



# COMMUNITY VOICE AGAINST STIGMA

*ACTIVISM FOR EQUALITY*

Focus groups with members of LGBTQ community -  
Important findings and recommendations

LLC MILKYWAY / EQUALITY MOVEMENT  
TBILISI, 2018

## Overview

The study was conducted by LLC MILKY WAY at request of Equality Movement. Part of the questions presented in the research (regarding widespread stereotypes) was based on the study “From Prejudice to Equality: study of societal attitudes, knowledge and information regarding the LGBT community and their rights”, conducted by Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) in 2016.

The study took place in Tbilisi, LGBTQ community members participated. Participants were selected by Equality Movement. Partakers included those who are receiving services provided by various LGBTQ organizations and those, who have never, came into contact with organizations.

Focus groups took place in Tbilisi, at the Equality Movement office. Participants were informed that their identity would remain confidential and the information provided by them would be generalized in the study.

Each focus group consisted of five to ten participants, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people. In total, 120 people took part in focus groups.

It is worth mentioning that scope of the study included focus groups of: a) LGBTQ community members altogether; b) only transgender people; c) only lesbian, bisexual and queer women.



## **Limitations of the Study**

We believe that the most important limitation of the study is the fact that participants were selected only from Tbilisi, which is why it is impossible to generalize the results of the study to the entire country.

Second and no less important issue is related to community members about whom we don't have any information. Therefore, we could not include these people in focus groups.

## **Research topics:**

- I. Important challenges that community members face in the country;
- II. LGBTQ Community organizations' work: service evaluation and desired changes;
- III. Traditional and new media policy regarding LGBTQ people: existing problems and desired changes;
- IV. Widespread stereotypes about LGBTQI people and the issue of counterarguments.

## **Main questions asked in the course of focus groups:**

- What is the most important challenge for LGBTQI community?
- What would you change in the work of LGBTQI Organizations/what advices would you give them?
- Is it worth participating in tabloid TV/Media programs where community members are facing radically homophobic opponents?
- What kind of information and arguments can we use to oppose the stereotypes about LGBTQI persons?

## **Important Findings:**

### **I. Important challenges that community members face in the country**

#### **Internal hostility and internalized homophobia**

During the meetings, it became clear that hostility among community members appears to be the most sensitive issue. Majority of the respondents noted that they have often experienced oppression from other community members; feminine gays are being stigmatized and oppressed: *"I, for example, have become a victim of bullying within the community many times because I'm a feminine gay. I generally hate subdividing like this; we differentiate each other and then expect the society to accept us."*

As a community member said, first of all, community members must overcome internal hostility, after which they will have the right to demand acceptance from the society. Additionally, it became clear that bisexual and transgender people experience aggression from other community members and they are being associated with perversion.

*"We copy heteronormative values, masculine guys are better than feminine guys, we copy this model. Gays are insulting lesbians and vice versa."*

The interviewed think that the reason behind internal hostility is lack of education and information, and oppression coming from society. One of the respondents said that community members channel the aggression they receive from society to their own community and confront each other.

Participants expressed initiative to bring community members close to each other, to create specific groups, where community members will unite under common interests and become closer to each other. This will increase their acceptance and sensitivity. *"In order to truly bring community members together, we must create groups where their orientation won't be the only thing they have in common, but also interests, to, say, learn crafts. For example, music can unite people, if being interested in creating music unites masculine and feminine gays, aggression will decrease."*

### **Community is not visible / Community Visibility**

During some of the focus groups we found out that one of the biggest problems of the community is lack of visibility; Participants said that the majority of community members are inert and *"hiding under Bassiani and Horoom."* This means that community members do not wish to get involved in activism, LGBTQI organizations, various events, etc. Their interest mostly includes nightlife and that's where they prefer to be visible.

### **Shelter**

The majority of focus group participants named absence of a shelter as one of the biggest problems. As they said, countless community members are being kicked out of their homes, persecuted from their villages, they come to Tbilisi without having a place to live. In their opinion, presence of a shelter will increase community members' willingness to get education and solve their social problems because the majority of community members work to pay the rent; having a shelter will temporarily lift this problem off of their shoulders and allow them concentrate on education and personal development: *Let's take care of those who don't have a shelter. Later on, existence of this shelter will increase readiness of the community to think about education and all the social problems they're facing. A person, whose only concern is where to sleep and where to eat, cannot understand the issues of being accepted by the society."* According to the interviewed, people are unable to realize their potential in the society.

### **Situation in regions**

It became clear that one of the biggest problems for community members appears to be the absence of services in regions, absence of psychological and legal services. This topic is tabooed in the regions of Georgia, community members don't have enough courage to come out and they need strengthening. Regional media does not cover stories related to oppression of community members; it was noted that it's important to communicate with regional media and launch advertisements in order to provide

LGBTQI people with access to the information, such as the name of the organization, address, contact information, etc.

### **Community awareness on services**

During focus group meetings it became clear that community members lack information about the work of the organization. What organizations do daily or monthly, what programs and activities they organize besides legal, psychological, and HIV-testing services, remains indistinct. There is also lack of information about services provided by the organization. Only a small number of LGBTQI people are aware of such resources. Respondents indicated that advertising organizations and services they provide is essential.

A concrete idea was proposed: *“The organization should come as the first result on the internet when searching for “Gay” or “Lesbian”, so that community members can access information about the existence of such organizations.”*

While speaking about services provided by the organization, existing homo/transphobia among doctors was underlined. Community members have a positive attitude towards Equality Movement implanting medical services. The majority of interviewed agreed that they’re in need of professionals who will work specifically with them and they will not have to hide any details.

### **Community members’ unemployment problem**

Most of the focus group attendees noted that unemployment issues and non-existent economic independence are the cause of all the other problems.

While discussing this topic, discrimination against transgender people and problem of their unemployment was brought up several times. Respondents believe that this problem is systematic. Transgender people are unable to be employed for several reasons. Transgender persons leave their families at the age of 13-14; as a result, they don’t get education and are unable to develop like their peers do. Meanwhile, transphobia in the country severely affects their mental state. Another problem is related to their ID cards. According to Georgian legislation, transgender persons cannot change their gender identity in official documents without having done the gender-affirming surgery. Therefore, having an entry of gender identity that doesn’t match their appearances creates an issue and causes discrimination during job placement.

As respondents stated, solving this problem is clearly government’s responsibility but LGBTQI organizations must actively start conversations about these topics and enforce the government to take appropriate steps.

Additionally, an idea was proposed about organizations collaborating with private sector, signing memorandums and finding new jobs for community members together.

Another initiative to solve the problem of unemployment included providing community members with the opportunity to get informal education and professional training courses which will increase the chance of community members getting hired.

## **II. LGBTQ Community organizations' work and service evaluation and desired changes;**

Focus group participants believe that some community members don't trust organizations, the main reason being grants. As they noted, there is an idea that organization leaders profit well, when instead the resources should be used to benefit the community members. The reason behind that can be lack of information about how projects are implemented and how grants are received and managed.

Additionally, what irritates community members is organization employees visiting different countries for various events because such opportunities are not available for ordinary community members. They believe that community members need to participate in these events even more to empower and educate themselves and acquire necessary skills.

Several focus group participants said that they often notice same projects repeatedly. As they stated, it leaves an impression that there are project templates and over the year projects with same content are being planned and implemented. They believe it is necessary to kick start innovations and maximize community members' involvement in project-writing. In particular, organizations should ask community members for opinions and plan the projects according to their needs.

The majority of the interviewed noted that these types of focus groups will allow the organization to better plan future plans activities and consider community members' interests.

## **III. Traditional and new media policy regarding LGBTQ people: existing problems and desired changes;**

Participants split into two when asked if it's worth participating in tabloid TV/Media programs where community members are facing radically homophobic opponents. One part of the interviewed believes that community members should participate in every show, including tabloid tv programs because this increases their visibility. In their opinion, they must use every platform that allows them to express their opinions.

Other half of the interviewed believes that LGBTQI activists should not take part in tabloid TV shows and programs where they face radically homophobic opponents because participating in such TV programs won't have any positive outcome. Focus group participants also noted that the nature of the TV

programs must be evaluated and the risks related to taking part must be calculated. If it appears that the purpose is to simply put on a show, offer to participate should be declined.

Respondents believe that competent people should participate in TV programs, who have information about every topic, who will avoid being provoked and will be able to respond to homophobic people. Speakers should present in a way that is understandable to society instead of talking using NGO-related terms. In their opinion, while arguing with homophobes, one must be patient and use simple language that is easy for people to understand. Only they, who can control their emotions and can be less aggressive should participate in TV programs. *“You should participate in tabloid programs too, but you have you to remain stable and no matter how they talk to you, you must show the audience that you’re above them and this is an important and problematic issue; there’s no time for aggression and confrontation.”*

Despite this, focus group participants understand that widespread homophobia and transphobia decreases the number of speakers. For this reason, organizations must actively work on empowering community members and activists in order to have diverse and professional community representation in media.

A lot of respondents said that they would like to participate in TV programs and communicate with different groups of society but they don’t have enough information or arguments. Respondents had an offer for the organization to create a list of community leaders and organize training sessions for them.

Some of the interviewed think that it would have a better outcome if community members attend biographical TV shows instead of debates because it will give them a chance to provide the society with positive information.

Additionally, they wish to see lawyers and psychologists appear on TV programs, who are accepted by a society and who can competently speak about issues and ways of solving them.

It became clear that TV producers invite community members to their shows in exchange for compensation and organization cannot control that since some of the community members cannot turn down such offers because of their financial circumstances. Some of the interviewed believe that despite the difficulty, they should try to work with these people, to speak to them and convince them not to get involved with the TV programs for money because it affects not only the individual, but also the whole community suffers.

As the majority of the participants believe, community members should appear on TV Programs from a positive angle and they should try to avoid being portrayed as victims.

They believe that community members should speak not only about homophobia and oppression, but about other social problems as well: *“They create TV shows about topics that are urgent. I think that when you appear on the show, you should bring up something critical that is not about the LGBT community. For example, underline that you’re facing opponents who don’t care about how many people die in the mines, about abortion rates and they’re talking about my piercings. We should discuss more real and sensitive problems.”*

The majority of the interviewed believe that organizations have trouble communicating with the broadcasting companies. In their opinion, specific rules must be determined, for example, to speak with the producer to get a specific time period to speak on the show and agree on some other details with them in advance.

Respondents believe that organizations must react to homophobic TV programs. They must enforce journalism ethics and standards and as soon as they see a homophobic TV program they must review it in accordance with the code of ethics.

In their opinion, journalists must get trained regularly. Organizations should explain the specificity of LGBT topics and provide them with relevant knowledge and information.

An idea of a community internet television was born, where community members will be hosting programs about general social topics and not only about community problems.

Additionally, it was noted that there is a lack of LGBT-related literature in Georgian. This includes fictional, as well as scientific literature. Organization should translate important articles or books about gender, sexuality and related topics.

There was also an idea of creating a YouTube channel, where videos of community members speaking about themselves, their professions and successes will be uploaded. Various series will be created, about health, doctors, psychology, lawyers, etc.

Interviewed participants think that campaigns are launched only for 17<sup>th</sup> of May. They believe that these products should be created constantly in order to raise awareness of the society and overcome negative attitudes.

Focus group participants find it irritating when the word “violence” is frequently used on posters and they expressed a wish to emphasize more positive things.

#### **IV. Widespread stereotypes about LGBTQI people and the issue of counterarguments**

During this part the researcher presented specific myths and stereotypes about LGBT people to the focus group participants and asked them exactly what kind of information or counterarguments could they use to effectively overcome these myths and stereotypes. Although it should be noted that focus group participants had hard time thinking of specific messages and arguments they would use to fight mentioned stereotypes. In almost all the cases, discussion was concentrated around possible ways, forms and activities for overcoming stereotypes. E.g. launching campaigns involving parents and so on. This indicates that community members hadn't actually thought about specific messages and arguments that could be used to overcome myths and stereotypes. The reason for that can be a lack of intellectual places and opportunities where community members can discuss widespread stereotypes and work on formatting specific messages/arguments.

As concerns the effective ways of fighting stereotypes, participants pointed out that parents of community members should get involved in campaigns so deliver the information to other parents, too.



They believe this will have the biggest effect on parents who oppress their children instead of accepting and protecting them.

They believe that in order to build trust, famous persons should be involved in video messages.

It was also mentioned that adding humor can have a better outcome:

*"I remembered that game, where the priest was walking around with a stool, it was spread on the social media. It would be interesting to use more humor, to transfer homophobia into mocking forms. Satire is often a good method. Although all of this should be created sensitively so it doesn't grow into aggression..."*

*"I would prefer seeing humorous videos, instead of tragic videos. It's very exhausting play the victim all the time."*

Community members find it important to launch any type of campaigns targeting myths and stereotypes to *"let the society know what the truth is;"* It was also noted that creating posters with explanations of terms would be useful.

They believe that in order to overcome stereotypes, they should deliver a message to society that they're not different; they are just like all the others.

With regard to one of the widespread stereotypes about lesbian women hating men, participants named response: *"I love my brother, I love my father. I don't hate men just because I'm gay or lesbian. I have a normal relationship with them, they accepted me."*

### **Recommendations for LGBT organizations:**

- Community organizations should improve working with the community to raise awareness and spread knowledge, this way internal oppression will decrease and the community will be more united;
- LGBTQI organizations should set common strategies and work in a coordinated manner;
- Regions should be emphasized; more services should be provided for LGBTQI people living in the regions;
- The information about these organizations, their work and especially their services should be spread more actively;
- Organizations should actively work with the private sector and try to find new job places for LGBTQI people;
- At the same time help community members develop professionally by providing informal education which will also help LGBTQI people become employed;
- Organizations should allow community members to participate in events and exchange programs abroad;
- Organizations should make their work more transparent; provide community members with the information about receiving grants, implementing projects and other processes by using right forms of communication with them;
- Organizations should actively train journalists, doctors and police officers;

- Communication with the community should be more frequent, especially before writing projects;
- Organizations should work on increasing the number of speakers; trainings on media communications should be organized for community leaders, as well as trainings/workshops, where community leaders/activists will be able to formulate specific messages that they will use against widespread myths and stereotypes.
- Activists and organization representatives should speak using simple language understandable for the majority of people.
- Media products should be created, where community members won't be portrayed as victims, instead, their goals, successes and other positive aspects will be emphasized.
- Media campaigns should not be launched only for the 17<sup>th</sup> of May but during the rest of the year, too.
- Despite the difficulty, organizations should work with those LGBTQI people who take part in media/TV programs and negatively affect the LGBTQI community with their TV appearances.