



RESEARCH REPORT

“I JUST WANT BASIC THINGS! - WE ARE NOT THERE YET”

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS, SERVICES AND CHALLENGES OF
LGBT COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND NGOs IN SOFIA

SUPPORTED BY: 
SMOKINYA
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PROJECT: ‘IHIGHER – VOLUNTEERING FOR YOUTH
PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYABILITY’

 PETRI
SOFIA

PROJECT: ‘VOLUNTEER POWER: SPEAK ACT
CHANGE’

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NGOs in Sofia**



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of contents	1
Glossary	2
1. Introduction	6
1. 1. Situation in Europe	6
1. 2. Situation in Bulgaria	7
2. Methods	11
2.1. Data collection instruments.....	11
2.2. Sampling strategy.....	17
2. 3. Analytic methods	17
3. Results	19
3.1. Demographics	19
3.2. NGOs priorities, perceptions and plans for LGBT activism	22
3.3. Social, political and cultural factors which contribute to LGBT needs	27
3.4. Needs of LGBT community as related to law, health, media, education and NGOs.....	29
4. Discussion and recommendations	34
4.1. Legal services and needs	34
4.2. Health services and needs.....	35
4.3. Media representation reforms	36
4.4. Educational reforms.....	37
4.5. NGOs specific recommendations	38
5. Limitations.....	40
6. Conclusion and next steps.....	42
7. References.....	43
8. About the authors	44
9. About the organizations	45

GLOSSARY

Understanding and using the terminology associated with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) community helps to ensure that services and organisations are inclusive and respectful. The following explanation provides a glossary of terms for practitioners and service providers to help them to better understand the terminology and to use inclusive language in service provision. Use labels and definitions carefully and avoid assumption. It is often better to ask people how they describe themselves and then use their preferred self-definitions and pronouns.

ALLY - A straight and/or cis person who supports members of the LGBT community.

BISEXUAL - Bisexual is an umbrella term used to describe a romantic and/or sexual orientation towards more than one gender. Bisexual people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including, but not limited to, bisexual, pan, queer, and other non-monosexual identities.

BIPHOBIA - The irrational fear or dislike of someone who identifies as bi based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs or views about bisexual people. Biphobic bullying may be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, bisexual.

CISGENDER OR CIS - Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Non-trans is also used by some people.

COMING OUT - When a person first tells someone/others about their identity as lesbian, gay, bi or trans*.

GAY - Refers to a man who has a romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction towards men. It is also a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality - some women define themselves as gay rather than lesbian.

GENDER - As a social construct of sex, gender is a category that refers to economic, social and cultural attributes which the biologically born bodies acquire. As an individual construct of one's own identity / expression, the gender confirms, denies and / or exceeds the socially assigned and formed sex and

gender roles of men and women, as well as the whole binary basis of male and female.

GENDER EXPRESSION - How a person chooses to outwardly express their gender, within the context of societal expectations of gender. A person who does not conform to societal expectations of gender may not, however, identify as trans*.

GENDER IDENTITY - A person's innate sense of their own gender, whether male, female or something else (see non-binary below), which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

GENDER AFFIRMATION - Another way of describing a person's transition. To undergo gender affirmation usually means to undergo some sort of medical intervention, but it can also mean changing names, pronouns, dressing differently and living in their self-identified gender. Gender affirmation is a characteristic that is protected by the Equality Act 2010, and it is further interpreted in the Equality Act 2010 approved code of practice.

HETEROSEXUAL / STRAIGHT - Refers to a man who has a romantic and/or sexual attraction towards women or to a woman who has a romantic and/or sexual attraction towards men.

HOMOSEXUAL - This might be considered a more medical term used to describe someone who has a romantic and/or sexual attraction towards someone of the same gender. The term 'gay' is now more generally used.

INTERSEX - A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female. Intersex people may identify as male, female or non-binary.

LGBT - The acronym for lesbian, gay, bi and trans*.

LESBIAN - Refers to a woman who has an emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction towards women.

NON-BINARY - An umbrella term for people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.

QUEER - This term primarily relates to everything that differs from conventional in a certain unusual way (synonymous for strange, eccentric). Initially, the term had offensive meaning for nonheterosexual people and today is used for subversive denouncing of existing almost fixed models, and by that rejecting the differences and the identities. With this, all LGBTI persons, without distinction, are covered by this term, and none of LGBT identities enjoys the preferential and privileged position. This term denotes defiance to heteropatriarchal norms.

SEX - Assigned to a person on the basis of primary sex characteristics (genitalia) and reproductive functions. Sometimes the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are interchanged to mean 'male' or 'female'.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION - A person's romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction to another person.

TRANS* - An umbrella term to describe people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth.

Trans* people may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including (but not limited to) transgender, transsexual, gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, non-binary, gender-variant, crossdresser, genderless, agender, nongender, third gender, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, trans masculine, trans feminine and neutrois.

TRANSGENDER MAN - A term used to describe someone who is assigned female at birth but identifies and lives as a man. This may be shortened to transman, or FTM, an abbreviation for female-to-male.

TRANSGENDER WOMAN - A term used to describe someone who is assigned male at birth but identifies and lives as a woman. This may be shortened to transwoman, or MTF, an abbreviation for male-to-female.

TRANSITIONING - The steps a trans* person may take to live in the gender with which they identify. Each person's transition will involve different things. For some this involves medical intervention, such as hormone therapy and surgeries, but not all trans* people want or are able to have this. Transitioning also might involve things such as telling friends and family, dressing differently and changing official documents.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Sustainable Governance Indicators Survey (2018), Bulgaria is the poorest member state in the EU, education quality is comparatively low, with significant geographical variance, the health care system is inclusive, but service quality is not high and the pension system does not reduce poverty among the elderly. If we compare with other EU countries, other social problems in Bulgaria, such as gender equality, racism or homophobia, create the overall negative situation.

In general, Bulgaria's social policy is unsuccessful in including and integrating people with lower education levels, minorities and foreigners. Additionally, there are not positive policies for the integration of specific groups such as minorities and immigrants. However, Bulgaria could expect a positive future for many reasons, and some of them are the following: Bulgarian tourism is growing massively which means that people of all nationalities mix with Bulgarians every day and Bulgarian immigrants are achieving significant results in their fields of study and work. "Bulgaria is one of the EU states, along with Austria, that places first in students willing to study abroad," said Svetlan Danev, Coordinator of the Global Education Project. Furthermore, the contribution of many NGOs to create an open-minded space for all kinds of citizens, and mostly minorities, is a chance to respond to the diverse needs of all the groups that consist in the Bulgarian society.

SITUATION IN EUROPE

Although same-sex relationships were quite common in ancient Greece, Rome and pagan Celtic societies, after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, severe laws against homosexual behaviour appeared. Over the years, different historical events made the situation for this community even worse. In revolutions, dictatorships and other political situations, they did not have enough rights and recognition to show their sexuality with total freedom.

Nowadays, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights are widely diverse in Europe per country. 14 out of the 25 countries that have legalised same-sex marriage worldwide are situated in Europe. A further fifteen European

countries have legalised civil unions or other forms of more limited recognition for same-sex couples. Additionally, Armenia, Estonia and Lithuania recognise legally performed same-sex marriages overseas, but do not perform them. The constitutions of Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine recognise marriage only as a union of one man and one woman, and thus ban same-sex marriage. According to ILGA-Europe, the top three European countries in terms of LGBT equality are Malta, Belgium and Luxembourg (Rainbow Europe 2019; ILGA-Europe, 2019).

SITUATION IN BULGARIA

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Bulgaria may face legal challenges not experienced by non-LGBT residents. Both male and female same-sex sexual activity are legal in Bulgaria, but same-sex couples and households headed by same-sex couples are not eligible for the same legal protections available to opposite-sex couples. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has been banned since 2004, with discrimination based on "gender change" being outlawed since 2015. Bulgaria, like most countries in Central and Eastern Europe, tends to be socially conservative when it comes to such issues as homosexuality. When it comes to children adoption and parenting, same-sex couples are banned from adopting in Bulgaria. However, single individuals regardless of sexual orientation are allowed to adopt, though requests from single men are rarely accepted. Since 1 January 2004, the Protection Against Discrimination Act of 2003 has prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and in all areas, and in 2015 the law that forbids discrimination of people who have changed their gender. Unfortunately, hate crimes against LGBT people are not uncommon in Bulgaria.

Regarding trans* and intersex rights, since 2015, people who have undergone gender affirmation surgery are protected with an amendment to the Protection Against Discrimination Act of 2003. Intersex persons in Bulgaria are even more marginalized and invisible in society than the transgender community.

Regarding blood donation, gay and bisexual men are not explicitly banned from donating blood in Bulgaria, but many medical professionals, especially

outside of Sofia, will not allow them to if informed about their sexual orientation. However, the blood donor application form, required prior to any blood donation, does not ask the applicant to disclose that information.

Most of gay life in Bulgaria is primarily set in Sofia. There are gay establishments in Plovdiv, Varna and Blagoevgrad. Outside of the big cities, this subject is taboo and rarely welcomed. As this is still a highly controversial subject in Bulgaria, accurate data cannot be obtained due to the unwillingness of some or most people who identify as LGBT to freely affirm themselves as such out of fear of public persecution, scrutiny or harassment.

Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria

The Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled last year that the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, does not conform to the Bulgarian constitution. This Convention, which aim was to protect/ improve the situation of minorities groups or groups at risk of social exclusion was not well accepted in the Bulgarian court.

The 12-member court ruled by eight to four that the convention's definition of "gender" as a social construct "relativizes the borderline between the two sexes - male and female as biologically determined". It added that if society loses its capacity to distinguish between a man and a woman, the fight against violence against women would become a formal and unfeasible commitment. The ruling stipulates that "the lack of a common understanding of the concept of gender is illustrated by the active social and political discussion 'for' and 'against' the gender ideology that has been ongoing in dozens of countries around the world for two decades". On December 28, the party, led by the Minister of Defence, Krasimir Karakachanov, claimed that, through the convention, "International lobbies are pushing Bulgaria to legalize a 'third gender' and introduce school programs for studying homosexuality and transvestism and creating opportunities for enforcing same-sex marriages". The decision of the Constitutional Court, which calls the use of the gender definition an 'internal contradiction' within the Convention, practically makes its adoption in Bulgaria impossible", Kanev said.

The convention has attracted criticism in some other Eastern European and Balkan states, but it was ultimately ratified by all Balkan parliaments, apart from the one in Sofia.

Rainbow HUB

Rainbow Hub is an open space for the LGBTIQ+ community to gather and to host all kinds of events/activities. The Centre is a joint project of the Youth LGBT Organization Action, the GLAS Foundation and the Bilitis Resource Centre Foundation. The idea of space that offers information, programs, services, leadership and advocacy in the categories of health, law, culture and education has spontaneously developed as a result of working together over the years. There is also the possibility to organize other kinds of events/activities in the centre, it is not always necessary to be related with the LGBTIQ+ community, but as long as the event is tolerant and for a good cause, it is welcomed.

They have open hours, everyone is welcome to consult on issues related to LGBTI people's rights in Bulgaria, seek support or simply to get acquainted with Hub's volunteers and team through a cup of coffee and learn more about community life in Sofia. At the Rainbow Hub reception hours you will find interesting books and information materials on queer themes. In addition to the reception hours, you can visit the Rainbow Hub by joining one of the already existing initiatives. So, according to Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and intersex people in Bulgaria are invisible. A common mantra in the country is that people have nothing against LGBT people, as long as they remain as discreet as possible, voiceless and hidden. The people from the LGBTI society need to have this visibility and publicity so they can communicate and discuss with the rest of the society their problems, needs and concerns.

Therefore, due to the lack of research background on LGBT needs and rights in Bulgaria, as well as insufficient funding to implement research projects on this matter, we are conducting this local needs assessment to provide critical information about LGBT community needs as identified by them and by the NGOs working with them. The aim of this project is to increase the knowledge and raise the awareness of the critical issues which affect the LGBT community, and

contribute to more mobilized and organized LGBT community. The goal of this needs assessment project is to offer possible ideas on how to improve the situation of the LGBT community in Bulgaria in different areas of life, such as law, health, education, media and community organizing, and explore ways to address LGBT peoples' and NGOs' needs.

METHODS

This research project was inspired by the LGBT national needs assessment in North Macedonia which was conducted by the NGO Subversive Front - Association for sexual and gender minorities, in collaboration with the University of Michigan in 2017 (Stojanovski, Bondikjova, Brooks, & Mihajlov, 2017). As the current research team member was part of the needs assessment in North Macedonia, we were following similar methodology with slight adaptation to the Bulgarian context for the needs of this local research. In collaboration with Rainbow Hub (NGOs Deystvie, GLAS Foundation and Bilitis), we conducted local needs assessment among LGBT community members in Sofia, Bulgaria. This needs assessment was a qualitative project which included one focus group and one semi-structured interview with LGBT community members, as well as four interviews with NGO staff members working on LGBT matters. The two researchers were responsible for the adaptation of the research methodology, construction of interview/focus group guides, data collection and data analysis and dissemination of findings. The researchers have previous experience in qualitative data collection with a focus on social and psychological matters. Throughout the data collection process, feedback/debrief were held after each interview/focus group. All interviews/focus group were conducted in English and the two researchers participated in all interviews and focus groups.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

As part of the needs assessment, we adapted the interview and focus group guides for the LGBT community members and NGOs staff members which were used in the LGBT needs assessment in North Macedonia. The guides were developed to gain a deeper understanding of six major areas (education, law, health, social climate, media and community activism). The interview was composed by 15-18 open questions. We aimed to gain information about the societal and political influence to the needs of LGBT community members and their daily lives in Sofia. Also, we envisioned to learn the key issues of LGBT community members in relation to the national laws, policies, health, education and recent political events in Bulgaria. Further, we explored the services of NGOs staff members, their priorities and key challenges in working with LGBT

communities, other NGOs, state institutions and donor organizations. At the end, we examined the critical areas which require improvement as reported by LGBT community and NGO staff members themselves.

Table 1. Example of LGBT community members guide

Social and cultural climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel living as LGBTI+ community member in Bulgaria? • How do you think the general population views LGBTI+ people in Bulgaria? Why do you think this is so? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) What could be done to help change this, if anything? • What do you think about the political and social environment for LGBTI+ people in Bulgaria? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) To what extent do you feel protected? Have you been able to use any laws to invoke your human rights? Can you provide an example?
Laws and policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you interacted with the police or justice system, if at all? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) To what extent is the police/justice system meeting your needs? Can you provide examples of how they are or are not meeting your needs? • What could be done to improve the relationship with the police and justice system? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) What do you think could be improved, legally and policy related, to ensure human rights protection of LGBTI+ people here?
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think about the media representation of LGBT people in Bulgaria? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Who do you think is responsible to change this? b) How do you think the LGBT media representation can be improved?
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel about the health services that you use? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) To what extent are the health services meeting your needs? • How do you feel about the sexual health services you

	<p>receive? (E.g. HIV and STD testing, access to prevention strategies)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of health services do you need that you feel you cannot access? Why? • Have you ever received mental health services? How did you feel about the services you received? • How might health services be improved? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Who could help improve them?
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How were your experiences in school (secondary and university) as LGBT community member? • What were some issues you had in school due to your sexual orientation or gender identity? How did you handle those issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) What additional support might you have wanted? From who? Why? • Have you ever witnessed someone being bullied (verbally or physically) because of their sexual orientation or gender identity? Probes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How did this make you feel? b) What did you do in the situation? c) Do you have a personal experience you would want to share?
Volunteering support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of support do you feel you need as LGBTI+ in Bulgaria? Why? How would this help? • How do you think international volunteers (EVS, etc.) can help in improving the LGBTI+ situation here?

In addition to the questions we asked LGBT community members outlined above, we included additional questions for the NGO staff members.

Table 2. Example of NGO staff members guide

Community activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you become involved in work related to LGBTI+ matters? What has your experience been like? • How do you feel about your job/being member of the Rainbow hub (if you are)/your LGBTIQ+ foundation?
Social and cultural climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe the situation of the LGBTIQ+ activism in Sofia/Bulgaria in general? Are there any differences between cities/towns?
Services and programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of services and programs does your organization have for LGBTI+ people? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How did your organization decide to provide these services and programs? What were the reasons for starting these activities? • To what extent do you think the programs and services you offer are meeting the needs LGBTI+ community in Bulgaria? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) What needs are not currently being met? What could be improved? • What are some barriers that you and your organization experience in providing services, programs, and conducting advocacy efforts?
NGOs priority areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does your organization prioritize? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How did your organization come to these specific priorities? Why these particular priorities? • Are there any subpopulations (of LGBTQI) whose needs are not being met (e.g. transgender, intersex)? Why? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How are their needs not being met? • What efforts are underway to address the needs of communities that do not live in Sofia? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Do you see their needs differing? How so? Why?
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are future planned advocacy efforts your organization intends to partake in?

	<p>a) How were these advocacy efforts identified as items that were needed? Why?</p> <p>b) How would you describe your collaboration with state institutions, donor organizations and other NGOs?</p>
Future plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the future planned services and programs your organization intends to implement? a) How/why did you decide on these future services? b) How were these future planned services and programs developed? c) Who was involved in the decision making?
Volunteering support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of additional support does LGBTI+ communities living in Bulgaria need? Why? How would this help? • How do you think international volunteers (EVS, etc.) can help in improving the LGBTI+ situation here?

SAMPLING STRATEGY

The research team used purposeful snowball sampling method in order to recruit needs assessment participants. First, we purposefully selected participants from different LGBT-focused NGOs in Sofia to ensure representation of the NGO staff in the civil society sector. We sent email and Facebook invitations to NGO staff members. We received positive responses from all human rights-focused NGOs except one. Second, due to the hard-to-reach population, we collaborated with NGOs from the Rainbow Hub in order to recruit participants for the focus group/community member interview. We purposefully selected a group of sexual orientation and gender identity characteristics to ensure representation of diverse LGBT members. The snowball sampling is typically used in research with populations that experience in live in marginalized environments. As part of the snowball sampling, we asked the NGO staff members - participants in the interviews to assist in recruitment of other individuals who they believed would be interested in the study. Using these strategies, we achieved the sample size of 4 NGO staff members and 7 community members.

The interviews/focus groups were conducted within a period of 3 months (March - May 2019). The duration of the interviews ranged between 45 min. and 1 hour and 15 min.

ANALYTIC METHODS

First, we transcribed the digital audio recordings. All the documentation - including audio recordings, transcripts, interview/focus group guides, draft report were shared in google drive for simultaneous work of the two researchers. Two researchers analysed the data using qualitative methods by receiving reading material about qualitative research methodology and previous reports from similar studies. The training methods and materials used were: in-person meetings, publications on qualitative methods, and Skype meetings. The research team used two qualitative analysis approaches: 1. Content analysis and 2. Thematic analysis.

- *Content analysis* was used in order to begin to understand the phenomena of the various needs of the LGBT community. We use a directed (using the research questions as a guide) to develop themes, as

well as conventional, which allowed for the themes to be developed from the transcripts. The purpose of content analysis is to examine who says what, to whom, and to what effect (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

- *Thematic analysis* was also used to identify patterns across transcripts, both focus groups and interviews separately, and then in conjunction. The purpose of thematic analysis is to characterize, investigate, and report upon patterns or themes discovered in the transcripts (Brickell, 2006; Seidman, 2014).

The data analysis process was conducted in following stages: 1. Each researcher transcribed and analysed 3 transcripts followed by writing summaries of findings for each transcript; 2. Researchers participate in Skype meeting to discuss general findings and next steps; 3. Researchers participate in writing the final report. Due to limited time and resources, the researchers did not use any qualitative analysis software or additional qualitative research approaches.

RESULTS

In this section we include findings from the needs assessment data collection activities and analyses. These findings include demographic characteristics of community members who participated in the needs assessment. Due to privacy and ethical reasons, we do not include demographics of NGO staff members who participated in the needs assessment. The findings report on the content of qualitative data, major patterns and themes. This part of the report is broken into the following sections:

- Demographics;
- NGOs priorities, perceptions and plans for LGBTIQ+ activism;
- Social, political and cultural factors that contribute to LGBT needs; and
- Needs of LGBT community as related to law, health, media, education and NGOs.

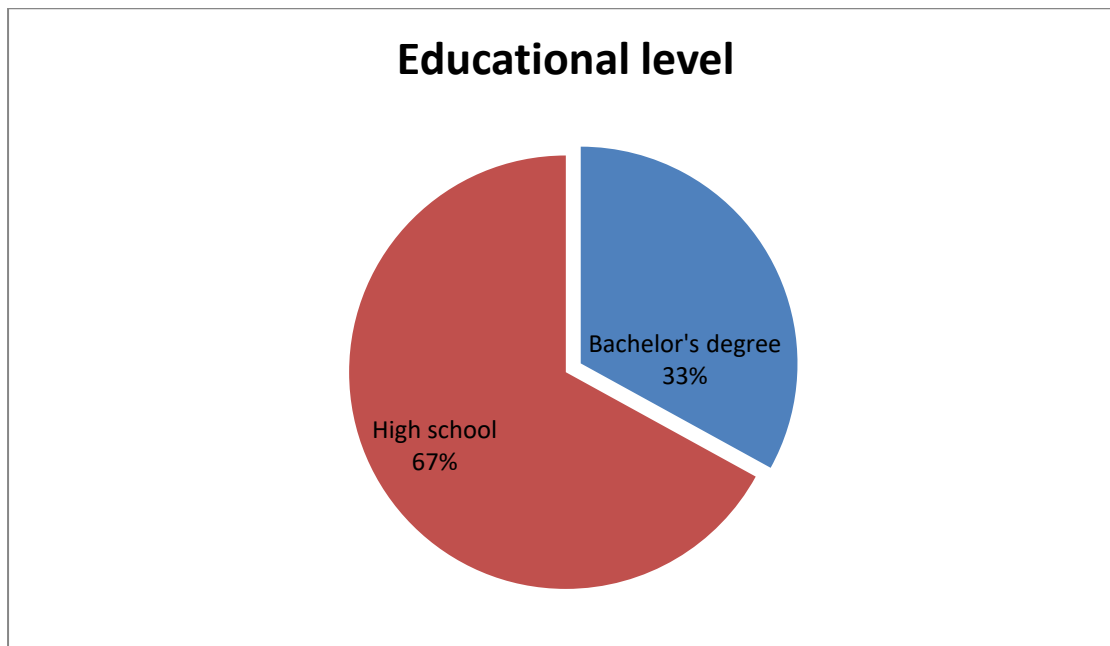
DEMOGRAPHICS

This section of the report reports on the demographics of the community members who participated in the focus group/interview.

All the community members - participants identified as ethnic Bulgarians with years in activism which ranged from 0 to 3 years. The age range of the participants was between 16 - 29.

In Figure 1 below we report on the educational attainment of community members who participated in the focus group/interview. Most of them finished high school/are high school students, and a few of them obtained a Bachelor's degree diploma.

Figure 1. Educational level of community member focus group and interview participants (n=6)



In the following three figures, we report on the sex assigned at birth, gender and sexual orientation of the community members who participated in the focus group/interview. As seen in Figure 2, 67% identified themselves as biologically female and 33% as biologically male. However, there was a higher diversity in responses when asked about the gender they identify with. In Figure 3, one can see that 33% identified themselves as males, 33% as trans*males (female to male), 17% as non-binary and 17% as other gender (I don't know). Next, we report on self-reported sexual orientation of the participants. As one can see, 67% self-identified as gay or lesbian and 33% as bisexual.

Figure 2. Sex of community member focus group and interview participants (n=6)

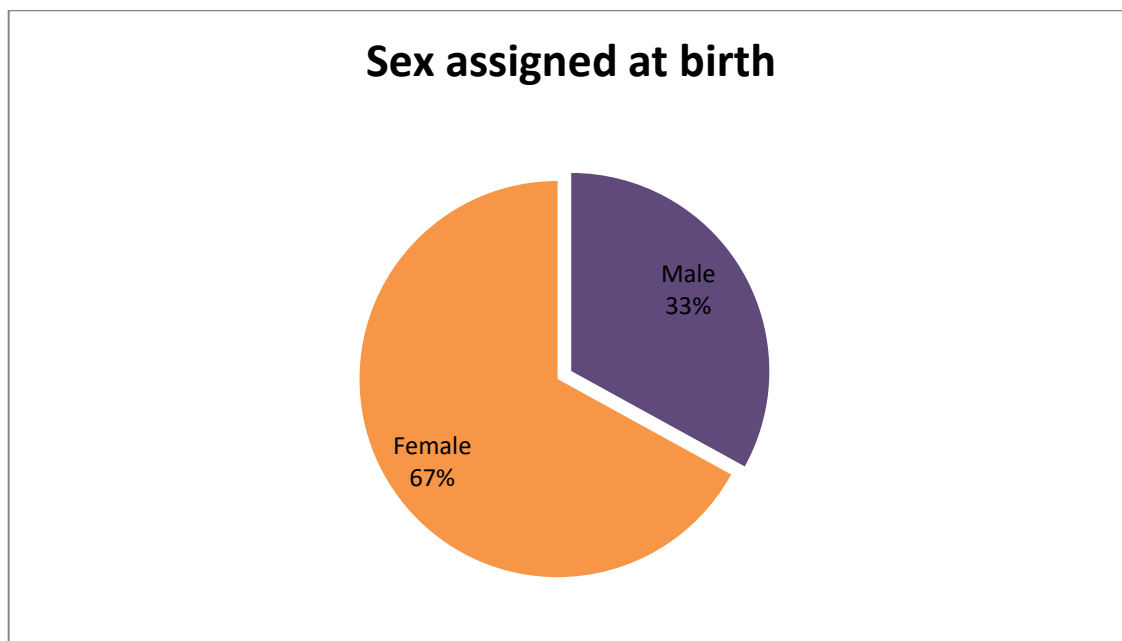


Figure 3. Gender of community member focus group and interview participants (n=6)

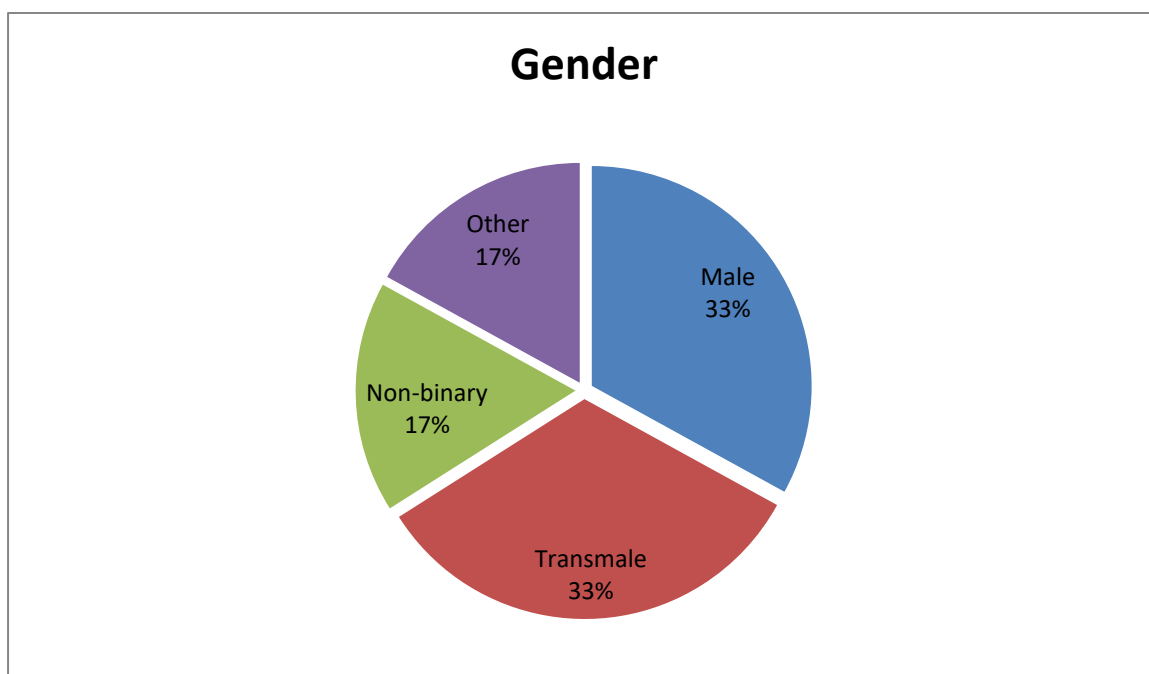
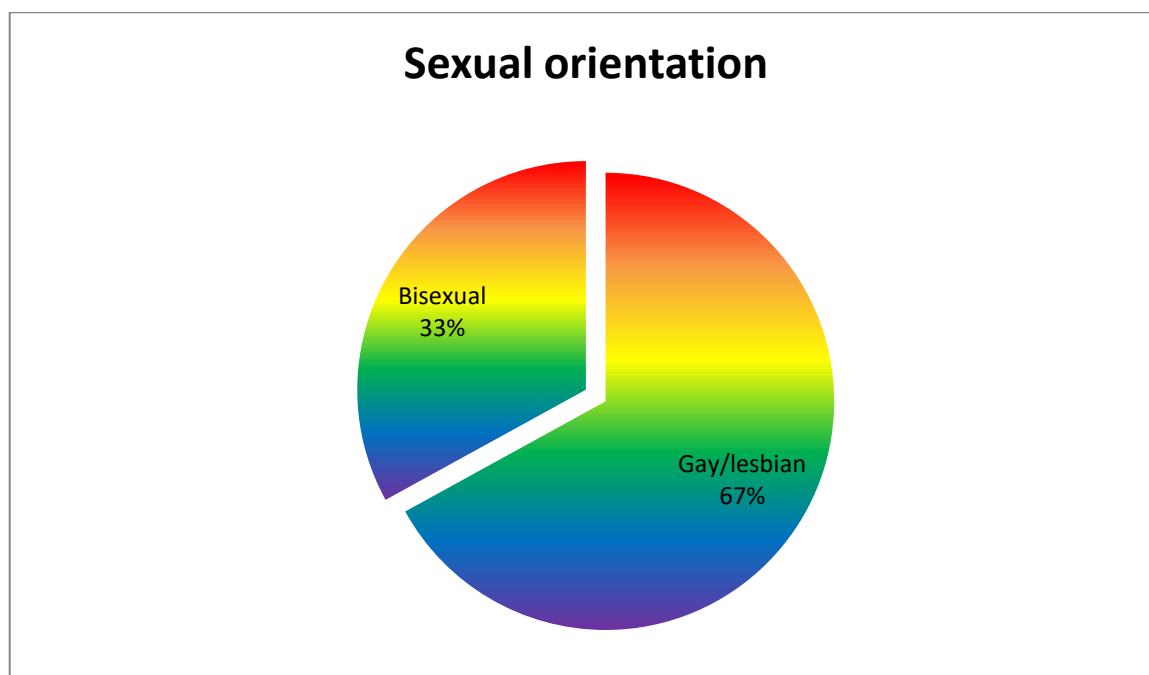


Figure 4. Sexual orientation of community member focus group and interview participants (n=6)



NGO PRIORITIES, PERCEPTIONS AND PLANS FOR LGBTI ACTIVISM

In this section, we focus on the findings related to the NGOs services and priorities, their motivation for engaging in LGBTI+ activism and future plans for activities.

Overall, majority of the NGO staff participants started their LGBTI+ activism due to personal identification with the LGBTQ+ community or by having close personal relations (family, friends, etc.) with LGBTI+ community members, as one participant mentioned, “One of the things that makes our program so successful is that we are also part of the community, we could easily understand each other. We are in the same situation”. Also, almost all of the interviewed NGO staff members became professionally active through step-by-step involvement - starting from attending non-formal events of NGOs to undertaking greater responsibilities for organizing events. As one participant noted, “...so, it was like a natural process...We are not doing it just for the publicity and for the sake of ours, but we are doing it for the community”. In addition to that, some of the participants were motivated to join the LGBT+ activism due to curiosity about LGBTI-related matters in Bulgaria and previous experiences in youth activism field, as one participant

noted, "...And I quickly realized that there is pretty much nothing in regards to legislation, or policies in place, or whatever...and that there are only a few organizations".

NGOs services and priorities

In general, NGOs staff members expressed positive attitudes towards working in the LGBTI+ field and they were aware of the advantages and disadvantages from this work. In terms of NGOs services and activities, it can be seen that each NGO is focused on one to two priority areas, however they combine the efforts for organizing bigger LGBTI-related events (for ex. Sofia Pride, film festivals, national research). For instance, some of the NGOs work mainly on community organizing and psychosocial support with focus on queer women, trans*, intersex and youth, other prioritize legal support and sexual health programs, and the rest are focused on PR and media representation, art and cultural events. Some NGOs highlight one priority, for example - psychological support, while investing in other side-projects, such as sexual health programs and career counselling for LGBTI+ people.

However, some NGO staff participants stated that working in the LGBTI+ field can be challenging due to a variety of factors such as the amount of work and limited human resources, lack of strategic plans and poor NGO management. One participant firmly concluded, "We have the issue of how to adapt to the growth that we have achieved. We are growing much faster than we are ready to". These barriers influence the result of the NGO work and the quality of the social impact they are envisioning. As one participant noted, "Every organization, or every person, is trying to improve the situation in many fields, which is demanding of course, and exhausting, and we are also not all...experts on everything, so this means that we put a lot of effort on many things, but we don't necessarily have the best effect". Similarly, delivering visible results was perceived to be difficult - due to negative rhetoric in the media, as one participant stressed, "I saw that it's going to take...it's a life-long project and it's not going to be easy".

On the question of approaches in developing NGOs priority areas, the answers among the participants greatly varied. Some NGOs utilize the top-down

strategy in their work, which means that they are creating the services according to their professional expertise as NGOs staff members, personal viewpoints and donor organization's requirements. However, some NGOs use the bottom-up strategy in developing priorities by direct communication with LGBT+ community members and responding to their feedback. On the question of how they make decisions about priorities, one participant mentioned, "The very practical and frank one is that LGBTI+ organizations in Bulgaria survive on whatever funding they can find. If there is a call for proposals providing analysis on bla, bla, bla...you get the money, you do it". However, some responded differently, like one participant, "So...we are trying to get away from this, very poisonous pattern, finding a program and trying to...come up with something which can fit in that program". However, regardless of their key priority areas, all of the NGOs staff participants emphasized that community organizing/outreach is fundamental aspect in their work.

Community organizing

NGO staff participants stressed community organizing as a guiding principle in their program development, however they experienced concerns in reaching out to different subgroups of LGBT community members. The fact that the majority of LGBT-related events are organized in Sofia, it is demanding to attract LGBT non-activists, trans* and intersex people and community members living outside the capital. As one NGO staff participant stressed, "And most of the people live elsewhere...and they face a lot more challenges because they may live in a homophobic family, or extended family, or their friends...I mean, it's very different experience for them, and we cannot support them in any way, unless online communication of anyhow, but you cannot chat with 10 000 people, I mean...it's physically impossible". They named several factors which contribute to the challenges in community organizing, such as: 1.difficulties in disseminating information on LGBT activities, 2.fears of coming out among LGBT community members, 3.difficulty in long-term retention in LGBT activism, 4.lack of knowledge on legal background in regards to LGBT rights, 5.low participation in offline activities (workshops, support groups), and 6.struggles in reaching parents and elder populations. As one NGO staff participant noted, "So, people who are gay, or

lesbian, or trans*, or bisexual may have no idea that organizations exist. They don't know what the legal situation is, they simply live their lives as they are, and they feel no need to do anything about it...because they don't see a problem.”, or “First is that many people are not out. And if people are not out, how do you find them, how do you actually propose them to do something?” These NGOs staff sentiments portray the severe complications they encounter while trying to organize and mobilize the LGBT communities.

Collaboration between LGBTIQ+ NGOs, donor organizations and state institutions

The NGOs staff participants did not discuss in detail about the relations between the NGOs working in the LGBTQ+ and human rights field. Many participants were aware that partnership between NGOs is inevitable, however not for all of the activities. Therefore, majority of the NGOs staff members collaborate directly through joint initiatives and projects, and some prefer to engage in neutral and professional communication and operate as a separate entity. There were numerous factors which contribute to this (lack of) civil society collaboration between LGBTIQ+ NGOs, starting from different approaches/goals on how LGBTI+ activism should be done, different fields of expertise of the NGO staff, and high competition for donor organizations' grants. In spite of this, some participants stated, “We've tried working with them [specific NGOs], but we're not on the same page when it comes to community outreach”, and some employed a different perspective, as one participant said, “...if we don't combine efforts, the organization will never have the space for all of us. We could work more on building alliances or supporting each other”.

In terms of civil society - government collaboration, majority of NGOs staff members experienced challenges in the communication with state officials, especially politicians, for discussing any LGBTI-related issues. Overall, NGOs staff participants agreed that relationships between LGBTIQ+ NGOs and government-led institutions are combative or non-existing due to the hostile political situation against queer communities in Bulgaria. As one participant noted, “Our politicians are very afraid of any association they could have with the topic, not only because of the gender hysteria right now, but also in the past”. Many of the participants

believed that the reasons for this LGBT-negativity is the lack of political will, and fears among decision-makers and no support towards LGBTI in general. As one participant noted, "...but the biggest obstacle so far has been the lack of any political will, or bravery, I would say, to even touch the [LGBTI] topic", and another participant added, "...for the Pride, for example, there is never a politician from the Bulgarian side, and it's been 11 years we had it right now...". However, several participants experienced positive, or at least, neutral communication with the police. These negative sentiments of NGO staff participants towards the government officials depict the main obstacle which they experience in performing their work.

In terms of relations between NGOs and donor organizations, majority of NGO staff participants reported using single-donor fundraising strategy (for ex., relying on EU-based grants) and some are expanding this scope by using multi-donor strategies to attract diverse donors (for ex. Foundations, private companies, etc.). Even though NGO staff members experienced positive communication with donor organizations, almost all of the NGOs found it difficult to approach donors to meet their and LGBTI communities' needs. Therefore, many NGO staff members mentioned numerous factors which make the fundraising process an evident challenge, such as, insufficient funding, discrepancy between NGOs needs and donor's grant proposal requirements, as well as lack of sustainable, ad-hoc and capacity building funds for organizational development. One participant noted, "...they have priorities and a priority could not be sustaining an organization...they have their own priorities for the money that they give.", while another participant added "...some child has been beaten up by their father, and kicked off their home, and he needs shelter, he needs food, he needs some assistance right away and you cannot tell them, well...you know what, I have money, but my money is coming from the [donor organization], and I have promised the [donor organization] that I will organize 5 discussions and...".

Additional financial barriers, as reported by NGO staff members, were the lack of financial support from the government and no core funding, as one participant mentioned, "The lack of core funding is basically killing all these smaller NGOs, especially in our field. Because...even all the [EC] projects, they

are co-funded by 20 or 30%, we have to somehow get the money from somewhere. Where to get this money from?”

The future plans of NGOs indicate high diversity in their activities and services. On one hand, some of the NGO staff members reported that they will continue working on similar initiatives by increasing the community outreach, as one NGO staff participant ensured, “...we want to, kind of, work more with the community, in terms of, providing them with platforms, and opportunities to express themselves, and you know, be participants somehow, be through art, be through sports, to be through...everything that you can think of”. Similarly, some of them indicated expanding the network of their stakeholders by extensive work with teachers, social workers and international foundations. On the other hand, few NGOs decided to put their future efforts into capacity building of the NGOs by creating clear strategic plans for the LGBT movement and enhancing the work with youth across the country. As one NGO staff participant concluded with a symbolic call to action, “Should there be gay people? I mean...it’s not really a question, there are gay people, the question is: what do we do about that? How do we live together?”

SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LGBT NEEDS

LGBT community members reported experiencing additional challenges in living authentic lives due to societal, political and cultural inhibitors which have been entangled into the society for many years. The feeling of being part of the LGBT community was described as negative due to several factors: psychological violence, homophobic attitudes, anti-LGBT cultural traditions and intersections between religion, national values and LGBT matters in the Bulgarian society. One gay man highlighted the high level of inacceptance and violence against LGBT people based on their (or perceived) sexual orientation or gender identity, “And I think most of the LGBTI people, if they are, if you can tell that they are LGBTI, they are bullied, or beaten, or whatever”. Also, the community and the Bulgarian society in general, have beliefs which suppress diversity in the society and prevent equity and inclusion, as one bisexual woman addressed, “...if you have short hair, unusual colours, especially short...like that kind of people are targeted way more than someone who looks...standardly feminine”. More, gay participants discussed

the verbal abuse towards gay men which was widely normalized in the Bulgarian context, as one gay man participant noted, “I just need security. I just need not to be called out because I am gay, I don’t want to be because I am...I just want basic things”. Transgender participants did not discuss societal factors in details, as they perceived their problems to be more specific, as seen from the statement of one transman participant, “I feel like our problems are bigger, more practical...and especially if we start transitioning”.

Similarly, some of the NGO staff participants elaborated on the reasons for this exclusive societal environment for LGBT people, especially for those LGBT people living outside the capital, as one NGO staff member discussed, “...but in Sofia there is social life. There is the chance for LGBT people to go out, to meet, to talk to each other, to go to events, to party...in the country, you have nothing, especially in little towns, it’s extremely hard for them...”. Several factors which shape these negative sentiments were the prejudices derived from the “gender aggression”, failure in Istanbul Convention ratification and the conservative mindset of the general population. As one NGO staff member concluded, “...right now it’s extremely hard to talk on these [LGBTI] topics, every kind of gender identity right now is like...a dirty topic, a dirty word”, and added, “this term [gender], which has nothing to do with its original meaning and everything, so...when we say now gender in Bulgaria, it’s something, it’s some creature, that no one knows what it really is, that just has some...you know, that is dirty, that is...freakish, that is completely unclear what it...you know, what...it looks like, or what it wants”.

Regarding political factors, LGBT community members shared similar thoughts and feelings as the NGO staff members. As seen from community members’ insights, LGBT participants indicated that the political situation in Bulgaria remains to be difficult for them. Nationalism, government-controlled institutions and media frame LGBT people in a negative light. Also, anti-LGBTI propaganda and lack of political will impact the hostile relationships between LGBT people and state institutions. These obstacles led the LGBT people to feel fearful, unsafe and apathetic towards the overall social progress. As one transman

participant noted, “I don’t see them working, really!” and “...it’s unhealthy for their career [politicians] to speak about us [LGBT community].”

NEEDS OF LGBT COMMUNITY AS RELATED TO LAW, HEALTH, MEDIA, EDUCATION AND NGOS

In this section, we report on findings related to law, health, media, education and community organizing needs of LGBT community members.

Perceptions about the law system

Community members provided many insights into the legal obstacles they experience in Bulgarian laws and policies. Also, the law-related conversations varied between LGBT community subgroups, including gay/lesbian and transgender participants’ ideas. In general, community members expressed lack of knowledge about the laws related to SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity). However, they expressed understanding of specific legal gaps, such as definitions of hate crime and hate speech acts, lack of same-sex marriage, children adoption for same-sex couples and legal gender recognition. As one gay man participant said “...the gay marriage is one of the problems, but we have bigger problems. Like, right now I think it will be okay if the society doesn’t treat us like some kind of a...mistakes”. This indicates that the information on reporting cases of discrimination and violence based on SOGI remains to be unclear for them. In addition, community members elaborated extensively on the lack of legal consequences for state professionals (healthcare providers, teachers, University lecturers) who engage in discriminatory or prejudicial behaviour towards LGBT people. As one gay man participant mentioned, “...because there is nobody to control it because we don’t have enough doctors, they should start firing them because of their behaviour, people will die and nobody will care about sexual orientation...so, it’s a national problem.”, while another bisexual woman participant added, “...there is no like, association or organization or whatever, that controls what happens in hospitals, what happens in schools, or that happens in..., like, you go to therapist, he tells you shit, and who do you complain to?”

Transgender participants discussed different type of structural barriers they encounter in the law system. They perceived that health professionals in Bulgaria

are not legally allowed to prescribe hormonal therapy and the procedure for legal gender recognition is difficult, time-consuming and widely inadequate for them. As one transman participant concluded, "...it depends on the judge...they are facing something they don't understand". Due to these complicated reasons, majority the transgender community members perform their medical transition abroad, as seen from one transman participant, "...usually they go abroad, they have facial surgery, they have top or bottom, all the surgeries, and they come here and then the court is forced to recognize... ". These statements from community members indicate the high level and complexity of legal needs inter-sectioning with the field of health, education and justice system in Bulgaria.

Perceptions about the health system and services

Focus group/interviews provided many insights into the physical, sexual and mental health of LGBT community members in Bulgaria. Community members spoke of how, due to fears from discrimination and unethical treatment, they experienced challenges in the health system.

In general, community members highlighted the unmet health needs of transgender people as the biggest structural problem. The severity and complexity of the health needs of transgender people differs from the needs of LGB people. They elaborated on several factors which contribute to trans* needs to be unmet: lack of access to hormone therapy, lack of opportunity for medical transitioning (uneducated providers), and discrimination and violence towards trans* people in the health system. As one transman participant noted, "...I know that my needs will not be met, I will be ridiculed. So, I know that I won't be met with any medical attention, and even if I am met with any, it's gonna be, not good.", and the same participant added, "...because obviously our needs are very different than anyone else's. At least on my side, because I told, one of the my doctors, that I am starting hormone therapy soon, and she was like...take substitute for Viagra, and I am like - what are you talking about?". This indicates the importance of education on trans* health issues among healthcare providers.

Overall, community members agreed that sexual health needs are met mostly by NGOs, and their services are mostly in the field of HIV testing. However,

community members reported that accessing sexual health services in state institutions (health clinics and hospitals) is an obvious challenge due to procedures, sexism and homophobia from healthcare providers.

Community members spoke in great detail about mental health system. The mental health services in Bulgaria are provided mostly by private health centers, and sometimes by state institutions for urgent cases. Also, NGOs provide self-support groups for subgroups of LGBT community members in order to meet their MH needs. In general, the mental health structure in Bulgaria was perceived as homophobic, sexist and transphobic by the LGBT participants. The participants - LGBT help-seekers envisioned the mental health services as not identity affirming, unethical and uncomfortable, as seen from one transman participant “I went to one of my psychologists, and she asked me if it’s because of my daddy issues. Cause she thinks it’s because of my dad, and I am like: no! and she was like: oh, I don’t see another reason for it, and I am like: I don’t think there is a reason for it.”. The factors which reflect these feelings among the LGBT participants were several: negative past experience with services utilization, medical approach towards homosexuality and transgender matters by MH professionals, untrained MH professionals on LGBT matters, and fears from coming out. As one bisexual woman participant noted “...like...most of the therapists are extremely homophobic, and they believe that homosexuality, bisexuality, whatever, comes from some issue or a trauma.”, and she also added “...at some point she [her friend] confessed to her therapist that she is bisexual and she started getting a lot of negative feedback and sense like...a general turn in the attitude towards her, so now she changed her therapist and she doesn’t tell anyone, anymore, that she likes girls too”. These numerous unpleasant insights with services utilization, as reported by LGBT participants, depict the high level of mental health need.

Perceptions about media representation

Community members raised the topic of negative media representation of LGBT and women as one of the key structural issues in Bulgaria. Both NGO staff members and community members agreed that the presence of hate speech and government-controlled media creates extremely hostile climate for LGBT people. As some NGO staff members discussed, “I would say that anything which is related

to gender identity and sexual orientation right now, especially to gender, is something which is...which has this scandalous taste in media...so media always jump on the topic.”, and another mentioned “...and that’s quite a big challenge, because there are a few independent medias that are covering correctly. And then the rest of them are just basically fabricating fake news, writing bullshit and horrible stuff”. Furthermore, the LGBT visibility in the Bulgarian media is regarded as ‘provocation, jokes, fun, mistake’ instead of a source for informing and education of the general population. As one bisexual woman participant mentioned, “...to represent the LGBT community like...some sort of, corrupts the children, want to ruin our traditions, and....so on, so we don’t have independent media in Bulgaria and trusted by people...”. Due to this negative portrayal of LGBT content publicly, community members experience high levels of need for adequate informing on these matters.

Perceptions about the educational system

The community members elaborated on educational needs from two different perspectives: experiences in school as LGBT community members and content in the educational curriculum. As seen from their personal experience as LGBT students, participants perceived the school environment as fear-inducing, diversity disrespectful and challenging. Almost all of LGBT participants experienced bullying in schools, especially the transgender participants, as seen from the statement from one lesbian participant, “...because we are two classes, started talking about me, and said: why are you there, you are neither woman or man, why are you there...” and another transman participants said “...children, they are monsters, they want to bully you...”. In terms of content taught in the educational institutions, community members emphasized the lack of LGBT-related content in the educational programs, especially the non-existent or outdated information on trans* matters in textbooks. As one transman participant assured, “...especially in schools, that’s just something you don’t talk about, hm...we talked about LGBT people, but just the L and the G, parts of the word...but B wasn’t discussed and T was like a far concept...”, and another bisexual woman participant was convinced, “I believe that if someone just sits with people and explains to them what does it mean to be part of this community, how it doesn’t

corrupt you in some way, and then...a lot of people will be more understanding and tolerant". It can be recognized from participants' perspectives, that the spectrum of unmet community needs in the field of education is widespread and diverse.

Community perceptions about NGOs services

Generally, community members expressed positive or neutral attitudes towards NGOs activities and services. As seen from LGBT community participants, they recognize the importance of NGOs as a way to meet their needs, such as legal protection and psychosocial support, while specific needs remain to be unmet. As one transman participant felt, "...they also provide services, they provide legal services, and support and information, which is very important...I think they are doing the best they can". However, some community members questioned the scope of the NGOs social impact, community outreach and approaches used by the NGOs. They perceived that LGBT activism is done in closed circles and that the NGOs activities are more focused on "details than big issues". As one bisexual woman participant noted, "...they need to focus more on...making other people see that LGBTI community is not scary, like work more into...join LGBT people and straight people...", and another gay man participant added, "I think people should be encouraged more to join LGBT activities, come to Pride, and so on, come out, cause...I feel like people on Pride are more and more every year, so I guess more people are being open about themselves. And I like to see this happen more and more". It can be seen that the NGOs are meeting the major needs of LGBT community members, however their viewpoints about LGBT activism differs from NGO staff members' perceptions.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

LGBT community members and LGBT-NGOs in Sofia reported an enormous amount of needs in terms of laws, health, media, education, community organizing and societal acceptance. This report, as local needs assessment, attempted to explore the needs of the community and NGOs, as examined by participants themselves. Many issues arose in the field of exclusive laws, poor health and negative media representation, and inability to reach out to different community members. In order to address these needs, recommendations for NGOs, state authorities, donor organizations and LGBT community members are provided and organized by area of need.

LEGAL SERVICES AND NEEDS

Recommendation 1: Advocate for changes in the antidiscrimination law to ensure that gender and gender identity as specific grounds for discrimination (in the Protection Against Discrimination Act), are included. Community members and NGO staff mentioned the need for changes in the legislation that protects the rights of all community members. As the participants discussed widely that Bulgarian legislative framework does not recognize the difference in the definition of sex and gender, therefore clear distinction of these terms is needed in the official policy documents in Bulgaria. Achieving this goal is vital in order to increase the protection of transgender people, women, and other sexual and gender minorities and induce feelings of safety among the community.

Recommendation 2: Advance the policy protections on hate speech and hate crime to ensure that SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) as specific grounds for hate speech/crime, are included. Community members and NGO staff participants highlighted the presence of hate speech in the media and lack of legal measures to process cases of hate speech and hate crime based on SOGI. Also, community members mentioned that the lack of appropriate information on reporting these cases of hate speech creates barriers for them to feel safe and protected. In order to ensure adequate reporting and monitoring of these cases, clear acts and articles which explicitly include SOGI are necessary in the national laws in Bulgaria.

Recommendation 3: Improve the access to information on reporting cases of discrimination and violence based on SOGI. Another way to increase the accessibility of information about discrimination and violence is to deliver clear instructions on how to report the cases of human rights violations. Such instructions might include developing guidelines, online applications, or organizing workshops on these topics for community members.

Recommendation 4: Advocate for protection of the rights of transgender people to ensure that the legal gender recognition procedure is easily processed - including change of conditions, name, and gender marker. As transgender community members mentioned that legal gender recognition processes are demanding, unclear and long-lasting, appropriate regulations are necessary in order to ensure that transgender rights are recognized and fulfilled. Therefore, these regulations have to respond to the transgender citizens' needs and requests, and not on individuals' decisions.

HEALTH SERVICES AND NEEDS

Recommendation 5: Improve the psychosocial support services for LGBT people through off- and online activities of NGOs. As seen from the community members, there are many needs as related to the mental health of LGBT community in Bulgaria. Community members experienced unethical behaviors, inadequate treatments and discrimination from psychotherapists who are not trained on LGBT matters. Therefore, it is crucial for the NGOs to address these mental health needs through different actions, such as self-support groups, free psychotherapy and mobile-based technologies.

Recommendation 6: Increase efforts to ensure that mental health professionals are trained on LGBT matters. As shown from community members and some NGO staff participants, sexual orientation and gender identity matters are inappropriately represented in school and university textbooks. The majority of psychosocial support service providers are unaware or uneducated on approaches to work with LGBT help-seekers. Therefore, comprehensive training programs on LGBT are needed in order to ensure that the MH professionals provide ethical, adequate and LGBT-sensitive help.

Recommendation 7: Develop novel strategies to address the diverse health needs of transgender people - including ethical, safe and trans-friendly medical transition. As trans* participants focused their discussions on the non-existent or poor healthcare due to their specific health needs, it is fundamental to introduce trans-related health services. This might include training on trans*-related surgeries for doctors, changing legislation on hormone therapy prescription, and adequate monitoring the provision of services.

Recommendation 8: Create a team of sexual health and mental health professionals specialized for providing LGBT-friendly healthcare. As LGBT community members, especially trans* members, expressed general avoidance or negative past experiences in accessing services, it is inevitable to form a network of LGBT-sensitive professionals who are going to meet their unique needs. The NGO sector, in partnership with doctors, therapists and psychologists can join the efforts to develop these teams.

Recommendation 9: Advance advocacy efforts to revise the educational content on SOGI representation in textbooks for humanistic professions - psychologists, doctors, social workers. As community members noted, sexual orientation and gender identity in certain books are still regarded as a disease, deviance, or mental health disorder. Therefore, the NGO sector, academia and educational professionals need to address this issue to ensure that all books reflect the correct evidence-based, up-to-date and scientific information on SOGI.

MEDIA REPRESENTATION REFORMS

Recommendation 10: Increase the efforts to engage outspoken activists for the rights of transgender and bisexual people in the public space. Community members and NGO staff participants noted that there is a lack of visibility of bisexual and transgender communities in the media. Therefore, as one of the ways to combat this is to motivate and engage self-identified bisexual and trans* spokespersons in order to ensure that their needs are equally and adequately represented.

Recommendation 11: Expand the network of celebrity figures who are out or support LGBT activities through big public events. The community

members emphasized that self-identified LGBT stars, such as famous singers or actors/actresses, who are out in public and speak in favor of the community, will greatly influence the public opinion. Therefore, they believed that if there are more celebrities who actively participate in LGBT-related events and openly speak about their identity, the media appearance might be improved.

Recommendation 12: Improve the collaboration between NGOs and media representatives by ensuring adequate informing on LGBT matters in the online space. NGO staff members mentioned that establishing and maintaining positive relations with the journalists can prevent the negative portrayal of LGBT by the media. Therefore, this goal can be achieved through organizing training programs about LGBT-reporting for media representatives and working on joint projects together.

Recommendation 13: Increase the LGBT-positive representation in the media by focusing on personal stories of LGBT people. Community members and NGO staff participants agreed that LGBT people are represented in a negative light. Therefore, in order to alter these negative attitudes towards LGBT in the media, real-life and positive stories of LGBT people who are out, are necessary.

Recommendation 14: Advance the efforts to ensure that NGO staff are educated on PR/campaigning and media. NGOs staff participants agreed that not all LGBT activists are journalists, or media professionals, and that not all of them are trained on the topics of PR, marketing and campaigning. Therefore, it is important that NGOs staff members who are working in the media teams have the required skills and knowledge to ensure professional communication about LGBT in the online space.

EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

Recommendation 15: Advocate for developing programs for prevention of SOGI-based bullying in schools. Community members mentioned that the majority of them experienced some form of bullying based on their SOGI in their school years - it was evident that aggression between school-aged students is widely normalized in Bulgaria. Therefore, in order to address this, it is essential to incorporate anti-bullying programs, workshops or trainings in the compulsory

school curriculum. This approach might help to ensure that students are taught to respect and value diversity and avoid violent behaviors towards students who identify as LGBT.

Recommendation 16: Introduce compulsory CSE (Comprehensive Sexuality Education) in the school curriculum. Community members and NGO staff participants agreed that the presence of fear, stereotypes and ignorance towards LGBT people is a structural issue due to lack of education and informing about sexuality and SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights). Therefore, the government officials in the field of education in Bulgaria must recognize the importance and power of CSE as scientifically proven mechanism to prevent the negative outcomes which arise from lack of adequate information, and stimulate positive health behaviour among youth.

Recommendation 17: Deliver comprehensive training courses on SOGI matters for key state officials, LGBT community members and parents of LGBT. Community members and NGO staff members noted that the majority of teachers, social workers, psychologists and doctors are not LGBT-sensitive and, due to this, they engage in discriminatory behaviours towards LGBT people. Also, NGOs participants discussed the presence of misbeliefs within the LGBT community due to lack of information about the specifics of different sexual and gender identities. Therefore, in order to combat this, educational programs on SOGI on all structural levels are needed - to ensure that the state officials serve their LGBT citizens in a professional manner.

NGO SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 18: Introduce new approaches for building partnerships between NGOs and government authorities to ensure political support for LGBT rights and NGOs. NGO staff participants elaborated on the absent or hostile relationships with the state decision-makers, and this creates barriers for them to organize activities and provide services. Therefore, higher political will is needed to ensure that the government recognizes and undertakes policy and legal measures to fulfil the rights of all Bulgarian citizens, including the rights of LGBT people.

Recommendation 19: Improve the access to information about participation in LGBT activism to ensure that LGBT community members are the agents of social change. Community members reported that it is challenging for them to find clear information on how to be part of NGOs activism. Therefore, NGOs should advance their efforts for transparency and information sharing for the community members to ensure that all LGBT communities participate in the NGOs activism, activities and programs development. This can be achieved through exploring needs-based and bottom-up approach in the process of fundraising and grant proposals' writing. This strategy would increase the diversity of opinions on the activities and policies and might contribute to capacity building of the LGBT community members involved.

Recommendation 20: Create fundraising strategies which ensure that diverse donor community is reached and NGOs needs are aligned with donors' priorities. In general, NGOs staff participants discussed that attracting donor organizations and communicating their needs with donor community is not direct and collaborative. Therefore, different methods for reaching out to donors are needed in order to count on more than one funding source - international foundations, private sector and state institutions. Also, change of communication between NGOs and donors is necessary in order to ensure that donors' requirements match the NGOs and LGBT community members' needs.

LIMITATIONS

Like all studies, this needs assessment has limitations. These limitations are explained separately below.

Hard-to-reach population - Taking into consideration the fact that the research team members are foreigners who live in Bulgaria for less than one year, it was demanding to recruit LGBT participants due to privacy and confidentiality concerns. Even though we are extremely grateful to the LGBTI NGOs who supported us in this process, we could not reach out to LGBT non-activists. Further efforts are needed in order to ensure that there is continuous collaboration between NGOs and EVS volunteers from the very beginning of the data collection phase and that there is sufficient amount of time planned in advance.

Sample size and geographic representation - Due to the small sample size of the LGBT community participants, we were not able to receive information from more LGBT people and ensure representation of different sexual and gender identities. Due to our limited contact with LGBT community members, it was challenging to recruit more transgender and intersex participants. Also, due to the time and resources constraints, we did not manage to expand our sample to LGBT community members living in different geographic regions in Bulgaria. Further efforts are needed to ensure participation of diverse minorities, and participants living outside the capital.

Language and cultural barrier - As all of our interview/focus group discussions were conducted in English, it is expected that some Bulgarian-speaking participants did not feel fully comfortable to express and elaborate on their ideas in a foreign language - especially on the sensitive research topic. Also, as there are LGBT community members who do not speak English, their participation had to be excluded. Further efforts are needed in order to ensure participation of Bulgarian-only speaking LGBT community participants and facilitation of discussions in Bulgarian.

EVS-related barriers - Due to the fact that our EVS projects have limited duration (6-12 months) and this needs assessment is a side-project within our main EVS project, it was challenging to devote our attention exclusively on this

research. Further efforts are necessary in order to ensure that we start our personal projects within EVS upon the beginning of our EVS project. This would help to ensure that all research stages are adequately developed and followed.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

As shown above, the LGBT community members and NGOs are working to improve the conditions they live in, and they have specific needs and challenges. Also, there are different approaches and strategies that might help to meet the communities' needs and respond to NGOs concerns. Efforts from diverse actors - NGOs, community members, government and donor organizations, should be made to ensure that the needs of the LGBT community are taken into consideration during policies, programs and projects development. The recommendations provided above can assist in this process.

As next steps in this local needs assessment, it may be beneficial to expand this research on a national level by including LGBT community members living in different cities and towns in Bulgaria, as well as government officials working in key life areas. It might also be useful to communicate the research findings by participation at bigger youth-focused events, government discussions and human rights conferences globally. This would be helpful to address the diversity the needs, improve the collaboration between the actors operating in this field and enhance the work in the civil society sector.

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Carmen J. Rivas is a social worker from Málaga, Spain. After finishing her university degree and being awarded for her research on "Management analysis in lucrative social organizations" by the University of Malaga, she decided to continue working on research and projects, but this time she felt that Bulgarian society had another type of needs and decided to start this path to fight for the rights of the LGBTI community. You can reach Carmen at carmenjoserivas@gmail.com.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

1. **The International Institute for Youth Development PETRI - Sofia** is established in:

- UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund
- The National Centre for Public Health and Analyses (NCPHA), Bulgaria
- Youth Peer Education Network (Y-PEER)

PETRI - Sofia is a knowledge hub and regional resource center at the National Center of Public Health and Analyses (NCPHA), Bulgaria that supports youth empowerment in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender equality and peacebuilding in the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia and beyond. More information about PETRI - Sofia can be found at: <https://petri-sofia.org/en/homepage/>

2. **SMOKINYA FOUNDATION** - Smokinya Foundation contributes in creating a world that works for everyone. They act out of love, care and cooperation.

Smokinya Foundation serves as a learning platform for individuals who are ready to commit to their own learning and development needs. We create opportunities and provide space for people to learn, contribute and grow by participation, volunteering and project leadership.

More information about Smokinya Foundation can be found at: <http://smokinya.com/>