

Queer inclusion - The ALLY-Project:
The life of queer Youth
in Germany, Greece and Italy



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A Shared Method: Local Voices, Transnational Goals

A transnational reflection from Greece, Germany, and Italy – The ALLY Project (KA210-YOU)

Across Europe, young people who openly live as queer individuals continue to face systemic and everyday discrimination. Whether in cities or rural areas, their stories often go unheard. The ALLY Project – Queer Inclusion, co-funded by the European Union under KA210-YOU (Small-scale partnerships in youth), was born to change that.

Three grassroots organizations from Germany, Greece, and Italy came together to ask a simple but powerful question: *What is life like for queer youth in these countries? What do they need to feel supported?* Over the past months, we've met with young people in community spaces, offices, youth centers, and activist networks to listen to their experiences. Through these conversations, we aim not only to amplify their voices, but also to reflect on our own practices as youth workers, educators, and activists. Our goal is to give voice to young people, learn from them, and improve how we work with and for queer communities across Europe.

Over several months, we conducted interviews with queer youth and youth workers in each country. Though each local context differed, common themes emerged—revealing the emotional, social, and institutional landscapes that queer youth navigate daily.

In Germany, the association *Systeme in Bewegung e.V.* conducted interviews with eight young people between the ages of 14 and 20. These conversations took place in a queer youth group offered by the city's youth welfare system, and in a cozy, informal group of friends gathered at the association's office. The open atmosphere allowed for candid and multifaceted discussions, revealing both daily struggles and sources of strength.

In Greece, the Femedubart association engaged with several local organizations before connecting with the national LGBTQ+ association OLKE. Though access to youth was more limited, the team managed to carry out a meaningful conversation with a young homosexual individual involved with the organization. The process also highlighted how difficult it still is to speak openly about queerness in parts of Greek society—a finding in itself.

In Italy, H.R.Y.O. (Human Rights Youth Organization APS) conducted three interviews with four queer individuals through its local networks in Palermo. These included: an individual interview with a young woman who identifies as homosexual; a group interview with a queer woman, and a non-binary person; and a final interview with a queer youth worker and activist supporting LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers in Sicily. The diversity of voices reflected the layered intersections of queerness, gender, migration, and institutional marginalization.

Early Awareness and the Process of Becoming

Across all interviews, one of the most intimate themes that emerged was how queer young people first became aware of their identity. Though timelines and emotions varied, what united many of the participants was that this process was rarely sudden—it unfolded over time, often in silence, confusion, or fear.

In Italy, participants described an early awareness of feeling "different," even if they lacked the language to articulate it. In Greece and Germany, participants similarly described a process of slow and emotionally charged discovery. Some had early feelings during puberty, while others came to terms with their identity later. However, across different narratives, the underlying sense of being "not like others" and the emotional labor required to move from awareness to self-identification was common. One Greek person admitted, "I was afraid of possibly being part of the LGBTQ+ community... I think I denied it for a long time." Some reflected on how their understanding began to shift during adolescence: "I came in contact with my sexuality and who I really was during puberty." Another participant noted, "I knew from a very young age... but the first click came at 17." For others, the realization came in adulthood: "Until 25 I was straight. Then I met my partner and everything changed." For some, identity awareness began early, but without support or recognition in their environment, acceptance came much later. One interviewee shared that queerness had been sensed for years, but was only fully embraced after entering a committed relationship and confronting social expectations.

This process was often shaped not only by internal discovery, but by the feeling of not fitting in the rigid framework of gender roles or romantic scripts across the different countries. One Greek participant stressed this concept by saying, "I never fit into the role of the girl who would marry a man—that scenario always felt foreign to me."

However, not all participants experienced identity in terms of a linear "coming out" narrative. A youth worker in Italy working with queer migrants challenged the Western idea of a "coming out journey" or "path to acceptance" as a universal experience. Many queer migrants don't identify as "gay" or "lesbian" - they may engage in same-sex practices without tying them to a fixed identity.

What stands out is that self-identification was never purely individual. It was deeply relational, shaped by cultural messages, school environments, and whether queer role models were visible. One Italian youth summarized the emotional impact of this absence: "If you never see people like you anywhere, it's hard to believe you exist." In Italy, Greece, and Germany alike, many youth found themselves undergoing a complex personal process of self-discovery and naming. In cases where acceptance eventually followed, the early stages were often marked by isolation. The lack of representation, the absence of language, and the pressure to conform all contributed to a quiet but heavy emotional burden.

This sets the stage for what follows: a closer look at how these youth come to speak about themselves—in their own words—and how those words can both liberate and hurt.

More Than a Label: Naming, Identity, and Belonging

The way queer youth choose to describe themselves is not just personal—it is political. Across Germany, Italy, and Greece, participants expressed how language both empowers and constrains them, especially when others demand definitions or project assumptions. One Italian participant said “Don’t force people to find the ‘right words’ to explain their identities—it can be violent.” This reflects a broader sentiment—naming must be self-determined, not imposed.

In Italy, the diversity of labels was particularly striking. One participant preferred the term “homosexual” over “lesbian,” saying it felt less gendered and stigmatizing. Another identified as queer, describing the word as a source of both power and community.

In Germany, language was seen as both a form of validation and a source of pressure. While naming oneself could be empowering, participants noted that society often demands coherence, clarity, and justification. One person said: “I wish it wasn’t so important that I’m queer, that people could see me for the person I really am.” Another added: “Don’t mix up my sexuality with my personality.” In Italy, participants described how coming out is still emotionally taxing—often met with invasive curiosity, awkwardness, or exaggerated reactions, particularly from cis-heterosexual men. What many youth longed for was neutrality and ease. As one participant put it, *“I wish they responded as if I’m saying I prefer sparkling water over still.”* This simple comparison captured a collective desire: to be met with acceptance, not spectacle.

In Greece, participants noted that in many families and communities, identity labels like “queer” or “trans” were not even part of the vocabulary, making it difficult to communicate their experiences without feeling alien or misunderstood. Rather than identifying with a specific label, some described queerness as something they slowly inhabited through emotion, relationship, and context.

A youth worker in Italy emphasized the importance of moving beyond Western frameworks entirely, especially when working with queer migrants. She advocated for using the term SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics) instead of LGBTQIA+, explaining: “SOGIESC fits better—it’s more open, and less tied to a specific Western narrative.” This terminology is not based on fixed categories but instead recognizes the wide spectrum of identity expressions, including those that don’t fit within Eurocentric understandings of gender and sexuality.

Across all three contexts, participants agreed that identity terms must remain self-defined. They emphasized that language should serve queer people—not limit them. Terms like “queer,” “homosexual,” or “non-binary” should be used on one’s own terms, not imposed from outside. Furthermore, several participants—especially in Italy and Germany—stressed that slurs or historically violent labels can only be reclaimed from within the community. Attempts by outsiders to ‘reclaim’ such language were viewed as inappropriate or even harmful.

Despite the challenges that the participants experienced, naming could also be a powerful source of pride. In Greece, one participant reflected: “I’m proud of my self-confidence and self-love.” Another added, “That I never hid my relationship—and married the woman I love.” Visibility, for many, was not only a right but an act of resilience. As one Italian youth powerfully put it: “If we don’t make our presence seen, we can’t fight for change.” But choosing how to name oneself did

not shield participants from being misunderstood or reduced to stereotypes. The simple act of existing openly often triggered microaggressions—whether through jokes, assumptions, or the exhausting expectation to educate others. Against this backdrop of everyday tension and social friction, the need for genuine safety and connection became even more urgent.

Microaggressions and the Burden of Educating Others

In all three countries, participants reported frequent microaggressions—ranging from casual jokes to structural discrimination. In Italy, these often took the form of invasive curiosity and gendered stereotypes. One participant shared: “I’m tired of being asked if I’m top or bottom—would you ask a straight person that?” Others described how expressions of queerness in public triggered discomfort or overreactions from cis-heterosexual men: “Cis-het men often react with weird defensiveness, like I’m hitting on them.”

Participants in Germany, Italy and Greece stressed that it should not fall on queer youth to educate others. “It’s not my job to explain to straight people what I’m like and what that means,” said one German youth. Another added: “Don’t assume that the nearest queer person wants to and will explain everything to you.” Rather than being treated as fully human, many felt reduced to interpreters of queerness. Greek participants also shared how they managed the emotional toll. Some withdrew entirely, while others attempted to educate those around them—but only to a point. “I try to educate – but I leave when rejection is clear.”

In supposedly inclusive spaces, queer people still found themselves unwelcome when their presence became a source of tension. “When you make a scene because a queer person flirts with you in a safe space, you ruin the space for everyone,” one Italian youth explained. Even jokes, when framed as harmless, were experienced as cutting: “Jokes about gender or appearance—even if said ‘playfully’—can still hurt.”

German participants echoed these concerns, describing a constant sense of vigilance. “You wouldn’t believe how often jokes are made about me,” one said. Another added: “As soon as I’m out in public, I’m constantly thinking about whether I’m making myself a target.” Participants described being on guard, especially in unfamiliar or formal contexts. As one youth expressed: “That it’s damn hard to always walk around like you’re a criminal just because you’re afraid of being bullied or judged by intolerant people.”

Italian participants similarly highlighted the emotional tension of navigating public life. Expressing affection—such as holding hands or kissing—was seen as risky. Safety was never guaranteed, but many preferred to remain visible despite the danger. One noted that avoiding public visibility reinforces marginalization. Another emphasized that being visibly queer is itself a form of resistance, crucial to fighting for equality.

In both countries, subtle acts—like questioning someone’s gender expression, making assumptions about behavior, or using labels without consent—accumulate into an everyday experience of alienation. “Many people are not aware that they quickly make us feel like we don’t belong.””

In Greece, discrimination was often more explicit and institutional. One participant recalled: “I was bullied for my sexuality and because I dressed femininely.” Another described how they and their partner were treated with suspicion in public offices: “We were asked if we were related.” Discrimination extended into the healthcare system and marriage registration processes, where queer relationships were often met with confusion or avoidance.

Across all three countries, microaggressions were not isolated events. They formed part of a broader environment of tension, discomfort, and exclusion. Whether subtle or overt, they contributed to a shared sense among queer youth that public life is often unsafe—and that protection requires self-censorship, emotional detachment, or constant negotiation.

In Italy, participants expressed frustration with the performativity of many so-called “queer” spaces. Youth centers and parties labeled as inclusive often lacked actual queer presence or leadership. One participant noted: “You arrive at a ‘queer party’ and there’s no one queer there.” Others emphasized that symbols—like rainbow flags—do not inherently guarantee safety. “Spaces are not safe just because of labels—people make them safe.”

On the other hand, in Germany youth showed appreciation for inclusive venues such as bookstores and cafés with visibly diverse staff. They emphasized that inclusive spaces should also be accessible and discreet, so no one is unintentionally outed. They also wished for more places where queerness isn’t always the main focus. Additionally, they stressed the importance of small signs of institutional awareness, such as gender-neutral bathrooms..

Safe Spaces, Community, and Allyship

In Italy, many youths described building protective social 'bubbles' composed of only trusted people. One said: “I live in a bubble where I only surround myself with safe people.” At the same time, Italian youth also expressed a longing for non-political, low-pressure environments where they could connect with peers without constantly having to defend or explain their identities. Nightlife, they felt, catered more to older gay men, making it harder for gender-diverse or younger queer people to feel welcome. One participant expressed: “We need informal places where we can just hang out and not defend our identities.” Especially for those with no queer friends, informal places targeted for queer youth were longed as an opportunity to connect with others.

Allyship was another key theme across all contexts. In Italy, participants made a clear distinction between genuine support and performative gestures. While symbolic acts—such as carrying a pride flag—were appreciated, they were only meaningful when paired with emotional presence and accountability. “If you’re a real friend, it’s fine to carry a flag—just don’t make yourself the hero.” Allies were asked to listen, educate themselves, and show up when needed, without taking over. Being an ally, they explained, means standing beside queer individuals, not ahead of them. It involves amplifying queer voices without claiming ownership of the message, acknowledging one’s privilege, and making space rather than taking it. Participants noted that real allyship also means taking on the labor of confronting discrimination—whether it occurs in conversations with family, in schools, or in the workplace—without leaving that responsibility solely on queer people. This kind of support was described as deeply impactful, especially in moments of public discomfort or institutional bias.

German participants reinforced this need, emphasizing that what they sought most from family and friends was respect, openness, and the willingness to self-educate. They didn't want to be reduced to their queerness, or treated as token representatives of an identity. Instead, they longed for empathy and deeper understanding. "Sometimes I just want to be understood instead of just 'accepted'," said one. Family and friends were expected not only to be tolerant, but to actively reflect on their own biases. One German participant stressed: "Parents should prioritize loving their child without reducing them to their sexuality." Others warned against outing queer people without consent or forcing them to educate others. Support meant respecting boundaries and offering empathy, not just acceptance.

In Greece, reactions from the social environment were more polarized. Some described family support and pride in their ability to live openly and love freely. Others, however, faced rejection—particularly from male relatives. The importance of allyship in these contexts became all the more critical: those who found support from friends, mothers, or professionals were able to build stronger self-worth and healthier relationships.

In all three countries, young queer people called not just for more services—but for more solidarity. Safety and belonging, they reminded us, are not policies or logos. They are built through relationships, mutual care, and communities that make space for everyone to simply be.

In Greece, the social environment varied widely. One participant described their mother as supportive while the father cut off all contact. Others spoke of losing some friends but gaining others. What made a difference was having someone—whether a partner, a parent, or a peer—who saw and affirmed them.

Across all three countries, support systems were recognized as vital—but unevenly available. Whether through community centers, chosen families, or trusted peers, participants emphasized the importance of spaces where they could be fully themselves, without fear of judgment or isolation. Still, even the most supportive communities could not fill the gaps left by underprepared institutions. For queer youth, meaningful inclusion also depended on the systems meant to serve them

What Youth Organizations Can Do: From Listening to Action

Institutional and Structural Support: Gaps, Needs, and Hopes

Across Italy, Germany, and Greece, queer youth highlighted significant shortcomings in institutional and service-based support. A major shared concern was the lack of comprehensive education, especially around sexuality, gender identity, and emotional wellbeing.

In Italy, participants expressed frustration that even when sex education was offered, it remained strictly heterosexual and reproductive. One youth in Palermo noted: "There is no sex or emotional education—and when it does happen, it's only heterosexual and reproductive-focused." This experience was echoed by participants in Greece, where one young person stressed the need for systemic change: "LGBTQ+ topics should be taught as naturally as anything else—from an early age." Another added, "I want LGBTQ+ education to start in primary school." These calls were also mirrored in Germany, where participants advocated for curricula that move beyond cisnormativity and heteronormativity. One German participant argued, "It would make sense if

sex education lessons in schools were less hetero- and cisnormative. Queer, intersex, and transgender experiences are hardly ever addressed.”

Schools were widely described as unsafe or unprepared. In Italy, participants said that no one at school could be trusted to talk about LGBTQIA+ issues. In Germany, youth emphasized the need for inclusive spaces outside school environments to avoid unwanted outing. Participants in all three countries pointed to the symbolic importance of gender-neutral bathrooms, inclusive paperwork, and visual signs of safety in public spaces. “In public facilities, it helps me if there are gender-neutral toilets,” one German youth said. “It shows there’s probably at least one adult who has a bit of an idea.”

Another recurring theme was the absence of trained professionals and peer-based emotional support. In Italy, queer youth expressed the need for informal listening spaces not solely mediated by psychologists or social workers. In Greece, the emphasis was placed on structural support, including accessible mental health services and LGBTQIA+ resource hubs. Participants wanted support systems that did not pathologize their experiences but instead created room for dialogue and affirmation.

“Youth across countries emphasized that inclusion cannot rely solely on individual resilience. What they asked for were not just services for queer people—but education for their environments: teachers, families, coaches. As one German participant put it, “There should be places where relatives can ask questions without putting it all on us.”

More broadly, young people across countries criticized the fact that queer existence is often framed as controversial or political. One German participant said: “If less time and platform were used to take apart the existence of queer people—especially trans* people—and to debate whether we’re allowed to exist, our community would be much less actively harmed.” Similarly, a Greek youth said: “Legal protection, mental health support, media visibility, and community resources”—these are not luxuries, but necessities for a just and safe life.

Another common thread was the fight for legal equality—especially in terms of marriage, healthcare, and family rights. A Greek participant plainly stated, “Our marriage should have the same rights as any other,” underscoring a desire not just for symbolic acceptance, but for full recognition under the law. In Italy, while same-sex civil unions are legally recognized, participants noted the continued absence of full marriage equality and the rights that come with it—especially regarding parental recognition and access to adoption. The legal framework still reflects unequal citizenship, and this gap was experienced not just as a policy issue, but as a deep personal injustice.

The voices gathered through the ALLY Project point to a clear message: meaningful allyship is not a matter of slogans, but of structural care. Queer youth do not simply want to be welcomed, they want to be respected, protected, and understood. For youth organizations across Europe, this means taking active responsibility in shaping inclusive environments.

Simple, everyday actions matter. Asking for and using pronouns—whether in conversation, in emails, or on name tags—is a sign of respect that helps avoid misgendering and affirms diverse identities. Similarly, offering gender-neutral bathrooms or inclusive registration forms signals awareness and helps participants feel safer.

Visual cues also play a role. Displaying pride flags or inclusive posters can indicate that an organization is welcoming. But participants reminded us that symbols must be backed by substance: being a truly safe space means doing the work—not just decorating the room. Visibility is important, but it must never become performative or self-congratulatory.

Equally important is building a culture where boundaries are respected and harmful questions are avoided. Youth workers should be trained not to ask intrusive questions or expect young people to explain or defend their identities. Instead, organizations should take responsibility for their own learning—educating themselves on terminology, intersectionality, and the realities queer youth face, so that the emotional labor doesn't fall on the very people seeking support.

Finally, organizations must be prepared to act—not just to host. This means advocating for queer rights in education, healthcare, and community spaces; amplifying youth voices; and standing in solidarity when discrimination arises. *Creare sicurezza non significa essere neutrali, significa esserci.*