isolation and the ability to forge meaningful connections and interactions. This heightened sense of disconnection, coupled with the inability to communicate and connect, dramatically elevates the susceptibility to suicidality and other profound mental health challenges.

<sup>2</sup> The Trevor Project. (2022). Homelessness and Housing Instability Among LGBTQ Youth. Retrieved from <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/homelessness-and-housing-instability-among-lgbtq-youth-feb-2022/>



## **A. Wars and Armed Conflicts:**

Furthermore, a myriad of factors exists that could be categorized as extenuating circumstances, lying beyond the realm of individual and communal control or management. Despite their inherent lack of direct influence, these factors wield profound and far-reaching repercussions on the mental well-being of both individuals and groups, particularly those who are marginalized as vulnerable minorities within society. For these specific groups and individuals, the adverse effects of such events can prove exceptionally detrimental and compounded, amplifying the impact far beyond that experienced by the broader society.

## **B. Suspension and Deterioration of Human Rights**

Another significant element involves the suspension of human rights and the regression of laws that previously affirmed, supported, and empowered LGBTQIA+ individuals. The reversion to more stringent laws aimed at criminalization, shaming, and discrediting of LGBTQIA+ persons seeks to marginalize, isolate, and incite public sentiment against them. Instances of such policy shifts are evident in countries like Hungary, Poland, and the UK<sup>3</sup>. The rise of right-wing populist parties and movements across Europe further fuels anxieties, fear, hopelessness, frustration, depression, and shame among LGBTQIA+ youth, who witness their rights being revoked, undermined and attacked.

## **C. Public Health Pandemics and Crises, Isolation and Restriction of Movements**

The emergence of public health crises, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential for future disease outbreaks, as well as other factors such as security concerns and emergency laws, can lead to restricted movements and placements. These restrictions curtail the ability of LGBTQIA+ youth to connect with peers, participate in community activities, and engage in social interactions. The resulting isolation significantly impacts mental health, escalating feelings of loneliness and depression. Moreover, the pandemic has forced many LGBTQIA+ individuals to return to family homes or confine themselves with unsupportive families, leading to a surge in domestic abuse, violence, and mistreatment. These distressing circumstances contribute to feelings of despair, frustration, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

<sup>3</sup>ILGA-Europe. (2022). Rainbow Map and Index. Retrieved from <https://www.ilga-europe.org/report/rainbow-europe-2023/>





## D. Economic Hardships

Escalating inflation, unemployment rates, and economic hardships have substantial ramifications on the mental health of LGBTQIA+ youth. The heightened cost of living affects the ability to afford housing, recreational activities, and essential supplies, placing increased strain on daily life. In an already biased job market that discriminates against and marginalized LGBTQIA+ individuals, the worsening of unemployment intensifies these challenges. The ensuing difficulty in securing employment amplifies the strain on mental health, impacting one's sense of purpose, personal growth, and hope for the future.

## IV. Recommendations

Within the following recommendations, it is important to make sure that the overall process is that of co-creation. That is, co-design, co-production and co-delivering with individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+.

**i. Develop a comprehensive awareness campaign** that harnesses the stories and lived experiences of diverse LGBTQIA+ individuals. This campaign should employ multimedia platforms, including social media, documentaries, and public forums, to foster greater societal understanding, empathy, and allyship.

**ii. Strategically implement a multifaceted approach** to increase the visibility of authentic personal stories and diverse voices within the LGBTQIA+ youth communities. Collaborate with media outlets, influencers, and advocacy organisations to spotlight relatable role models who have triumphed over adversities related to their sexual orientation and gender identity.

**iii. Prioritise the promotion of narratives that acknowledge the complexities of the LGBTQIA+ youth experience**, discouraging toxic positivity and unrealistic expectations. Work with content creators, mental health experts, and community members to craft messages that resonate with authenticity, honesty, and a balanced perspective on challenges and successes.



**iv. Establish structured pathways that facilitate the entry of LGBTQIA+ individuals into professions** dedicated to fostering inclusivity and support. Collaborate with educational institutions, industry leaders, and mentorship programs to create targeted pipelines that encourage and enable diverse representation.

**v. Develop and implement specialised training programs designed to equip professionals** from diverse fields with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively engage with and support LGBTQIA+ individuals. Collaborate with experts, organizations, and trainers to design comprehensive training modules that address cultural competence, sensitivity, and best practices.

**vi. Co-design and implement comprehensive training modules tailored for healthcare providers** to effectively address the distinctive challenges encountered by LGBTQIA+ youth. Collaborate with medical associations, academic institutions, and mental health experts to create evidence-based training that encompasses understanding, diagnosis, treatment, and support.

**vii. Spearhead advocacy efforts to instil culturally sensitive and inclusive mental healthcare practices within healthcare systems.** Engage with policymakers, professional organizations, and advocacy groups to promote guidelines and policies that mandate respectful and affirming care for LGBTQIA+ youth.

**viii. Provide strategic support to facilitate the establishment of safe and inclusive spaces within LGBTQIA+ communities.** Collaborate with community organizations, local governments, and businesses to secure resources, locations, and funding for these spaces, ensuring they cater to the diverse needs of LGBTQIA+ youth.

**ix. Promote open dialogue and organise activities that actively work to reduce stigma,** cultivate a sense of belonging, and offer peer support within these safe spaces. Collaborate with mental health professionals, community leaders, and youth advocates to design and implement programs that encourage shared experiences, empathy, and empowerment.



## V. Conclusion

The insights gleaned from our workshops illuminate deeply concerning trends and risk factors that are driving the escalating mental health challenges and suicidality faced by LGBTQIA+ youth. The issues of discrimination and stigma, the lack of access to vital support systems, and the compounding influence of sociopolitical factors all contribute significantly to the pronounced strain on their mental well-being. It is evident that these challenges demand effective policy reforms as mitigating measures.

Our formulated policy recommendations address these issues comprehensively. To initiate transformative change, we propose a multi-faceted approach. First and foremost, raising awareness through targeted campaigns is crucial to fostering understanding and building allyships across society. Amplifying the voices of authentic LGBTQIA+ youth narratives through various platforms can serve as a beacon of inspiration, instilling hope and resilience throughout their arduous journeys. Ensuring representation within professions focused on inclusivity and support will contribute to creating a more nurturing environment.

Of equal importance is the reform of healthcare systems to provide an affirming and sensitive space that caters to the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ youth. The establishment of safe spaces offers a sanctuary for meaningful connections and mutual empowerment, while community-based activities and programs foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among the diverse intersections of the LGBTQIA+ community.

By embracing and enacting these recommendations, we embark on a transformative journey to dismantle the barriers that perpetuate mental health challenges and suicidality within the LGBTQIA++ youth community. This endeavor paves the way for a future characterized by compassion, resilience, and empowerment. Ultimately, it positions mental well-being at the forefront of our collective efforts, ensuring that disparities are progressively diminished, and the potential for a brighter, more equitable future is realized.

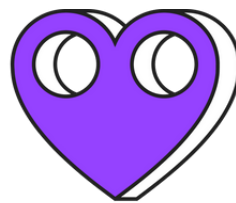




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