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**ON THE MARGINES OF THE MACEDONIAN
SOCIETY
- PROBLEMS OF THE LGBTI COMMUNITY -**

Abstract

The paper deals with the status of the LGBTI community in Macedonia as one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. It is based on the findings of few researches which are conducted in the country on this topic. It mainly shows that in this country, there are not even the basic preconditions for normal life and functioning of the LGBTI population. The analysis begins with the context, the attitudes of the citizens towards homosexuality and the legal background which impact the status of the LGBTI. It is followed by a presentation of the results of a qualitative research conducted among the LGBT people, who share their experiences and problems in the society.

Key words: LGBTI community, Prejudices, Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Macedonia is facing a deep political crisis and is burdened with numerous political and economic problems, which leaves many other serious issues on the margins of interest. One of them is the position of LGBTI people, as one of the most vulnerable groups in Macedonian society. There are two reasons for which they have been chosen as a topic for this paper. The first regards enormous prejudices towards this population, and the other derives from the fact that there is practically no legal protection against discrimination for the LGBTI people.

Awareness of the general population on this matter is poor, so (with an exception of a minor segment of the NGOs) this category is left to itself when it comes to solving their complicated problems. This especially regards less visible segments of LGBT such as lesbians, transgendered people and LGBT people who belong to the ethnic minorities.

The paper will mainly be based on a research of this problem within the project “Ethnically and Gender Inclusive Grass-Root LGBTI Movements in Macedonia” conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities – Skopje, but also on some other similar researches.

The purpose is to turn the attention among the analysts who work on Macedonian affairs, on the neglected questions of homophobia, hate speech and physical attacks on LGBTI people. All those questions have undoubtedly political dimension and reflect the global atmosphere in the Macedonian society.

THE CONTEXT

Homosexuality in general is researched very little in Macedonia, although this population is not different in numbers than in many other countries.

If a short resume is made, based on researches, describing how Macedonians see homosexuals, it would be the following:

- They have a disturbed mental health
- They are related to sexually transmitted diseases
- They are promiscuous
- They are pedophiles¹

The common word for such perceptions of the general population is obviously **uninformed**.

According to a research conducted on the marginalized groups in Macedonia², almost half of the population feels that sexual orientation is a "private issue and

should not be discussed in public". Yet, around two thirds believe that homosexuals are discriminated in Macedonian society, which implies a conclusion that for part of the population, even this discrimination is a private issue.

Although conducted some 7-8 years ago, such data explain the context in which prejudices towards homosexuals exist. To be more specific, it is the context in which 90% would not accept a homosexual member of their family; 77% think that homosexuals should not work with children; 48% think that homosexuality is a disease and one third of the population consider homosexuality - a crime. It is also a context in which 62% of the citizens find homosexual neighbors unacceptable; 42% would not associate with them at work and even 94% would not support a member of their family who is homosexual.

Unfortunately, the atmosphere has not improved in the last years. On the contrary, open physical attacks on LGBTI NGOs and activists as well as public hate speech began to happen more recently.

These data greatly reflect the legal context in Macedonia with regards to the rights of the LGBTI population.

Before the political transformation of Macedonia (during the socialist period), homosexuality was treated as a criminal offence and was included in the Criminal Code. After the independence, it was erased and defined as a human right for sexual orientation. However, it happened in 1996, 12 years after the European Parliament has decriminalized homosexuality.

Macedonia has signed the Universal Declaration for Human Rights but it is far from being implemented in practice.

Since 2010, there has been a Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination,³ but LGBTI population is not mentioned in it. It provoked smaller protests and debates, but the arguments of the Government were that equal rights are guaranteed to everybody in the Constitution, so it is not necessary to name them specifically.

"Sexual orientation" is also not mentioned in the "National Strategy for Equality and Anti-Discrimination (2012-2015). Equality, including sexual orientation, is guaranteed only in: the Law on Protection of Patients Rights,⁴ Law on Public Health,⁵ Law on Higher Education,⁶ and in the Ethical Code of the Law on Civil Servants.⁷

Such a legal and official discrimination has been many times pointed in the reports of the European Commission progress reports for Macedonia. (For example, the Report for 2011 openly points that Macedonian LGBTI community is subjected to discrimination).⁸

Years later, such evaluation remains. According to *ILGA- Europe* (European organization dealing with the rights of LGBTI population), in 2013 Macedonia

was on the 43-th place among 49 countries in regards to: anti-discrimination laws, protection from hate crime, freedom of expression etc.⁹

The Macedonian Government in the last 10 years did not show concern for the discrimination based on sexual orientation. On the contrary, it constantly introduces campaigns promoting heterosexual families; its supporters practice prejudicial or hate speech (and are never sanctioned); allows contents in the educational system which describe homosexuality as a disease etc. Even in the political rhetoric, especially during electoral campaigns, the sexual orientation is being abused for political purposes.

Li such a context, it is not surprising that the only LGBTI Center for Support in the country is a target of frequent attacks and threats against the LGBTI activists. So far investigation of those crimes has not been finalized. Gay Parades are impossible to organize, and their substitutes (“Pride Week” festivals of films and debates related to LGBTI rights) were faced with negative comments and threats by pro-governmental NGOs and media.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

One of the few in-depth studies conducted on LGBTI rights in Macedonia is “Ethnically and Gender Inclusive Grass-Root LGBTI Movements in Macedonia”, conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities – Skopje. Based on previous findings the starting points were: the invisibility of LGBTI people is a result of the their own self-censorship; there is a great fear of public exposure in a traditional society such as Macedonia; there is a perception that the NGOs are generally corrupted and abusing the problems of the concerned groups and the belief that one’s sexuality is a private matter and not a political or public issue.

The qualitative and quantitative research included 100 LGBTI people, representative in regards to gender; place of living; ethnic background and social status. Their age was 18-45 years.¹⁰

The qualitative methods included oral histories and focus groups with: lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people and gays from ethnic minorities.

Complementary, a poll was conducted on a representative sample from the LGBTI movement, investigating their problems and priorities.

Most interesting data was gathered with a method of oral histories which is adequate for investigating personal and intimate experiences of sensitive populations. The respondents included lesbians, transgendered people and gays who belong to ethnic minorities. Their responses were quite open and gave a clear picture about the challenges they face and the everyday problems in the society.

The lesbian participants in the oral histories share an impression that they are not particularly discriminated in the Macedonian society. They have a stabile social circle of friends who support them, even parents who understand their position and help their LGBTI activism. Some of them did not openly share their intimate issues because it "makes them feel uncomfortable. They claim they are discriminated, mainly because they are women in a patriarchal society and stress the necessity for a loud fight for their rights. According to the girls, the most important condition is expressing openly their sexual orientation, which especially refers to the ones who do not have a problem to accept themselves for what they are. This is especially important for the LGBTI people who live in more conservative environments, especially in the rural areas. One of the main problems for the lesbians was the mentioned "hidden tolerance" towards them, which results in a certain social invisibility. All of them feel that they are less visible as a community compared to gay men who are more present as objects of public interest, but also exposed to more reactions and public anger.

This group pointed at few priorities for the LGBTI community. The first one regards the legal framework and before all - creating a strategy for anti-discrimination. Next is building tolerance in the approach of the media (avoiding sensationalism, labels, stereotyping and hate speech), often present in the pro-governmental media. The third level regards the LGBTI community itself; their organization and integration in formal and informal centers for support, clubs, shelter centers etc.

Such priorities are shared by gay individuals from the ethnic minorities. However, their oral histories revealed more serious problems. They gave examples of extreme violence and intolerance. Some of them have been victims of verbal insults and physical attacks, some of them fear for their life. They mentioned particularly the threats from their ethnic community or "their people" as they call it, who perceive them as "shame and disappointment" for their ethnic group.

The transgendered people, according to the oral history, perceive themselves as the most disadvantaged group in the society. They face most prejudices, even within their close social circle, by people who take a long time to accept them or fail to accept them at all. Additionally, they are objects of prejudice in the wider surrounding.

The transgendered people in Macedonia are often exposed to ridicule, due to the misconception of their real condition. As a result, they are experiencing serious psychological problems, mental suffering, suicide attempts. Complementary, they face discrimination by the state institutions. (they cannot change their ID number and social security card, since the Macedonian health system does not support their operations and changes).

According to the transgender people, their biggest problem originates from the mentality of the Macedonians who cannot empathize and accept “something that can’t be understood”.

Transgendered people’s priority is changing the legal framework which at this moment does not regulate their status and prevents them to satisfy their basic needs.

Within this project, the focus group with transgendered people (which would have given a bigger insight into their specific problems) had to be cancelled on their request, due to their own discomfort when speaking in front of others.

Differently than the previous group, three successful focus groups were held - one with gays from ethnic minorities and 2 with lesbians and female bisexuals.

The key words in the focus group with gays from ethnic minorities were: fear and mistrust. Thus, they mainly talked about the problems of the “others” rather than their own. All of those participants spoke of the “hypocrisy of the Macedonian society”. The biggest discrimination they face is within their own ethnic group. As they said: “members of other ethnic groups don’t feel compassion, because they are not “one of them””.

The results showed that Albanians are object of the biggest discrimination, compared to the others, according to their perception. They cannot expect any support from their family because they mainly live in traditional, highly religious environment and beliefs that “everyone should have ‘normal’ (heterosexual) family of their own”. On the other side, in this case, there appears a visible ethnic component as well. Albanian gays see the Macedonian gays as “elitists” or people “who act only in urban places and they don’t include gay people from other ethnicities”. Albanian gays think they have the least support, and point that this should be a priority of the NGOs which deal with LGBTI rights, as well as an organized visibility and common acting. As they pointed, in Macedonia “there is no LGBTI community, only LGBTI people” and “the personal relations between LGBTI people should stop impacting their common cause and socially useful purpose”.

The focus groups with lesbians revealed many examples of psychological and physical violence against them, which are not visible for the wider population. Those examples are frequent in the smaller towns. To quote some of the statements - the worst problem is the “unserious, but favored treatment. Lesbians are treated like high school experiment, party behavior, transit phase and they are experiencing vulgar comments related to the image created by porn movies”. Almost every participant pointed that, at some point, she faces comment like: “Probably there is a real man who can change you”. The most common perceptions of this population are that they are “more acceptable because they are less visible as a community”. On the other hand, bisexual women are in a more complicated situation due to their “incomplete identity”.

Parallel to the focus groups a nationwide survey was conducted with over 140 LGBTI representatives, which resulted with indicative findings.

On the question “do they feel discriminated?”, sadly, even 93% of the respondents gave a positive answer.

Who discriminates this population the most? According to the results, one quarter of the respondents (25%) answered that the discrimination comes from their friends and acquaintances. 20% felt discriminated from their families, while 18% pointed at their neighbors. It is interesting that 13% appear to be discriminated from the LGBTI people themselves. A smaller percent (10%) declared that they were discriminated by their colleagues, while, only 2% mentioned the authorities. Only 5% said they never felt disadvantaged because of their sexual orientation.

At the same time, regarding their supporters outside the LGBTI community, almost half of the respondents pointed at their friends, additionally to 27% who mentioned – relatives. There are 22% who chose NGOs. The state institutions authorized to deal with this kind of discrimination were barely (or not) mentioned at all.

It is interesting to see how LGBTI people they see their perspectives. On the question: “How could the treatment of LGBTI people improve?, the most frequent answer (32%) relate to reforms in the educational system (withdrawing all textbooks that stimulate homophobia or treat homosexuality inappropriately; early education for respecting of human rights and freedoms ; introducing sexual education in schools...) Almost the same percentage (31%) would work on raising the public awareness. A smaller number (21%) expect improvement with reforms in the legal system. Only 10% expect the improvement in Macedonian economy to reflect on the status of the LGBTI population, while 9% think that all of the previous are equally important.

Obviously, one of the biggest problems of the LGBTI population is its visibility in the public. The results of this research show that they are aware of it. Thus, for one third of the respondents respectively, most important is: coming out in front of the wider public and opening more centers for promotion of LGBTI rights and freedoms. A smaller number (13%) think that opening to the family is most important, while the rest find everything mentioned above as equally important.

However, almost half the population do not know how the LGBTI community can strengthen, using its own potentials. Nearly a third of the respondents think that LGBTI members should be more organized, while 16% ties it to the increased public visibility. Although it is very important, only 2% mentioned the presence in the media and lobbying in the state institutions.

The last question to be presented in this paper concerns the perception of the discrimination of the different groups within the LGBTI community. Here, half of the respondents chose the transgendered people as most discriminated, which truly

resembles the reality. Gay men are chosen by 19% of respondents, 4% see bisexuals and intersexuals as most discriminated group.

Summarized, the results of the survey show that the awareness of the LGBTI people and ideas how to strengthen the capacities of their community – are very low. Their expectations and requirements are small and mainly relate to the legal changes. LGBTI people avoid the wider public, although they speak of opening to it as a big priority.

CONCLUSION

Almost 30 years ago, a Croatian author¹¹ (Koshichek 1986) said that we can be a society which accepts the individual as a highest value, only after we have acknowledged homosexuality, because we have no right to be blind for any human characteristic. From this standpoint, Macedonia is far from being such society.

Prejudices and stereotypes towards any group or member of a society contribute to social dysfunction. In this case, a widely spread homophobia as it is in Macedonia, has great influence over this population and over the society as a whole. A constant fear of the LGBTI people to face prejudices in the surrounding, even the closest one, fear of aggressiveness and violence, leading a double life, all produce frustrations which have deep social, political and economic implications. They affect the society as a whole.

The research data which was presented has shown only part of the numerous problems which the LGBT community is facing in Macedonia. Even a part however, is enough to understand that the policies of the state institutions have not provided even the basic conditions for a normal life and functioning of the LGBTI people.

The legislation related to LGBTI rights, is far from the ones in democratic countries, and so far, there has been no will to change it. It is a source of numerous obstacles in the everyday life of this population.

The educational system recognizes only heterosexual relations and marriages. The textbooks stimulate homophobia, while the teachers are not trained at all to deal with it (or to deal with any issue that concerns sexual orientation).

Some of the pro governmental media show no tolerance towards homosexuals or transgendered people. On the contrary, they are often a real source of homophobia.

Violence towards LGBT population, or hate speech is not sanctioned; sometimes it is not even investigated.

In such a context, it is logical and expected that the LGBTI community itself and their supporters will show lack of activism, proper internal management, initiative and mobilization.

All those elements cannot result in any awareness raising among the Macedonian citizens, nor open a debate on LGBTI rights.

Obviously, the Macedonian citizens would feel more comfortable if the issue of sexual orientation remains locked in the so called “private sphere”, without understanding that there is nothing “private” about obstructing a basic human right to find its proper place in the society.

ENDNOTES

¹ Lechevska Kalina, “Homophobia in Republic of Macedonia” (Heraklea, Bitola, 2008).

² “How Inclusive is the Macedonian Society”, Open Society Macedonia, 2009. The research included a poll on 1200 respondents and 8 focus groups.

³ Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (The Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia, n.50/2010).

⁴ Law on Protection of Patient’s Rights (The Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia, No.82 8 July 2008), Article 5 “Patient has right on his rights, written in this Law, without discrimination based on gender, race, skin color, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national or social origin, national minority, material status, birth origin, sexual orientation or any other status.”

⁵ Law on Public Health (The Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia, No.22, 15 February 2010) in Institute for Public Health’s activities, Article 16, “The Institute and the Centers govern their activities from Articles 10 and 11, based on principles of: 1) clearly defined goal of public health; 2) procedures based on modern scientific principles and evidence; 3) well-targeted interventions involving the optimal number of persons in accordance with public health standards; 4) taking the least restrictive interventions of the rights and interests of individuals in the public health; 5) undertaking interventions that do not discriminate individuals on the basis of race, sex or different national and social origin or property status, religious belief, gender, sexual orientation or status of a person with special needs and 6) respecting the dignity of every individual during interventions.”

⁶ Law on Higher Education (The Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia, No. 35, 14 March 2008), Article 108, “University determines the procedure for selection of candidates regardless of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, birth, social status, disability, sexual orientation or age.”

⁷ Law on Civil Servants (The Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia, No.133 of 30 September 2011), Article 9, “Public Servant equally treats natural and legal persons without discriminating natural persons based on age, gender, ethnic or social origin, language or race, political opinions, marriage or family status, invalidity, sexual orientation or any other kind of base, and legal persons under their type, scope, place of registration and state of origin.”

⁸ “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2011 Progress Report” available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/mk_rapport_2011_en.pdf, accessed on 20.07.2013.

⁹ “FYR Macedonia score sheet based on Rainbow Europe Map 2013”, available at http://www.ilga-europe.org/home/publications/reports_and_other_materials/rainbow_europe/score_sheet/fyr_macedonia, accessed on 20.07.2013.

¹⁰ The participation of minors in this research was incompatible with project's purposes, because respondents talked about vision and activism strategies, which means certain adult and other competences. LGBTI activists over 45 years weren't even available for the research.

¹¹ Koschichek, M. "U okviru vlastitog spola", Mladost Zagreb, 1986