

# DISCRIMINATING/ DISCRIMINATED

LGBT IN LESSER POLAND



# NO ONE'S LAND

GRASSROOTS LGBT MOVEMENT  
IN "NEGLECTED" AREAS



 **RÓWNOŚĆ.ORG.PL**  
FOUNDATION

CRACOW, 2018

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# **DISCRIMINATING/ DISCRIMINATED**

LGBT IN LESSER POLAND



# STARTING POINT

Are there at all any LGBT people in smaller cities and villages? What is their life like, what do they do for living and in their free time? How do they connect with each other? Do they build their own communities?

Do they face discrimination? Do public institutions have the knowledge and tools to tackle homophobia?

"LGBT people are not visible in our city", „This issue does not concern our city" – these are the statements that we have heard repeatedly, whenever we searched for the answers to the questions above.

In 2014 and 2015 our Foundation conducted a project called "Discriminating/Discriminated. LGBT in Lesser Poland".



DISCRIMINATION FOR ME MEANS A LACK OF TOLERANCE TOWARDS A PERSON OR A GROUP OF PEOPLE THAT HAVE A DIFFERENT SEXUAL ORIENTATION, RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OR CULTURE. IT IS A LACK OF ACCEPTANCE OF THE WAY I AM, JUST BECAUSE I AM HOMOSEXUAL.

*Excerpt from an interview with participant of the research*

It was a human rights monitoring that aimed to increase the expertise on tackling discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity as well as develop common standards to counteract it focusing on the local level. We have decided to choose four cities in the southern Poland in Lesser Poland voivodeship: Tarnów, Oświęcim, Nowy Sącz and Wadowice.

In Poland the vast majority of activities focused on LGBT communities still takes place in bigger cities such as Warsaw, Cracow, Poznań, Wrocław, Katowice or Gdańsk.

The belief that a gay or a lesbian from a smaller city has to leave it as soon as possible (usually when going to university) is still very prevalent. But the question is what if a person cannot migrate to a bigger city, because e.g. financial or personal reasons? What about youth? What about people that do not want to leave?

“Big city” stereotypes about LGBT community are present and well. However, recently we can notice progress – more and more LGBT organizations want to and start designing their actions in some smaller cities.

# VOICE OF COMMUNITY

We asked LGBT persons in chosen cities about their experiences, including those of discrimination, as well as their needs. 84% of LGBT people that we have reached during our project in Lesser Poland had experienced some kind of discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity within the last 3 years.

The most frequent forms of discrimination that they faced were ridicules, demeaning gestures, including those of sexual nature, derogatory graffiti in public spaces as well as bullying in schools.

Diagram 1. Have you experienced discrimination on basis of sexual orientation or gender identity?

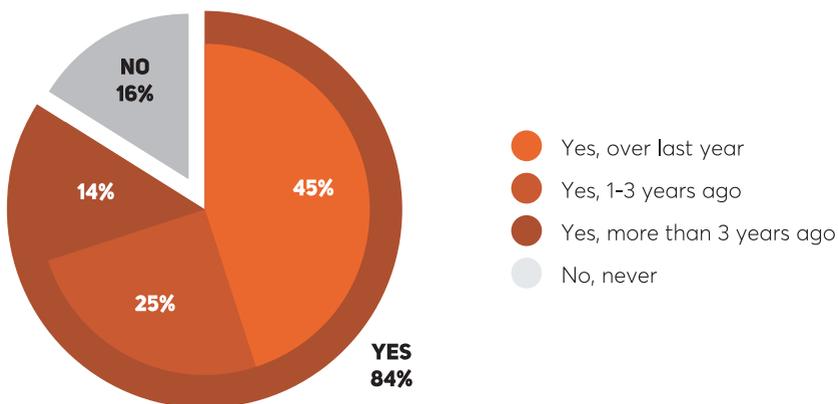
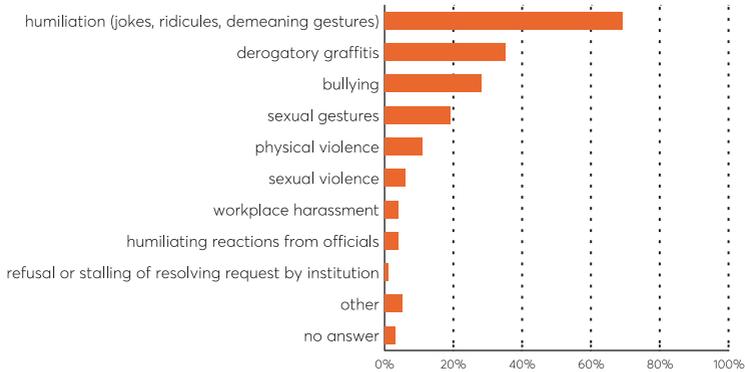


Diagram 2. What forms of discrimination have you experienced?



Primarily they were discriminated by their acquaintances – 70%. Half of them said that their faced discrimination from strangers. More than half (54%) have experience discrimination in their school, while every third LGBT person mentions parents, religious groups or their peer groups.

One in ten declared that their workplace (both colleagues and bosses) is discriminatory. Over 25% of surveyed persons have experienced three or more forms of discrimination.

As seen, LGBT community not only **exists** outside of big cities, but feels discriminated, neglected and forgotten as well.

# THEATRE OF OPERATIONS

We have conducted a desk research, approached the representatives of City Councils to interview them about their antidiscrimination work, if they consider it an issue or whether they have some tools in use or not. We have also send out requests for public information to various public institutions and authorities.

When looking for partners in future actions - LGBT allies, we talked to organisations working in area of human rights and democracy building.

We have conducted media monitoring focused on how, why and what the local media have said about LGBT people.

*Photo 1. Railway station in Tarnów, by Andrzej Otrębski (CC BY-SA 4.0)*



## INSTITUTIONS

According to local officials and governments, there is no homophobia or transphobia outside of big cities. How did they come up with that conclusion? Because the LGBT community itself is not present, or at least not visible and therefore its problems and needs are invisible as well.

Invisibility is encouraged by living in the closet, the fear of coming out, lack of acceptance and support, including psychological support. Living in hiding makes building communities as well as alliances much harder.

While doing our research we laid out a couple of questions regarding discrimination based

on sexual orientation and gender identity e.g.: are there any cases of such discrimination in the cities we investigated, is there any data collected, do the institutions have the knowledge and tools to react?

We have issued our queries to city councils in Nowy Sącz, Oświęcim, Tarnów and Wadowice, but also to superintendent, labour inspector office, local Police Departments and Police Human Rights Supervisor. Sadly, the outcomes were not positive.

Their knowledge about discrimination of LGBT people and available actions to counteract unequal treatment based on sexual orientation and gender identity, but also propagation of human rights was rather shallow and superficial.

During our interviews the topic turned out to be incomprehensible and fairly negligible. Discrimination? Non-existent, as there are no LGBT people. And those who live there are so hidden that their discrimination is not visible. Although, a bright side can be seen – in some of the cities we managed to contact some officials that notice the need for change and want to do something about the situation of LGBT persons in their surroundings. .

## **MEDIA**

70% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people surveyed wishes that the local media would engage more in their issues, and over 80% expects that the media would do some kind of antidiscrimination work. This shows that LGBT persons are aware of the way media speaks about them and through that how it influences the local community.

We analysed local media in some of the cities of Lesser Poland in terms of presenting the topics of LGBT issues. The public discussion about civil partnerships or the proposal of Gender Recognition Act, as well as the presence of Anna Grodzka and Robert Biedroń in the parliament, but mostly the discussion about the term "gender", which gained the biggest attention in 2015, were also present in the local media. It was treated as a news flash, an oddity, regrettably without any context or explanation of key terms which demonstrates itself the most in the case of unfortunate "gender".

## **ORGANISATIONS**

To get to know and diagnose the local social situation in the four cities in terms of antidiscrimination activities, it was necessary to get to know the non-profit organisations working in the region, especially those that focus on human rights

or democracy and civil society building. It was a key part of this research as we needed to learn about the particular situation in which these organisations work, how they collaborate with local governments and if the local community is engaged. Secondly, one of the main aims of the project was to get those organisations interested in antidiscrimination topics and education including sexual orientation and gender identity to assess the possibility of future collaborations.

A couple of problems were diagnosed: lack of interest, lack of engaged civil society, the struggle to recruit volunteers or to get funding (the second one becoming a bigger issue over the last two years). Nonetheless, nongovernmental organisations want to participate in antidiscrimination work, inclusive of LGBT community. They want to educate themselves and they have built on trust a well-established position in their local communities.



MORE DURABLE AND THEREFORE BETTER ARE THOSE RELATIONSHIPS THAT SPROUT FROM A COMMON ENERGY AND JOINED FORCES, BECAUSE ONE CAN WORK WITH AN ORGANISATION WHICH WORKS IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FIELD, BUT WE COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER PERFECTLY.

*Excerpt from an interview with participant of the research*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1

DIAGNOSE AND LEARN ABOUT THE NEEDS OF LOCAL LGBT COMMUNITIES AND EMBRACE THEM.

2

GRASP THE POSSIBILITY OF TAKING ACTION, FIND LOCAL LEADERS AND REACH OUT

3

GET AUTHORITIES AND LOCAL OFFICIALS INTERESTED IN TAKING ANTI-DISCRIMINATORY ACTIONS, ESPECIALLY THOSE INCLUDING SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

4

LOOK FOR ALLIES WITHIN THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS.

5

WHEN PLANNING SEMINARS, WORKSHOPS OR OTHER EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES TAKE SMALLER CITIES INTO ACCOUNT.





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# WORDS INTO ACTIONS

Bearing in mind the recommendations, we focused on taking action for and with the LGBT community. We have also broadened our reach to two more voivodships, Holy Cross and Subcarpathian, as we received a lot of queries and request from there.

It is worth remembering that since 2014, when we first started our activities in smaller cities, the political context in Poland has dramatically changed. Homophobic rhetoric of the current government caused institutional antidiscrimination actions to be frowned upon, and teachers and civil servants to be afraid, especially in smaller cities. LGBT persons are also afraid since it is harder for them to come out in a smaller city.

One of the most important premises of our project was a substantial participation of

the local communities. We wanted to avoid conquer those towns, and telling people what and how are they supposed to do. Instead we want to support them, get them out of their homes, empower them and if needed help by being visible ourselves.

Supplementing the network established in 2014-2016, at the beginning of 2017 we have sent out a survey asking persons to leave their contact details if they are interested in grassroots LGBT actions in their cities and towns.

Over the course of the next months we talked, asked but most of all listened and learned from the local communities. We chose the safest and most comfortable means of communication. Together, we wondered what events would be most interesting, but also positively received and engaging towards further discussion about

LGBT persons and their local communities.

At the end of summer, the first LGBT film screenings took place – open and free for all, and advertised in local media. We assumed that they have to take place in local public institutions – it was a strong signal for gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people, that those places should be also open to LGBT topics.

The screenings moreover were a good place for the community to integrate and get to know each other.

In Autumn 2017 we conducted the second round of events, that were a direct response to interests and needs of local communities. In 2018 we can see already a couple of events planned, as the communities take their fate into their own hands.

*Photo 2. A part of our project were screenings of "The Way He Looks"*



# COMMUNITY UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The issues that dominated our discussions with local LGBT communities were:

- + lack of possibilities of integration and poor communication within the communities,
- + inability to self-organise, unused resources, tools and skills that are available to LGBT persons,
- + unfavourable socio-political situation in Poland and in the region.

However, the last one did not prevent participation of out LGBT people, that are socially or politically active, in our activities.

Something that caught our attention could be called a "social malaise". There are a lot of events in the cities where the project took place, but people do not want to attend them, they do not show any interest in them. People taking part in our project mentioned this problem as well in the context of LGBT community.

A slightly different situation could be observed in the 2 bigger cities, where we started our project in 2016: Kielce and Rzeszów. There are bigger LGBT communities, acting as "social circles", but still they are affected by the problem of homophobia and stereotypes, lack of friendly places in the city as well as lack of LGBT visibility in the region.

At the end of 2016, in one of the cities, we started a secret Facebook group focused on LGBT topics. It was an outcome of our consultations with the local communities, that pointed out this form of communication and integration as most favourable and safe. The group quickly took off and at this moment has over 90 members. At some point it became a tool for the local community to organise itself by going out together or sharing information about various events or topics that are LGBT related.

In other cities there was a similar story – sometimes we joined already existing groups and helped to reanimate them. At the same time, we were building a mailing list which would help us communicate quickly and effectively with local communities about interesting events or actions.

Things that seem obvious, cease being so in places where there are no friendly places, where the only heard voice belongs to conservative politicians and municipal institutions are subjugated by them.

Therefore, it is crucial to build alliances and using the easiest tools for engaging communities.

What worked for us based on our experiences?

- + Private meetings - not all of the LGBT persons want to come out. It is worth thinking about a gathering for a coffee or tea where persons can get to know each other.
- + LGBT themed events - they can give a chance to meet each other, and secondly engage allies, whose attendance is important especially for LGBT youth.
- + Activities in public spaces – they are riskier as one might not want to or be able to attend them, however, they serve an educational purpose and increase the important and often mentioned visibility.

- + Approaching local journalist with LGBT topics – speaking out about discrimination and showing positive stories and actions about LGBT persons.
- + Campaigning – increasing visibility of LGBT community in smaller cities.

*Photo 3. Participants of an event organised in Rzeszów*



# ALLIANCES

During 2016 and 2017 a strong ally movement was created, including smaller towns, build upon the Black Protest movement and Committee for the Defence of Democracy. Some of our activities, especially discussions about civil partnerships and marriage equality, or in general the demand of Polish LGBT movement, were also targeted at allies, as well as local politicians and activists.

As it turned out, they were very keen about the topic and open to new information, declaring that they would like to take part in future activities for allies in their community. At the same time, we have received a lot of feedback from the local LGBT communities, that the presence of allies during our events was very important to them.

*Photo 4. Speech by the representative of Równość.org.pl Foundation during rally for independence of judiciary, by Katarzyna Derda/Aparat Partyjny*



# OBSTACLES ON THE ROAD

In November 2017 in Nowy Sącz we realised that there is still a lot of work ahead of us. In Small Gallery, a municipal culture institution, we had a film screening of "Article 18" planned. It is a documentary that tries to answer the question why it was not possible to pass a law formalizing same sex partnerships in Poland. After the film we prepared a discussion with Wojtek and Michał, a couple that takes part in strategic litigation.

The gallery is owned by the city; however, we have previously organised a screening without such an "outrage". One and a half day before the event we were informed that there had been an accident in the gallery and the screening cannot take place there. On the same day, in a local press, Tomasz Michałowski, deputy director of the Department of Culture, Sport, Promotion and Social Communication in the city of Nowy Sącz took a stance. His statement is a proof of homophobia plaguing the local government.



IF SOMEONE WANTS TO ORGANISE SUCH MEETING, ONE CAN DO THEM IN OTHER PLACES. THE CITY OF NOWY SĄCZ HAD JUST ACCEPTED THE PATRONAGE OF SAINT MARGARET, THEREFORE I CANNOT IMAGINE HAVING SUCH EVENTS TAKING PLACE IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS. THE MAYOR EXPLICITLY DID NOT AGREE FOR THIS EVENT TO BE HELD THERE

*Statement by Tomasz Michałowski, after [sadeczanin.info](http://sadeczanin.info)*

Unfortunately, this was not the end of the story. Both local and national media got interested in it, which gave a possibility to Michałowski and other local officials to spew their homophobic views and comments.

We have decided to file a complaint to Polish Ombudsman, who sent a letter to the Mayor of Nowy Sącz, Ryszard Nowak. We look forward to receiving his response. The case is still open.

The Foundation considers filing a lawsuit, on the claim of homophobia-based refusal of providing service by public institution.

The screening and discussion took place. They were very successful, and during the media hype, we have received a lot of words of encouragement from inhabitants of Nowy Sącz, as well as requests to organise such events in other cities.

*Photo 5. Header of Ombudsman's letter to Mayor of Nowy Sącz*



**RZECZNIK PRAW OBYWATELSKICH**

**Adam Bodnar**

Warszawa,

20/12/2017

**XI.814.8.2017.AK/AM**

**Pan Ryszard Nowak**  
**Prezydent Miasta Nowego Sącza**  
Urząd Miasta Nowego Sącza  
Rynek 1  
33-300 Nowy Sącz

# WE ARE HERE

At the end of January 2018, in some cities of Lesser Poland as well as Rzeszów and Kielce, billboards and advertisements with a slogan "WE ARE HERE" appeared. In the background there is a pair of girls holding hands. This campaign shows that LGBT people, as in gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender persons live not only in the biggest cities of Poland.

Where this idea came from? We were looking for an answer to what is the most crucial for local LGBT communities. What do they need the most? There was only one answer – visibility.

"WE ARE HERE" campaign is a solution to that need. Billboards and advertisement were there to encourage inhabitants of those cities to reflect and discuss the place of LGBT persons in their communities. And to show LGBT people that they are not alone.

Billboards were also complemented by a campaign in social media, supporting LGBT persons and allies to share their stories and experiences, as well as to show the mutual support.

Because in the end - **we are here.**



# ABOUT US

Równość.org.pl Foundation was established in 2013 and since the beginning it was focused on actions towards LGBT persons in smaller cities, especially in southern Poland.

Do you want to live in more colorful city? Do you have an idea for an action, but you don't know how to start? Do you want to hold a film screening or discussion about LGBT issues? Contact with us!

Any organisation or institution is also welcomed to contact us, especially if they want to learn more about LGBT community and most of all – how to take their needs into account. We would be happy to tell you about our recent projects, and we can also conduct antidiscrimination workshops for you.

## CONTACT US

[info@rownosc.org.pl](mailto:info@rownosc.org.pl)

[www.rownosc.org.pl](http://www.rownosc.org.pl)

[facebook.com/rownosc](https://facebook.com/rownosc)

# SUPPORT OUR WORK

Let's remember about LGBT persons in smaller cities and villages. Thanks to our work LGBT persons feel safer and know that they are not alone.

Your financial support can help us in reaching more people and making their lives easier..

Donate or set up a monthly transfer. Don't let those places stay neglected.



## **DONATE OR SET UP A MONTHLY TRANSFER**

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