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## I matter

Promoting empowerment and well-being for sexual and gender minority young adults.

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<p>The aim of this functional thesis was to develop a model to empower, boost confidence and increase well-being of sexual and gender minority youth. This was then implemented through a booklet in a specifically conducted multilingual workshop called “I matter”. The idea for the operation emerged from the author’s own experience as youth worker as well as from the volunteer work performed in ArcoKerava. This is the primary working life partner, however marginal collaboration came also from the youth service and library of the city of Kerava and Onnila of the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, the co-partners of the project ArcoKerava.</p> <p>The target group of both ArcoKerava and of the developed workshop and booklet are young adults between the age of 12-22 who participated in the “I matter” day held at the Kerava public library on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2023. Afterwards, an interview with three youth workers and two volunteers was conducted to better evaluate the workshop, facilitate further discussion and to gather feedback on the topics of empowerment and well-being for LGBTQAI+ (which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, asexual or other identification) youth.</p> <p>Youth is an exciting yet delicate phase of life; a moment of changes and evolution, and a period in which social relationships become particularly crucial for the young adult person. Studies have shown that gender and sexual minority youth appear to be more at risk for marginalisation and discrimination in social and political contexts as well as in their everyday-life environments. This discrepancy between the need and the reality may affect a person social behaviour, life experience and mental health.</p> <p>I argue that, in order to bring about a concrete change and to aim towards better participation and inclusion, it is fundamental to focus, promote and improve the sense of empowerment and well-being of young adults belonging to sexual and gender minority. The development of the booklet and the implementation of the workshop was planned and created specifically to boost empowerment and sense of positive well-being. Although this tool is meant for professional to be utilised when working with youth, the pamphlet is composed of diverse exercises that aims to leave decisional and creative power in the hands of participants.</p> <p>The results of I matter-day have showed that the majority of activities were enjoyed and considered empowering by the youth, professionals and volunteers. Moreover, the interviews conducted and in support of the thesis’ theory, shown the urgent need of better tailored services for LGBTQAI+ youth. These services should be able to consider the various form of discrimination and be active agents against them. If we, as society, want to create a more inclusive and kinder world, we need to promote empowerment and well-being of minorities and, in the specifically in this project, of LGBTQAI+ youth.</p>	
Keywords	self-confidence, empowerment, inclusion, well-being, youth counselling, gender identity

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<p>Toiminnallisen opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli kehittää työmalli seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöjen nuorten voimaannuttamiseksi, itseluottamuksen- ja hyvinvoinnin lisäämiseksi, joka toteutettiin kirjasen avulla erityisesti pidetyssä monikielisessä työpajassa nimeltä "Minä olen tärkeä". Idea työpajaan lähti tekijän omasta kokemuksesta nuorisotyöntekijänä sekä ArcoKeravalla tehdystä vapaaehtoistyöstä, joka on opinnäytetyön työelämäkumppani. Marginaalista yhteistyötä tuli myös Keravan kaupungin nuorisopalvelusta ja kirjastosta sekä Mannerheimin Lastensuojeluliiton Onnilasta, jotka ovat yhteistyökumppaneita ArcoKerava-projektissa.</p> <p>Sekä ArcoKeravan että kehitetyn työpajan kohderyhmänä ovat 12–22-vuotiaat nuoret aikuiset, jotka osallistuivat Keravan yleisessä kirjastossa 14.03.2023 pidettyyn Minä olen tärkeä - työpajaan. Aiheeseen liittyen järjestettiin myös haastattelu 3 nuorisotyöntekijän ja 2 vapaaehtoisen kanssa, jonka tarkoituksena oli pohdiskelua aiheesta, syventää keskustelua LGBTQAI+:n (joka tarkoittaa lesboa, homoa, biseksuaalia, transseksuaalia, queer, aseksuaali tai muu) nuorten voimaantumisen ja hyvinvoinnista.</p> <p>Nuoruus on jännittävä ja herkkä elämänvaihe, missä sosiaalisista suhteista tulee erityisen tärkeitä nuorelle aikuiselle. Toisaalta sukupuoli- ja seksuaalivähemmistöön kuuluvilla nuorilla näyttää olevan suurempi riski syrjäytymiseen ja syrjintään yhteiskunnallisessa ja poliittisessa kontekstissa sekä jokapäiväisessä ympäristössään. Tämä ero tarpeen ja todellisuuden välillä voi vaikuttaa henkilön sosiaaliseen käyttäytymiseen, elämäkokemukseen ja mielenterveyteen.</p> <p>Väitän, että konkreettisen muutoksen aikaansaamiseksi ja osallistumisen ja osallisuuden tavoittelemiseksi on olennaista keskittyä, edistää ja parantaa seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöön kuuluvien nuorten aikuisten voimaantumisen ja hyvinvoinnin tunnetta. Kirjasen kehitys ja työpajan toteutus on ajateltu ja luotu nimenomaan voimaantumisen ja positiiivisen hyvinvoinnin lisäämiseksi. Vaikka tämä työkalu on tarkoitettu ammattilaisten käytettäväksi nuorten kanssa työskentelyssä, pamfletti koostuu erilaisista harjoituksista, jotka voivat antaa osallistujien käsiin päätöksenteko- ja luomisvoimaa.</p> <p>Minä olen tärkeä- työpajan tulokset ovat osoittaneet, että nuoret ja ammattilaiset sekä vapaaehtoistyöntekijät nauttivat ja pitivät suurinta osaa toiminnasta voimaannuttavana. Lisäksi tehdyt haastattelut, jotka tukevat opinnäytetyön teoriaa osoittivat, että LGBTQAI+nuorille räätälöityjä palveluja tarvitaan kiireesti. Näiden yksiköiden tulee pystyä ottamaan huomioon erilaiset syrjinnän muodot ja toimimaan aktiivisesti niitä vastaan. Jos me yhteiskuntana haluamme luoda osallistavamman ja ystävällisemmän maailman meidän on edistettävä voimaannuttamista ja vähemmistöjen hyvinvointia ja erityisesti tämän hankkeen yhteydessä LGBTQAI+ nuorten hyvinvointia.</p>	
Avainsanat	itsetunto, voimaantuminen, osallisuus, hyvinvointi, nuorten ohjaus, sukupuoli-identiteetti

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## 1 Introduction

Young adults identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, intersexual, asexual or other (acronym LGBTQAI+) are part of a minority in need of specific support and services (Wagaman, 2016). Understanding gender identification and youth counselling are essential factors to ensure equality, empowerment, participation and well-being for sexual and gender minority youth.

From a social services professionals' perspective, it is our duty to respect human dignity, basic human rights and being capable of offering an inclusive and non-discriminatory work to clients (Eskola, Heinimäki, Theol, Lehto, Pahlman, Pihlainen, Pösö, Sulkava, Topo, 2012). Moreover, since promoting well-being and inclusion as well as reduce inequalities is regulated by the Social Welfare act (Finlex, 2023) and an ethical duty (Talentia, 2022), I believe acknowledging and understanding gender identification is a fundamental professional responsibility.

The purpose of this functional thesis was to develop a booklet, which is integrated as a tool of empowerment and well-being promotion for gender and sexual minority youth. The activities included are diverse and conceived to allow the youth autonomy and creative-decisional power for the execution of the activities, which range from self-reflection, focus on personal strengths and good qualities, affirmation sheet as well as including stress-relief activities and breathing exercises. With the aim of creating an effective tool, a specific study and literature review on discrimination, empowerment, well-being and youth as life-phase was conducted as a theoretical framework for the booklet. Lastly, professional feedback and further discussion on the topics occurred in the final interview with three workers and two volunteers of ArcoKerava. The idea for this functional thesis originated from my own working experience with youth and, in particular, from my time as a volunteer in ArcoKerava.

Pre- and teenage years can be an exciting phase in one's life, however it is undeniable that they can also bear confusion and a frightening feeling. Youth brings along extensive changes – physically, emotionally, psychologically and sexually. Research showed that, Finnish LGBTQAI+ youth, in many cases, feels unable to be open about their gender identity or sexual orientation in environments such as work, leisure time or neighbourhoods (Alanko, 2014.) Because of this, I support the need to develop specifically

thought methods and tools to better promote and implement empowerment and well-being for this community.

In this paper I firstly introduce my working life partner, ArcoKerava, followed by an analysis about youth and the concepts of empowerment and well-being. Consequently, I inspect some of the terminology used in relation to the sexual and gender word and examine the various severe challenges faced by this minority in their life. These main parts and youth-work knowledge construct the academic foundation for the booklet development. Lastly, I present the implementation plan (composed of planning, operation, research methods and ethical concerns), the workshop performance and its response, feedback and evaluation of both the process and the results.

The workshop as taken place in Finland with both Finnish and foreign participates therefore I used Finnish and English as communication language. The theory and data used in the research and knowledge acquisition process and, on which the workshop is based, refers mostly to a Finnish and European context. However, in certain instances, also a more international point of view has been considered and investigated.

## **2 Environment and Target Groups**

The theoretical research has been utilized as a framework for the booklet and for the workshop “I matter” that happened in ArcoKerava. This organization has played the role of working-life partner for the functional thesis as well as being the actual environment of this study.

In this section, I introduce the organization as well as clarify its target group versus the one I considered for my study.

### **2.1 ArcoKerava, inclusion for gender and sexual minority**

ArcoKerava is a developmental project set up in collaboration among Kerava city library, the local youth services and Onnila, an organization belonging to the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare.



Image 1. A flyer with the ArcoKerava logo

Initially, the work done in the organisation was mostly performed thanks to volunteers, however, ArcoKerava has developed and increased its reach and effort, receiving funding also from the Regional State Administrative Agency and valuable support from important rainbow-organisation such as Seta ry and the Helsinki Pride. As of today, the project has both youth-workers and volunteers who help regularly with the activities both on- and offline (Mettälä, 2022.)

ArcoKerava has been created and works for the inclusion and participation into society of sexual and gender minority young adults. Its goals are:

- The creation of a safe space for rainbow youth in the city of Kerava.
- The organisation of regular guided and educational activities.
- Offering an environment to rainbow youth where they can share their experiences and from where they can find support and guide.
- Increasing of the national and regional cooperation among sexual and gender minority youth as well as of the rainbow associations.
- Networking on city, regional and national scale. (ArcoKerava, n.d.)

In addition to these purposes, the organisation is working towards expanding its collaboration and activities towards schools in the area. The implementation is done through two main channels: the regular meetings happening in the city library of Kerava twice a week and the online channel support open every day and accessible from the platform Discord (Mettälä, 2022.)



## 2.2 Target groups

The target group of ArcoKerava is primarily young adults and teenagers from 10 years up, who may be at risk of discrimination or marginalisation due to sexual and gender identification. However, everybody is welcomed to visit and to partake in the activities, as networking and participation are important aims for the project.

The same age-group is simultaneously the target of my booklet and related workshop, whereas the discussion and feedback are held in collaboration with the professionals and the volunteers. At the “I matter” event, the youth present was between 12 to 22 years old.

## 3 Youth as a phase of life

At a general public level, as well on the political and societal sphere, youth is often discussed about as the future of tomorrow. This may be a problematic standpoint as it tends to focus more on the potential in the future, without really considering the capabilities, the needs and the challenges that youth face in the present.

This viewpoint has increasingly become dominant even on governmental institutions and policies, which lean towards a categorised representation of youth in three groups: those who are promising, those who are inclined to tend to other people and those with high risk of marginalisation. Although it appears that youth is seen as a homogenous body, this point of view creates a division in young adults based on class position and gender because a division is constructed on how good of a resource they can be for the future (Nikunen, 2016.)

However, this point of view regarding youth can be considered problematic for different reasons; for instance, it limits the discourse around youth solely based on employability, resourcefulness, economic growth and so on, and it paves the way towards discrimination and it tends to focus only on the future of youth, forgetting that young adults are people of today, with needs, challenges and positive input to put into the society, but they must be supported, encouraged, facilitated and listened to.

The transitional period of life from childhood to adulthood is called youth and it is an extremely delicate and exciting phase in which a human being experiences physical, psychological, emotional and sexual growth. Not less importantly, this phase is also

strongly affected by a societal component, in other words, the social environment that surround the individual. It is important to state that the complexity of the transition in adolescent derives from the interaction and co-existence of all the factors above mentioned, which operate at the same time (Beckett & Taylor, 2019.)

Therefore, it is evident how youth should be able to receive support and use services that are specifically designed for them and their needs, as well as being supported with chances of participation. The concepts of involvement and participation are emphasised by the World Health Organization (2022) as well as by the Finnish Youth Act (2016) where the main goals of the legislation revolve around promoting social participation, support of youth growth, independence and offering leisure time along with encouraging equality.

In last decades, the world has been experiencing dramatic changes with the continuous advancing of technology and its effects on everyday-life principally for the youth, economic and societal crisis, environmental and climate crisis and, not less challenging, the Covid-19 pandemic. These mutations affected and are affecting youth and their mental health; for instance, the climate crisis has been source of increased anxiety and exhaustion (Räyhäntausta, Siillfors and Viukari, 2019), while a diminish sense of economical safety and possibilities future employability have cause more hopelessness and pessimism for the future in young adults (Valtion nuorisoneuvosto, 2016).

According to a study by the Finnish Institute for health and welfare (THL, 2021) in the years from 2013 to 2019, between 13 to 20% of female students experienced anxiety, while for males the percentage was 5-7%. Later, in 2021, 32% of females in upper secondary schools and 40% of those in vocational institutions reported a poor or average health status; the male percentages were 17-19%.

Lower life satisfaction in youth have grown during the Covid-19 pandemic and young adults are more concerned on its consequences on topics such as well-being, future prospects and economic situation. Strong youth policies for empowerment and participation (Mette, 2020) along with efficient and improve social services youth work can be fundamental apparatus to help fight these recent trends.

## **4 Sex, Gender and other terminology**

When confronting topics in relation to sexual and gender minority it is crucial to have a clear understanding of the vocabulary used to express distinct spheres and elements.

When debating about sex and gender, we are facing two very different factors; same situation happens when using the acronym LGBTQAI+ or any of its variants. Moreover, there is the necessity to comprehend how the language affects both the research and the perception of the community, their needs, wants and the challenges they face.

Gender can be defined as socially constructed characteristics that may refer to women, girls or boy and men. Some of these aspects are behaviour or gender roles associated to one gender or the other, and the relationship with each other. Instead, sex is the various features in correlation with biology and psychology (World Health Organization, n.d.). Sex is often binarily-categorized, male or female.

It is important to not confuse gender and gender identity. The first is how the identity of a person relates to the external environment, therefore socially and culturally. The latter, in fact, is very personal and internal to a single individual who may experience and recognize themselves in a different gender identity than the sexual identity assigned at birth or may identify as non-binary gender. Non-binary gender is one of the terms used for those who do not identify as exclusively male or female.

When a person identifies with the same construct assigned at birth, they are described as cisgender (or cis), whilst a person who identify with the opposite sex than the one assigned at birth, the term used is transgender (or trans) (Planned Parenthood, n.d.).

Lastly, the acronym LGBTQAI+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, asexual and intersexual; the plus is used with the intend to be inclusive towards all those individuals who do not recognize themselves in any of the previous words. For the sake of this thesis LGBTQAI+ and sexual and gender minority are used as synonyms.

## **5 Empowerment and well-being as concepts**

Conceptualised terms such as empowerment and well-being can be quite an arduous task; this is because the context influencing empowerment and well-being, or the factors associated with them are diverse and can vary based on geography, society or political settings. However, to better understand the base of the theoretical framework and the criteria used in the final evaluation, I define both terms in the following paragraphs.

## 5.1 Empowerment as concept

Often empowerment is present and defined based on affective criteria, presence of agents and receivers, and/or objectives. Economic, human and social, political and cultural empowerment are all considered different faces of the same general coin, nonetheless they hold diverse goals and background (Luttrell Quiroz, Scrutton, Bird, 1995, pp.1). For example, if the discourse revolves around women or immigrants' empowerment, the point of observation could be different; if analysis is from an economic or political point of view, we would have economic empowerment of women or of immigrants. If it is political, then we would be studying political empowerment of women or immigrants.

In spite of the complexity and layered nature of this phenomenon, for the sake of this paper and related workshop, empowerment is intended here as a process that facilitates people to gain and recognise power in order to use it in their life as individuals, but also in their role as part of a community and of the society (Page & Czuba, 1999).

Regardless of the point of view chosen, to obtain a full comprehension of the term, it is basilarly to understand the concept of power and its dimensions, which are:

- *Power Over* or the ability to influence or sometimes even coerce.
- *Power To*, the capability of change or reorganise existing hierarchies.
- *Power With* comes from the collectively, which gain more power because of a joint effort.
- *Power from Within*, instead, comes from individual consciousness (Rowlands, 1997.)

In addition to these, Galiè and Farnworth (2019) present a new dimension known as *power through*, which incorporates the involuntary aspect. It allows the empowerment to happen even in those circumstances where there is no apparent agent and the changes have other sources such as the subject's relatives or friends, or their relations to others or from the community in which an individual lives.

When analysing this thesis's project through the five-power-dimensions lenses, I identify four of them as the most relevant: power to, with, from within and through. ArcoKerava represents already a safe space for rainbow youth and one of the main desired outcomes of the "I matter" workshop is to stimulate and expand the sense of community that this youth feels not only within the spaces of ArcoKerava or the workshop, but

especially, as a valuable and important part of the society (power with). Additionally, the workshop aims to assist the young participants to better observe themselves, their positive aspects and virtues so they can improve their consciousness necessary from empowerment in connection to power within. Lastly, I recognise the significance of those external components that can help support the empowerment of the participants such as family, friends and the community surrounding the participants.

Moving forward, another approach that has been taken into consideration in this project was that of the Power Cube. This method does not only consider the dimensions of power, but also the levels, spaces and forms of it and the way they interact to each other (Gaventa, 2009). The forms of Power Cube are classified as *visible*, *hidden* and *invisible* and denote the methods used by power to present itself. The spaces refer to the areas where it would be possible to create participation and inclusion, they are denominated *closed*, *invited* and *claimed*. Lastly, the levels, which are divided in *local*, *national*, and *global*, refer to decision-making and authority level (Gaventa, 2009).

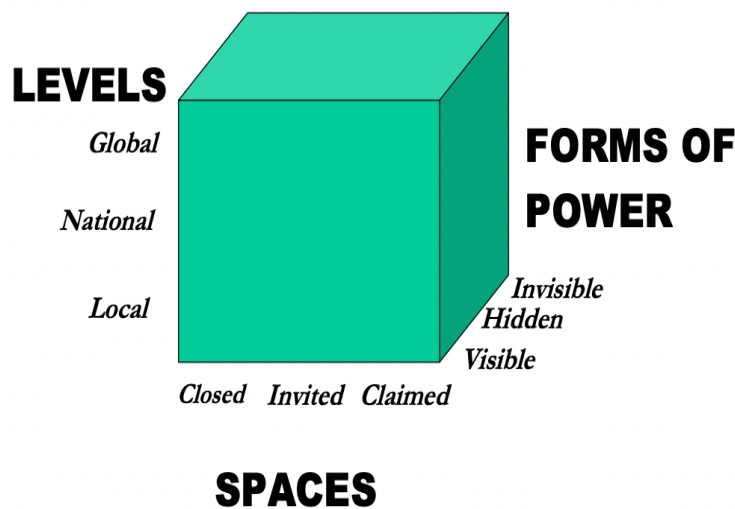


Image 2. Visual representation of the Power Cube (Gaventa, 2009)

Visible power is applied in public spaces or because of formal decision-making bodies, for instance: parliament. The invisible power is the one that may influence the individual perception of self and of their place in society. Secondly, hidden power (or privileges) can be maintained when at this level there is a conscious effort to discourage change and participation (Gaventa, 2009). On the other hand, spaces can be closed and controlled by elite groups, such as politicians or experts; while invited are those spaces that

are intended for outsiders and aim to a certain level of involvement. Finally, a space is called created if it is claimed by the less powerful without a permission from higher levels (Luttrell et al., 2009). The last power cube face is that of levels, which is quite self-explanatory.

The project of the workshop is performed at local and at a visible power level; in fact, it happens in the Kerava's city library as an open event. The participation and empowerment are created in an invited space, both within the group itself, as well as among the participants, the author of the paper and the social counsellors and volunteers who are present.

These two main perspectives are considered and examined throughout the study and in the evaluation section; among the objectives of the functional thesis here presented there are, in fact, the aim to fortify the contribution and participation in the community throughout claimed spaces as well as promote the accessibility and recognition of the power aspect in the children participating to the workshop. As precedentially explained, a claimed space is something taken to reclaim a certain level of power, which is the operational environment for ArcoKerava.

## 5.2 Well-being as concept

The World Health organization (2021, p.10) defines well-being as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions.” However, the discourse around this concept and its description has increased, particularly in recent years, and currently there are two main views on well-being: subject and objective. The first accentuates the individual experience and understanding of their own well-being (e.g., sense of fulfilment in life, personal growth or feeling happy and content with life choices), while the latter focuses more on external and material resources accessible to human beings, such as food, house arrangements, education or health (Ross et al., 2020).

When it comes to youth well-being, it is possible to list multiple spheres that incorporate both subjective and objective well-being. These domains are intertwined and together represent the requirements for achievable youth well-being; they are good health (in-

cluding mental health) and nutrition, positive network, contribution to society and values, safety and support, education, learning skills and employability, and agency and resilience (Ross et al., 2020).

As this thesis and my professional knowledge resides in social services field, the notions considered and implemented in the research and during the “I matter” workshop are positive networking, safety and support, good values, contribution to society and resilience. Positive network, good values and support actively promoted through the exercises of the booklets and the workshop itself, which was performed in a safe environment and among a circle of youth in which a certain level of belongingness is shared. However, resilience is an element I hope I planted in youngsters, however it does require continuous tending, to grow and develop further.

To summarize, well-being is not only affected by personal and internal factors, but it presents a component that roots in society and external influences. Particularly during a critical phase such as adolescence, well-being is affected by environment, growing context as well as power over opportunities and choices. Failing to address these aspects or inadequate context may bring around daunting results both on short and long term. Negative well-being can, in fact, have effects on mental and physical health, stress management abilities and capability of learning life skills; therefore, it is vital for government to invest in improving and promoting overall well-being (physical, mental, societal and economic) and particularly youth well-being. Regardless of this, the Global Youth Wellbeing Index (2017) showed some alarming results:

- Only 11% of the Index-selected countries experience high levels of well-being.
- There is a strong support of gender equality from youth that does not always translates into concrete policies and societal changes.
- 2 out of 3 youth think the government is not interested in them.
- Young people feel the need for better mental health related services and more equal accessibility.

Moving to a Finnish context, the school health survey (Finnish Institute for health and welfare, 2021) indicated that one third of girls experienced severe or moderate anxiety and girls are also the ones with higher percentage, 22 to 26%, of experiencing loneliness against 10% for boys. However, the survey also showed that a large number of children and youth are overall satisfied with their life.

## 6 Challenges experienced by sexual and gender minority

Research has determined systematically how the LGBTQAI+ community is at higher risk for discrimination, harassment, microaggression and violence. On the other hand, the Special Eurobarometer (2019) “Discrimination in the European Union” displayed more positive tendencies and perceptions toward sexual and gender minority in the European countries, with a 76% of the population agree that gay, lesbian and bisexual individual should be granted the same rights than heterosexual people. Moreover, the study showed that 46% of the respondents admitted to the need of integrating other gender options in addition to male and female in official documents. Nevertheless, the Eurobarometer (2019) also demonstrated that these tendencies are not homogenous and widespread in Europe, rather they mirror extensive differences among countries; for instance, Spain has a positive direction in opinions regarding sexual and gender minorities up to 63% whereas Hungary holds only a 13% and Bulgaria a 7%.

In this chapter, I analyse some of the major threats to which the sexual and gender minority population is exposed to.

### 6.1 General discrimination and microaggression

Article 1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000/C 364/01, 2000) declare that human dignity is inviolable and, therefore, must be respected and protected, while the article 21 forbids any kind of discrimination based on sexual orientation. So, it emerges undoubtedly that equal treatment for all individuals is a fundamental right in the European Union. This should guarantee respect of human dignity and full participation in all aspect of social, economic and cultural life. However, the infographic “Perception of minorities in the EU: LGBT people included in the Eurobarometer “Discrimination in the EU” (2019) shows clearly that 53% of Europeans think discrimination based on sexual orientation is widespread in their own country, 48% think it is based on being transgender and 39% on being intersex. The infographic shows also that a high 76% of the European population believes the same right owned by heterosexuals should be granted as well to gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

From these statistics, it is dreadfully evident that discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation is present in all Europe, yet the perception and attitudes towards LGBTQAI+ people is not linear throughout the territory. This account is supported also by the “Homophobia and Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender



Identity in the EU Member States” (2009) developed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). The report, in fact, reports that many factors can influence the behaviour towards sexual and gender minority; among these factors there are: age, political orientation and educational background.

Interestingly, the perception or behaviour towards sexual and gender minority does not necessarily translate into absolute tolerance; actually, the point of view analysed has a very strong impact on the answer. For instance, acceptance has very different percentage regarding possibility for LGBT people to contract marriage than it has with the tolerance of a homosexual neighbour. The first instance shows acceptance up to 71% in Sweden, 69% in Denmark and down to 8% in Romania and 7% in Malta. The acceptance of a homosexual neighbour shows that two third of interviewees in Europe have some sort of positive feeling, while one third do not feel comfortable (FRA, 2009.)

Moreover, general discrimination (which can be performed in different forms, such as physical or verbal abuse) appears to be common also in educational and work, in health-care and leisure contexts. Although European legislation forbids very clearly discrimination based on sexual orientation, homophobic and transphobic intent is not an aggravating circumstance in the law of many EU member states, therefore the reporting of hate crimes remains low (FRA, 2009). This inevitably makes sexual and gender minority population feel often unsafe and unable to practice their rights, such as freedom of expression.

When analysing the statistics related specifically to sexual and gender minority youth, it is possible to observe similar (or worse) data. For instance, a National Survey in the United States reports some dramatic numbers: 73% of LGBTQAI+ young adults experience some sort of discrimination throughout their life, 65% is aware the motivation is related to their sexual orientation, while 71% of trans or non-binary people is discriminated based on gender identity. Lastly, of the youth discriminated, 19% admits having contemplated suicide, while for those who reported no discrimination, the percentage is 7% (The Trevor Project, 2022).

Another form of violence suffered by LGBTQAI+ individuals is microaggression. This term indicates all those acts, voluntary or involuntary, that convey negative, hostile and derogatory inclinations towards member of a certain minority. Although being a common type of aggression inflicted to sexual and gender minority, microaggression is an understudied theme (Nadal et al., 2016). Nevertheless, Nadal et al. in their literature review on the topic (2016) reported how lgbtq people among different studies felt they

were victims of microaggression (e.g., being socially ostracised, or fall victims of derogatory comments) both in educational and work environments. For example, in research, 85% of students belonging to the lgbtq community experienced verbal harassment based on sexual orientation in the school settings, while 19% received some sort of rebuke, specifically dress-code violation, due to their gender expression (GLSEN, 2013 cited in Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo, Davidoff, 2016).

Furthermore, a large majority of the participants to the studies analysed admitted to not have reported discrimination fearing a retaliation, victim blaming or believing that little to no action would be applied to fight the discrimination (GLSEN, 2013 cited in Nadal et al., 2016). Failure to address and to take measures against microaggression and systematic discrimination, creates a fertile soil for its continuation and possibly for its diffusion.

## 6.2 Suicide risk, mental health and harassment

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and queer identifying youth are at a much higher risk both for mental health related challenges and for suicidal thoughts. According to the Trevor Project (2022), 45% of LGBTQ youth in the US have seriously considered taking their life, while 14% have attempted to. Research have shown that the covid 19 pandemic may have increased the risk disparities between sexual and gender minority youth and heterosexual/cisgender youth for both mental health and suicide risk. In particular, it appears that stress at home and suicidal ideation are factors more present in sexual and gender minority youth (Hansen et al., 2022).

According to research, LGBTQAI+ individuals are at a higher risk of committing suicides also due to what is known as *minority stress*, a conflictual feeling that derives from the disparities from dominant portion of society – in this case, meaning cisgender and heterosexual (cishet) – and the minority, or LGBTQAI+ (Green, 2021 cited in rainbowstacks.com, n.d.).

For the youth identifying as belonging to this minority, the social environment, as much as school, family settings and leisure time can present challenges, such as being accepted or possibility of freely expressing themselves, that are unique to them and separated from cishet youth. Hence, LGBTQAI+ young adults experience greater stressors, higher risk of discrimination, harassment and violence which inevitably has an extremely negative impact on the overall well-being and the mental health; among the consequences there are developing of depression, or anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

### 6.3 Facing the challenges

It is evident how sexual and gender minority youth embody a unique group with its own set of needs that should be better met, respected and supported. The covid-19 pandemic has aggravated the challenges and disparities in mental health, discrimination, stigma and suicidal tendencies, between LGBTQAI+ and non- population. Though the necessity for better services and legislation is great, there are some precautions that can help support and improve the overall well-being of this community.

Self-care can be defined as the actions taken to improve, maintain or assist one's own overall health. Among the alternatives for improve well-being through self-care, there are spending time with loved ones, implementation of routines and practice leisure activities, as well as participating in society. In particular, a study about enactment of self-care among sexual and gender minority youth during the covid-19 pandemic, shared the following data: young adults recognise the importance of a supportive network of peers and friends with whom the contact could have taken place face to face or online, spending time with family and pets, creating a routine to help promote stability throughout life as an adolescent and, lastly, activities such as meditation, sport or even rest have been mentioned as self-care (O'Brien, Parra, Cederbaum, 2021.)

Being actively part of a community can reinforce both the self-esteem and the sense of belonging and as previously explained, can empower especially through the concepts of *power with* and *from within*. I believe it was vital that organisations such as ArcoKerava managed to support the youth by offering the services also online during the covid-19 pandemic.

The workshop and the tools offered to the youth in ArcoKerava are designed to support empowerment through self-acceptance and self-confidence, while showing some methods to apply positive power correctly and claim their place in the community. To better comprehend how the workshop and the activities are going to facilitate the collaboration and integration of rainbow youth in the community and, therefore understand the support of empowerment and well-being concepts such as participation and good values, it is fundamental to remark that while ArcoKerava is a safe space for LGBTQAI+ youth, it is not intended only for this minority youth, but it is a very welcoming and inclusive place for collaboration.

## **7 I matter workshop: the booklet**

As above mentioned, the main goals of the I matter-day are to suggest methods for enhancing empowerment, to boost self-confidence and promote well-being among sexual and gender minority youth. Thusly, the booklet has been thought and created around these objectives.

Firstly, I wanted to allow the participants to have complete decisional power regarding the form or art method used to fill the activities; the youth was provided of materials such as paintings, brushes, pastels, old magazines and more. Moreover, the various tasks are designed to encourage the youth to take a deep look into and observe themselves from a positive point of view so to highlight the good characteristics and the desires that each of them has.

The booklet is divided into two segments: the first, formed by four activities, is dedicated to empowerment and self-confidence, while the second section is about well-being and coping in stressful situations. The empowerment side put attention on self-imagining, introspection, body positivity and positive thinking. On the other hand, the well-being side presents self-care, as well as breathing and grounding exercises that can be performed every time they are needed, regardless of the location.

When I was designing the activities for my booklet, I based it on the significant theory while creating a final product for the youth that would be visually pleasing and fun to complete. In fact, it was important for me to outline an interactive yet enjoyable series of exercises that would not feel like tasks but would anyway allow the youth to reflect on themselves and the tools they possess when coping with demanding situations.

At the conclusion of the workshop, participants took the completed booklet home and, as per request, ArcoKerava was provided with an additional digital copy.

### **7.1 Empowerment, self-esteem and body positivity**

The first section, dedicated to promoting empowerment and self-confidence in sexual and gender minority youth, has four different exercises and it is built around two main topics: increasing self-confidence and body positivity.

Self-esteem can be described as the sense of sense, the general idea, negative or positive, that a person holds of themselves. It is already with us at our birth; however, it

is a component of human personality particularly sensitive to external impulses, especially during adolescence. Self-esteem is composed of various elements: self-knowledge, embodying the understanding of personal abilities, skills, weaknesses and values and self-awareness, representing the individual perception of self (Minev et al. 2018).

I argue that a positive self-esteem encompassing an adequate knowledge of oneself, and adequate self-awareness can become an empowering agent, specifically in the *power from within*-dimension. Consequently, the activities in this segment concentrate strongly on the idea and representation of self, on the description of positive characteristics and what makes one happy. As presented in the image 3, the first activity covered the representation of self and involve the creation of an introductory-poster about the young person, with different categories to depict; for instance, the best personal quality or what one likes. In addition, this segment included happiness lists, representing the greatest skill owned, future projects and desires.



Image 3. First activity of I matter booklet called “All about me”

Proceeding, I included some reflections on body image and body positivity. Although some research shows that young generation have a critical approach towards ideals of beauty which are described as unrealistic (Holmqvist Gattario, 2013), it is undeniable

how pressure particularly through and from media can have an impact on the perception of youth image and on their relationship with their own body. As a result, it is important to encourage adolescent to have accepting opinions on their own body. In the booklet, to promote body positivity, I created a space in which the participants could freely illustrate their favourite body part along with their favourite emotional aspect (image 4).



Image 4. Body positivity activity “My body is fabulous; my heart is wonderful”

## 7.2 Well-being and resilience

The second and final part of the booklet revolves around promotion of resilience and implementation of stress-relief tools for the sexual and gender minority youth. Duan (2023) describes resilience as “psychological toughness”, or the ability to respond well in crisis-situations. It is a life skill that can impact an entire lifespan, but it is largely moulded during adolescence, by life experiences and by the environment in which an individual lives and develops. Duan also argues that amongst the major phenomenon capable of affecting youth’s resilience there are difficult and abusive family relations, quality of education and community as well as individual negative perceptions and experiences.

Resilience is a life-skill based on inner strength and enable an individual to face critical moments in the course of the lifetime. It is not an innate ability human beings own, rather something that can be – and should be – learned and improved during the life and with the different human experiences. However, as presented above, sexual and gender minority youth have a higher risk of suffering discrimination, bullying and harassment or experiencing mental health struggles, hence the necessity of an improved and specific support for the developing of resilience in LGBTQAI+ youth. To implement this, there are numerous pathways, including providing the youth with effective tools to learn to cope in challenging moments of their life. For this reason, I incorporated into the booklet several breathing exercises and grounding exercises that can help the youth to become aware of the present moment when, for example, experiencing anxious feelings. Additionally, I created a self-care bingo as a preventive tool for the young adults to use when they start perceiving an increase of overwhelming feelings. In these instances, it can be comforting to take some time dedicated to self-care and carry out something enjoyable (image 5).

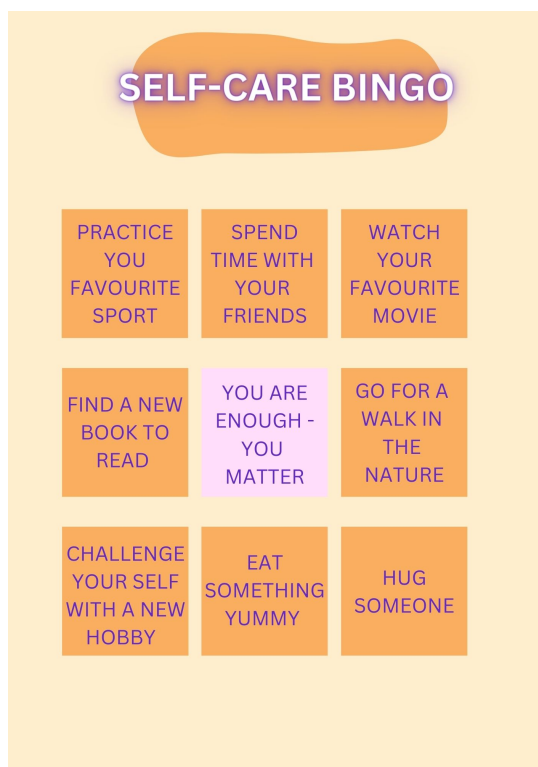


Image 5. Self-care bingo activity

## 8 Implementation Plan

In this chapter, an in-depth presentation of the implementation plan is offered through its major phases: planning, participants gathering and implementation and, lastly, research methods and ethical considerations.

### 8.1 Planning process and gathering participants

The idea of a thesis about empowerment of gender and sexual minority youth generated from my time as volunteer in ArcoKerava in 2011, therefore immediately during the planning phase, I got in contact with the organization.

Initially, the prototype for the workshop revolved around the creation of a book club and the use of books as a way for representation, however it became clear of the impracticalities of this first prototype. After discussing with the one of the youth workers in ArcoKerava, I have opted for a more interactive and creative exercise in which the youth could have the power to express themselves freely and safely.

Consequentially, I started researching and perform a literature review of empowerment and well-being of young people and, specifically, of LGBTQAI+ youth. Because it was possible to find an extensive number of theories and definitions, I focused only on those applicable in this project which are presented above. The overall standpoint of this passage is, obviously, that of health care and social service.

The theory background was fundamental for the creation of the booklet used in the workshop for the “I matter-day”. The various parts and tasks were designed to either promote and increment self-awareness and self-confidence or suggest methods to increase well-being through mindfulness and breathing exercises. Before the I matter-day, I made sure to visit ArcoKerava to introduce myself and the topic of my thesis as well as explaining how the workshop is implemented. Also, I asked for the youth’s opinions and feelings about the I matter-day and the atmosphere was of interest and excitement.

Lastly, in order to offer a professional point of view on the discourse of empowerment and well-being, I opted to arrange individual interviews with the three youth workers and two volunteers of ArcoKerava. The interviews were held online through zoom platform and each one lasted for around 60 minutes.



Moreover, the dialogue with professionals also represents a suitable moment for gathering professional feedback on the activity, while the young adults' feedback was collected on a voluntary base and through a form at the end of the workshop.

Since ArcoKerava is an already established project and has regularly meetings every week, it was fairly easy to find youngster identifying as belonging to the sexual and gender minority, however because from meeting to meeting the number and the individuals may change, there was some uncertainty of how many participants were exactly going to be involved in the workshop. My hope was to have a minimum of seven participants; however, I was pleased to see that over ten young adults partaken to the matter-day.

## 8.2 Research methods

Empowerment and well-being of sexual and gender minority youth are sensitive and important themes that deserve an open and conscious conversation. Moreover, because both the youth workers and the volunteers interviewed have youth work experience, I firstly consider a group interview. However, due to the length of questions and to schedule conflicts, I then proceeded with individual interviews which proved an extremely suitable solution as it allows enough time for the interviewees to clearly share their own opinions on the themes. As data collection method, I opted for semi-structured interviews.

In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer knows clearly what they want to know better and explore so it is helpful to guide the conversation through a set of questions, however these shouldn't be as rigid as for structured interviews and the dialogue is free to diverge (Fylan cited in Miles & Gilbert, pp.65, 2005). The feedback form (attachment 3) offered to the youth was a one page document where, through a four-choices scale, I asked them to evaluate every single activity and the usefulness of the experience.

As previously explained, the goal of the interview was to learn the perspectives of the workers and volunteers about empowerment and well-being for sexual and gender minority youth, to gather professional feedback on the workshop and promote the conversation around these themes. Hence, since, this study holds a qualitative nature, I performed a content analysis on the interview results for the final report.

### 8.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are a vital fragment that must be analysed and considered when doing research. When performing human research, like in the case of my thesis, among the goals, there are the willingness to understand a real-life phenomenon and to create or divulge new ways to improve lives; these goals and the collaboration with individuals make ethical considerations a delicate and fundamental part of the research itself (Bhandari, 2021).

Bhandari (2021) defines ethical considerations in research as a “set of principles that guide the research designs and practices” and they are put in place in order to safeguard the rights of participants, to augment validity of the research and to sustain scientific or academic integrity. In addition, Anastas (2020) argues that research has at least three principles that apply to it and these are beneficence, justice and respect.

Beneficence implies that the participants are not put in any form of danger and also that from the research will come some benefits for the participants themselves in the present or in the future (Anastas, 2020). My study involves investigating and promoting empowerment and well-being for gender and sexual minority youth and, therefore, the benefit aspect lies in offering a booklet and creating activities to promote these themes within young individuals who belong to this community as well as designing a tool for the youth worker who interact with them. Moreover, in the implementation process the activities, the feedback as well as the interviews with the professionals have been held in a safe environment which allow for self-reflection and ponderation on the topics.

Secondly, justice is the principle that incorporates fairness for participants and researcher, as well as reminding that the basic aim of social work research is to promote social justice and equality in research as in society and every-day life (Anastas, 2020). In my study process I have considered essential to focus on fair treatment in various phases and through different ways; for example, the sensitivity about the language choose to discuss the topics and to address the participants (e.g., use of pronouns, correct and up-to-date definitions) or hold the meetings and the workshop in both English and Finnish, which resulted in a more accessible experience for the participants regardless of the language spoken. Other key modes to ensure fairness in my research include concentration on the objectives of promotion and deeper understanding of the main concepts and guarantee a safe and open space for discussion and for expression of oneself.

Lastly, respect in Anastas (2020) is outlined as “the autonomy, privacy, and self-determination of those who participate must be safeguard”. To ensure this principle, I considered important to hold an introductory meeting with participants, youth workers and volunteers before the I matter day; in this meeting I presented myself and the project, I went through the objectives of my study and the activities of the workshop, and I answered all related questions that were asked. In addition, I considered the privacy feature, which, according to Anastas (2020) impose the crucial position of the methods used for collection of reasonable research data, their storage and sharing. To assure this, the participants to the interviews were provided with a consent form in which was included a GDPR statement (see Appendix 1). All data were collected and reported in consideration of anonymity and in the respect of participants’ privacy. ArcoKerava, as my working-life partner, was provided with the final results, however these did not display any individual information that could be retraced back.

## **9 I matter workshop**

The I matter-day took place in two phases: an introduction and the actual workshop with the young adults. The first happened on during one of the usual meetings of ArcoKerava, while the second part was held a week later, on. Beside myself, two youth workers and two volunteers and over ten young adults were present in the first phase, while at the actual I matter day, there were fifteen youths, two youth workers, four volunteers and me.

### **9.1 Phase one: introduction**

I visited ArcoKerava for their meeting at the beginning of March. In that occasion I had the possibility of encounter again some of the youth I already knew from my volunteer period and to introduce myself to the newcomers. During this meeting I had the chance to spend some time with the youth of ArcoKerava and observe the way they interact within each other as well as with the professionals and volunteers.

I briefly gave some information about myself, my studies as a social counsellor as well as my working background in social services. Then, I proceeded to introduce the topic of my thesis project and to announce the timetable and content of the “I matter” workshop.

During this first meeting, I pithily described when and where the workshop would take place and I was very happy to see there was excitement and curiosity regarding the activities.

## 9.2 Phase two: “I matter” workshop

The second part took place a week later. First and foremost, I carefully went over the topics of the workshop “I matter”; empowerment and well-being of LGBTQAI+ youth. Secondly, I explained the reasons behind my perusing of the topic, which depend on my previous collaboration with ArcoKerava and the trust I have in the project and work of the professionals, organisers and volunteers. I also declared that the topic was chosen also due to my firm believe that every single human being deserves to be treated fairly, equally and with respect. Lastly, I went over the phases of the thesis project, and I clearly explained that the workshop, the research and the feedback are utilized in my thesis. In addition, I reported that the feedback is given voluntarily, in full anonymity and it represents only an evaluation of the activities included and, therefore, requires no personal data sharing whatsoever.

Moreover, I took some time to introduce and clarify to the young adults the terms empowerment and well-being. However, I found remarkably that all the partakers were actively participating at the conversation and gave their opinion on the significance of these two words. The workshop was offered in English and Finnish.

The first part of the workshop was dedicated to a rapid introduction of all the participants, workers, volunteers and me. I was please to notice a good number of the youth present at the introduction day returned and were excited to participate. Beside myself, at the second phase, there were fifteen young adults, two youth worker and four volunteers.

After everybody was settled, with the help of the workers, I distributed the booklet and gave to the youth information regarding the content and the various activities. I showed them the materials and paper stand, where they could find all the tools need to freely fill the activities. The overall meeting in ArcoKerava for the “I Matter” workshop lasted for three hours, however I decided to dedicate some time to the booklet and save at least half an hour for the feedback phase and for possible questions.

It was a thought-provoking and remarkable experience and, even if some of the participants may have enjoy it more than others, the youth feedback revealed an interest in

the activities and in the themes of empowerment and well-being; in fact, many reported the intention to save the activities and the booklet for future reference.

Before leaving the location, the youth was offered a digital copy of the booklet and an extra digital copy of the booklet was also delivered to the coordinator of ArcoKerava for future use and reference.

### 9.3 Young adults' feedback

At the conclusion of the workshop, I asked the young adults to fill the feedback that I prepared in advance (appendix 3). In this form, I simply asked how they enjoy the activities, if they see themselves using the booklet in the future and which activities have been more useful for them. The results of the feedback, which was completely anonymous and voluntary, is presented in this section.

Overall, the workshop "I matter" had positive reviews and appeared to be useful for the youth; nine out of fifteen reported that will be use the workshop in the future as an empowerment and well-being boosting tool (five chose "agree" and four "strongly agree"). In the specific, the vast majority of the empowerment activities seemed to be enjoyed by the youth, particularly "All about me", a poster in which one would introduce themselves focusing on their positive aspects and "I am great because...", an activity in which the youth was asked to focus the characteristic that makes them a great person. Interestingly, over half of the participants filled the "agree" option for future use of the "My body is fabulous, my heart is wonderful", even if this appear to be the most challenging activity for the young adults to fulfil. This last endeavour was about body-positive and the ability to recall a part of the body one admires, as well as a part of their emotional persona.

To continue, the booklet offered the well-being part, which was filled with exercising aiming to stress-relief and positive coping mechanism. In this section, two activities were majorly liked and disliked by the youth: "5...4...3...2...1...cope" and "The breathing star". The first is based on a well-known grounding exercise that requires, during stressful moments, to find on 5 visible, 4 touchable, 3 heard, 2 smelt and 1 tasted thing. The idea is to redirect one focus towards something else that the challenge itself, so to calm the body and the mind. On the other hand, "The breathing star" is a simple breathing exercise in which one inhales when the star increases its size, hold, and then exhales when the star gets smaller. Unfortunately, it was not possible to have a digital version of the booklet during the "I matter" workshop and, therefore, the "Breathing

star” became quite an unpractical exercise and not many participants found it so useful as the above mentioned grounding activity or the self-care bingo.

Nevertheless, the feedback form that almost all of the participants (ten out of fifteen) found the grounding exercise valuable and reusable in the future. As a matter of fact, this was one of the most successful parts of the whole workshop.

## **10 Interviews with professionals and volunteers**

In the two weeks after the workshop, I held the individual interviews with three professionals and two volunteers working for ArcoKerava and collaborating at my thesis project I matter-day.

The interviews were performed separately and online through zoom platform. The interviews were semi-structured and, therefore, presented two sets of preliminary questions (attachment 2), however the discussion was not strictly or rigidly attached to the prepared enquiries. Every interview lasted 60 minutes.

### **10.1 Interview findings**

In this section, I present the findings of the semi-structured interviews with the youth workers and the volunteers. To facilitate the assimilation, I sorted them in four different subcategories based on the themes: Feedback on the I matter day and the booklet, empowerment, participation and well-being.

#### **10.1.1 Feedback on the “I matter – workshop” and related booklet**

In this paragraph, I will briefly present some of the feedback I received from the workers and volunteers present during the “I matter” workshop. I received extremely positive comments on the booklet, both for the content and for the aesthetic. The workshop was called interesting, useful and well-designed.

Amongst the empowerment part, differently from the youth, the workers and volunteers found that the most enjoyable and useful activities were: “My body is fabulous, my heart is wonderful” and “I am great because...”. However, for the well-being part, the results matched those of the youth; in fact, the most appreciated activities were

“5...4...3...2...1...cope” while “The breathing star” looked like the most challenging one.

Overall, the workshop received good feedback, even if there is definitely room for improvement. Six out of six among the professionals and volunteers that actively participated to the workshop and used the booklet declared that they see themselves as using the workshop as a tool in the future.

### 10.1.2 Empowerment and Participation

Empowerment has been almost unanimously defined as, first and foremost, as operating from the *power from within*-level. Many of the interviewees described empowerment as a decisional authority onto one's true self; this has often been connected to self-determination and ability to recognize and acknowledge one's true persona. It is interesting to report the two main currents of views on empowerment emerged during the interviews: the first sees empowerment as something that can continuously develop and be adapted to the world changes, while the second current sees empowerment as an answer to an imbalance on power distribution. Both schools of thought, however, recognize the importance of equality and equity when aiming towards an effective and positive empowerment.

These two terms are often reported interchangeably, yet they hold very different meanings; equality is offering to every human being the same treatment regardless of their conditions, needs, or individual differences. On the other hand, equity sees these distinctions as important to consider so to guarantee that everybody can succeed also through help and support calibrated on one's needs and characteristics. Although being two different concepts, equity and equality are connected to each other; more specifically-designed services, broader support and conscious education have been brought up during the interviews as conductors of equity for LGBTQAI+ youth. The implementation of these, in return, would create more equality between the rainbow community and the rest of population.

The second space in which empowerment is seen as actively running comes from the shared-empowerment; or coming from organizations and community. This is a power that can be reach through *power with* and operates on the *claimed spaces* and *local levels* of the power cube. Both the workers and volunteers appeared to recognize the importance of communal and social-political surroundings and their effects on the LGBTQAI+ community and on the single individuals.

The idea of empowerment as the result of individual and shared effort was predominant also in connection with the characteristics of the concept itself. Among the most important aspects needed for empowerment, autonomy, truthful representation, education, sense of community and participation were all mentioned. When exploring the Finnish context, a need of more extended and inclusive education in schools and to the general public and clear political support are seen as lacking at the moment. A recent example used in positive direction was the passing of the transgender law in the beginning of 2023.

The new modifications allow for transgender individuals to change their gender without the need of a long and stressful medical process that included psychiatric assessment (Yle News, 2023). The whole inter for this result was particularly long and turbulent, however, the discussions about the law and portrayal of trans people in media as been seen as often poor and disrespectful. It is clear that misinformation and lack of representation of trans-people may cause a negative impact on the public opinion.

Furthermore, representation in media and conscious education have been often broached as fundamental tools to promote empowerment. Nowadays, especially for younger generations, social media and internet represent a big part of social life and an instrument for information gaining and sharing. The debate between the positive and negative effects of social media and internet on young adults is vast and always ongoing, however what the interviews enlighten is the need for a truthful representation of rainbow community.

Often it was mentioned in Finnish major media, e.g., news web-sites, television news and publications, the LGBTQAI+ community tends to be given more coverage in selected times of year, for instance in the month of June, known also as pride month. Nevertheless, the interviewees recognized that Finland has been actively increasing the services and working towards equality for LGBTQAI+ community, creating more inclusion and participation. One example is the above mentioned changes to the transgender law (national level), or organizations and projects specifically intended for the rainbow community individuals such as my working life partner, ArcoKerava (local level). Implement and support education for young adults has been seen as a necessary step to promote empowerment. Currently, all the information one may need or want can be easily accessed with a click of a mouse, nonetheless not all the data received should be trusted, believed or shared. Young adults have the right to appropriate content, but they should be supported in developing critical thinking skills and in filtering the information.



Lastly, some of the interviewees shared an interesting notion overseeing Finnish context: generational disempowerment. This was defined as an involuntary disempowerment whose roots can be found in miseducation and historical trauma. Oldest generation who may have experienced traumatic or harsher life conditions may have used disempowering interaction with the youngest generation, nevertheless in the several decades more and more instruments have been introduced to help overcome this generational issue and overcome abuse of power in the relation between generations. For example, corporal punishment was made illegal, equality in society (even among younger and elders) is supported in Finland and more services to help the youth navigate their life have been initiated.

In summary, promoting empowerment is described as a combination of individual and cooperative forces offering tools to inspire and enable power comprehension, gaining and shift. Moreover, it was clarified how empowerment can happen on an individual or collective level, however these two stages are impacted by each other so that individual empowerment can support collective and vice versa. Human beings are social beings and steer towards socialization and collectives, therefore, participation, sense of belonging, inclusion and representation (or influence on how individual are portrait and seen from the outside) are seen as fundamental properties for promotion of empowerment. These ideas are supported and considered in "I matter" workshop; in fact, as explained above, the promotion of empowerment has been implemented on the two levels: me as a human being and why I matter, as well as me as part of a collectiveness, or which is my role in the society.

### 10.1.3 Participation

Participation is not only a basic right, but it is also one of the guidelines on which the Universal Declaration of Human rights is based on. Youth is a fundamental human resource for social change, development, economical growth as well as technological information (UNDESA, n.d.), hence youth participation should be reinforced and researched to empower youth itself and society as a whole.

Amongst the potential ways to support participation of LGBTQAI+ youth, the ones discussed were inclusion, equality, sense of community, organizations, services directed specifically to this minority and educational support as well as informative events for the families, parents and guardians of LGBTQAI+ youth. This last element exposes another side of participation, which exceed the most classical definition of participation: being involved, being made a part of something. In fact, actively including guardians

and parents in the conversation about rainbow youth supports the youth and the family empowerment, while increasing the right of the youth of having the support of their family. Moreover, if closed ones are part of a safety network for the youth, the LGBTQAI+ youth will be given more authority and encouraged to embrace their true self in total freedom.

In conclusion, a restricted number of organizations, events and safe spaces dedicated to sexual and gender minority, along with non-accepting loved ones, discrimination and lack of direct action against it have been seen widely as major threats to participation and promotion of empowerment for LGBTQAI+ youth. This is one of the reasons why professionals and volunteers agreed in sustaining that, in order to empower and promote well-being among LGBTQAI+ youth, is fundamental to recognize the importance of resilience as a life skill that should be learned and developed through experiences, safe environment and education.

#### 10.1.4 Increasing well-being

The definition of well-being that arose from the interviews diverged from the interpretation offered by the World Health Organization. The approach used to characterize well-being, in fact, appeared to be more holistic; physical and mental health have surely been continuously suggested as components of well-being, however a certain accentuation directed towards some of the aspects precedently consider for empowerment: inclusion, sense of belonging, equality, self-determination. In addition to these fundamental aspects of well-being, self-esteem, confidence, knowledge of self and safety network were mentioned. Some of these components, specifically boosting and promotion of self-esteem, acceptance, sense of belonging and knowledge of self, were reported as being focal part of the workshop "I matter".

It is rightful to mention, how some of the interviewees appear to be concerned about the representation of LGBTQAI+ minorities in the media worldwide. They admitted there might have been an increase of representation and normalization of belonging to the rainbow community, however many agreed that acceptance has not significantly increased nor the change in representation seemed to have had a considerable impact on the overall well-being of the minority and its youth. The main reason may be the lack of effective and concrete action against bullying and discrimination based on sexual and gender identification, particularly in school and recreative youth environments. The shared opinion of the volunteers and workers was that the educational system should

be more outspoken and inclusive of LGBTQAI+ youth as well as being capable of taking a clear stand against discrimination.

Another important subject that emerged is the pressure and position gender roles play in the life of sexual and gender minority youth. The dialogue highlighted that gender roles have, in fact, an impact on the youth as well as on the way others interact with them. For instance, communication can be affected by the perception of gender and involuntary can cause disempowerment; this happens particularly with languages in which, grammatically speaking, there is a clear distinction between male and female (e.g., English or Italian), while in other languages, such as Finnish, this is minimized or non-existent due to the neutral aspect. Hence, it is important to listen and respect the way others feel and see themselves, ask if we are unsure or support the interaction with un-gendered word such as the use of they/them in English. It is vital to understand this to avoid involuntary disempowerment and to favour respect as well as the right to self-determination, correct representation and acknowledgment and autonomy.

Additionally, gender role pressure has been called one of the negative factors influencing mental health. The primary distinction nominated in the interviews is about male versus female; what society portrays as female or male and what are the characteristics that mostly describe someone as belonging to one category or the other. Social pressure and norms may strongly impact the way youth feel about themselves, their behaviour and freedom of expression. Some of the interviewees recalled experiences of LGBTQAI+ youth feeling “wrong” because they were not able to fit into a societal label; maybe they were too feminine for being males or too masculine for being females. It is clear how a negative perception on one’s self can impact anybody, especially a young adult during their formational years, which may lead or exacerbate mental health related challenges.

Lastly, it was reported in the discussion that trans people seem to be majorly affected by stereotyping and gender role pressure. Often, trans men are expected to be hyper-masculine, on the counterpart trans women are expected to be hyperfeminine and when these connotations are not met, trans people may experience discriminatory acts such as not being recognized with the identified gender, or being overseen about their behaviour or dress code, or being called not a “true woman” or “true man”. However, other individuals belonging to the gender or sexual minority experience the pressure of gender roles, particularly when it comes to their freedom of expression (e.g., clothing, make-up etc.) and the choice they make in their appearance.

## 11 Discussion

Youth is a thrilling, formative and fundamental phase of human life; it is a time in which major develop occurs and in which some relationships are fortify, some are built and some concluded. Unfortunately, it is also a period in which individuals can be more vulnerable and exposed to risk of bullying, discrimination and marginalization. Studies has shown that gender and sexual minority youth are at a major risk for these phenomena both on political contexts and in their everyday-life environments. I support the urgent need for specifically-tailored support and services for LGBTQAI+ youth, particularly intended towards the promotion of empowerment and well-being. To implement this concept in a practical way, I designed and conducted a workshop called “I matter” at ArcoKerava, my working life partner and an organization for rainbow youth.

The booklet for the activities of “I matter” workshop was though and created specifically to boost empowerment and sense of positive well-being. through various exercises that aims to boost confidence, self-knowledge, positive thinking and self-care of the youth participating. Furthermore, every activity was designed so to the give the participants decisional and creative power on how to fulfil the booklet.

Empowerment and well-being are complex and multidimensional concepts to which many theories can be applied. For the purpose of this thesis, I decided to focus on specific framework that has been already presented above. Moreover, to deepen my research and better analyse the effectiveness of the designed workshop and the importance of empowerment and well-being for sexual and gender minority youth, I conducted five interviews with professional youth workers and volunteers of ArcoKerava.

As reported by the Eurobarometer “Discrimination in the EU” (2019), over half of Europeans interviewed believed their country is affected by discrimination based on sexual orientation. It is important to acknowledge that discrimination comes in different shapes and forms, e.g., open-discrimination, microaggression, but also misuse of pronouns, not having the same rights as cishet individuals, or not having one’s gender recognized on official documents (in fact, in many Europeans countries, official documents present still only bigender option: male/female) and so on. Because the nature of discrimination is multifaced and dangerous, also the consequence and the burden it creates can impair different areas of someone’s life and, therefore it needs to be prevented and eradicated from different perspectives and with different types of support.

In the specific of LGBTQAI+ youth, research have revealed that the areas greatly affected by discrimination are mental health and increment of suicide risk, relationships with others and self-esteem and idea of self, which are directly connected to both empowerment and well-being. However, studies have also demonstrated that exactly these areas are those that can help support and promote positive well-being and sense of empowerment in sexual and gender minority youth.

This was supported by the conducted interviews in which notions of empowerment displayed an urgency to act both on boosting empowerment within the youth as well as offering to them the tools and assistance to understand, reclaim and exercise their role as a valued member of society. Considering the power cube approach (Gaventa, 2009), therefore, the support offered through my thesis project is applicable on at a *local* and *visible power* level; in fact, the open event happened in Kerava's city library and was, obviously, free of charge and inclusive. The participation and empowerment are created in an *invited space* and required interactions within the group of participants, and amongst the youth workers, volunteers and me.

Since I argue that in order to bring about change and to increase participation and inclusion of gender and sexual minority youth is fundamental to operate through and towards promotion of empowerment and well-being, the research and the activities included in the workshop are intended as active agents to implement this theory.

Firstly, in order of promoting empowerment through *power from within*-level, I decided to operate towards boosting self-esteem and knowledge of self. As I consider positive consideration of self and adequate self-awareness as important tools to increase one's empowerment, I designed specific activities that, through positive thinking, would allow the youth to analyse, focus on and represent their good characteristics in creative methods. The feedback I received right after the workshop, demonstrated that the positive thinking was an effective way to redirect the focus of the young participants towards their good characteristic; noticeably, this exercise appeared to be easier for the youth to perform when the aim for towards personality, whilst body positive connotation has been more challenging to bring up for some youngsters. As remarked in the interview and in the research, however, to be more effective, empowerment needs to operate through other levels, such as *power with*, hence it needs a collective-agent. This is why the booklet was executed during a workshop in which all the participants were encouraged to interact, and space was dedicated for the voluntary performance or explanation of the activities by the youth to the rest of the group. This was facilitated by the

fact that ArcoKerava youth is an inclusive, accepting and open group of young adults and this notion was clear from the introductory meeting.

Secondly, in the booklet I operated towards increasing well-being for sexual and gender minority youth. Well-being can generally be comprised of physical and mental health. In social services field great importance is given to both of these factors as well as to overall well-being; however, for the sake of this project and in consideration of the timeline of the workshop, I wanted to concentrate more on the mental health – related side. As presented above, according to the classification by Ross et al. (2020), youth well-being can be classified in various groups, the ones considered in this thesis are: positive networking, safety and support, good values, contribution to society and resilience. In fact, the booklet was carefully crafted to promote and respect inclusion and gender identities, moreover, the workshop took place in a safe environment and group in which networking already occurred and is continuously supported and integrated.

Thirdly, another central part of the “I Matter” project revolved around resilience and its developing. In order to encourage and support it, the activities were designed to inspire connection amongst the youth and with the professionals, volunteers and me. Resilience can, in fact, be sustained by positive and accepting relationships as one do not feel judged or marginalized, rather in good and health relation with others, we tend to feel loved and supported. Furthermore, both the dialogue opened during the workshop day and the work of ArcoKerava as organization are aiming to implement proactive and conscious action and knowledge in the youth as well as offering a safe space and the possibility to easily access professional help when needed.

In summary, this thesis wants to underline the importance of promotion of empowerment and well-being for sexual and gender minority youth. Through research, I have presented the theoretical framework as well as the statistical background involving LGBTQAI+ and discrimination. Furthermore, through the creation of the workshop and the related booklet, I aimed to show some of the supportive tools that professionals can integrate into their activities with youth. “I matter”-workshop received overall positive reviews and several amongst the youth participating at the event have brought up their interest in some specific activities, such as those helping to cope with stress and challenging situation as well as those involving positive thinking and positive focus on one’s good characteristics. Many have expressed the interest in using these activities in their future.

## 12 Limitations

This bachelor's thesis work is based on a restrict number of contributors to workshop and interviews; more participants would have better demonstrated and validated the value of the project, particularly in the long term. However, as presented above, the results are positive.

Secondly, in my research I focused specifically on empowerment and well-being of the younger part of individuals of this minority. However, it is important to remember that, generally speaking, sexual and gender minority is a term used to refer to a vast number of single individuals, everyone with their own characteristics, needs and social/political environment around them. The challenges they face are unfair and, often, they see their basic rights as human being not respected or even taken away for the mere reason of who they love or who they are. Participation, further research and conscious conversation are key elements towards a more inclusive and fair future for all.

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# Consent Form

1

## Informed Consent for Research Participation

The study complies with the EU data protection regulation. The data protection statement is based on the EU data protection regulation (2016/679, General Data Regulation or GDPR) registrants' obligation to inform (GDPR, articles 12-14), the data controller's obligation according to Article 30 of the GDPR to maintain a report on the processing operations for which they are responsible, and the interviewees' personal data is stored and processed in accordance with the data protection regulation (1050/2028). More information on the processing of personal data can be found in the research consent form below.

## Consent

I, \_\_\_\_\_, participate freely and voluntarily to the individual interviews and the workshop for Erika Kallunki' bachelor's thesis, *I matter – promoting empowerment and well-being for sexual and gender minority youth*. I hereby declare that I have been clearly informed about the thesis' purposes and objectives.

I give the permission to document and record the interviews and the participation to the aforementioned phases (workshop and interviews). Both the recordings and the documentation are stored in the research, Erika Kallunki, computer. The consent forms are stored in paper version at Erika Kallunki's home inside a specific folder that it is not accessible to others, beside the researcher. I have been informed and I acknowledge to be aware that the forms are securely disposed of, after the graduation happening at latest in fall 2023.

I acknowledge that the recordings are used only by the interviewer for the research purpose and the material is destroyed safely at the end of the thesis process, latest in fall 2023. I am aware the whole documentation (registration, transcription and participation documentation) is stored in Erika Kallunki's computer and, in no case, is send electronically, shared to others or uploaded to any cloud or e-storage space.

I know that the researcher is bound to a silence and confidentiality agreement, therefore all the information obtained in the research is confidentially in accordance with the ethical principles of the University of Applied Sciences. I understand that anonymity is ensured in the writing by hiding my identity.

The interviews are not cited word by word; however, I understand that excerpts from the oral statements I gave during the participation may be quoted in the final thesis and in possible subsequent publications, and, hereby, I give permission for that. I also know that the thesis will be published on the Theseus page.

I am also aware the interview results are shared with the ArcoKerava representative and youth-worker, Claudia Gutierrez-Semprun, for their reporting. I am aware of my right to refuse the study and to withdraw my consent afterwards without giving a reason.

Signature and name

Date and place

## Interview Preliminary Questions

### *Interview: Preliminary Questions*

#### **EMPOWERMENT**

The first set of questions is about empowerment. The aim is to gain information about the ideas on the concept itself and on the work/volunteer work experiences.

##### **CONCEPT:**

- How would you define empowerment?
- What are the core characteristics of empowerment?
- What do you consider to be the factors affecting empowerment socially and politically?
- According to you, is empowerment individual or collective?
- What are the most important aspects affecting empowerment for the LGBTQAI+ community, particularly for the youth?

##### **OWN EXPERIENCE WITH LGBTQAI+ YOUTH AND EMPOWERMENT:**

- How do you think LGBTQAI+ youth can be empowered?
- According to you, what are the steps that need to be taken to promote and support empowerment of the LGBTQAI+ youth community?
- Have you assisted to disempowerment of LGBTQAI+ community, voluntarily or involuntarily? How?
- Do gender roles affect the empowerment of the LGBTQAI+ youth?
- In your experience, have you been educated and trained enough to work with LGBTQAI+ youth?
- How can be empowerment for LGBTQAI+ youth community be promoted? Supported? Implemented?

#### **WELL-BEING AND PARTICIPATION**

The second set of questions focuses on well-being and participation. The goal is to gather information on the concepts as well as the experience on the work/volunteer work field and the promotion.

##### **CONCEPTS:**

- What is well-being and what are its components?
- What are the crucial factors that affect well-being of the LGBTQAI+ youth community?
- How would you describe, generally, the grade of well-being of the LGBTQAI+ youth community in the last 3 to 5 years? What affected well-being in this timelapse?
- What is participation?

***Interview: Preliminary Questions***

OWN EXPERIENCE WITH LGBTQAI+ YOUTH AND WELL-BEING AND PARTICIPATION:

- In your working experience as a youth worker/volunteer worker, what are the factors that mostly affected well-being for the LGBTQAI+ youth?
- How would you evaluate the grade of participation for LGBTQAI+ youth community on a national level?
- Do you think participation should be supported and implemented more? How?
- How can well-being for the LGBTQAI+ community be promoted and supported?
- What are the external factors affected well-being for the LGBTQAI+ youth community?
- What are the external factors affecting participation for the LGBTQAI+ youth community?

## Youth Feedback

### YOUTH FEEDBACK

*Please choose one of the answers in the following statements*

#### 1.I enjoyed the activity "All About me"

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 2.I enjoyed the activity "I am great because..."

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 3.I enjoyed the activity "(I) wish me happiness"

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 4.I enjoyed the activity "My body is fabulous, my heart is wonderful"

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 5.I enjoyed the activity "5...4...3...2...1...cope"

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 6.I enjoyed the activity "Self-care bingo"

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 7.I enjoyed the activity "The breathing star"

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 8.The workshop was useful for me

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 9.I see myself using some of the activities in the future

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

#### 10.In the future, I see myself using again the following activities (here, you can choose more than one answer)

- All about me
- I am great because...
- (I) wish me happiness
- My body is fabulous, my heart is wonderful
- 5...4...3...2...1...cope
- Self-care bingo
- The breathing star