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LBQ NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

20

24

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

02

PURPOSE OF THE
ASSESSMENT

03

KEY FINDINGS

04

RECOMMENDATIONS

09

HEALTHCARE NEEDS

05

LIMITATIONS

06

METHODOLOGY

07

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

08

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

10

RECOMMENDATIONS

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

LGBT+ rights in Kosovo have seen slow and unequal progress, with significant inequality remaining, particularly for lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women in Kosovo. In a country that remains largely conservative, LGBT+ persons continue to face widespread social stigma, discrimination and violence. The Government Action Plan for the rights of LGBTI persons in the Republic of Kosovo for 2024-2026, aimed at addressing these inequalities, is a critical step forward, but its implementation raises concerns. Despite contributions from two key LGBT+ organisations, the Action Plan falls fails to adequately address the specific challenges disproportionately affecting LBQ women, such as healthcare access, economic marginalization, and social exclusion. LGBT+ and human rights organisations have also expressed concerns regarding the budget and resources allocated for Action Plan's implementation, questioning whether it will have the necessary impact.

Kosovo remains a predominantly conservative society, heavily influenced by traditional gender roles, patriarchal norms and religious values. Homophobia and transphobia are widespread, especially in small towns and rural areas, where LGBT+ persons often face stronger pressure to conform to imposed societal norms, forcing many to hide their identities. Despite strong anti-discrimination laws, there is a significant gap between the legislation and its practical implementation. The existing cultural and societal norms create significant barriers for LBQ women to live openly and safely, with many choosing to hide their identities to avoid stigma, discrimination and violence.

In recent years, due to Kosovo requirements to align its legal framework with the EU and international human rights standards there has been some progress in terms of legal frameworks supporting human rights including the LGBT+ community. However, there is no political will to fully embrace LGBT+ rights and politicians often avoid openly supporting LGBT+ issues due to the fear of backlash from conservative voters and social groups. As a result, the rights of LGBT+ persons are often sidelined in national policy discussions, with more attention being placed on the hateful rhetoric directed at the LGBT+ community rather than advancing their rights and protections. The increased prevalence of the hate speech in last several years by the MPs and political party members has shifted focus from meaningful policy reform and increased negative public attitudes toward LGBT+ community.

PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT

The main purpose of this assessment is to address existing knowledge gaps, enhance understanding, and identify unique needs of lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Kosovo. Its findings aim to inform and shape effective strategies and interventions aimed at improving the situation and position of LBQ women in the country.

Although this assessment is a small-scale study with a limited scope, it provides valuable insights into the challenges and needs faced by LBQ women. The findings will serve as a foundation for more comprehensive research in the future.

The assessment covered several key areas: personal and basic needs, community connection, social life, civic engagement, access to physical and mental health care, legal assistance, housing and experiences of physical and emotional safety. However, it does not address all relevant issues. Further research is necessary to explore how various disparities are interrelated, such as relationship between ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation and how identities are accepted within these intersections.

Additionally, this assessment does not include the specific needs and challenges of transgender women. This exclusion was based on the belief that a separate, dedicated study is required to fully address the distinct experiences and concerns of transgender women, ensuring that their unique needs are properly understood and addressed.

KEY FINDINGS

LBQ women make a significant part of the LGBT+ community in Kosovo, yet their lives, needs and issues remain largely invisible, both within the society and within the LGBT+ community itself. To date, no research or assessment has been conducted to understand the unique challenges that LBQ women face in Kosovo. This assessment highlights the lack of research and policy focus on LBQ women who experience social, legal and political marginalization, including concerns regarding personal safety. LBQ women often experience multiple layers of discrimination, not only based on their sexual orientation but also their gender, that result in unique issues that are insufficiently addressed by both women's rights and LGBT+ organisations.

LBQ women are often marginalised within the broader LGBT+ movement, where the needs of gay men and transgender persons tend to dominate the agenda. As a result, many LBQ women report feeling excluded from LGBT+ spaces and organisations, limiting their access to resources, safe spaces and advocacy. This exclusion, combined with broader societal stigma and pressures, forces many LBQ women to remain invisible and harder to reach, further complicating efforts to address their needs and rights.

The lack of visibility remains a critical issue for LBQ women in Kosovo. Despite some progress in raising awareness through some activities of the LGBT+ and Queer organisations in Kosovo, including the Prishtina Pride Week, LBQ women remain largely absent from public discourse, media representation and political debates. The invisibility of LBQ women in the public sphere maintains harmful stereotypes and contributes to lack of understanding of their experiences, needs and challenges and reinforces societal indifferences to their struggles.

There is a lack of inclusivity in organizational programs, initiatives, partnerships and safe spaces of the needs and challenges faced by the women living in small towns, rural areas and specifically ethnic minority backgrounds. Most work within LGBT+ and queer organisations and spaces focus on the white, Albanian lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Prishtina.

Women's rights organisations, crucial for advancing gender equality, tend to neglect the specific challenges faced by the LBQ women. Their programs and advocacy focuses on the general women's issues, such as economic empowerment, discrimination or gender-based violence, without addressing the intersecting forms of discrimination that LBQ women face due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. This exclusion prevents LBQ women from benefiting fully from initiatives focused to empower women in Kosovo. Moreover, this exclusion limits potential for collaboration initiatives and solidarity between women's rights and LGBT+ and Queer organisations, to create more inclusive and effective strategies for addressing challenges of the LBQ women in Kosovo.

In summary, the situation for LBQ women in Kosovo remains concerning with significant challenges including social stigma, barriers to healthcare, limited visibility, and weak legal protections. The Government Action Plan for 2024-2026 represents a step forward, but without adequate funding, targeted measures and proper implementation, it risks failing to achieve meaningful progress for LBQ women. There is a pressing need for greater political will, more comprehensive research and stronger collaborations between LGBT+, Human rights and women's rights organisations to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for LBQ women in Kosovo, and thus contributing to greater gender equality in the country.

The below findings reveal multifaceted challenges faced by LBQ women, highlighting disconnection, marginalization, and the urgent need for tailored support within the LGBT+ community, community organizations, healthcare, and perceptions of safety.

Community Connection and Marginalization

Many LBQ women feel isolated from the broader LGBT+ community despite their involvement in organizations and events. This disconnect comes from a perceived lack of safe spaces dedicated to their specific needs, leading to feelings of invisibility. Bisexual and queer women often report exclusion, particularly from lesbian women, which worsens their sense of isolation. Furthermore, the absence of dedicated spaces for LBQ women to connect and share experiences further amplifies their feelings of marginalization.

The generational divide within the LBQ community also shapes perceptions of belonging. Younger individuals tend to identify more openly as queer and embrace diverse gender expressions, contrasting with older generations who may feel more constrained. Additionally, while increased visibility of the LGBT+ community in Kosovo has encouraged some to accept their identities, it has not fully addressed the unique needs of LBQ women, leaving them feeling underrepresented.

Organizational Limitations

Community organizations play a crucial role in advocating for LBQ rights, yet their efforts often lack sustained focus on this group. Support for LBQ women is typically sporadic, and organizational visibility frequently hinges on the leadership's identity, resulting in more attention when led by LBQ women themselves. Moreover, initiatives primarily focus on white, Albanian LBQ women in urban areas, neglecting those from rural regions and minority backgrounds.

Funding challenges further complicate the situation, as donors often prioritize broader LGBT+ issues, making it difficult to secure dedicated resources for LBQ women. The lack of collaboration between LGBT+ and women's organizations also hinders the development of tailored support. Overall, the need for sustained initiatives and dedicated spaces remains pressing to combat feelings of exclusion.

Healthcare Needs

Healthcare for LBQ women is fraught with challenges stemming from a lack of research on their specific health needs, leading to inadequate care and recognition. Barriers such as poor-quality public healthcare, limited access to private insurance, and societal stigma contribute to reluctance in seeking care. Many LBQ women avoid healthcare settings due to heteronormative assumptions, which further compromises their health outcomes.

Additionally, there is a significant knowledge gap among healthcare providers regarding LBQ-specific concerns, leading to calls for a more inclusive approach. The demand for LBQ-friendly healthcare providers is evident, with many advocating for visible inclusivity in healthcare settings, such as the presence of rainbow flags. Access to mental health care is another critical need, with a strong desire for LGBT+ sensitive practitioners.

Perception of Safety

While many LBQ women report feeling generally safe, their identities as women often compromise their sense of security, especially in predominantly heterosexual and male-dominated spaces. This discomfort leads to avoidance of such environments, resulting in feelings of vulnerability and irritation.

Although workplace discrimination is not widely reported, negative comments and jokes about LBQ women persist, indicating a pressing need for greater inclusivity in professional settings. In terms of housing, experiences remain underexplored and warrant further investigation. While physical assaults based on sexual orientation are not reported, mistrust of law enforcement and the judicial system remains high, with many preferring to report incidents to LGBT+ organizations, although with skepticism regarding their effectiveness.

In summary, the findings underscore the urgent need for more inclusive, sustained, and tailored initiatives to address the unique challenges faced by LBQ women in Kosovo. From fostering community connections to improving healthcare access and ensuring safe environments, a comprehensive approach is essential to enhance the well-being and visibility of LBQ women within the broader LGBT+ landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The below recommendations aim to create a more inclusive environment for LBQ women across community, organizational, healthcare, and safety contexts in Kosovo. By focusing on the unique challenges and needs of LBQ women, these recommendations emphasize the importance of dedicated support, visibility, and collaboration.

Creation of safe spaces

Establishing dedicated safe spaces for LBQ women is a foundational recommendation. These spaces would facilitate connection, support, and open expression. Initiatives should include regular events and spaces tailored to the specific needs of LBQ women, fostering community and connection while addressing feelings of isolation.

Dedicated organizations and initiatives

The establishment of an organization or initiative solely focused on LBQ women is crucial. This would ensure sustained advocacy and targeted support, addressing the unique challenges they face. These organizations should work to increase visibility and representation within the broader LGBT+ community and society at large, providing tailored resources and services.

Enhanced focus on LBQ women within existing programs

Existing LGBT+ organizations must enhance their focus on LBQ women. This involves integrating LBQ-specific programming and ensuring inclusive practices that consider diverse identities, including those from ethnic minorities and rural areas. Collaboration with LBQ women in leadership roles can drive more relevant programming and advocacy efforts.

Bridging generational gaps

Developing initiatives that facilitate dialogue among different generations of LBQ women can help address differing perceptions of identity, community, and gender expression. This can promote understanding and inclusivity, ensuring that the needs of both younger and older LBQ women are recognized and addressed.

Increased inclusivity and visibility

Promoting inclusivity within the LGBT+ community is essential. Initiatives should aim to combat the underrepresentation of LBQ women, particularly bisexual and queer women, by recognizing and valuing all identities and gender expressions. This includes outreach and support specifically tailored for older LBQ women, who may face different challenges and may not identify with newer queer identities.

Collaboration and partnerships

Fostering collaboration among LGBT+ organizations, women's rights groups, and human rights organizations is vital to address the specific needs of LBQ women effectively. Partnerships should also extend to organizations focused on minority rights, ensuring that the unique challenges faced by LBQ women from different backgrounds are recognized and addressed.

Healthcare improvements

To create a more inclusive healthcare environment, targeted research on LBQ women's health needs should be initiated to identify gaps in care. Facilitating access to LBQ-friendly healthcare providers, particularly gynecologists, and advocating for policy changes will help address systemic barriers. Furthermore, increasing awareness and knowledge among healthcare providers about LBQ-specific health concerns is crucial.

Mental health support

Ongoing access to mental health services, especially through LGBT+ organizations, is essential for LBQ women. Support should come from practitioners knowledgeable about LGBT+ issues, and regular research should be conducted to identify emerging health needs and challenges.

Safe environment initiatives

Creating inclusive safe spaces through partnerships and collaborations with various organizations is important for LBQ women's well-being. Additionally, enhancing workplace inclusivity and raising awareness about LBQ issues can mitigate negative attitudes and foster a more accepting environment.

Addressing housing and legal concerns

Conducting research to understand the housing experiences of LBQ women, especially those from outside urban areas, is necessary to identify potential discrimination and privacy concerns. Strengthening collaborations with law enforcement and the judiciary is essential to ensure effective protection and support for LBQ individuals.

The combined recommendations emphasize the need for a holistic approach to address the unique challenges faced by LBQ women in Kosovo. By creating safe spaces, establishing dedicated organizations, enhancing visibility and inclusivity, and improving healthcare access, the overall aim is to foster a supportive environment that recognizes and values the diverse experiences of LBQ women. Continuous collaboration and advocacy efforts are necessary to ensure sustained progress and empowerment within the community.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this assessment are significant and must be acknowledged. First, the study was small-scale and limited in scope, which means that the findings may not fully reflect the broader population of LBQ women in Kosovo. The restricted sample size and geographic reach may have left certain voices or experiences, resulting in incomplete representation.

Additionally, while the assessment explored important areas such as personal needs, community connection, health care access, and safety, it did not address several crucial topics. For instance, the intersection of age, ethnicity, race and sexual orientation was not examined, limiting the understanding of how these factors influence experiences of discrimination or acceptance.

A significant limitation is the exclusion of transgender women. This decision was based on the basis that their needs are distinct enough to conduct a separate, focused assessment to ensure their specific experiences are properly addressed.

Researching the lesbian, bisexual and queer women's community in Kosovo presents considerable challenges. The community is underrepresented, and accessing participants is often difficult due to a lack of visibility and the sensitive nature of discussing sexual orientation within certain cultural contexts. Additionally, only a few services for LBQ women are available, with most being offered by general LGBT+ organizations. There is a noticeable gap in funding and resources specifically allocated to initiatives that focus on LBQ women, further complicating efforts to meet their needs and create tailored support systems.

Moreover, there is no systematic or coordinated approach to address the needs of LBQ women across key sectors such as health care, legal assistance, and social services. As a result, comprehensive data on key issues like access to resources, experiences of discrimination, and overall well-being are lacking. This absence of data hinders the development of evidence-based policies and programs that could meaningfully improve quality of life for LBQ women.

METHODOLOGY

The information for this needs assessment was gathered through a combination of desk research, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with lesbian, bisexual and queer women. This multifaceted approach allowed to capture a diverse range of perspectives and experiences within the LBQ community.

In addition to engaging directly with LBQ women, we also conducted in-depth interviews with representatives from the relevant LGBT+ and Queer organisations, as well as human rights and women's organizations currently operating in Kosovo. These discussions provided valuable insights into the systemic challenges faced by LBQ women, as well as the situation regarding the support services available to them.

This assessment focused on women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, and queer, using these terms to include a range of identities beyond binary definitions. It adopts an inclusive approach to include the experiences of those who identify as women and individuals who are gender nonbinary and genderqueer. This inclusive perspective aims to ensure that all voices within the LBQ community are acknowledged and considered in the findings of this assessment.

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Lesbian, bisexual and queer women were interviewed about their connection and involvement with the broader LGBT+ community. While the majority expressed that they identify as part of the community, many felt a significant lack of connection to it. This disconnect was attributed to several factors, most notably the perceived absence of safe and secure spaces specifically for LBQ women.

Despite this, many LBQ women maintain strong personal support networks comprised of LGBT+ friends, frequent queer bars and LGBT+ friendly bars and clubs, and attend events organized by LGBT+ and civil society organisations. However, even with these connections, many still feel detached from the larger LGBT+ community.

For example, although lesbian women often frequent queer bars and LGBT+ friendly spaces and events, and may attend Prishtina Pride Week activities, a significant number do not join the actual Pride March. Bisexual and queer women often report feeling marginalized within the LGBT+ community, frequently citing exclusion by women who identify as lesbian.

Most of the women interviewed had some connection to active LGBT+ organisations. However, the perception is that these organisations, while providing activities and events for LGBT+ community, in recent periods tend to focus more on the rights and needs of gay men and transgender individuals. As a result, there is a noticeable lack of attention, visibility and programming dedicated to the specific needs and concerns of LBQ women.

This gap in representation and resources contributes to the ongoing sense of disconnection that many LBQ women experience, despite their involvement in LGBT+ spaces and their identification with the community.

The interviews reveal a recurring perception among LBQ women that they are often unable to fully express their individuality within the broader LGBT+ community. A significant factor contributing to this is the absence of dedicated safe spaces for LBQ women – places where they can meet, engage in meaningful discussions, and form connections. Without these spaces, many LBQ women report feeling invisible within the very community they identify with.

Over the last three decades, the lesbian community has undergone various shifts, and there is now a noticeable generational divide in how individuals perceive the concept of community, as well as in the attitudes towards gender identity and expression. Younger generations, influenced by evolving social contexts tend to identify as queer women with diverse gender identities. They are generally more open about their sexual orientation and gender expression, and more likely to be out to siblings, friends, work or university colleagues. In contrast, many older women continue to identify more strongly as lesbian, reflecting both their lived experiences and the language of community during their formative years.

This generational difference is partly a result of increased visibility of the LGBT+ community over the past two decades, driven largely by the work of various LGBT+ and human rights organisations. These groups have played a key role in increasing visibility, fostering public awareness, and advocating for the rights of LGBT+ persons, which made it easier for younger generations to be open about their identities. However, the increased visibility has not fully addressed the specific needs of LBQ women, nor has adequately bridged the generational gap in how the community is experienced and understood.

Furthermore, while there has been some progress in understanding the challenges faced by lesbian women, the experiences of bisexual women remain largely under-researched and underrepresented. This lack of research contributed to bisexual women feeling particularly marginalized, both within the LGBT+ community and in society at large. Conducting research on the experiences and needs of bisexual women could be an important step toward addressing this gap and ensuring that all members of the LBQ community feel recognized and supported.

Overall, while many LBQ women maintain ties to LGBT+ spaces and organizations, they still face significant barriers in finding spaces where they feel fully seen, heard and understood. The lack of visibility, safe spaces and weak representation in the broader community preserves feelings of isolation, particularly for bisexual women and those from older generations. More focused effort is needed to ensure that the diversity of identities, experiences and needs within the LBQ community is acknowledged and valued.

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Currently, there are a number of LGBT+, human rights and women rights organizations focusing their program and work in supporting the advancement and protection of the LGBT+ rights in Kosovo. For this assessment, we conducted interviews with the representatives of the following expert organizations: Center for Equality and Liberty (CEL), Center for Social Group Development (CSGD), Hyneshat, Dylberizm, Bubble Foundation, Termokiss, Fondacioni 17, Kosovar Gender Studies Center (KGSC), QIKA and Youth Initiative for Human Rights Kosovo (YIHR KS).

While these organizations play a crucial role in advancing the LGBT+ rights in Kosovo, their work and focus is dedicated to empowering the LGBT+ community through advocacy on general LGBT+ issues, capacity building initiatives, and awareness raising. Although these efforts are crucial for the rights and acceptance of the LGBT+ community, there is a pressing need for more targeted support for specific groups within the LGBT+ community, such as LBQ women.

In general, most of the interviewed organizations treat the challenges and needs of LBQ women as cross-cutting issues, often viewing them as part of the broader concerns affecting the LGBT+ community as a whole. However, some organisations recognize the specific gender-related needs within the LBQT+ community and prioritize LBQ women in job openings, internships and other capacity building initiatives. This approach leads to a more informed and empowered LBQ community, paving a way for greater advocacy and representation in Kosovo.

Currently, CSGD and CEL are the main two LGBT+ organisations who address a variety of needs and challenges of the entire LGBT+ community. However, over the last four-five years, both organizations have shifted their focus more toward advocacy rather than direct community engagement, which has led to a loss of some connections with community. While their services are designed to support the broader LGBT+ community, LBQ women can access these services relatively easily. Both organisations provide a safe, inclusive and confidential environment where LBQ women can seek psychological support without fear of judgment and discrimination.

In addition to mental health services, CSGD and CEL offer legal aid, supporting LBQ women in cases of discrimination or violation of their rights. Furthermore, both organisations are actively engaged in joint advocacy efforts for the establishment of a dedicated shelter for the LGBT+ community. Once operational, this shelter will be an important resource for LBQ women, addressing their specific needs and providing a safe refuge.

CSGD has undertaken various activities focused on addressing the specific issues and needs of LBQ women, although these initiatives are often limited. CSGD hosts occasional discussions and events that focus on LBQ women's issues, providing a platform for dialogue within the community. They also organized two Queer women camps, which offer a safe space for LBQ women to connect, share experiences and engage in capacity building activities. Additionally, CSGD marks online important dates that raise awareness on LBQ women's challenges and visibility. In 2023, CSGD in collaboration with ERA, organized a conference on Lesbian, Trans, and Queer+ women rights and situations in Western Balkans and Turkey. The conference served as a critical platform for addressing regional challenges, promoting cooperation and advancing the rights and visibility of LBQ women.

Similarly, CEL has undertaken steps to address the needs of LBQ women through occasional discussion and events specifically focused on their issues. The "Girls night" is the event created solely for LBQ women, providing a space for connection and discussion. Additionally, CEL actively marks important awareness days, ensuring the visibility of LBQ women within the broader context of LGBT+ activism. CEL has also made efforts to prioritize women in its organizational structure, giving preference to female applicants in calls for staff and internships. Recently, CEL has enhanced its engagement with LBQ women by hiring lesbian and bisexual women staff members, and better equipped the organization to understand and address challenges faced by the LBQ women.

Dylberizm plays a role in raising awareness and publishing educational information about the rights of LBQ women in Kosovo, treating the topic more as a cross-cutting issue rather than a dedicated program or focus. By publishing a series of interviews with current and former openly LBQ women activists in Kosovo, it amplified voices, provided insight into their challenges and successes, and highlighted their role in building the LGBTQ+ movement and empowering the LBQ women in Kosovo. The feminist media platform QIKA provides information, space for discussion and reading and puts attention to the marginalized perspectives of girls and women in Kosovo.

Termokiss, a community led initiative, is committed to creating an inclusive, safe and respectful environment. Women have played a crucial role in its development since its founding, using it as a platform for LBQ women to engage with the community, organize initiatives and address issues relevant to them, promoting empowerment and visibility. While there is no specific program for LBQ women, Termokiss fosters a queer-friendly space by hosting events like drag shows and community gatherings. It upholds a strong commitment to safety, addressing sexual harassment with zero-tolerance policy and maintaining a blacklist for offenders. Their policy is applied across all queer friendly spaces and events.

Both the Bubble Foundation and the Foundation 17 actively support the broader LGBT+ community, prioritizing LBQ women in their programs. Their joint initiative "Fluorescent" aims to enhance visibility and inclusion of LGBT+ persons in Kosovo by fostering acceptance and understanding of diverse sexual orientations and identities. Through workshops and cultural events "Fluorescent" creates safe space for dialogue and community engagement while specifically addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups within the LGBTQI+ community, particularly LBQ women. This initiative empowers LBQ women and amplifies their voices within the broader LGBT+ movement

KGSC does not have specific program goals focused solely on LBQ women, but they are included as a cross cutting priority organization's strategy, with emphasis on their empowerment, solidarity and inclusion in civic spaces. Because many women's organizations overlook the specific needs of LBQ women, KGSC frequently acts as a bridge between LBQ women and the border feminist movement. KGSC addresses the challenges with the lack of access to shelters, and has made efforts to prioritize LBQ women in calls for staff and internships. Recently, KGSC signed a MoU with the Kosovo Law Institute to provide legal assistance accessible also to LBQ women. They actively display supportive symbols, such as the rainbow flag, which has helped connect to LBQ women. Additionally, KGSC advocates for the inclusion of LBQ women's issues in legislative processes, addressing issues like maternity leave, domestic violence and shelter access

YIHR KS, as a human rights organization does not have a primary focus on the LBQ women issues nor provides any specific services, but it includes them in all its programs and activities. For instance, in all organizational calls, they specifically prioritize marginalized groups, including LBQ women, ensuring that persons from diverse backgrounds are given opportunities to engage. With this inclusive approach the organization aims to create an environment where everyone feels valued and represented. YIHR has been a key player in promoting and protecting LGBT+ rights in Kosovo for the past decade. The organisation has actively participated in various significant legislative and advocacy processes aimed at advancing LGBT+ rights, contributing to the ongoing struggle for equality and inclusion.

According to several interviewees, the visibility of different groups within the LGBT+ community in Kosovo has often been influenced by the identity of the leaders of LGBT+ organizations. For instance, when the organization is led by transgender man, there tends to be greater visibility and focus on transgender issues. The leader's identity significantly shapes which groups receive more attention and resources. An example is the period from 2012 to 2015, when a lesbian woman led a key LGBT+ organization. During this time, there was a notable increase in the engagement, participation and visibility of LBQ women, because the organization, among its programs, included initiatives and activities specifically focused on empowering LBQ women, highlighting how leadership can directly impact the focus of advocacy and support efforts within the community.

However, it needs to be noted that almost all initiatives and activities within the LGBT+ and queer organisations primarily focus on the experiences of the white, Albanian lesbian, bisexual and queer women mainly living in the capital city of Prishtina. This results with failure to recognize and understand unique challenges faced by women living in small towns and rural areas, and women belonging to the minority groups, such as Serb, Bosniak, Turkish, Roma and other communities. Women with different ethnic backgrounds may face additional cultural barriers such as language differences, cultural stigmas and intersection of ethnic identity with sexual identity - which as a result can hinder their involvement and engagement with LGBT+ organisations and queer initiatives. These women may feel marginalized and invisible within the very organisations that are meant to protect their rights and provide a sense of safety.

Spaces specifically designated for the LGBT+ community in Kosovo are limited and have historically been dominated by certain groups, particularly by men. Drop-in centers that were established by CSGD and CEL to provide safe spaces for the entire LGBT+ community have often become hubs where gay men or transgender persons were more visible and active. While these spaces offered essential support, they sometimes lacked the inclusivity that LBQ women needed.

All of the organisations interviewed agree that LBQ women experience a significant lack of dedicated and safe spaces, coupled with lack of solidarity. This has led to feelings of marginalization and exclusion, both within the LGBT+ movement and broader society. While some initiatives, such as girl's night, discussion and workshops have been organized, these have often been short-term efforts rather than sustained programs. Without sustained and tailored efforts to create spaces where LBQ women can gather, express themselves and address their unique challenges, their needs remain secondary or overlooked by the more visible and vocal groups of the LGBT+ community. This marginalisation emphasizes the need and importance of developing programs and initiatives that prioritize the needs of the LBQ women, and ensure their full engagement.

Organisations also face limited or restricted funding, which significantly challenges their ability to provide sustained and tailored support for LBQ women. Many organisations report difficulties in securing funds specifically aimed at empowering particular groups within the broader LGBT+ community. Instead many donors prefer to fund projects like conferences, capacity building initiatives or public awareness campaigns. This funding leads to lack of financial and operational resources for tailored programs that may address the needs of LBQ women, ultimately affecting their visibility and representation.

In terms of legal framework, while organisations such as CEL, CSGD, YIHR KS and KGSC advocate for various legislative initiatives concerning LGBT+ rights, there has been noticeable absence of specific input addressing specifically the needs of the LBQ women (i.e access to health care, reproductive rights in the Parliament, Labor law, etc). One exception is the joint advocacy effort of the organisations for the inclusion of the same-sex marriage and KGSC who included several recommendations some legislative processes such as maternity leave, domestic violence and shelter access.

There is established collaboration among organisations at different levels, with almost all of the organizations interviewed working together through joint projects, initiatives or advocacy efforts. However, it is important to note that none of these collaborations are specifically focused on the empowerment of the LBQ women.

Organisations such as CSGD, CEL, KGSC, YIHR KS and Civil Rights Defenders form Prishtina Pride committee, as well as participate in a non-formal Advocacy group aimed at advocating for the inclusion of same-sex marriage in the Kosovo draft Civil Code. Additionally, initiatives like “Marshojme s’festojme” saw different organisations actively involved in organizing the 8 March protest, contributing to raising visibility for LBQ women. Recently, a group of women queer activists formed an informal network for LBQ women to come together and discuss relevant issues and causal settings. However, the group is not very active. Despite these efforts, there remains a general lack of collaboration and solidarity between LGBT+ and queer organisations and women’s rights and other civil society organisations. This gap highlights the need for more partnerships and collaborative initiatives that specifically address unique challenges faced by the LBQ women and promote their empowerment within the broader society.

In conclusion, while there are organisations in Kosovo who are advancing the LGBT+ rights, there is a pressing need for more targeted support for LBQ women. Existing initiatives and programs focus on the broader LGBT+ issues, with some efforts dedicated to LBQ women, but they are often limited. The lack of sustained programs, dedicated safe spaces and specific funding further hinders LBQ women visibility and empowerment. Collaboration between LGBT+ organizations and women organisations is very important and needed to address these unique challenges that LBQ women face.

HEALTHCARE NEEDS

This section of the assessment seeks to identify the general challenges and barriers that lesbian, bisexual and queer women face when seeking healthcare, giving the significant absence of research focused on their unique physical, mental and sexual health needs and services. It aims to address these challenges by developing recommendations and initiatives that improve practices and policies, ensuring that LBQ women receive proper, informed and inclusive health care.

The LBQ women's unique health needs are rarely recognized or addressed separately from general LGBT+ and are often overlooked in women focused initiatives and programs, leaving LBQ women without specific care and support. The absence of research makes these issues more complex, leaving critical areas unaddressed, such as the need for inclusive and non-discriminatory healthcare environments, the importance of addressing mental health challenges linked to stigma and marginalization, and specific sexual and reproductive health needs of LBQ women.

The assessment identified several challenges that LBQ women face when seeking healthcare. These include poor-quality public healthcare characterized by superficial treatment and long wait times for appointments and exams, limited access to private health insurance that enables access to private healthcare sector, heteronormative assumptions and societal stigma, and a lack of knowledge regarding the specific health concerns affecting women who have sex with women.

Societal stigma, prejudice, and the assumptions that all patients are heterosexual, and cisgender lead many LBQ women to avoid healthcare visits altogether. This is a significant concern, as it results in lower rates of preventive care and delayed illness detection among LBQ women. The women we spoke with noted that these heteronormative assumptions create barriers between them and their healthcare providers, fostering distrust and avoidance. For LBQ women to receive proper care and avoid misdiagnosis or neglect, it is essential that they can have open and honest conversations about their sexual orientation and gender identities with their health care providers.

With few exceptions, most of the women interviewed did not disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity to their healthcare provider, and some do not feel it is necessary or important to do so. In certain cases, this reluctance is due to fear of discrimination, negative reactions, or concerns about confidentiality. Additionally, many women believe that sharing information about their sexual orientation and gender identity is not relevant to their healthcare.

The assessment did not identify any cases of the healthcare refusal or negative, discriminatory treatment based on sexual orientation and gender identity, but this is largely because most women do not disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity to healthcare providers, difficulty to find an LBO-friendly healthcare provider, or avoid seeking care altogether. However, based on over two decades of work with the LBO community, there are known but unreported cases of discriminatory practices experienced by LBO women.

Most challenges in accessing proper healthcare arise during gynecologist visits. The findings show that most women have had unpleasant and uncomfortable experiences with gynecologists, often leading them to postpone or avoid gynecological visits until absolutely necessary. Gynecologists assume that LBO women are heterosexual, subjecting them to heteronormative assumptions and questions, such as inquiries about their sexual activity, birth control or marital status. Nearly all the women interviewed reported difficulties in finding an LBO-friendly women gynecologist.

Overall, there is a limited understanding, especially among younger women, regarding the importance of sexual health, routine screenings for cervical and breast cancer, and STI testing. Consequently, only a small percentage of women regularly undergo cervical and breast screenings, and very few of the women interviewed had STI screening in the past year. There is a lack of awareness about diseases and STIs among bi-sexual and lesbian women. To address this gap, educational initiatives are needed to encourage routine STI screenings and help women make informed health decisions.

Health information is generally sought online, with the internet being primarily a source for most women. In some cases, women also turn to family members or friends who work in the healthcare sector for advice. Relying on online resources can lead to different levels of accuracy and reliability in the information found. A better access to professional health information is needed to ensure that women get proper and accurate guidance for their healthcare needs.

Healthcare providers often lack sufficient knowledge about the specific health concerns of the lesbian, bisexual and queer women, particularly those affecting women who have sex with women. Many women we spoke with expressed the belief that specifically gynecologists and other health professionals should adopt a more inclusive approach by eliminating assumptions of heterosexuality, being more sensitive and empathetic, and more informed about LBQ sexual health needs.

The findings suggest that women are seeking and require access to LBQ-friendly healthcare providers. Some noted that visible signs of inclusivity, such as rainbow flags in the clinics, can make the environment more welcoming and accessible. Several women also emphasized that having a list of LBQ-friendly gynecologists or free gynecological visits, possibly provided through LGBTQ+ organisations, would significantly improve healthcare access and contribute to better health for LBQ women. Such resources could help reduce the anxiety and discomfort that many women feel and ensure that their specific needs are addressed with care and understanding.

The assessment findings show a clear need for further research, particularly through discussions, focus groups or in-depth research involving healthcare providers and professionals. By involving healthcare providers and professionals directly, the research can assess their current knowledge and understanding, identify areas where training or education is lacking and address the biases that affect the quality of healthcare for LBQ women. It will also identify systemic barriers in healthcare which hinder access for LBQ women, helping to develop tailored programs that promote inclusivity and raise awareness about specific LBQ health needs.

Finally, the assessment found that continuing access to mental health care is a critical and urgent need. Many women emphasized the importance of having continuous access to mental health services, specifically through LGBTQ+ organizations. This is because of their concerns about confidentiality and to access mental health practitioners who are knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ issues. As in other areas, there is significant lack of research specifically focused on the mental health care needs of LBQ women.

PERCEPTION OF SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Lesbian, bisexual and queer women were interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of safety as LBO women. The interviews included questions focused on both their physical and emotional safety, addressing issues such as discrimination, harassment, threats, violence and violations of their rights.

When women interviewed were asked to assess their sense of safety in various environments, the overwhelming agreement was that while they generally feel safe, their safety is often compromised by their identity as a woman. Many LBO women experienced discomfort in predominately heterosexual and male dominated spaces, and often choose to avoid these spaces altogether. This feeling of discomfort comes from the experiences of sexism, misogyny and lack of acceptance of their identities. In addition, while they may feel physically safe in certain settings, the emotional toll of navigating spaces where their identities are forced to be hidden or marginalized, leads to feelings of vulnerability, irritation and discomfort. In these predominately heterosexual spaces many felt they have to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid being offended or harassed further contributing to a sense of isolation for LBO women.

Almost all the women interviewed referred to the queer bar Bubble as a safe space where they can express themselves freely. They also mention a few other queer-friendly places in the city that promote inclusivity. Additionally, many of the women appreciated Termokiss's strict zero-tolerance policy against sexual harassment. This policy effectively ensures that individuals who engage in harassment or discriminatory behavior are not tolerated and are banned from these safe spaces, creating a more secure environment for LBO women and fostering a sense of community and support. Regarding the workplace experiences, none of the women reported experiencing direct discrimination or unequal treatment. However, this may be due to their choice to keep their sexual orientation and gender identity discreet. Despite this, they often witness or hear negative comments, derogatory remarks and jokes about LBO women and other LGBT+ persons. Such instances contribute to an overall atmosphere of negativity toward LGBT+ persons in many workplaces, highlighting a need for greater awareness and inclusivity in professional settings. Women working in LGBT+, queer, or human rights organizations felt more comfortable being open about their sexual orientation and gender identity.

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Only a few women reported housing challenges, primarily related to privacy invasions by landlords. One woman shared the experience of an intrusive landlord who questioned why she had female friends visiting her apartment, ultimately pressuring to consider relocating. Most of the women interviewed live with their family members, while some share an apartment with close friends or live alone, and few live with partners. The couples that we interviewed did not report refusals to rent. In recent years LGBT+ organizations did not receive complaints regarding the refusal in housing. Consequently, experiences related to housing for LBQ women remain somewhat underexplored. Given the limited data that we have, we can only speculate about their experiences indicating a need for a more comprehensive research on housing challenges faced by LBQ women, particularly those in the relationships and living outside Prishtina.

With one exception, none of the women reported experiencing physical assaults or threats of violence because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. However, many expressed mistrust of the law enforcement and judicial system, fearing that reporting incidents would expose their sexual orientation and gender identity or lead to inaction.

Many of the women indicated that if they were to report an incident, they would prefer to approach LGBT+ organizations instead. However, even then they remained skeptical about the potential outcomes of such reports. This reflects wider concern regarding the effectiveness and responsiveness of both police, judiciary and support organizations to address the safety and rights of LBQ women.

In conclusion, the findings reveal a complex landscape of safety and belonging for LBQ women. While many women generally feel safe, their sense of security is often undermined by their identities and the pervasive presence of heterosexual norms, particularly in predominantly heterosexual and male-dominated spaces. The emotional burden of hiding their identities fosters feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Furthermore, while direct discrimination in the workplace may be minimal, they frequently encounter negative comments and a lack of inclusivity that affects their emotional well-being. Despite some challenges related to housing there is a lack of reported discrimination in this area, indicating a need for further research. Moreover, although most women interviewed have not faced physical violence, there is a significant mistrust of law enforcement and judicial systems, leads them to prefer reporting incidents to LGBT+ organizations, although with skepticism about the effectiveness of such support.