

COMMUNITY SUPPORT NETWORKS AS A PILLAR FOR THE INTEGRAL HEALTH OF THE LGBTQIA+ POPULATION: CHALLENGES AND STRENGTHENING STRATEGIES



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Flávio Júnior Barbosa Figueiredo¹, Guilherme Teodoro Martins², Pedro Henrique Cardoso Duarte³, Ana Paula Quintella Mélo Ferreira⁴, Ana Lais Bastos Lopes⁵, Tiago dos Santos Cezar⁶, Priscilla Bandeira Frota⁷, Alexandre Maslinkiewicz⁸,

¹ Dr. in Health Sciences

Institution: FIPMoc University Center and University Center of Northern Minas

E-mail: figueiredofjb@gmail.com

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/0897191154736049>

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1452-9573>

² Nursing Undergraduate

Institution: UniFACTHUS University Center

Email: guilhermecentraldevacinas@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9030-4742>

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/6804569032818965>

³ Undergraduate Nursing Student

Institution: Federal University of Rondônia Foundation (UNIR)

Email: pehcduarte@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3271-4122>

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/0284117867783479>

⁴ Medical Student

Institution: CESMAC

E-mail: apquintella@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7089-1086>

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/0399152886443042>

⁵ Bachelor of Science in Nursing

Institution: University Center of Pará

Email: ana_lais91@hotmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-75434925

⁶ Graduate in Nursing

Institution: UFRGS

Email: tiagocezarenf@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8711-9387>

LATTES: <https://lattes.cnpq.br/0377247008529679>

⁷ Family Health Residency

Institution: ICEPI

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2305-9550>

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/1251014539040559>

⁸ Biosciences and Health Teaching Graduate Program

Institution: Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ)

Email: alexmaslin@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9722-8383>

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/7524893321976536>

João Victor Cruz Correia⁹, Eduardo Vinicius Barboza dos Santos¹⁰, Daivid Tiago Oliveira Sousa¹¹ and Wanderklayson Aparecido Medeiros de Oliveira¹².

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes community support networks as fundamental pillars for the promotion of comprehensive health of the LGBTQIA+ population, considering their challenges and strengthening strategies. The objective was to understand how these networks contribute to mitigating inequalities, promoting social inclusion, and strengthening public policies aimed at sexual and gender diversity. The methodology used was the integrative literature review, with the selection of eight studies published between 2012 and 2024, in addition to the analysis of official documents, such as the Brazil Without Homophobia Program and the National LGBT Comprehensive Health Policy. The results show that, although significant advances have been achieved, such as the creation of inclusive spaces and the strengthening of public policies, gaps persist related to the discontinuity of actions and insufficient funding. Community networks stood out as essential mediators between the LGBTQIA+ population and health systems, in addition to offering emotional support and acting as agents of social transformation. In the final considerations, the importance of greater integration between community initiatives and formal health systems is reinforced, as well as the need for political articulation and investments to ensure the sustainability of these actions. This study contributes to the academic and social debate by proposing strategies that promote equity and strengthen the rights of this population.

Keywords: Community support networks. Comprehensive health. LGBTQIA+ population. Public policies. Social inclusion.

⁹ Master's student in Health, Environment and Work

Institution: Federal University of Bahia

Email: jvccorreia_@hotmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6670-0689>

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/9464318628144080>

¹⁰ Master in Structural and Functional Interactions in Rehabilitation

Institution: University of Marília UNIMAR

Email: eduardo.vbs@live.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1042-6839>

LATTES: <https://lattes.cnpq.br/5864760577218141>

¹¹ Doutorando em Ciências da Educação

Instituição: Inter-American Faculty of Social Sciences

E-mail: daividsousa13@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0002-6024-5168

LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/6030019144082318>

¹² PhD in Business Administration

Institution: Centro Universitário FIPMoc - UNIFIPMoc

E-mail: wander.oliveira@unifipmoc.edu.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7795-545X>

LATTES: <https://lattes.cnpq.br/8072462713188902>

INTRODUCTION

The LGBTQIA+ public is composed of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender identities and non-normative sexual orientations (Mattos 2020). This diversity reflects different experiences and forms of expression, which often challenge hegemonic social and cultural norms, each letter of the acronym represents a specific segment, but all share the struggle for recognition, respect, and equality in a context still marked by prejudices and structural inequalities (Fonseca 2020).

The LGBTQIA+ population faces historical and contemporary challenges related to prejudice, discrimination, and social exclusion, which have a direct impact on their physical, mental, and social health. Despite advances in civil rights and the growing visibility of this population's issues, many individuals in this group continue to experience significant barriers in accessing health services, strengthening social bonds, and guaranteeing fundamental rights (Magalhães *et al.*, 2022).

These difficulties are aggravated by health systems that are often structured without taking into account the specificities and vulnerabilities of this population. In this context, community support networks have emerged as essential pillars for the promotion of comprehensive health, offering not only emotional support, but also tools for empowerment and social autonomy (Magalhães *et al.*, 2022).

Community support networks are organized and collaborative systems that promote emotional, social, and practical support for individuals and groups in vulnerable situations. They are made up of non-governmental organizations, collectives, support groups and local communities that work to offer shelter, exchange experiences and provide tools for individual and collective strengthening. These networks play a crucial role in building inclusive environments where marginalized individuals find safety, guidance, and solidarity (Junior *et al.*, 2015).

When related to the public in question, they play an important role in mitigating the inequalities faced by sexual and gender diversity. These communities offer safe spaces for exchanging experiences, building identity and strengthening bonds, in addition to contributing to the confrontation of stigma and discrimination. More than that, they facilitate access to health information and services that might otherwise be inaccessible to many individuals. However, the effectiveness of these aid platforms depends on their ability to

overcome structural challenges, such as lack of funding, scarcity of inclusive public policies, and the impact of conservative social norms (Stephan *et al.*, 2023).

Integral health, understood as the state of physical, mental and social well-being, is intrinsically linked to the promotion of inclusive environments and the recognition of diversity as a positive element for society (Brasil 1980). For this public, achieving this comprehensive health requires a joint effort from multiple sectors, including education, work, security and, above all, health. Host communities occupy a central place in this process by filling gaps left by insufficient or poorly implemented public policies, offering a community and humanized approach to the specific needs of this group (Gouvêa *et al.*, 2020; Brazil 2011).

One of the main challenges faced by support initiatives is related to confronting institutionalized discrimination. Studies reveal that the LGBTQIA+ population often avoids seeking health services due to previous experiences of prejudice, invisibility, or symbolic violence (Bezerra *et al.*, 2019). This context reinforces the importance of networks that offer culturally sensitive and inclusive support, ensuring that each individual feels valued and respected in their entirety. In addition, community networks play a crucial role in building the capacity of health professionals and advocating for public policies that promote equity (Reis *et al.*, 2022).

At the same time, it is necessary to recognize the structural factors that influence the effectiveness of these support circles. The lack of adequate funding is one of the main limitations, often restricting the scope of the actions carried out (Moraes filho *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, articulation with governments, companies, and international organizations can be an effective strategy to ensure the sustainability of these initiatives. Additionally, it is important that these networks adapt to regional specificities, considering the cultural, economic, and social differences of each territory to expand their relevance and impact (Magalhães *et al.*, 2023).

Strategies for welcoming spaces should include the creation of inclusive public policies, the encouragement of the training of leaders of this group and the promotion of educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness in society in general. Investing in communication technologies is also essential to expand the reach of these networks, allowing information and services to reach populations in remote areas or with difficult access to face-to-face resources (Brasil 2013). In addition, cross-sectoral partnerships can strengthen the capacity of aid platforms to influence policies and practices in various areas, including education, health, and public safety (Freitas *et al.*, 2022).

On the other hand, it is important to highlight the transformative role that community support networks play not only in health, but also in promoting the citizenship of the LGBTQIA+ population. By providing spaces for welcome and empowerment, these organizations that support sexual and gender diversity help build resilient identities, fostering a sense of belonging and community. This action is particularly relevant in contexts of high social vulnerability, where isolation and exclusion can be even more pronounced. (Irenaeus *et al.*, 2021)

This study aims to explore the challenges and strategies for strengthening community support networks as pillars for the integral health of the LGBTQIA+ population. To this end, an integrative literature review will be carried out, which will allow synthesizing existing knowledge on the subject and identifying gaps and opportunities for future advances. In addition, it seeks to understand how these networks have been perceived and used, as well as to evaluate their impact on improving quality of life and addressing social inequalities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

LGBTQIA+ host communities play a central role in promoting the integral health of this population, considering the historical and contemporary challenges that this group faces, including discrimination, social stigma, and exclusion. These conditions directly impact physical, mental, and social health, requiring solutions that transcend traditional clinical care and integrate an inclusive approach that is sensitive to the specificities of this population. In this scenario, community support networks emerge as spaces for welcoming, resistance, and promoting well-being (Vasconcelos *et al.*, 2023).

Comprehensive health, understood as a state of physical, mental, and social well-being, is especially challenging, given that they face institutional challenges in accessing health services. Experiences of discrimination in care settings, lack of training of professionals, and family rejection are factors that intensify the rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions in this group. This situation highlights the need for actions that reduce inequalities and promote more humanized care (Gonçalves *et al.*, 2023; Brazil 1990)).

In this context, intersectionality is a fundamental concept, as it recognizes how different forms of oppression, such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and social class, intersect to shape the lived experiences of this community (Da Silva 2020; Filice; Muller

2024). This understanding reinforces the importance of welcoming spaces, which offer emotional, instrumental and informative support. These networks not only provide warmth and belonging, but also play a transformative role by strengthening resilient identities and providing a sense of community (Filice; Muller 2024).

Support networks act as a link between this group and essential services, contributing to overcoming barriers to access. Through health education and advocacy initiatives, they push for inclusive public policies and promote knowledge about the rights of this group. In addition, these networks offer services tailored to their needs, functioning as tools to mitigate health inequalities (Lima *et al.*, 2020).

Despite their relevance, networks face significant obstacles, such as the lack of sustainable financing and insufficient support from public policies are recurring problems, making it difficult to scale up these initiatives. In conservative contexts, resistance to the recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights further limits the scope of actions. These challenges are particularly evident in rural areas or regions with less access to resources, where networks tend to be less structured (Biacchi; Costa 2023).

The strengthening of these support structures depends on several strategies. The implementation of inclusive public policies is essential to ensure adequate funding, institutional support, and formal recognition. Intersectoral partnerships, involving governments, non-governmental organizations, and private companies, can amplify the impact of these initiatives, ensuring their long-term sustainability (Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2021).

The formation of leaders of this audience is another fundamental strategy. These leaders play fundamental roles in social mobilization and in the articulation of specific demands. Additionally, the use of digital technologies has proven to be an effective tool to expand the reach of networks, allowing the creation of platforms that connect people in search of support, information, or services (Carvalho *et al.*, 2023).

Integration between support networks and formal health systems is also indispensable. This articulation can facilitate the training of professionals to offer inclusive and sensitive care, in addition to enhancing the reach of community networks. Thus, the health system becomes more equitable, ensuring that the needs of the LGBTQIA+ population are met comprehensively (Torres; Dos Santos Junior 2024).

Finally, host communities not only promote integral health but also play a transformative role in society. By providing shelter and empowerment, they help build more resilient identities and foster social belonging. In contexts of high vulnerability, these

networks are even more essential, offering alternatives to isolation and exclusion. These initiatives also contribute to social awareness, promoting respect for diversity and building an inclusive culture. In this way, community support networks are not limited to individual support, but act as agents of social transformation, fundamental for the construction of a more just and egalitarian one (Moura *et al.*, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study was developed as an integrative literature review, with the objective of gathering, synthesizing and critically evaluating the scientific production related to community support networks and their contribution to the integral health of the LGBTQIA+ population. This approach was chosen because it allows a comprehensive and integrated analysis of different perspectives and methodologies, making it possible to identify gaps in the literature and propose strategies to strengthen these networks.

For the selection of studies, the research question was established: How do community support networks contribute to the integral health of the LGBTQIA+ population? The search was carried out in scientific databases such as SciELO, PubMed, Lilacs and PsycINFO, using descriptors such as: Community support networks; Comprehensive health; LGBTQIA+ population; Public policies; Social inclusion., combined by Boolean operators (AND and OR). Articles published between 2012 and 2024, in Portuguese, English, and Spanish, were included, ensuring the relevance and timeliness of the sources.

The inclusion criteria included original studies, literature reviews, and qualitative or quantitative research that directly addressed the proposed theme. On the other hand, studies outside the delimited period, editorials, reviews, and articles that did not have a direct relationship with the theme were excluded. The initial screening was based on the reading of titles and abstracts, followed by the complete analysis of the selected texts, totaling 8 studies included in the review.

The information extracted from each study was organized in a table, considering data such as authors, year of publication, methodology, and main findings. The analysis of the results was conducted in a thematic way, dividing the contributions of the community networks into three main axes: emotional support, access to health services and influence on public policies.

Ethical issues were rigorously observed, with the selection of studies that followed ethical research standards and, when applicable, that were approved by ethics committees.

This precaution ensured the integrity of the data and respect for the subjects involved in the original studies. The methodology adopted allowed the construction of an integrated view on the impact of community support networks on the promotion of comprehensive health of the LGBTQIA+ population. From this approach, it was possible to identify structural challenges, propose strengthening strategies, and highlight the contributions of these networks in mitigating social inequalities and promoting inclusion.

RESULTS

During the course of this study, 127 articles related to the proposed theme were identified. However, after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, only 8 studies were selected to compose the analysis, as detailed in the following table. A significant challenge encountered during the process was the outdated nature of most of the available publications, which made it difficult to search for recent and relevant references to support the work. This limitation highlighted the need for more up-to-date scientific production on the subject, reinforcing the importance of systematic reviews that follow the contextual and social changes related to the object of study.

The selected articles offered valuable contributions to the understanding of the impact of community support networks on the integral health of the LGBTQIA+ population, addressing aspects such as emotional support, access to health services, and influence on public policies. Each study analyzed brought important perspectives, allowing a comprehensive view of the challenges and potentialities of these networks in tackling inequalities and promoting social inclusion. The selected studies and their main findings are presented below, organized in order to facilitate the analysis and integration of the data collected.

Table 1: Selected studies

AUTHOR/YEAR	METHODOLOGY	TITLE	OBJECTIVE
Francisco; Mello 2021	Documentary research with a longitudinal approach	Mental health of the LGBT population: Psychosocial vulnerability and the search for help	It analyzes the prevalence of LGBTQIA+ people who reported seeking support In the field of mental health; Discuss the reasons that make it difficult for the LGBTQIA+ population to seek for health services and psychosocial support.
Da silva; Malfitano 2023	Exploratory qualitative research	Acts of life: LGBTQIA+ people living on the streets and therapy Social occupational	Know life acts of LGBTQIA+ people Homeless during the covid-19 pandemic, in Maceió-AL, Brazil

Govêa 2019	Exploratory qualitative research	The insertion of the National LGBT Comprehensive Health Policy for the fight to guarantee rights	To discuss the constitution and applicability of the PNSI-LGBT in the context of health services in two municipalities in the interior of the state of São Paulo
Lima 2020	Applied architectural design	Support house for the LGBTQIA+ population	Develop a functional and inclusive architectural space that meets the needs of the LGBTQIA+ population in the central region of Rio de Janeiro.
Selles <i>et al.</i> , 2022	Qualitative, exploratory research	Social networks to support trans people: expanding the production of care	Present and discuss the therapeutic itineraries built by trans people in Niterói through their social networks.
Da Silva <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Qualitative approach	Implementation of the National Comprehensive Health Policy for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transsexuals (PNSI LGBT) in Paraná, Brazil*	The implementation of the National Comprehensive Health Policy for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transsexuals (PNSI LGBT) in Paraná was investigated based on four focus groups with 48 participants
Mello; they breed; maroja 2012	Analytical qualitative study	Where are public policies for the LGBT population in Brazil	To reflect on the effectiveness of the plans, programs and conferences produced and carried out by the federal government in the process of building public policies for the LGBT population in Brazil.
Diaz 2019	Virtual ethnography	The LGBT scene in the Humanizassus Network: a public health cyberspace	It investigates the LGBT theme in a cyberspace within the scope of the Brazilian Unified Health System, created from the public policy Humanizassus Network (RHS), in the wake of the National Humanization Policy. The objective is to apprehend the meanings of narratives of topics about LGBT politics in this Network

Source: Researchers, 2024.

This table summarizes the main studies used in the analysis, highlighting the different axes of action of community networks and their contributions to the integral health of the LGBTQIA+ population

DISCUSSION

The results of this research show that, despite the advances achieved, the effectiveness of public policies aimed at the LGBTQIA+ population in Brazil still faces considerable challenges, especially with regard to the application and sustainability of these initiatives at the federal, state, and municipal levels (Mello; De Avellar; Maroja, 2012). This analysis, based on the eight studies included, as well as official documents from the Ministry of Health and the National LGBT Comprehensive Health Policy (BRASIL, 2011),

offers a comprehensive view of the actions, gaps, and ways to strengthen the rights and citizenship of this population.

The implementation of public policies, such as the Brazil Without Homophobia Program and the National Plan for the Promotion of LGBT Citizenship and Human Rights, is recognized as an important milestone in the struggle for equal rights (Brazil 2004). However, Gouvêa (2019) points out that the operationalization of these initiatives is still limited by barriers such as political discontinuity, lack of resources, and resistance from conservative sectors. These challenges were also identified in the study by Mello, De Avellar and Maroja (2012), who highlighted the need for constant monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that the proposed plans are effectively implemented and bring concrete results for the LGBTQIA+ population.

The analysis of the interviews conducted in this study reinforces the importance of intersectoral strategies and the training of professionals in health services. The National LGBT Comprehensive Health Policy, instituted in 2011, establishes clear guidelines to ensure equitable and inclusive care, promoting the elimination of prejudice in health services (Brasil 2013). However, as observed in Da Silva *et al.* (2020), the effectiveness of the PNSI-LGBT is often hampered by the lack of awareness of managers and the insufficiency of resources to adapt services to the specificities of this population. The document also points out that, in many municipalities, policies are restricted to specific actions, without effective integration with the primary care and mental health networks.

The studies by Francisco and Mello (2021) and Silva *et al.* (2023) highlight that community support networks have played an essential role in filling the gaps left by the State. These networks offer welcoming, disseminate information about inclusive rights and services, and act as spaces for social empowerment. Despite this, as identified by Lima *et al.* (2022), the performance of these networks is limited by the lack of funding and institutional partnerships, especially in peripheral and rural regions, where the LGBTQIA+ population faces even more vulnerabilities.

Another central point raised by the studies is the need for policies that consider the specificities of LGBTQIA+ subpopulations, such as trans and non-binary people. The National Human Rights Program 3 and the PNSI-LGBT include guidelines aimed at this public, but, as indicated by Gouvêa (2019), and Brasil (2009), the implementation of these actions has been slow and fragmented, reflecting the lack of institutional recognition of the demands of this group.

The research question outlined in this study is also answered by the use of participatory methodologies, such as interviews with managers and representatives of civil society. This process revealed that, although there is a robust legal and political framework in Brazil, its effectiveness depends on concrete actions that integrate public services and community demands (Mello; DE Avellar; Maroja, 2012). The critical analysis of the documents and practices reported reinforces that the sustainability of public policies requires not only financial resources, but also a continuous commitment to inclusion and equity (Brasil, 2011).

The integration of digital technologies, as highlighted by Selles *et al.* (2022), is a promising strategy to expand the reach of public policies. Digital platforms have the potential to connect individuals to support networks and inclusive services, especially in areas where the presence of the state is limited. However, the impact of these tools depends on investments in technological and capacity building infrastructure, ensuring that digital initiatives are accessible and inclusive.

In conclusion, the analysis of the eight studies included, added to the official documents, shows that public policies aimed at the LGBTQIA+ population in Brazil represent significant advances, but still face structural and operational challenges. For these policies to become more effective, it is essential to strengthen the articulation between the different levels of government, invest in the training of professionals, expand funding for inclusive actions and foster dialogue with community networks. Only with an integrated and committed approach will it be possible to guarantee the promotion of rights and full citizenship for the LGBTQIA+ population.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study allowed us to reflect on the effectiveness of community support networks and public policies aimed at the LGBTQIA+ population in Brazil. From the analysis of the eight studies included and official documents, such as the Brazil Without Homophobia Program and the National LGBT Comprehensive Health Policy, it was possible to identify significant advances, but also persistent gaps that compromise the sustainability and effectiveness of these initiatives. The research question was answered by showing that, although community support networks play an essential role in mitigating inequalities and promoting comprehensive health, their performance is still limited by structural barriers, such as lack of funding and discontinuity of public policies.

The results highlighted the importance of these networks as mediators between the LGBTQIA+ population and health systems, filling gaps left by the State, especially in regions of high social vulnerability. In addition, the study highlighted the relevance of existing public policies, but pointed to the need for greater integration between these initiatives and the specific demands of this population. The inclusion of digital technologies and the training of local leaders were also identified as promising strategies to expand the reach and effectiveness of actions aimed at the LGBTQIA+ public.

Despite the contributions, this work faced limitations, such as the outdated part of the available literature and the scarcity of empirical studies that evaluate the impact of specific public policies. Thus, it is recommended that future research explore the practical implementation of these policies in different regional contexts and investigate the effectiveness of intersectoral and technological strategies in strengthening support networks. In addition, it is essential to promote continuous monitoring of the proposed actions and foster dialogue between civil society, public managers, and health professionals, ensuring inclusion and equity in all spheres.

In summary, the analysis reinforces that the strengthening of community support networks and the articulation of inclusive public policies are essential for the consolidation of the rights and full citizenship of the LGBTQIA+ population. Only with a collective effort, which integrates different sectors of society, will it be possible to address structural inequalities and build a fairer and more equitable protection system.

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