



FLASH PAPER nr. 6

Observatory

LGBTQIA+phobic violence

Overview of the situation in the Brussels Region on the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia



MAY 2024

The International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia has been celebrated on 17 May every year since 2003. In 2024, a week of conferences, debates and activities on this theme was organised in the Brussels Capital Region (BCR) from 8 to 17 May, culminating in the Pride March on Saturday 18 May. This year's Pride theme (*Safe Everyday Everywhere*) was directly linked to security issues.

To mark the occasion, safe.brussels presents some new data on LGBTQIA+phobic violence in the Brussels Region. This data was collected via the non-profit organization *RainbowHouse Brussels* as part of a partnership set up in 2019 between equal.brussels within the *Regional Public Service Brussels* (SPRB/GOB), the Observatory within safe.brussels and this non-profit organization to help improve the reporting of LGBTQIA+phobic acts committed in the Brussels Region. On the one hand, the aim is to improve the image of the problem through the quantitative and qualitative information, which is anonymous but structured and exploitable, contained in the reports collected by the non-profit organization. On the other hand, the aim is to make victims aware of the official reporting options available to them and provide them with the contact details of victim assistance services and/or psychological, medical and social services according to their requests and needs.

The reports collected via this system provide a range of information on the experiences of violence by LGBTQIA+ people in the Brussels Region, which usefully complements and nuances the incomplete picture that emerges from existing official figures.



Methodological note: the analysis presented here does not reflect the reality of LGBTQIA+phobia in the BCR, only that part of it brought to our attention via the reporting system. This is not a survey on a representative sample; the data collected depends on the one hand on the proactivity of *RainbowHouse Brussels* in collecting reports and on the other hand on the willingness of people who have experienced LGBTQIA+phobic violence or discrimination to report it (or not) to this association - which does not reach all groups of affected people in the same way. Quotations taken verbatim from reports are enclosed in quotation marks in this analysis.

Over 200 reports collected

The project was launched in the last quarter of 2019. It really began in 2020, with 36 reports collected (mainly in April and October, during the lockdown periods caused by the Covid-19 pandemic) – which were the subject of a previous analysis by the Observatory^[1]. In 2021 and early 2022, the project operated at a fluctuating pace, before becoming more regular in 2023. A detailed analysis of the content of the reports is currently underway and will be published at a later date. Here are some of the key findings that emerged from the content of the reports. This is followed by an assessment of the project in terms of its objectives, as well as prospects for the future.

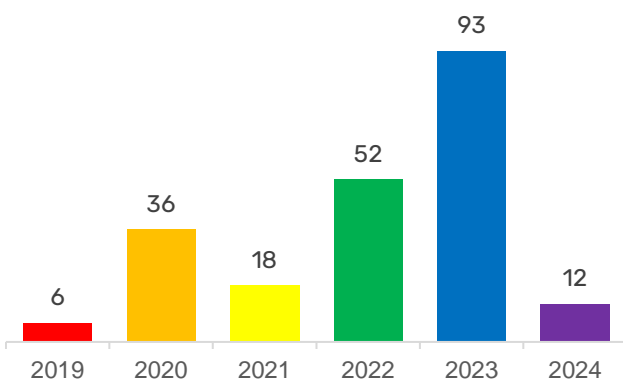


FIGURE 1. Number of reports collected via the system (source: safe.brussels)

TYPES OF VIOLENCE	# Reports	Percentage
Verbal violence (insults, threats, mockery, hate speech)	159	73%
Psychological violence (pressure, blackmail, manipulation, humiliation, undermining, etc.)	103	47%
Physical violence (pushing, hitting, etc.)	67	31%
Discrimination	34	16%
Written violence (same as verbal violence, on the Internet or on a physical medium)	22	10%
Sexual violence (explicit non-consensual gestures, unwanted touching)	20	9%
Theft or damage to the victim's property (vandalism, etc.) & extortion	16	7%
Other	14	6%

TABLE 1. Number and percentage of reports in which each type of violence is mentioned (several types possible in one report) (source: safe.brussels)

Several types of violence reported

Incident reporters had the option of selecting one or more forms of violence they experienced during the event they are reporting. Several types of violence were identified by the person reporting the incident in 7 out of 10 reports. Most frequently (in 47% of reports), two types of violence were involved in the incident reported. Verbal abuse, present in 73% of reports, was the most frequent, followed by psychological abuse (47% of reports) and physical abuse (31%) - cf. Table 1.

Events that persist...

In more than half of the reports collected (58%), the reported event was described as a situation of some duration; the facts were considered harassment by the people reporting them in almost the same proportion (54%).

...and take place in different locations

In more than a third of the reports received (38%), the incidents took place on public roads. Next came private homes, mentioned in 16% of reports, then hotel, restaurant, catering and recreational areas (in 13% of reports). But violence was also reported on public transport, in shops, in education (schools/universities), in the workplace, in administrative or institutional buildings (police, municipal authorities) and in the medical environment... Nowhere is spared from LGBTQIA+phobia.

1. Observatory, "Les violences LGBTQIA+phobes en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale", *Focus de l'Observatoire - n°3*, Brussels: Brussels Prevention and Security, 2022. Available in French and Dutch.

More physical violence in public(ly accessible) spaces

Physical violence was the most frequently reported incident in public spaces in the broadest sense (public roads, public transport, surroundings of homes and recreational areas, i.e. 48% of reports), after verbal violence, which was the primary category of incident reported for all types of location. Physical violence was involved in half the incidents that took place on public roads and in the vicinity of recreational areas, and in 4 out of 10 violent incidents committed on public transport. Physical violence was also common in places accessible to the public (hotels, restaurants, leisure facilities, shops; i.e. 18% of reports), where it was mentioned in 3 out of 10 reports.

Psychological violence more prevalent in the "private" environment

Psychological violence was proportionally more prevalent in places of residence (19% of all reports) and in the professional/school environment (12% of all reports), where it was mentioned in two-thirds of all reports.

The paradox of the "gay district"

The geographical distribution of reports shows a concentration of violent incidents in the City of Brussels (40% of reports) and in particular the very centre, mainly due to the concentration of LGBTQIA+ socialising and meeting venues. While people may feel safe there, they are also subject to violence linked to their greater visibility (*see below*). Nevertheless, the incidents of LGBTQIA+phobic violence and discrimination recorded by *RainbowHouse* concerned every municipality of the Brussels Region.

Victims with different profiles

People who file a report with *RainbowHouse Brussels* are asked about some of their personal characteristics to inform the analysis of the facts they report. The majority are young (60% between 18 and 29), but all age groups are represented, from 12 to over 70. When it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity, reporters defined themselves in a wide variety of ways. However, categories had to be established for the analysis (*see Table 2*).

Cisgender male (homosexual/pansexual/bisexual/attracted to men/queer/unspecified)	35%
Cisgender female (homosexual/pansexual/bisexual/attracted to women)	18%
Gender fluid, non-binary, queer, agender	28%
Transgender person (trans man*, trans woman*)	17%
Other	3%
Not specified	6%

TABLE 2. Self-reported gender identity (source: safe.brussels)

Sexual orientation and gender identity are different characteristics, but both can lead to discriminatory violence against people who stray from the dominant heteronormativity. Reporters were asked whether they considered that the event they reported was related to their sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, both or other reasons (*cf.* Figure 2). For cisgender people, sexual orientation was seen as the aspect that led to the incident in almost 6 out of 10 cases. However, gender identity and/or expression was also mentioned, and more often, the fact that both aspects played a role in the incident. For people in the "queer/non-binary/gender fluid/agender" group, gender identity and/or expression was the element most linked to the violence experienced – but here too, gender identity and sexual orientation are often associated. This finding was even more pronounced for transgender people, with half of those reporting citing gender identity/expression as the element linked to the violence they had experienced.

Other characteristics were also mentioned as playing a role in the events reported (in isolation or in combination), e.g. physical appearance, skin colour or ethnic origin.

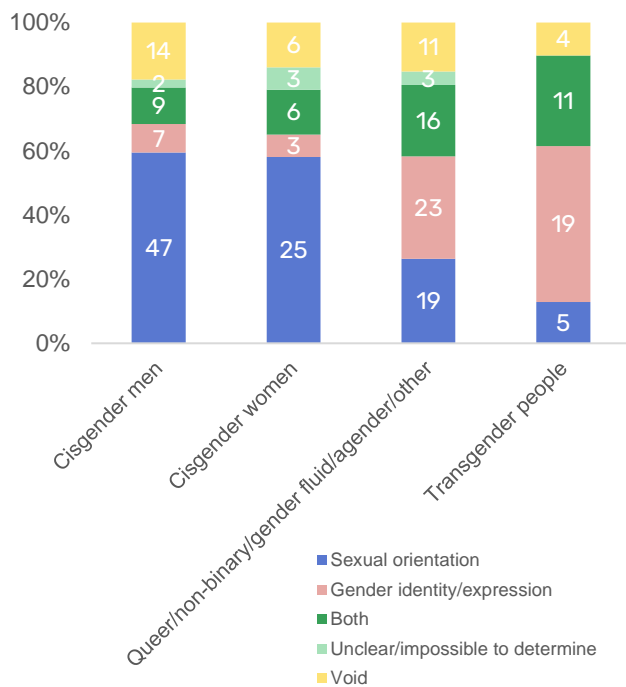


FIGURE 2. Characteristic at the origin of the violence according to the characteristics of reporters (source: safe.brussels)

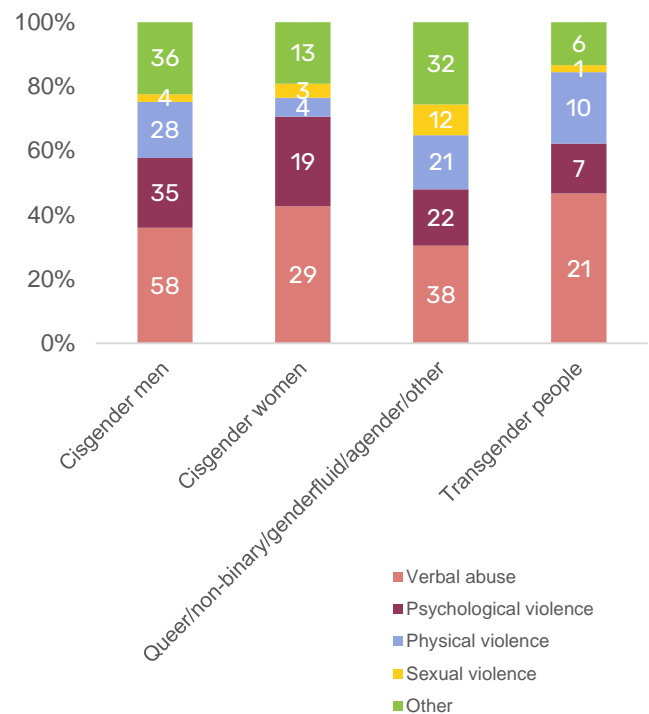


FIGURE 3. Types of violence according to the characteristics of reporters (source: safe.brussels)

Violence varies according to the profile of those reporting it

The incidents reported mainly involved verbal abuse, for all groups. Cisgender women were proportionally less affected by physical violence, but more so by psychological violence. Cisgender men, non-binary people and especially transgender people were proportionately more frequently victims of physical violence (cf. Figure 3).

"Disturbing" LGBT visibility

Public roads were still the most frequent locations for heteronormative violence. The "visibility" of LGBTQIA+ people, when they are identifiable as straying from stereotyped gender-based appearances, was often cited as a trigger for violence. It is well known that violence in the public space "reaffirms the hierarchy between masculine and feminine and the heterosexual social order. [...] The degree of conformity to feminine or masculine gender-based appearance stereotypes also plays a key role in these situations"^[2]. The Brussels Region is no exception in 2024, with many reporters mentioning their look, their style, the wearing of make-up, clothing or shoes (e.g. with heels) traditionally attributed to the other gender as the cause of the violence they suffered. "Visibility" is also expressed through public displays of affection, which also lead to aggression - of which there are unfortunately numerous examples in the reports collected.

In detail, people defining themselves as "non-binary/queer/agender/gender fluid/other" - most often perceived as visibly straying from gender norms - reported the highest rates of violence in public spaces (49%).

2. INED, *Press dossier Violences et rapports de genre. Enquête sur les violences de genre en France*. Edited by Elizabeth Brown, Alice Debauche, Christelle Hamel and Magali Mazuy, p. 22.

Gay men who are visible in the public space, either as couples or because their gender expression is deemed non-compliant, are also exposed to violence. The same applies to lesbians, who also suffer sexism as women and are often hypersexualised as lesbians; many report being offered threesomes, feeling reduced to the status of a "fantasy". Discrimination criteria are interwoven, reflecting the domination systems at work in society.

Men as perpetrators of violence

Eight out of 10 acts of violence committed by men, and even 9 out of 10 for physical violence

Most of the incidents reported (79%) were described as having been committed by men (alone (41%) or in groups (38%)). The fact that men are the predominant perpetrators of LGBT-phobic violence has already been widely noted in the literature, both internationally and in Belgium, and more specifically in Brussels^[3].

Perpetrators mostly unknown to victims, but with nuances

For the reports as a whole, the perpetrator was unknown to the victim in 69% of cases. For incidents that occurred in public or publicly accessible places, the perpetrator was unknown in the vast majority of cases (92% of cases). However, for violence committed in the place of residence (*i.e.* private home, emergency shelter) or in the context of interactions in the professional sphere (including school/university) or in public or medical buildings, the perpetrators were known to the victims in more than 7 cases out of 10.

Under-reporting to the police, building trust

Of the 217 reports of violence received, respondents indicated that they had filed a complaint with the police 29 times, *i.e.* in 13% of cases - a rate similar to that reported in other surveys^[4].

The police, "not the staunchest ally of minorities"

The reasons given by reporters for not filing a complaint were essentially of three types. Many felt that the events they experienced were not serious enough and did not want to spend time on unnecessary procedures. A second group spoke of a lack of trust, or even distrust, of the police, mentioning fear of secondary victimisation, of not being taken seriously, or even of being "laughed at". Lastly, a fear of repercussions (threats of reprisals, fears of professional repercussions, a deterioration in the situation at home, etc.) was also often mentioned.

To talk about their experiences, LGBTQIA+ people - like everyone else - need to feel safe. They said that this was the case when they made an anonymous report within the framework of this project, but not in front of a police officer - or even in front of their entourage for some - since in 1 case out of 5, the reported facts had never been told to anyone. The reporting system therefore represents an important space where victims of LGBTQIA-phobic acts can express themselves in complete safety.

3. Huysentruyt H., Dewaele A., Meier P., *Le contexte de la violence homophobe dans l'espace public. Une recherche ethnographique dans le centre de Bruxelles*, Steunpunt Gelijkekansenbeleid, 2014, pp. 4-5.

4. 14% in Burgwal A., Van Wiele J., Motmanz J., *GENOEG. ENOUGH. ASSEZ. Onderzoek naar de ervaringen met geweld van LGBTI-personen in Vlaanderen*, Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur team Gelijke Kansen, Brussels, 2023, p. 105.

Project assessment

Now that the reporting system has reached a certain degree of maturity, a process of reflection has been launched with different stakeholders (associations, institutions) on the existing system, how it is perceived and how well it meets the initial objectives.

All those interviewed were aware of the project, and the perceived objectives were in line with those announced, namely a clearer picture of the number of cases of violence suffered (quantitative aspect) and a better understanding of them (qualitative aspect); welcoming and listening to victims and providing information on the structures and services available to deal with the situations reported.

The project was also considered useful by all those questioned, on various levels. Firstly, on a collective and long-term level: this system is part of "advocacy" work and is seen as a tool for "fighting for equality", "raising visibility" and "raising awareness". It was described as a complementary "link" in a collective effort to combat discrimination. Secondly, on an individual level: this service is seen as useful for people, since it acts as a point of entry and offers a "safe" place to go and be listened to, where victims can "share their experiences" "freely".

The positive points of the project most often highlighted were the anonymity of reports (which is even a critical success factor), the contribution to making LGBTQIA+phobic violence more visible, the information provided to reporters and the possibility of reporting in safety.

A number of avenues for improvement have also emerged. They concern the involvement of various associations in the scheme; communication about the project both to the public and to other stakeholders to which victims may potentially be redirected (including, but not exclusively, the police); and the diversification of the system in terms of data collection methods (online, paper questionnaire, face-to-face, etc.). Any changes to the project will have to take into account the - possibly revised - objectives of the project initiators, the expectations of the beneficiaries and the recommendations of the stakeholders. An important factor, according to many of those involved, is to ensure that this system continues as an essential link in the work of (re)building trust in institutions that are still too often perceived by LGBTQIA+ people as violent towards them.

Acknowledgments

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