Sexual orientation-based violence in Colombia: A mixed methods study on the experiences and perspectives of bystanders and the targets of violence

Abstract

Despite the urgency of addressing violence against the LGBTQI+ community in Colombia, scientific research on the topic remains limited. This mixed-methods study explores lived experiences of sexual orientation-based violence and the role of bystanders witnessing such abuse. A total of 1,291 participants (50.8% cisgender women, 37.1% cisgender men, 3.1% trans or non-binary) responded to an online Spanish-language survey which included open and closed questions focused on both real-life and hypothetical sexual orientation-based violence. Utilising thematic analysis, we constructed three themes based on responses to the open questions: (1) Lived Experiences as Targets and Bystanders in Sexual Orientation-Based Violence; (2) Diverse Proposed and Actual Intervention Strategies; and (3) Bystander Barriers and Facilitators. Further, analysis (i.e., logistic regression) of the quantitative data showed that recognizing a situation as harassment and feeling responsibility to act were significantly associated with past bystander intervention. Findings highlight the diverse nature of sexual orientation-based violence in Colombia and those factors impacting on the likelihood of bystander intervention.

Keywords: bystanders; Colombia; intervention; LGBTQI+; sexual orientation; violence

Introduction

Colombia is a paradoxical country when it comes to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and other gender identity or sexual orientation related (i.e., LGBTQI+) rights. On the one hand, current legislation protecting the rights of this community is amongst the most advanced in the Latin American region (Bocanumenth, 2020). For instance, discrimination based on sexual orientation is illegal in Colombia and the recognition of non-binary individuals, same-sex marriage, and adoption of children by same-sex couples have been legalised (Human Rights Watch, 2021). On the other hand, LGBTQI+ community members face high levels of violence and discrimination, both historically (Maier, 2020; Reyes et al., 2025; Zea et al., 2013) and in the present day (Choi et al., 2020; Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2021; Sin Violencia LGBTI, 2019). Reflecting significant interpersonal and structural discrimination, LGBTQI+ community members experience minority stress and multiple adverse outcomes (e.g., poor mental health, increased suicidal ideation; Choi et al., 2020; del Río-González et al., 2021).

Despite the importance of understanding the experience of violence directed towards LGBTQI+ individuals in Colombia, scientific investigations on the topic remain at an early stage (Barrientos et al., 2024). The efforts to tackle and prevent violence against LGBTQI+ communities in Latin America could benefit from a bystander approach. Bystanders are individuals who are present in (or knowledgeable of) events of abuse, with the potential to intervene to help the targets (see Banyard, 2024). This intervention can take multiple forms, from directly addressing the abuse to distracting perpetrators, delegating help, or displaying discomfort or disapproval (e.g., York et al., 2021). However, there are often multiple barriers to active intervention, influenced by a complex interplay of situational (e.g., clarity of the situation; perceived danger), individual (e.g., personality; morality; minority status), and social (e.g., social relationships; social norms) factors (e.g., Banyard et al., 2007; Bennett et al., 2014; Lyons et al., 2022; 2025; McMahon et al., 2020). Bystander behavior has been studied widely in the context of sexual violence, mainly in English-speaking countries and in the context of higher education (e.g., Hoxmeier et al., 2018; Mainwaring et al., 2023; Mujal et al., 2021). Research into bystander behavior in response to violence (sexual or otherwise) directed towards members of LGBTQI+ communities more broadly and in non-Western countries is less common (see Christou et al., 2024; Fowler et al., 2024; McMahon et al., 2020). To develop bystander intervention approaches suitable for Colombia, it is important to investigate the barriers and facilitators to bystander intervention in this context.

Current knowledge of bystander behavior in Colombia, especially in LGBTQI+ directed violence outside of educational settings (e.g., in “street harassment”; Fileborn & O’Neill, 2023), is limited. Indeed, research on public harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity is still in its early stages in many countries, with relatively few studies available. In one qualitative exploration in Australia, Fileborn and Hindes (2023) concluded that harassment of LGBTQI+ individuals is common, takes diverse forms, and leads to multiple adverse outcomes in terms of mental health, identity, and visibility. Reports from Colombia also indicate that LGBTQI+ based violence in public places, as well as from the police, is a serious problem (Dupuis-Vargas & Gómez Restrepo, 2023; Reyes et al., 2025). The role of bystanders and what may hinder active intervention in public places in Colombia is, however, not clear.

The most appropriate way to initiate research on this topic is by using a mixed methods approach. Firstly, utilizing an emic, inductive, bottom-up, non-positivist approach can help to establish the types of violence experienced and bystander responses to this violence without imposing frameworks developed in other (e.g., Western) contexts (see also Lyons et al., 2024; Lyons et al., 2025). Second, gathering information on established facilitators and barriers to bystander behavior is useful in determining the extent to which previous results can be generalised to Colombia, as well as in understanding the results in a broader global context (see also Bartholomew & Brown, 2012).

Thus, the present study utilises mixed methods in investigating violence based on sexual orientation in Colombia, and the role of bystanders in these experiences. More specifically, we were interested in the following questions:

1. What types of sexual orientation-based violence do people experience (both as targets and as bystanders) in Colombia?
2. What strategies have bystanders used/would hypothetically use in intervening?
3. What factors influence the likelihood that a person has previously intervened?
4. What barriers and facilitators do bystanders report when observing sexual orientation-based street harassment?

Methods

The research was conducted using a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We collected both qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously; qualitative data to obtain more detailed information about the barriers and facilitators of bystander intervention and quantitative data to identify the variables associated with previous bystander responses to sexual orientation-based harassment.

Participants

A total of 1,291 people aged 18 to 76 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.76$, $SD = 13.07$) were recruited for an online study using a convenience sampling method. Participants were reached through social media adverts, emails to universities and organizations involved in the prevention of violence targeted at marginalised groups, and word of mouth. Participants were most commonly cisgender women (50.8%) or cisgender men (37.1%), with 3.1% identifying as trans or non-binary. Most participants reported being single (49.8%) or married (21.2%) at the time of the study, with relatively few divorced (8.6%) or widowed (1.5%) participants. With regards to education, 59.9% had completed high school, 18.4% were university students, 11.2% had a postgraduate degree, 8.8% had an undergraduate degree, and 1.6% did not finish high school. With regards to occupation, 47.5% reported being in full-time employment, 18.5% were unemployed, followed by those who were self-employed (16.3%), in part-time employment (10.8%), retired (3.7%), or other (2.9%). The educational characteristics of the sample reflected higher levels of high school education (35.8%) and postgraduate (4.6%) attainment compared to national averages, but a lower proportion of participants held an undergraduate degree (12.3%). Regarding occupation, the distribution within our sample was similar to Colombian national data (National Administrative Department of Statistics [DANE], 2022).

Most participants identified as White or Mestizo (63.0%), followed by Afro-Colombians (32.7%), with remaining participants (4.3%) identifying as one of the three remaining legally recognised ethnic groups; Indigenous peoples, Raizales (from the archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia), and Rom. The sample, obtained through convenience sampling, was not representative. Of particular note, the proportion of Afro-Colombians was higher in our sample than the estimated national percentage (6%; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2020a) and representation of other recognized ethnic groups was lower. Indigenous participants were below the estimated 4.4% of the national population (DANE, 2019), while the representation of Raizales and Rom was similar to national estimates, both accounting for less than the 1% of Colombian population (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2020a; Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2020b).

A significant proportion of the sample (39%) reported direct personal experience of discrimination. Of these, 23.6% reported experiencing discrimination because of their ethnicity or skin colour, 18.9% based on their gender identity, 16.6% because of their age, and 10.3% because of their sexual orientation. Moreover, 49% of the participants had witnessed at least one situation where a person had been intimidated, harassed, or discriminated against because of their ethnicity or skin colour, sexual orientation or gender.

Materials and Procedure

The survey was administered in Spanish via the Qualtrics platform. After reading the information sheet and providing online consent, participants were directed to answer a series of demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, relationship status).

Participants were then asked the following open-ended question: Have you ever witnessed a situation in which a person has been bullied, harassed or discriminated against due to their sexual orientation such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pan sexual, etc? A large number (*n* = 399) answered "yes" to this question. Those who answered "yes" were provided a space to elaborate more on the situation, e.g., whether they were an active bystander; and if they did not actively respond, what prevented them from intervening. LGBTQI+ participants were also given an opportunity to write about their personal lived experiences of discrimination, including the presence and actions of bystanders.

Following this, participants were presented with a vignette, created after discussions among team members on homophobic street harassment common across Latin America. The vignette stated that "You see two men walking down the street, it seems that they are a couple and very much in love with each other. They walk past a group of men, who immediately start yelling rude comments, using degrading words, and saying how disgusting the couple is". After reading the vignette, participants were asked the following questions: "As a bystander, what are the possible actions you could take? What are the things that would prevent you from acting? What are the things that would help you take action?"

Participants were also asked a series of closed questions on a 10-point Likert scale (1= not at all to 10 = extremely so): (i) In this situation, how likely is it that you would notice that something is out of place? (i.e., "noticing"), (ii) How uncomfortable is this situation? (i.e., "feeling uncomfortable"), (iii) Is it your responsibility to get involved in this situation? (i.e., "responsibility"), (iv) How likely is it that you would know how to act to provide help? (i.e., "knowledge on how to help"), (v) How confident are you that you could intervene successfully in this situation? (i.e., "confidence"). Other aspects of discrimination and bystander intervention (e.g., experiences and responses to racism) have been reported elsewhere (Lyons et al., 2025).

Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis. For the open-ended survey responses (relating to personal experiences as bystanders or targets of sexual orientation-based violence and potential actions, as well as barriers and facilitators as a response to the vignette), we applied both inductive and deductive coding and adopted a thematic analysis (TA) approach. This method is well-suited for online survey data with relatively short responses (Braun et al., 2021). The approach involved a “codebook” (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2021), where we developed a coding framework for the analysis. Consensus (e.g., inter-rater reliability) between the coders is not an indicator of quality in this approach (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2023). Instead, the team worked together in creating an understanding of the lived experiences and bystander behavior in the Colombian context. The coding and theme development were organised across all the qualitative questions (rather than within each question). This means that the resulting themes included responses for both hypothetical vignettes as well as the accounts of actual lived experiences.

The team members consisted of two postgraduate students (one man and one woman, both native in Spanish and fluent in English), as well as faculty members (four women, one native in English, one native in Spanish and fluent in English, and two fluent but not native in English and Spanish). Two of the authors are activists with lived experiences (a gay man from a LGBTQ+ charity in Panama and a trans woman from community-based organization promoting trans rights in Colombia, both native in Spanish, and one fluent in English). Throughout the research and analytic process, the team reflected on their experiences and positionalities, with our diversity encouraging examination of the data from multiple perspectives. Although those of us who are heterosexual and cisgender have not been targets of violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity, we all had experiences as bystanders. This was useful in providing a personal insight into the types of barriers and facilitators that bystanders could have in sexual orientation-based violence. In addition, those of us with direct lived experiences of being targets of violence verified that the themes were a good reflection of the landscape in Latin America. This knowledge was also fundamental in exploring the meaning behind the themes.

The process started with two postgraduate students (second and third author) independently reading through the responses and starting the coding process. They developed an initial coding frame and suggestions for themes, which were audited by the first, fifth, sixth, and last author. During the process, it became apparent that one of the proposed themes (Diverse Proposed and Actual Intervention Strategies) fit well with existing frameworks of "5 D's" of bystander action (Right to Be, n.d). For this theme, we revised the coding from inductive to deductive, aligning the responses with the 5 D's developed in the context of sexual violence. The second and third author combined the responses and developed the final themes, which were agreed with the whole team.

Quantitative Analysis. To better understand the factors that contribute to previous active bystander intervention in response to sexual orientation-based violence in Colombia, we conducted a quantitative analysis. A binary logistic regression examined the variables predicting whether participants reported having acted as bystanders in previous situations of violence (yes or no) based on sexual orientation. The model included sociodemographic variables (such as gender, age, and ethnicity) and the closed answers to the vignette concerning (i) noticing, (ii) feeling uncomfortable, (iii) responsibility, (iv) knowledge on how to help; and (v) confidence. Data analysis was conducted using R (Version 4.4.2; R Core Team, 2024) and the rms package (Harrell, 2024).

Results

Qualitative Results

We constructed three themes from the open-ended questions addressing lived experiences as bystanders or targets of sexual orientation-based violence and potential actions, barriers, and facilitators as a response to the vignette describing street harassment. These were (1) Lived Experiences as Targets and Bystanders in Sexual Orientation-Based Violence; (2) Diverse Proposed and Actual Intervention Strategies; and (3) Bystander Barriers and Facilitators

Theme 1: Lived Experiences as Targets and Bystanders in Sexual Orientation-Based Violence

In this theme, we consider the lived experience of being the target and/or bystander in sexual orientation directed violence. Different types of harassment, the location of abuse, and who the perpetrators, targets, and bystanders were, are outlined in this theme. This theme also describes some of the perceived reasons why violence and discrimination occur, and the feelings that it evoked in participants.

Participants reported that the violence occurred in multiple locations, including places of work or education, public spaces (e.g., the street, church, restaurants, and shops) and public transport, online, and within families. The violence was perpetrated by friends, strangers, work colleagues, authorities, family members, and religious leaders. It took multiple different forms, from jokes, derogatory comments, social exclusion, and 'dirty looks' to threats of and actual physical violence.

Bullying in the workplace was discussed in terms on unequal treatment, inappropriate jokes, mocking, and unfairly dismissing the person because of their sexual orientation. For instance, one participant stated how "*In my workplace, one of my friends is homosexual and he was constantly made fun of or called with derogatory names. I couldn't describe a single moment, since it was repetitive…one of the bosses called him 'the different one' when he* *wanted to refer to him*". The participants wrote about how workplace harassment was perpetrated by colleagues, management, and customers alike.

Educational institutions were not free from violence. As with the workplace, aggression took the form of jokes, degrading comments, and ostracism. One participant reported "*I have a gay friend. Everything happened at the university, we were between 15-20 students and we had to form work groups. We asked a classmate who was next to us if he wanted to join us to carry out the activity, to which he responded 'I don't talk to queers'. My friend and I decided to change places and look for someone else. The other people just watched. I felt a lot of anger and noticed how being in these times there are still such discriminations only due to sexual orientation*". Many participants wrote about experiences of abuse in school, both as targets and as bystanders. The perpetrators were not just other school children, but also teachers and non-teaching staff.

Public transport and public places were frequently identified as places of harassment. In these settings, physical violence was often mentioned. Street harassment was also common, and it took the form of name calling, mobbing, and threatening looks and gestures. Participants wrote how the aggression was directed towards individuals who showed affection to their partner in public. Others were targeted for their way of talking, walking, or the clothes that they wore. For instance, one participant wrote how "*They treated a friend badly in Transmilenio (the bus system) because he was holding hands with his boyfriend*". Another participant described a situation of escalating violence when out on the street with their friend, and how they were *"…walking with a classmate, who is gay, towards his house, which was next to a high school…young people who were outside the school (approximately 150) began to shout things at him…putting him in a vulnerable situation*". Street harassment also included physical attacks, such as throwing rocks and bottles at people. According to one participant, "*I was walking with some friends and from a car they started shouting and* *insulting us, when they approached they threw soft drinks at us. One of my friends is homosexual and extroverted, they made fun of that*". Intimidating people in public places was common, and violence often escalated from initial stares and comments to shouting and use of weapons. For instance, one person described how "*There were two gay men on a date in the park and a group of young people started yelling at them and throwing stones at them*". Bystanders commonly described physical attacks towards members of the LGBTQI+ community in public places, such as "*On many other occasions, I saw people physically attack an LGBTQI+ person on the street*".

People experienced violence in shops and shopping centers, where abuse was often characterised by attempts to "police" behavior and stop people showing affection to each other. For instance, "*I was in a shopping center and a couple of girls were holding hands and showing affection to each other and then a security guard asked them to please separate*". Abuse included being denied service based on sexual orientation. For example, "*Not wanting to serve my lesbian friend who was with her partner in a store. They ignored them and looked at them with contempt. They live outside the country and it only happens to them when they come to Colombia*".

Bars, restaurants, and nightclubs were not safe spaces. As described by one person: "*It was strange, but for some reason two women were putting down a gay couple who were eating... which caused them (the women) repulsion…makes me curious because it affects them so much*". In these establishments, the abuse was perpetrated not just by other customers, but also by staff and management. For instance, one participant witnessed abuse that "*…happened in a restaurant and they denied entry to a trans man who was with his partner. The establishment's managers excused themselves by saying that 'other customers may feel uncomfortable.' Being a public place, there were more bystanders and I felt very bad for not doing anything or intervening".* One participant described a situation in a night club, where "*We were in a bar with several friends, including some gay friends. People in general, especially men, were looking at us with contempt. They made some awkward and mocking comments about my friends' appearance and way of dancing. That irritated me a lot and I wanted to confront them, but they (my friends) stopped me and we got out of there*".

Both bystanders and members of the LGBTQI+ community reported discrimination that happened in church. For instance, one person wrote how "*I went to church to confess and the priest told me that I was bad and he would come back with someone who was going to transform me and I could truly be a daughter of God*". According to another participant, "*I was in church and the pastor said that we should be free of sexual sin so we should repeat Jesus, I am not bisexual, I am not transsexual, I am not gay, and we are in the middle of preaching and I started crying out of rage*". In addition, many described how discrimination was perpetrated by religious family members who saw their sexual orientation as a violation against God.

Indeed, families were mentioned as a common source of abuse, which often included ostracism, threats, and disapproval. One person wrote how they observed a friend whose "*…parents discriminated against their son for telling them his sexual orientation, the way they received the news and what they responded to was uncomfortable... 'I'd rather have a dead son than a gay one.'*" Some of the abuse was violent in nature, including threats to life. One participant (a lesbian woman) wrote how "*My mom's (at the time) boyfriend was talking about how 'faggots' now believe that they can be on the street like 'normal people' and that they should be killed like Hitler wanted to do. That if I came home with a girlfriend, he would kill me; and that it would be easier to tell people that I have two husbands because I'm a whore rather than to tell them that I have a girlfriend*".

The negative impact of such behavior was clear and both bystanders and targets of abuse wrote about feeling helpless, angry, indignation, frustration, fear, discomfort, and disappointment. These feelings were often associated with perceptions of social justice and what is right or wrong, for example, "*I felt bad and angry because those people had no right to harass someone just for being 'different'*". Some participants reported that they felt uncomfortable in the presence of jokes and disparaging humor, including "*I have witnessed ridicule towards people for being gay, the situation was uncomfortable because I do not agree with these types of jokes that can affect people personally*". Participants felt negative emotions when seeing friends or family targeted for abuse. One person wrote that they "..,*felt very frustrated and angry, the person who suffered this was a trans friend*".

Theme 2: Diverse Proposed and Actual Intervention Strategies

This theme narrates the various ways in which targets and bystanders have (or have not) intervened in real life. The theme also includes responses to the hypothetical vignette that depicted street harassment. The answers aligned to existing bystander frameworks (e.g., 5 D's, 3 D's) developed in mainly sexual harassment literature in the USA. The responses included direct help, delaying help, documenting the situation, displaying discomfort, or delegating the help to other people.

Direct help included directly addressing the perpetrators (mainly verbally), or comforting the targets (e.g., accompanying them, taking them away). One person wrote about witnessing street abuse, and how they told the abuser that *"... none of that works…gay people have always existed… I had to bite my tongue because my mom gave me the 'oh, leave it. That's how he thinks' look and I had to shut up*". Another person described how a manicurist declined to serve a gay man for the fear of getting HIV, and how they"*…talked to the lady about her prejudice and we went somewhere else. I acted because I felt I had to*". Many reported that they would demand respect for the gay couple in the vignette scenario, for example, by telling the perpetrators that they should "*…respect the couple, that they (the perpetrators) are not the God to judge. You have to be tolerant*". Participants also wrote that they would directly name the act, such as "*tell them that what they do is homophobic and they should be ashamed of thinking like that*". Other responses to the vignette included strategies that would also catch the attention of other people, such as "*I would demand respect out loud so that other people realize what is happening*" or focusing on the targets of the violence directly, such as " *I feel like the only thing I could do is ask the couple if they are okay and tell them to get away from this place as soon as possible*".

Displaying discomfort through looks, gestures, and indirect comments was also a commonly deployed bystander strategy. As a response to the vignette, one participant declared how they would provide help by "*Showing my disagreement with gestures*", and another wrote that "*Well, my first response is to look at the group of young people badly*", and if that did not help, "*depending on the circumstances I would try to shout demanding respect*". Disapproving looks were mentioned often, such as "*One bad look could tell them a lot*". Other people indicated they would indirectly display discomfort by shouting out loud. For instance, people wrote how "*The actions you could do is shout long live love!",* or "*Shout that I love happy people, that rude people are the unpleasant ones. I would smile at the couple*".

Delay characterises support provided after the abuse takes places. One person wrote how, as a potential action in the vignette, they would "*...try to calm them down because they were very upset*". Others reported that they would help only after the abuser/s left the situation. Strategies could include asking what the targets needed or asking them how they are. In the words of one participant (describing a likely response to the vignette), "*In case the men (abusers) pass, I would be asking the couple if they feel okay or if they want to report it. I don't think I would intervene directly*".

Documenting and reporting the situation of violence was also a strategy identified by participants. One person said how they would "*…take a photo of the harassers and distribute it on the anti-harassment network. I would record them and report them to my community*".

Delegate involves seeking support and action from other people (e.g., other bystanders, authorities, etc). For instance, a participant wrote how they would help the couple in the vignette by **"***Seeking support from people who may feel and/or perceive discomfort in the situation*". People also reported that they would "*…ask my friends for support; delegate to police*". Delegating to the police was sometimes mentioned in the context of escalating violence, "*I think I would wait to see if these men take violent actions with the couple before calling the police*". One participant explained that they tried to help a gay student bullied at university, by delegating action to staff members, but it did not lead to any improvement, "*…we had a meeting with the discipline coordinator, but it didn't solve anything*".

Theme 3: Bystander Barriers and Facilitators

In this theme, participants wrote about a diverse set of barriers and facilitators to bystander intervention both in real-life and in response to the vignette. We organised this theme into five subthemes: (1) Bystander Knowledge; (2) Morality and Emotions; (3) Perceptions of the Target and the Situations as Intervention Worthy; (4) Social Norms and Presence of Other People; and (5) Fear of Negative Consequences.

Subtheme 1: Bystander Knowledge focused on participants (lack of) knowledge in relation to appropriate responses to sexual orientation-based abuse. Lack of knowledge was a barrier and possession of knowledge was a facilitator of bystander intervention. One participant described a real-life situation where, in school, they observed a group of children mocking another for being gay but they felt ill-equipped to intervene. "*I couldn't do anything, since at that time I didn't have enough tools to defend him*". Another participant wrote about a situation in their family, where the lack of knowledge on how to act led to bystander paralysis "*…a cousin came out as gay and the family turned against him. I did not know what to do. I froze*".

Subtheme 2: Morality and Emotions outlined how strong emotions, such as anger, rage, fury, and indignation facilitated intervention. These were often mentioned by participants, for example "*The anger that there are boys who are bothering two young people just for being a couple. They have no right to bother them just for their sexual orientation*". These types of emotions were linked to moral stance and principles. Many participants reported that they would always intervene in the vignette scenario as a matter of principle, morality, defence of human rights, and allyship with the LGBTQI+ community. Comments such as "*I wouldn't like someone to be mistreated because of their sexual orientation*", "*My instinct would make me help them*", and "*these two men have every right to be in peace without being made to feel less than others*", suggest that there are people whose moral values would facilitate intervention.

Subtheme 3: Perceptions of the Target and the Situation as Intervention Worthy described how perceived need and seriousness of the situation was both a facilitator and a barrier to intervention. Some participants wrote they would not help if they thought the incident to be minor, for example, if it was "*just a passing comment*". Others noted they would be more likely to help if there was a serious risk of escalation, including potential for physical violence.

The relationship between the bystander and target also contributed to perceived worthiness of intervention. For instance, one participant described how they observed an incident of sexual orientation-based bullying but did not help because "*…he is no one that I know and because he is not a member of my family*". Knowing the target personally (e.g., as a friend or a family member) was a clear facilitator. For instance, participants discussed that a facilitator in the vignette would be that "*… my brother is part of the community. I think that* *the love I feel for my brother gives me strength to be able to handle that situation*". This also links with the previous subtheme of Morality and Emotions- personal relationships influence the feelings that bystanders have, making the situations worthy of intervention.

In addition, participants reported that target gender (i.e., being men) removed the need for help. For instance, one participant explained how they would do "…*nothing because they can defend themselves and it seems bad that another man has to defend them*". On a similar note, another participant wrote that "…*if they dared to go out on the street it is because they do not care about the comments*". In addition. some participants did not perceive the abuse in the vignette as their problem, and instead, they blamed the targets of the abuse, "*Demonstrations of affection should be given more discreetly to avoid these inconveniences*". Some participants commented that if the targets had already defended themselves, or were uncomfortable with help, they would be less likely to provide it.

Subtheme 4: Social Norms and Presence of Other People highlights the importance of other people and authorities as well as their willingness to collaborate to provide help. According to one participant, a barrier to intervention would be "…*that there are not more people around who also intervene*". Participants also reported feeling safer if they "*Get together with more people so I don't feel so vulnerable to the men who are attacking*". In addition to feeling safer in the presence of others, some participants linked this to the existence of social norms that either support or undermine the intervention in response to homophobic violence. One person mentioned how intervention would be easier if there was "…*a systemic change to homophobia…and it stops being justified by the government, schools, and the church*". The presence of police was frequently mentioned as a barrier or a facilitator, depending on the individual participant.

Subtheme 5: Fear of Negative Consequences included descriptions of hesitation to intervene if there was a risk of getting hurt. The fear was often intersectional, with women and those in poor health, accompanied by their children, LGBTQI+ community members, or ethnic minorities feeling more vulnerable to retaliation. For instance, "*I am a woman… they can act against me. It would be difficult, because I would also be a victim if I tried to defend them…situation is going to become physically violent and you won't be able to do anything about it. There is no security with the police, since they also discriminate or do not take these situations seriously*." Other bystanders feared an escalation of violence and commented that targets could be at increased risk because of their involvement. For example, "*Fear of escalating the situation and making it more dangerous than it already is for someone. The situation described sounds quite aggressive and volatile. Possibly facing the group of men could be dangerous*" was described in response to the vignette. Fear of getting hurt was also a reason for not intervening in real-life situations. One participant who observed two gay men being bullied in the park by a group of young people disclosed how they "… *preferred not to intervene for fear of getting hurt*".

Perpetrator gender (i.e., being men) and generic violence in society were discussed as barriers. One participant wrote how "*In general, I feel that in Bogota one is in constant risk, like anyone can react very aggressively and I do not feel prepared or willing to have verbal fights, much less physical ones. So I'm afraid of that reaction, especially coming from a man/men and that prevents me from acting*". Participants also wrote about the presence of drugs, alcohol, or weapons as a barrier to intervention in the vignette scenarios. These could relate to unpredictability and escalation of violence that could harm the bystanders.

Quantitative Results

Overall, 18.4% of participants reported having previously acted as a bystander. This corresponds to 18% of women, 9% of men, and 3% of trans/non-binary participants in the sample. Among those who had previously intervened, the majority had done so by providing direct help (69.1%), followed by delaying (18.8%), delegation to others (11.7%), and documenting the incident (0.4%).

The logistic regression model predicting prior active intervention (yes/no) was statistically significant ($\chi^2(8) = 92{,}61$, $p < .001$). The analysis revealed that individuals who were more likely to recognize (noticing) the vignette as a situation of sexual orientation-based violence and indicate they have a responsibility to take action were more likely to have intervened as active bystanders in the past in response to discrimination based on sexual orientation, though with low effect sizes (see Table 1). Demographic variables and the remaining items were not found to be significant.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

Results of the Convergent Mixed Methods Analysis

In order to complete the convergent mixed methods analysis, we sought to integrate the qualitative and quantitative results and identify points of convergence and divergence (see Table 2).

Table 2 summarizes the results of this integration for facilitators of bystander intervention. The columns present the five closed-ended items from the vignette regarding (i) noticing, (ii) feeling uncomfortable, (iii) responsibility, (iv) knowledge on how to help; and (v) confidence, as derived from the quantitative analysis. The rows include themes identified as facilitators in the qualitative findings. The results indicate that *noticing* and *responsibility* from the quantitative data converge with qualitative themes of *Morality and Emotions,* and *Perceptions of the Target and the Situation as Intervention Worthy*. No convergence was found for the items knowledge on how to help, feeling responsible, and confidence and the qualitative themes of *Bystander Knowledge* and *Social Norms and Presence of Other People*.

[INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE]

Discussion

Our results demonstrate the extent and diversity of sexual orientation-based violence that occurs in Colombia. The abuse took diverse forms and occurred in a range of locations, with perpetrators that were family or community members, study or work colleagues, or strangers. In addition, we identified how bystanders have used (and propose to use) several strategies to help the targets, with several facilitators and barriers to their actions. Interestingly, the quantitative findings suggested that rather than individual characteristics (e.g., gender or ethnicity), previous bystander action was predicted by recognising a situation as violence and feeling responsible to take positive action. This converges with the qualitative findings of Morality and Emotions (i.e., always helping because it is defence of human rights; feeling angry) and Perceptions of the Target and Situation as Intervention Worthy (e.g., acting because the situation is escalating). Below, we discuss the results in more detail, with suggestions on how to address LGBTQI+ directed violence more broadly.

Findings indicate widespread sexual orientation-based abuse and suggest that individuals from LGBTQI+ communities are not safe in Colombia. Testimonies indicate a significant level of physical harm in a range of contexts, ranging from schools and public transportation to simply walking down the street. The violence took numerous forms, from unfair treatment to disparaging looks, comments, threats of physical violence, and actual physical violence. This is consistent with other evidence demonstrating high levels of violence (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2023; Reyes et al., 2025). Indeed, newspapers in Colombia have speculated that being gay or transgender in Colombia is a “death sentence” (e.g., Palomino, 2023).

Though introducing progressive policies (e.g., same sex marriage) may positively influence public opinion (Sansri et al., 2022), this may be more challenging in highly religious countries (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019), such as Colombia and the Latin American region more generally. Interestingly, the qualitative responses demonstrated the church was active in perpetrating discrimination. Indeed, despite the legislative advances in many Latin American countries, negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities are widespread (Chaux et al., 2021). Enduring prejudice highlights the discrepancy between legal progress and societal acceptance, underscoring the need for continued efforts toward cultural and social transformation. Education aligned with legislative change is recommended to promote inclusive attitudes, promote LGBTQI+ rights, and foster safer environments for individuals within this community. In Colombia, legislation alone is clearly insufficient; it must be accompanied by comprehensive educational initiatives targeted at the broader community.

In addition, participants discussed a range of strategies that they had used in the past or would use in a hypothetical situation. These actions aligned well to the (5 D's or 3 D's) frameworks used in bystander training in the North American context (e.g., York et al., 2021). Our Colombian participants talked about intervening directly (e.g., questioning the perpetrator); delegating help (e.g., involving others; calling the police/authorities); delaying help (e.g., consoling the targets after the situation was over); displaying discomfort (e.g., staring at the perpetrator; making clear with nonverbal displays that they disapprove of the abuse); and documenting the abuse (e.g., filming the event). Providing direct help was a strategy that was mentioned often. In contrast, creating a distraction was largely missing from the responses. Distraction occurs when the bystander does something that indirectly interrupts the situation. Example techniques may include dropping something, placing themselves in between the perpetrator and the target, taking the target away from the situation by pretending that they know them/something has happened, and starting a conversation about a neutral subject. In other contexts (e.g., sexual and dating violence in the USA), the use of distraction has been related to less negative feelings and responses from others, as well as feeling less fearful for one's own safety (Moschella & Banyard, 2020). It may be useful to raise awareness of the distraction technique when developing bystander education in Colombia, which addresses one of the barriers to intervention reported by participants (i.e., Fear of Negative Consequences).

Our findings suggest that there are several barriers and facilitators to bystander intervention in Colombia, which should be considered when designing interventions that are suitable for this context. First, the qualitative findings indicate that practical knowledge can encourage intervention (see also Banyard et al., 2007; Bennett et al., 2014 for similar results in the context of sexual violence), which highlights the need for teaching diverse strategies for intervention. Second, a sense of responsibility (facilitated by morality, emotions, and perceptions of the target/situation as intervention-worthy) was important, aligning with studies from other contexts (e.g., see Hoxmeier et al., 2018 for sexual violence in the USA, and Lyons et al., 2025 for racism in Colombia). This underscores the need for interventions that go beyond simply providing information. Indeed, knowledge of social justice and human rights can facilitate bystander action against homophobia (Dessel et al., 2017) and raising critical consciousness could increase responsibility for action (Johnson et al., 2019). Thus, bystander interventions against LGBTQI+ targeted violence in Colombia would benefit from providing practical tools as well as emphasising awareness of human rights and social justice.

Limitations

Although our study has provided initial data for increasing understanding of sexual orientation-based violence from bystander perspectives in Colombia, the work has some limitations. For instance, we did not ask our LGBTQI+ participants what kind of help they thought might be beneficial. Indeed, very little research has investigated bystander behavior from the perspective of the targets of violence (Banyard, 2024). An important next step includes working with representatives of LGBTQI+ communities in Colombia to understand bystander involvement from the perspective of those targeted by abuse. This knowledge is crucial in aiding future intervention development. In addition, the LGBTQI+ community is conceptualised is diverse, though our vignette only included one narrow section of the community. Attitudes differ widely depending on which segments of LGBTQI+ community are considered. For instance, transgender individuals can be subjected to much more negative views than cisgender lesbian and gay people (Lewis et al., 2017). Trans women, especially, suffer abuse, femicide, and epistemic injustice at unprecedented levels in Colombia (Muñoz et al., 2021). Future studies should aim to understand the role of bystanders in abuse directed at different sectors of the LGBTQI+ community.

To conclude, our study revealed there is a widespread violence directed at members of the LGBTQI+ community in Colombia, exposing a disconnection between progressive legislation and societal acceptance. This underscores the urgent need for sustained cultural and social transformation. Key to this process is the role of bystanders, whose action - or inaction - can significantly influence the prevalence and escalation of violence against LGBTQI+ individuals. Empowering bystanders through education, awareness, and practical strategies is crucial for removing the barriers to intervention. Potential action could include training of teachers and education to disseminate the strategies (Rios-Gonzalez et al., 2023), organization of public awareness multi-media campaigns, and designing bystander intervention workshops (Christou et al., 2024) using creative methods, such as theatre for bystanders (see Puvaneyshwaran et al., 2025). To our knowledge, there currently are no educational initiatives in Colombia that focus on bystander intervention. Future work would benefit from developing and testing different bystander education approaches in the context of Colombia, and more broadly, in the Latin American region. Broader efforts should also include investing in inclusive education, supporting visibility and representation, strengthening community engagement, enforcing anti-discrimination policies, promoting mental health and wellbeing, and engaging religious and cultural leaders. These combined strategies are essential for bridging the gap between policy and lived experience (both as targets and bystanders), and for building a more inclusive and equitable society.

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