

European GBQMSM Networking Meeting 2025

Outcome Report

Date: 12.12.2025, 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. CET

Format: Online meeting (inputs, breakout groups & plenary discussion)

Moderation: Madi Awadalla

Minutes: Harald Klant Sadja

1. Objectives of the Meeting

- Share insights about topics relevant for the community, while highlighting the perspectives of underrepresented GBQMSM subgroups
- Encourage participants to share materials produced by their organisations
- Strengthen peer-to-peer support and ongoing collaboration
- Identify barriers to staying in touch and to using existing online resources
- Collect ideas for an accessible, user-friendly exchange platform

2. Agenda Overview

- Opening & introduction
- Presentations + Q&A
 - Navigating Political and Institutional Landscapes - Justin Varney-Bennett
 - Decriminalisation of Sex Work in Belgium: Fact-checking, Implementation, and Impact on GBQMSM Sex Workers - Stéphane Boyer
 - Navigating Transitioning in Sex Work & Beyond - Wszebor Sienkiewicz
 - Overview of Resources by Regional Networks - Ismar Hačam
- Networking Exercise – breakout group discussions
- Networking Exercise – plenary discussion
- Summary & closing

3. Presentation summaries & Discussion Points

3.1 Navigating Political and Institutional Landscapes - Justin Varney-Bennett

Justin shared his experience balancing a career in public health with long-term involvement in LGBTQA* activism. He described how working inside government institutions allows him to make real change but also comes with limitations on what he can say or do publicly.

Key points

- Justin decided to enter public service in order to influence policy from within the system. In his talk, he reflected on the tension between civil servants' need for neutrality and personal/community advocacy. Senior officials must manage public conduct carefully to maintain trust, which can be challenging during sensitive times like COVID-19 or debates on gender.
- Achievements often take years: for example, including sexual orientation questions in the national census took decades of groundwork. He also highlighted the UK government's report on lesbian and bisexual women's health as a major success.
- Justin stressed the importance of both inside influence and outside activism, noting that they work best together.
- Policies should reflect the diversity of LGBTQA* communities: Don't assume all LGBTQA* people have the same needs, forming allyships can help amplify voices often missing at decision-making tables.
- He also mentioned that most of his advocacy work was done next to working a full-time job and spoke about the challenges related to that.
- He encouraged organizations to understand the wider policy landscape: With budget cuts and political changes on the horizon, framing LGBTQA*-specific needs within broader priorities is necessary. He also encouraged organizations to maintain a seat at the table even when funding is scarce, and build alliances with other groups to strengthen their impact.

You can watch a **recording of the talk** on AAE's Youtube channel:

<https://youtu.be/RGR-KiJKJnI>

3.2 Decriminalisation of Sex Work in Belgium: Fact-checking, Implementation, and Impact on GBQMSM Sex Workers - Stéphane Boyer

Stéphane spoke about the process of decriminalizing sex work in Belgium, focusing on what it means for GBQMSM sex workers specifically.

Key points

- Decriminalisation vs legalisation: Decriminalisation removes most laws and regulations that control sex work, while legalisation regulates it with specific rules. Belgium's reforms aim to decriminalize most sex work.
- Legal changes:
 - In 2022, decriminalization removed many criminal penalties for organizing sex work and provided a new definition of pimping.
 - In 2024, a new law allowed sex workers to have employment contracts with basic rights, such as workplace safety, the right to refuse clients, and access to benefits.
- Challenges in practice:
 - Employment contracts are not widely used yet and available only to people with a permanent residence permit.
 - Street-based sex workers, undocumented migrants, and GBQMSM workers remain vulnerable and largely unprotected by the law.
 - Some legal terms, like "abnormal advantage," are vague, creating uncertainty.
- Public debate and implementation:
 - Political and election contexts influenced the timing of reforms.
 - Engagement with sex worker organizations and other stakeholders helped give legitimacy to the process.
 - Advocates need to stay aware of how laws can be used in unintended ways, such as for targeting vulnerable groups.

Stéphane emphasized that transparency, dialogue with all stakeholders, and careful monitoring are key to making reforms work for the people they are intended to protect.

You can watch a **recording of Stéphane's presentation** on AAE's Youtube channel: <https://youtu.be/pJOKfAaMomY> Stéphane's slides are available [here](#).

3.3 Navigating Transitioning in Sex Work & Beyond - Wszebor Sienkiewicz

Wszebor described how femininity is imposed and commodified from a young age for people Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB). Sex work was framed as a way to benefit from existing cis-heteronormative expectations, where emotional labour, anticipation of needs, and consent management largely fall on the person perceived as more femme.

Transition and Changing Working Conditions

For a femme presenting AFAB person, sex work can offer financial stability, safer working environments, and opportunities for professionalisation. During and after transitioning, misgendering and fetishisation are frequent, alongside a sharp drop in client numbers and income. Working conditions become less safe, and there is an increased pressure for condomless sex, as clients no longer consider pregnancy a risk.

As a result, sex work during and after transitioning can become economically unsustainable. Loss of income and housing security leads some transmasculine sex workers to delay, interrupt, or stop transitioning, often with serious mental health impacts.

Moving Between Sexual and Social Spaces

Transitioning involves navigating cis-heterosexual, MSM, and FLINTA* spaces, each with distinct norms around communication, consent, and desire. This experience can be quite disorienting and isolating – MSM spaces in particular can be difficult to navigate due to heavy reliance on non-verbal communication, unspoken rules, and narrow ideals of desirability.

Key Observations included

- There is a widespread lack of understanding of transmasculine bodies, health needs, and experiences.
- Transmasculine and non-binary people are often treated as an afterthought in organisational and political work: There is a lack of clear political positioning and visible trans* inclusion.

Identified Needs

Short term:

- Do not assume gender, anatomy, or sexual practices

- Make trans* inclusion visible and explicit in organisations and services
- Increase trans* representation in decision-making roles

Long term:

- Sustained, transformative awareness raising and educational work
- Spaces for honest, vulnerable conversations
- Greater openness, curiosity, and care across communities

Good Practice Example

Checkpoint BLN's dedicated service day for trans* people was highlighted as a positive example of targeted inclusion, though demand currently exceeds capacity.

NOTE: Not all contents of the presentation were included in this summary – if you would like to know more about Wszebor's experience, feel free to contact him: communications@eswalliance.org

3.4 Overview of Resources by Regional Networks - Ismar Hačam

In his presentation Ismar provided an overview of existing resource libraries and knowledge hubs from regional networks and organisations working in HIV combination prevention. It highlighted tools, trainings, databases, and publications covering harm reduction, HIV criminalisation, migrant health, trans* rights, and sex workers' rights. Participants were encouraged to actively use these resources, connect with local organisations, and share their own work to strengthen collective advocacy and visibility.

You can find a list of resource libraries [here](#).

4. Resources Shared by Participants

Participants shared examples showing how limited access to funding continues to affect trans* communities, particularly in relation to transition-related healthcare (e.g. in Hungary). In response, **emergency funds, crowdfunding, and other community-based financial support** were highlighted as important short-term solutions, while several new resources are currently in development and will need broader dissemination once published.

Resources Highlighted:

- Upcoming sex workers' rights guide for Sweden
- "Keeping Up with the Transition" by Ines Anttila, documenting experiences of migrant trans* women in Sweden
- ESTICOM training programme for MSM-focused community health workers

Key Reflections:

- Funding shortages impact not only service delivery but also knowledge sharing and participation.
- Many community organisations operate with minimal staff and resources.
- Political and institutional changes are making community-based work increasingly difficult.
- Solidarity-based models (e.g. for conference participation) were identified as essential to support under-resourced organisations and ensure inclusion.

5. Discussion: Experiences and Challenges in Accessing Resources

Challenges Identified:

- Resources are fragmented and difficult to find
- There is a lack of long-term archiving and stewardship of resources
- Many valuable project outputs disappear once funding ends
- There's an overload of e-mails with information and links to resources

Ideas for Improvement:

- Participants support the idea of a meta-database or archive collecting outputs from large and small organisations.
 - Archives should protect materials from political censorship or disappearance and prioritise smaller community organisations whose work is often lost
 - Preference for building on existing platforms rather than creating entirely new ones.
 - A shared platform could allow organisations to upload national-level resources, enabling cross-country learning.
 - Archived materials (e.g. COVID-era harm reduction practices) may become relevant again in future crises.

- Improve targeting so that resources reach the most relevant audiences.
- Participants share good experience in a bulletin curated by a trusted organisation.
 - Monthly or regular e-bulletins can significantly reduce email overload.
 - Effective Formats are:
 - short (one-page)
 - link-based (not reproducing full content)
 - clearly structured by topic
 - Participants value the ability to skim and choose what is relevant to them.

5.1 Language, Translation & Adaptation

Challenges Identified:

- Language barriers: most materials are in English; local-language resources are rarely translated.
- Manuals are often only partially translated, with just the summaries available in other languages.
- Legal and cultural contexts differ – the materials should be adaptable to specific local and community contexts.

Ideas For Improvement:

- Use AI-assisted translation cautiously for short texts, combined with human review for:
 - linguistic accuracy
 - cultural and community appropriateness

While AI tools can assist with categorisation, searching, and preliminary translation of short texts, they require critical use, human review, and ethical consideration. Concerns raised include:

- Translation errors, inappropriate terminology, and loss of nuance
- Ethical risks when working with marginalised communities
- AI does not necessarily save time for longer or complex texts
- AI-generated content is viewed as low quality and risks oversaturation
- AI outputs always require strong human oversight.
- Establish volunteer-based language “sense-check” networks across countries.

- Participants would like to read evaluation reports showing how projects evolved over time, including notes on what worked, what failed, and what was adapted

5.2 Informal Networks & Community-Based Exchange

- Informal chat spaces (Signal, Telegram, Discord) can support rapid peer exchange.
- Security, privacy, and moderation remain important considerations.
- Such spaces are seen as complementary, not replacements, for structured platforms.

5.3 Screen Fatigue & Alternative Learning Formats

- Participants reported significant screen and information burnout (an overload of digital information and non-targeted communication) which leads to disengagement, reduced information processing, and ultimately ignoring the content
- Participants share interest in collective, relational learning formats, including:
 - movie screenings
 - shared listening to audiobooks
 - low-cost, low-pressure community gatherings
- These formats support reflection, accessibility, and emotional processing.

5.4 Communication Capacity & Strategic Planning

- Many NGOs rely on one communication officer to manage all outputs.
- High turnover leads to loss of institutional knowledge.
- Suggested solution:
 - shared or external strategic communication planning
 - clearer communication strategies aligned with member needs

6. Next Steps

- Continue discussions on resource archiving and curated communication formats
- Share presentations and meeting summary with participants
- Explore mechanisms to sustain exchange beyond current funding cycles