

By Róisín O'Shea

Two gay men were beheaded in their own homes in Sligo this April. The queer community here is in mourning, and in fear. The general mood hasn't been helped by the hateful abuse heaped with impunity at Panti Bliss in early July in Westport after she had participated in a reading to children in a bookshop. A man yelled in her face asking if she had sought Garda clearance to talk to minors.

Homophobia is not a popular thing to write about. It's upsetting on the one hand, and on the other it's basically over now, right? We've done the marriage referendum, our former and future leader is gay, and half the country spent last month decked out in rainbows. So why go on about something so old-hat?

Sligo presents itself as a queer-friendly space – maybe because it looks good to potential tourists, helps draw students to our shiny new Technological University, and keeps our housing market afloat – but we are not safe here. And not much is being done to correct that, or even acknowledge it. As we move out of Pride month, let's not go back to ignoring homophobia.

Francis

Francis is a gay man, a Sligo native, and was a friend of Michael Snee, the second murder victim. Many of Francis' queer friends are too afraid to come out publicly, especially after what happened in April.

Francis has been the victim of regular hateful acts in his neighbourhood. He's had his car and front-door locks glued shut, €900 worth of work equipment stolen from his property, the clothes drying in his garden slashed to bits and "smeared in dog shit".

"It started about a year and a half ago. The wheels on my [car] were loosened... The tyres are let down every night. I had to buy a machine to pump them up, it takes me half an hour every morning".

"I lost two stone from the anxiety...I still walk into my house looking over my shoulder". The Garda were called to Francis' home on three occasions but were unwilling to search for the culprit(s) because he had no CCTV footage.

"I spent hundreds making my back garden perfect, and now I'm too afraid to go into it". Francis is not in a financial position to move and so made a plea to the County Council housing service, which was ignored.

Pauline

"There's this idea that Sligo is a friendly place. I don't see that". Pauline is a trans woman living in Sligo, and she gets harassed almost every time

Sligoing backwards



Though 'queer friendly', Sligo, where two gay men were recently beheaded, ignores homophobia

she leaves the house. "[Every] time I went out last week I was followed home by people shouting at me".

Before coming out, Pauline was read as a straight, cis-gender man and never experienced this type of abuse. "It's like the world's easiest spot-the-difference".

Pauline finds that people "go out of their way" to berate her. In one mid-pandemic instance, a man spat at her in a crowded street and no-one came to her aid. "A street full of people did nothing".

She has been refused service at multiple establishments, and had cashiers walk away from tills and whisper to their manager while casting looks and gestures back at her – and no matter how busy the shop, café, or restaurant, no one has ever stood up for her.

"A tiny minority act horribly, but they're only able to do it because the majority allow it...And it's not unique to Sligo. I've had the same stuff in Dublin, and not once has anyone done anything to help."

SMILEY

The young members of SMILEY, Sligo's LGBTQ+ youth group, often face prejudice. Most were shut

down by teachers when they came out at school, and some were even told that they had a mental illness. Several were dropped by their friends, challenged on their identity, and told that they were "just looking for attention".

One member told me: "My parents are less supportive than they think. It's kind of performative...They won't use my pronouns...I feel selfish for expecting the bare minimum from them". Another said: "I was always afraid to come out...I have older cousins who are queer, and I saw how my family treated them differently".

There is a misconception that homo- and transphobia are dying out, confined to dwindling generations. But young queer people are still enduring phobia from all sides.

While there has been growth in the Sligo LGBTQ+ scene in recent years, there is still no designated safe space, no club or bar. Many queer people rely on safety in numbers, and won't go into the city centre without friends. There are semi-regular meet-ups arranged, but many people are unwilling to attend these events – in case a neighbour sees.

Yes, brutally violent phobia-fuelled murders are not the norm, but that doesn't mean that the LGBTQ+ community is not in near-constant danger. 🗨️



Another gay man had his car and front-door locks glued shut, his tyres repeatedly let down, €900 worth of equipment stolen, and the clothes drying in his garden "smeared in dog shit"