Strengthening LGBTQI+'s Voice in Politics

National Report - Cyprus

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STRENGTHENING **LGBTQI+'s** VOICE IN **POLITICS**

Acknowledgements & Disclaimer

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1. Introduction

In a speech delivered in August 2019, the Bishop of Morphou, a Greek Orthodox cleric, claimed that homosexuality is a negative trait passed on to the child from the parents: "they say it… happens when the parents [indulge] in erotic acts that are unnatural" (Smith, 2019). He was referring to anal intercourse during pregnancy. He then suggested that homosexual men give off a "particular odour". Costas Gavrielides, Adviser to the President of Cyprus for Multiculturalism, Acceptance & Respect to Diversity, asked for the bishop's statement to be investigated on the grounds of hate speech. Following a police investigation, the Cyprus Attorney General concluded that the bishop's statements "do not constitute an attempt to incite violence or hatred because of gender orientation or sexual identity nor can they be described as hate speech within the meaning of the law" (Hadjioannou, 2019).

The incident unfolded and concluded in a manner that was not at all surprising, given the present socio-political landscape in the Republic of Cyprus. It revealed the positioning of LGBTQI+ issues in the political arena, the gaps in the relevant legislation, the enduringly dominant voice of the Church in public discourse, and the growing resistance among LGBTQI+ rights advocates. The cleric's comments ultimately represent an institutional form of discrimination which can be analysed at different levels such as individual, interpersonal, societal (see, for example, Soshilou & Vasiliou, 2016).

No socio-political issue can be discussed in Cyprus without taking the island's bi-communality into consideration. Since 1974, Cyprus has been divided geographically and politically, with the Turkish-Cypriot community residing in the north and the Greek-Cypriot community in the Republic of Cyprus in the south. We review the differing contexts that have arisen as a result, stressing at the same time that the last decade has seen great progress on both sides of the divide.

Yet, there is still a long way to go. In Cyprus, "discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is a major issue that is currently not adequately dealt with and which has not been investigated so far" (Apostolidou, 2019: 2). Cyprus is ranked 29th among 49 European countries regarding legislation and policies that have a clear positive impact on

LGBTQI+ human rights, with a total score of 31%[1] (ILGA-Europe, 2020). A number of European surveys have concluded that Cyprus remains a country where intolerant attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people are prevalent (ECRI, 2016; FRA, 2014). In line with this, the limited scholarly research on the topic agrees that Cypriot society remains largely patriarchal and characterised by homophobic attitudes (Apostolidou, 2019; Shoshilou & Vasiliou, 2016; Kapsou, Christophi & Epaminonda, 2011).

The motivation of the current study is to expand the evidence base, to study the changing attitudes, and help determine the extent to which LGBTQI+ groups participate in public life and politics. The study targeted four groups: LGBTQI+ persons, government officials, representatives from political institutions, and the general public. The study primarily aimed to identify perceptions on LGBTQI+ rights by the four groups, as well as the obstacles faced by LGBTQI+ persons with minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, we investigated opinions regarding policy reform, as well as the participation of the LGBTQI+ community in the political arena. This project seeks to engage with the four target groups in an effort to develop collaborative strategies to overcome discrimination and exclusion and to promote the rights and political voice of LGBTQI+ groups.

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[1] 0% indicates gross violation of human rights & discrimination, whereas 100% denotes respect for human rights & equality.

2. Methodology

2.1 Desk research

The desk research was conducted by reviewing relevant literature on LGBTQI+ rights at the national and regional level. Given that the topic has been inadequately documented and researched in Cyprus, especially with regards to discriminatory incidents against LGBTQI+ individuals, and Cypriots' perceptions on the role of LGBTQI+ individuals/organisations in political decision-making processes, available literature and data is scarce. Further research in addition to this study is required for substantial and accurate conclusions to be made.

2.2 Online survey

The main objective of the online survey was to map the status of LGBTQI+ individuals and issues in Cypriot society and politics. A questionnaire had been prepared by the project partners and then translated into the respective official language(s) of each of their countries (for Cyprus, in English, Turkish and Greek). An online platform was used to run the survey and collect data.

In Cyprus, the following outreach methods were used: a) social media (posts and paid advertisements), b) direct emailing using organisational mailing lists, c) a press release, and d) a live-streamed online event.

Accept-LGBT Cyprus (Accept) disseminated an invite to participate in the survey through organisational social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram), with follow-up posts a week later. Emails were sent to mailing lists that included Accept members, ministries, municipalities, commissioners, political institutions, unions, and other civil society organisations (e.g. NGOs). Reminder emails were sent every two weeks (a total of three reminders) until the survey deadline had been reached.

Accept also disseminated a press release, which one local online magazine helped disseminate by publishing on their website. In order to achieve the

minimum participation rates required[2], especially regarding participant quotas of government officials and representatives from political institutions, a paid advertisement was published on social media (target group was set to Cyprus residents aged 18-65+, with the interest field indicating "civil service", "government", "politics" and "politicians"). The ad was successfully posted on a second attempt, as the first was rejected on the grounds of "mention[ing] politicians, topics that could influence the outcome of an election, or existing or proposed legislation". Once adjustments were made, Accept were able to promote the survey to the under-represented categories required to reach participant goals. The live-streamed online event, which took place in April 2020 and centred on a discussion of the project as a whole, was the final method used to promote the survey. Representatives from four of the largest political parties in Cyprus took part in a panel discussion around LGBTQI+ rights and the involvement of LGBTQI+ individuals in the political sphere. The parties also laid out their agendas on a micro and macro level.

The online survey was undertaken by 658 participants, from which 427 fully completed the survey and 231 left the survey incomplete. For the statistical analysis we only included completed responses, while incomplete responses were excluded. For hypothesis testing, we mainly used chi-square and one-way ANOVA.

2.3 Limitations

The most important limitation of the survey lies in the low participation of government officials and representatives of political institutions, a fact that could be the result of the voluntary participation in the survey as well as the attention given to LGBTQI+ issues by such groups. In absolute numbers, 19 representatives from political institutions and 22 government officials participated in the study. The questionnaire was answered mainly by younger individuals (82% aged between 19-45) with an advanced educational background (almost 80% had completed tertiary education). As a result, the sample comprised a narrow range in terms of diversity, with little input from people with a more basic educational background or aged older than 45. Another

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[2] Minimum quotas from the four target groups was set at: 5% government officials, 15% representatives from political institutions, 25% LGBTQI+ individuals and 25% general public.

limitation is the quantitative method, which on the one hand allows for generalised trends to be inferred, but on the other hand does not do justice to the complexity of the role of LGBTQI+ issues in politics. With regards to the desk research, the researchers are both Greek-Cypriots, a fact that influences the positionality of the researchers.

3. Desk Research

Our starting point was a context analysis that would facilitate an understanding of the current situation, as well as the ability to start mapping the critical points that have culminated in the status quo. Historically, Cyprus went from being a province of the Ottoman Empire (1571-1878) to becoming a British protectorate in 1878 and later, a British colony in 1925. British colonial rule ended in 1960 with Cyprus becoming an independent republic. In the first 14 years of its independence, Cyprus went through a considerable amount of social and political upheaval, resulting in violent clashes among the two main ethnic communities, the Greek-Cypriots and the Turkish-Cypriots. In 1974, following a military intervention by Turkey, the island was divided into two parts, with Turkish-Cypriots settling in the north of the island and a Greek-Cypriots in the south. In 2004, the Republic of Cyprus became a full member of the European Union. With the de facto division still in place, only the areas under the effective control of the Republic abide by EU rules and legislation. Nevertheless, Cypriot nationals on both sides of the divide are considered EU citizens.

LGBTQI+ history on the island has been similarly turbulent. Homosexuality went from not being a criminal offence in the mid-19th century – when Cyprus was still a part of the Ottoman empire (Tanzimat) – to being criminalised under the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885) put forward by British rulers. Following independence in 1960, the newly established Republic of Cyprus incorporated this law in its Criminal Code, until it was removed from the statute of books in 1998 in the Republic of Cyprus, and in 2014 in North Cyprus.

As the island has been divided and segregated in every aspect of public life since the military intervention in 1974, we have seen the two communities following separate trajectories in relation to the legal status of homosexuality. Hence, the socio-political analysis that follows is provided for each community separately.

3.1 LGBTQI+ rights and legal framework in the Republic of Cyprus

The subject of homosexuality first entered the public discourse of the modern Cypriot state in 1997, when the section of the Criminal Code criminalising sexual acts between men[3] came under review by the Cypriot parliament. In 1993, following a case brought to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) by Cypriot gay activist Alecos Modinos (*Modinos v. Cyprus*), the ECtHR had ruled that the code violated Article 8 (the right to private life) of the European Convention on Human Rights[4], which the Republic of Cyprus had ratified in 1962. In 1998, under pressure by the Council of Europe, and in light of the Republic's application to enter the European Union, the Cypriot parliament voted to amend the law and decriminalise homosexuality. The decision was controversial at the time, giving rise to considerable backlash from certain sectors of Cypriot society.

Alecos Modinos, the activist who had brought the case to the ECtHR, had previously founded the first organisation in Cyprus to defend gay rights, the Cypriot Gay Liberation Movement (AKOK) in 1987. He was an integral member of the movement that ultimately led to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1998. The revised law, however, was far from unproblematic: "the amended law was more degrading to people of same-sex sexual choice than the previous one. It included ambiguous provisions designed to ensure that living as a homosexual in Cyprus would be harder than pre-1998" (Kamenou, 2011: 156). This is a reference to provisions like the age of consent, which was set at 18 for homosexual men and 16 for everybody else. This discrimination in the law was addressed in 2002 when the age of consent was amended to be 17 for all individuals.

The 1998 Criminal Code amendment kicked off the debate around LGBTQI+ issues. At present, Accept (established in 2011) is the only registered organisation representing the rights and interests of LGBTQI+ people living in Cyprus. It also organises the annual Pride march, which it has been doing since 2014. Whereas the Modinos movement was mainly concerned with securing the right to privacy for homosexual men, Accept took on a larger mission, which includes education, tackling homophobia and transphobia, raising awareness, empowering

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[3] Female homosexuality was never criminalised hence the law only referred to male homosexuality. See Karayanni 2006: 257.
[4] For the judgement see https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{"itemid":["001-57834"]}

LGBTQI+ people and securing legal rights. The organisation fosters visibility for the LGBTQI+ community and gives it an official voice.

A European directive against discrimination was implemented in 2004 into national law to prohibit different forms of discrimination in the workplace. The Equal Treatment in Employment and Occupation Law (Cyprus, 2004) established a network whose main objective would be the elimination of discrimination in employment based on racial or national identity, religion, opinion, age, or sexual orientation. While the law has been in force since 2004, incidents of discrimination based on sexual orientation in work environments continue to be reported (Nicolaides, 2019). It is important to note that incidents not only include first degree discrimination, but also more subtle forms of discriminatory action that must be addressed. Evaluations are conducted by ILGA-Europe and the Commissioner of Administration and Protection Human Rights and a report is published on an annual basis.

Accept has had two major achievements in lobbying to bring about legislative change: the amendment to the hate speech legislation and the passing of the civil partnership law. The former targeted a section of Criminal Code 154 (I) of 2011, which regulates hate speech in the Republic of Cyprus. The law criminalised any person who incites violence or hatred against a person or group based on race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin. Following its amendment in 2015, the law now includes sexual orientation and gender identity as characteristics upon which individuals can be discriminated. Accept is now lobbying for further amendments, so that the legislation criminalises the discrimination directly, instead of relying on the requirement of inciting violence or hatred. Given how the legislation is currently worded, it is unlikely to lead to convictions on the basis of hate speech towards LGBTQI+ individuals (as in the case of the Bishop of Morphou). According to a 2019 report on hate speech by the Equality, Support and Antiracism Movement KISA, discrimination against LGBTQI+ people in Cyprus remains a common phenomenon; this is further compounded by the fact that, "hate speech incidents are either not identified and recorded properly, or even if properly recorded they are not prosecuted most of the time because they are not substantiated, according to the authorities." (KISA, 2019: 28).

The second milestone toward equal rights for LGBTQI+ individuals concerned the passing of the Civil Union Act 184(I)/2015 (Cyprus, 2015) regulating

civil partnerships, an important step in the legal recognition of LGBTQI+ partnerships.

Same-sex parenting, on the other hand, remains legally unrecognised. In fact, the discussion around same-sex adoption rights was shelved in order to allow the civil union law to pass with less opposition. The law even states: "*With the exclusion of the Adoption Law*, contracting a Civil Union has the same effects and consequences as if a marriage was solemnised under the provisions of the Marriage Law" (emphasis is ours). Couples who take part in a civil union partnership are therefore not allowed to adopt as a married couple. In addition, there are currently no provisions in place for same-sex family planning through Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART).

With regards to trans rights, Accept is currently promoting new legislation to ensure the right of any person over 18 who feels that their gender identity does not correspond with the one stated in their official documents to request a correction of their registered gender without having to present any medical documentation of diagnosis, hormonal treatments or surgeries (ILGA-Europe, 2020). In 2018, the Ministry of Interior disseminated Legal Gender Recognition (LGR) guidelines across district registry offices. In the absence of official legislation to regulate the issue, the guidelines remain optional. Nevertheless, we note that some trans people successfully completed gender correction procedures in 2019, without having to present any medical documents (ILGA-Europe, 2020).

With regards to how LGBTQI+ rights are handled in the area of education, a number of programmes have been implemented in public schools to combat homophobia and transphobia over the last decade. In 2011, sexual orientation and gender identity were incorporated into the curriculum (under health education) at the pre-primary, primary and lower secondary levels. Additionally, the Ministry of Education implemented an anti-bullying plan in schools in order to promote a supportive environment for LGBTQI+ children[5]. The government has also supported a workshop (developed by a third party initiative) in which primary and secondary education teachers could participate voluntarily, called 'Shield Against Homophobia' (Apostolidou, 2019). Nevertheless, research shows that discrimination on the basis of gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation is still prevalent across

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[5] Discrimination faced by children of LGBTQI+ parents was not addressed.

schools. A recent study which focused on educator experiences indicated that homophobia in schools is manifested through bullying and the use of derogatory language towards students and staff (Shoshilou and Vasiliou, 2016).

As illustrated by the incident with the Bishop of Morphou, the Greek Orthodox Church maintains a conservative, anti-LGBTQI+ stance that strongly influences public discourse. A press release (Holy Synod of Cyprus, 2014) issued by the Church in May 2014, before the first Pride march in Cyprus was unequivocal: homosexuality was considered a perversion and should be treated as such (Cyprus-Mail, 2014). The Church went further by linking homosexuality with the Cyprus Problem; in times when our national and religious identities are under "attack", the press release stated, decriminalisation of homosexuality is an offense to human dignity[6].

3.2 LGBTQI+ rights and legal framework in regions out of the control of the Republic of Cyprus

In North Cyprus, the public discussion around LGBTQI+ issues began in 2007 when an organisation called Initiative Against Homophobia (Homofobiye Karşı İnisiyatif, HOKI) was established. In the following year, HOKI began lobbying the government for the repeal of the law deriving from British colonial legacy that criminalised homosexual acts.

In 2011, seven men were arrested in different incidents, charged with participating in "unnatural intercourse". One of the seven males was a Republic of Cyprus government official who has since resigned his post. During the remand hearings, all the detainees, apart from the government official, reported physical violence by the police. They were all ultimately released on bail. HOKI denounced the incidents publicly and declared that "the current law in effect does not protect the rights of the children nor the rights of people's control over their own bodies. It aims to protect the 'morality' of the society" (History of QCA, 2019).

In March 2012, HOKI was renamed Queer Cyprus Association (QCA). The QCA aims to promote equal rights for LGBTQI+ people in Cyprus and to eliminate

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[6] For an earlier discussion on homosexuality and the national problem (and identity) see Philaretou, Phellas & Karayianni, 2006.

discrimination based on gender, gender expression, sexual orientation and gender identity. The incident above led to the LGBTQI+ community exerting greater pressure for the decriminalisation of homosexuality; "on 27 January 2014, lawmakers in northern Cyprus abolished Criminal Code provisions which punished consensual sexual acts between adult men with five years of imprisonment and instead adopted new provisions that criminalised libel based on hate towards actual or perceived sexual orientation gender identity and expression". (History of QCA, 2019).

The first Pride march in North Cyprus was organised by the QCA in 2014. Despite the growing visibility of LGBTQI+ issues, and the legal shift towards decriminalising homosexuality, assaults against LGBTQI+ individuals have neither been eliminated nor adequately dealt with on an institutional level due to the lack of effective implementation of the law (History of QCA, 2019).

North Cyprus is not recognised as a state by international bodies, which has resulted in a political and economic dependence on Turkey[7] (Navaro, 2012). As a result, LGBTQI+ issues can also be seen in relation to the uncertainty that characterises the status of North Cyprus. In Kramer's study, one QCA representative discussed the theme of unrecognition that affects Cypriots residing in North Cyprus, which adds another layer of complexity to LGBTQI+ issues. In her words: "[…] more and more we feel the oppression coming from Turkey. Now they're transferring all the religious stuff here" (Kramer, 2017: 122). It seems that for LGBTQI+ individuals, oppression is multifaceted. Specifically, "queers are governed by the closet, […] the internationally-reported homophobia of the Turkish military; […] and old nationalist rhetoric supporting the status quo" (Kramer, 2017: 122).

In September 2019, QCA and Accept set the grounds for collaboration and cooperation through the signature of a memorandum of understanding. The two organisations have also collaborated on certain aspects of the current project (e.g. survey dissemination and collection of data). Their collaboration opens the possibility of future coordinated attempts to address LGBTQI+ issues in both communities.

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[7] Through the years, the Greek-Cypriot community established Greece as "motherland" and the Turkish-Cypriot community established Turkey as "motherland".

3.3 Institutions working on LGBTQI+ issues

As previously mentioned, research on the national and regional level is limited; however, institutions are increasingly focusing on topics related to the LGBTQI+ community, which is resulting in higher visibility around LGBTQI+ rights. The Gender Studies programme at the University of Cyprus has been offering postgraduate degrees in the critical study and research of gender issues since 2012. The programme has grown in popularity, serving as a platform for activist movements, academic publications and cultural and creative works related to gender.

Moreover, several European bodies, including the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the European Commission, regularly conduct surveys regarding LGBTQI+-related issues in member states. To date, the studies have indicated a continuing need for policy reform in Cyprus and showed that Cyprus has a long way to go, compared to other European countries.

3.4 Public perception of LGBTQI+ rights

The present report is being produced two decades following the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Cyprus and just four years following the enactment of the law that recognises same-sex civil unions. In this context, the notion of "LGBTQI+ rights in Cyprus" represents a relatively recent accession in the social imaginary. This does not in any way excuse the discrimination directed at LGBTQI+ individuals. However, an acknowledgement of context can offer a better understanding the status quo, as well as identifying best practices moving forward.

As demonstrated by the most recent ILGA-Europe annual review (ILGA-Europe, 2020), only 31% of overall LGBTQI+ human rights (see footnote 2) have been secured by legal mechanisms in Cyprus. This 31% consists of three milestones: the Equal Treatment in Employment Law, the Civil Union Law, and the Hate Crime Law.

When it comes to the perception of LGBTQI+ rights, we highlight the following: in an EU survey addressed to LGBT individuals, FRA asked participants if they were aware of programmes or awareness-raising campaigns addressing discrimination against LGBT individuals, transgender individuals, or LGBT

individuals who belong to ethnic minority groups. In all three cases, Cyprus as a country came in at last place (FRA, 2014: 46), which reveals how little governmental and non-governmental organisations have done to promote LGBTQI+ rights. The same study looked at anti-discrimination protections in employment, and revealed that LGBT individuals were relatively unaware of the existence of legislation that protects them. Only 24% of participants said they knew they could legally challenge discriminatory behaviour by their employer (FRA, 2014: 43-44).

Moving on to the perception of the general public concerning LGBTQI+ rights, we turn to a particularly revealing report (European Commission, 2019) that focused on the social acceptance of LGBTI people across EU member states. 32% of Cyprus participants believed that LGBTI individuals should not have the same rights as heterosexual people (the EU average was 20%), 55% of participants totally disagreed with the statement "there is nothing wrong in a sexual relationship between two persons of the same sex" (EU average, 24%), 60% believed that same-sex marriage should not be allowed in Europe (EU average, 26%), and 39% believed that transgender and transsexual people should not be allowed to change their civil documents to match their inner gender identity (EU average, 29%). This is in line with other studies suggesting that homophobia remains prevalent in Cypriot society and the negative views put forward by the Greek Orthodox Church continue to influence these perceptions (Apostolidou, 2019; Shoshilou & Vasiliou 2016).

In the political arena, homophobia against LGBTQI+ people is a commonly witnessed phenomenon, usually through direct slurs or subtle jokes about homosexuality. Apart from being discriminatory, this illustrates the overall stance that politicians and government officials have toward LGBTQI+ rights. According to FRA, politicians use offensive language when discussing topics related to homosexuality as often as 60% of the time (EU average, 44%) while jokes are used as often as 56% (EU average, 37%). One politician recently remarked, "since homosexual partnerships have become a reality […] then maybe further rights should also be granted to paedophiles, those who partake in bestiality, necrophiliacs and criminals, since they [are] also present in society" (Kafetzi, 2015, Ioannidou, 2019). When a journalist characterised the statement as "hate speech", the politician sued for libel. The court ruled in favour of the journalist, declaring the comments "reasonable and honest" (Ioannidou, 2019). This court ruling is evidence of a very recent

shift in the perception of LGBTQI+ people. It is also important to note that the presence of female politicians has coincided with Cypriot political parties becoming slightly more progressive[8].

3.5 Discriminatory acts against LGBTQI+ individuals

As already discussed, discriminatory behaviour is not a rare phenomenon in Cypriot society, be it in work environments, schools, or politics. European studies and data collected by NGOs that support LGBTQI+ rights show that LGBTQI+ people are often harassed or experience violence on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. FRA's LGBT survey (FRA, 2014) showed that 56% of participants in Cyprus reported that they had been harassed or discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation (FRA, 2014: 26). This is also in line with a more recent study in which 67% (EU average, 53%) of participants reported that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is widespread in Cyprus (European Commission, 2019: 64). Participants were asked whether they observed negative comments in school settings due to a schoolmate or a teacher being perceived as LGBTQI+: 75% of the participants had observed negative comments or conduct at school due to being LGBTQI+, 97% observed negative comments because a schoolmate was perceived to be LGBTQI+, and 86% observed negative comments due to a teacher being perceived as LGBTQI+ (FRA, 2019: 38).

Moving onto the obstacles faced by LGBTQI+ persons with minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds, it is important to highlight that Cypriot society is already characterised as generally intolerant of ethnic minorities (Georgiadou, 2019). As per KISA's report, "[…] there is no comprehensive monitoring system regarding racial discrimination and violence, just as there has been relatively little interest in racial victimisation (or even other kinds of criminal victimisation) of migrants or other ethnic communities in Cyprus" (Kassimeri & Chowdhury, 2016: 3). There are currently no official reports taking into account the intersection of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity with ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

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[8] In the online event that was organised as part of this project, the four political party representatives who participated were all women. Their attitude towards the project was very supportive.

However, international literature informs us that LGBTQI+ individuals who come from ethnic or cultural minority backgrounds are often marginalised and subject to both racism and homophobia (Harper, Jernewall & Zea, 2004). While further research is necessary in order to determine the extent of the discrimination they experience, LGBTQI+ individuals with minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds residing in Cyprus most likely share that experience, facing additional obstacles due to their minority status. At present, according to an unpublished report by UNHCR (2020), the Asylum Service does not keep statistical data as to the LGBTQI+ identity of refugees and there is no comprehensive vulnerability assessment procedure in place for new applicants. According to the report, "[t]he result is that the needs of LGBTI asylum seekers are not identified upon referral to reception centres, they may face risks, including at the often congested and isolated reception centres or at immigration detention facilities. LGBTI persons may be subjected to harassment, discrimination, social exclusion or even violence in such settings" (UNHCR, 2020: 1).

3.6 Participation of LGBTQI+ individuals in politics

In June 2019, in the run up to the European parliamentary elections, Accept sent a questionnaire to Cypriot MEP candidates calling them to position themselves on issues concerning the LGBTQI+ community. Only 10 out of 36 candidates responded and "notably none from the ruling party DISY [Democratic Rally / liberal-conservative]" (ILGA-Europe, 2020). In terms of the general public, almost half of the participants (44%) to the Commission's study reported that they would feel uncomfortable with an LGBT person in the highest elected political position in Cyprus (European Commission, 2019: 10).

While both politicians and the public seem more hostile than not towards the LGBTQI+ community and their rights, one positive development has been the appointment in 2018 of Accept's former President Costas Gavrielides as adviser to the President of the Republic of Cyprus for "promoting multiculturalism, acceptance and respect for diversity", a move that shows the situation has just started to experience a shift (Kades, 2018). Apart from this appointment, however, there are no individuals participating in the political arena (political parties or government) that openly identify as LGBTQI+.

The weak promotion of LGBTQI+ rights, the lack of awareness of existing legislation protecting LGBTQI+ rights, and the unwelcoming environment for LGBTQI+ individuals wishing to participate in the public sphere should be seen through a broader lens. At present, it seems that most LGBTQI+ individuals are not open about their identity. Only 4% of people who identify as LGBTQI+ in Cyprus said that they are always open about being LGBTQI+, while 64% of LGBTQI+ participants said that they are never open about their identity (FRA 2014: 81).

3.7 The need for policy reform

The majority of participants from our four target groups seemed to agree on one issue, and that was the need for LGBTQI+ policy reform. While discrepancies in participant responses were very much evident, we discerned a general trend towards inclusion and the promotion and enforcement of legal equality for LGBTQI+ people.

As the annual report of ILGA-Europe (2020) indicates, Cyprus has a long way to go in reforming the laws and policies that have a direct impact on LGBTQI+ people's human rights, specifically in terms of: equality and non-discrimination; family; hate crime and hate speech; legal gender recognition and bodily integrity; civil society space; and asylum. In the course of the panel discussion that was conducted in the framework of this project[9], representatives from the political parties suggested a number of actions as steps to achieve policy reform. Suggestions included creating LGBTQI+ teams within political parties and establishing a national committee with a 10-year agenda. Considering that 86% of people in Cyprus think that positive measures that promote respect for human rights of LGBTQI+ people remain rare, while 85% think that the same applies for positive measures regarding the human rights of transgender people (FRA, 2014: 109), these reforms cannot come a moment too soon.

In the process of acknowledging the need for policy reform, it is important to question the effectiveness of the legislation already in place. As indicated by Special Eurobarometer participants (European Commission, 2019:

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[9] Four politicians participated to an online event, to discuss their – and their parties' – views regarding LGBTQI+ issues and LGBTQI+ participation in politics.

173), Cyprus – along with France – holds the highest proportion of residents (both 40%) who think that their country's efforts are not effective in fighting all forms of discrimination.

4. Online survey findings

The sample comprised 427 participants of which 77% identified themselves as cisgender (43% female and 34% male), 1% transgender (7 male and 1 female), and 4% genderqueer. Ten (10) % of the participants did not specify their gender and 5% did not want to answer this question. Three (3) % of the sample identified as intersex. In terms of age, 3,5% of participants indicated that they belong to the 15-18 years old age category, 58% identified as young adults (22%, 19-25 years old and 36%, 26-35 years old), 32,5% middle-aged (25,5%, 36-45 years old and 7%, 46-55 years old), 4% were 56-65 years old and only 2% 66-75 years old. In terms of educational level, most participants (84%) held a university degree, from which 19% was a PhD title or equivalent, and 9% were graduates from higher education institutions. 3% had graduated from secondary school, 2% were still attending secondary school and another 2% were in vocational training. With regards to the distribution of target groups, 163 participants identified themselves as LGBTQI+ and 223 people identified themselves as general public. Twenty two (22) of the participants were government officials (5% of the sample), out of which 7 identified as LGBTQI+ and 2 chose the option "do not want to answer". Nineteen 19 participants were representatives from political institutions (4.4% of the sample), out of which only 1 identified as LGBTQI+.

4.1 Perceptions about LGBTQI+ rights

Awareness of rights
The first set of questions in the survey addressed the **awareness level** of the four target groups around the current state of LGBTQI+ rights in Cyprus. In the first four questions, differences among the groups were statistically significant for civil unions (p-value; p = .025), same-sex marriage (p-value; p < .001), child fostering (p = .037) and adoption (p = .01). More specifically, the responses showed that the LGBTQI+ community is more aware than expected[10] of the current state of their rights, whereas the general public is less aware than expected. Next, for the question on whether respondents believe it is legal to change the gender marker on legal documents in Cyprus, the target groups showed a similarly significant variation (p =

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[10] When mentioning "expected", we refer to the expected value as calculated under the hypothesis of independency between the target groups' opinions.

.023), mostly because the LGBTQI+ community seems more certain than expected, as opposed to the general public which seems less certain than expected. On the other hand, the statistical difference on the opinion regarding protections from "normalising" medical interventions (p < .001), is due to the fact that the government officials and representatives from political parties seemed to be more convinced than expected around the existence of such protection. The only question with no statistical difference (out of the first set of questions) was on the topic of legal protections against discrimination (p = .29). For the question of whether legal protections against hate crimes exist, there is a significant difference between the four target groups (p < .001): the LGBTQI+ community appears to believe they are protected against hate crimes, whereas the general public seems more unclear on that matter. A large percentage of LGBTQI+ individuals and members of the general public (25% in total) answered that they are "not sure" whether LGBTQI+ individuals are legally protected from discrimination and hate speech crimes.

Opinions on rights

All four groups seem to strongly agree that people should be able to freely express their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, they should not lose jobs or job opportunities due to being LGBTQI+, and that LGBTQI+ individuals should have the same rights as cisgender heterosexual people and be treated equally. The rest of the responses in this set, however, showed statistically significant differences. Relating to the legality of same-sex marriage (p = .002), the difference is due to the LGBTQI+ community showing a stronger agreement compared to the general public. In relation to child fostering and adoption by same-sex couples, the difference is also statistically significant (p < .001 in both cases). The LGBTQI+ community expressed strong agreement that these processes should be legal, whereas the other three groups largely chose the option "agree" (instead of "strongly agree"). Regarding the option of changing the gender marker on legal documents, there is a significant difference (p = .001) between the opinions of the four groups. According to the post-hoc tests, the statistical difference was due to the LGBTQI+ participants having a stronger opinion on this matter than the representatives from political institutions and the general public. With regard to the representation of the LGBTQI+ community in political life and

whether that representation is adequate, a statistically significant difference (p < .001), revealed that the LGBTQI+ community and the general public have a stronger opinion on this than representatives from political institutions and government officials.

4.2 Occurrence of discrimination

There seems to be an agreement between the four groups that the LGBTQI+ community is generally not accepted in Cyprus (p ≈ .352). Some participants chose to elaborate on their opinions. Some participants discussed from where the influence on society emanates: "A large portion of Cypriots are homophobic and anti-feminists. There is a wide discrimination and hate against the LGBTQI society. It's embarrassing because this is driven by our politicians and the Church"[11] (participant from general public). Some participants highlighted the fact that a majority of LGBTQI+ individuals are still closeted: "I have LGBTQI+ friends who are still not out to their families because they are afraid of the consequences. I wouldn't say that's accepting" (participant from LGBTQI+ community). Last but not least, some participants expressed that "acceptance" is in itself an ambiguous term: "There is only an appearance of acceptance, because it's the 'modern' approach. Deep-rooted misconceptions, discriminatory perceptions and unfortunately behaviour are everywhere" (participant from LGBTQI+ community).

The target groups seem to agree on many questions around incidents of discrimination. They agree that people are "sometimes" excluded from events or activities (p = .661), physically attacked (p = .725) or sexually harassed (p = .805), because they are or are perceived to be LGBTQI+. They also believe "sometimes" that physical attacks are targeted against an individual for the same reason (p = .314). On the other hand, the four target groups vary in their opinions, ranging from "sometimes" to "often", in relation to the frequency with which LGBTQI+ and those perceived to be LGBTQI+ are outed without their permission (p = .11), intentionally misgendered (p = .167), hear negative comments about the LGBTQI+ community in public places (p = .83), are mocked (p = .098), verbally harassed (p = .76) or not treated equally (p = .12).

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[11] Unless otherwise stated, original response provided in English is quoted.

With regards to the rest of the questions about incidents of discrimination, statistically significant differences continued to emerge. Regarding people receiving negative comments because they behave in a different manner than expected according to their perceived gender, LGBTQI+ people seem to believe that this happens "often", whereas the representatives from political institutions place themselves somewhere in between "sometimes" and "often". Similarly, LGBTQI+ participants believe that "sometimes" people are discriminated in public spaces because they are or are perceived to be LGBTQI+, whereas the representatives from political institutions believe that this happens only "rarely" or "sometimes". Moreover, LGBTQI+ participants believe that people make negative comments about the LGBTQI+ community online or use LGBTQI+ terms in a derogative way "often", but the representatives from political institutions and the general public believe that this happens only "sometimes" or "often". Similarly, the last two groups believe that people "sometimes" use the dead name of transgender people to address them, whereas the LGBTQI+ people believe that this happens "sometimes" or "often".

The vast majority of the sample (78%) (and of each group) have heard negative comments towards the LGBTQI+ community made publicly in Cyprus; there is, however, a statistically significant difference between the LGBTQI+ community, where 88% answered positively and the general public, where 72% answered positively. In the space provided to elaborate, LGBTQI+ participants stated various places where they heard negative comments such as school, at work, in public spaces or even within their social circles. An interesting note was how often people tried to pass homophobic comments off as humour. For example, a participant from the general public mentioned: "[…] Unfortunately it has been normalised by our society to hear negative or racist comments about the LGBTQI+ community, especially when they are masked as 'humour'. Although nowadays it is not as acceptable as it used to be, it is still a part of our everyday life to hear, or for some, even make these comments".

4.3 Experiences of discrimination

It is very interesting that, although the majority of the LGBTQI+ participants seem to recognise the existence of discriminatory acts and behaviours against the LGBTQI+ community in Cyprus, when they are asked whether they have personal experiences of these, they mostly answered "rarely". The most common

forms of discrimination experienced (with the majority of the sample answering "rarely" or "sometimes") are negative comments for behaving in a different manner than expected according to their perceived gender, being outed without their permission, and negative comments or not being treated equally because they are or are perceived to be LGBTQI+. The answers tended towards "rarely" concerning intentional misgendering, use of LGBTQI+ terms in a derogative way, negative comments online, mocking, verbal harassment, and discrimination in public places for being or being perceived to be LGBTQI+. Regarding incidents of discrimination, most answered "never" regarding the use of their dead name (for transgender people), exclusion from an event or activity, physical attacks, premeditated or otherwise, and sexual harassment for being or being perceived to be LGBTQI+.

Although the survey distinguished LGBTQI+ participants depending on whether or not they also had minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds, the answers between the two groups were very similar. Also, for the group of LGBTQI+ people with minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds, the same questions were repeated for discrimination a) due to being or being perceived to be LGBTQI+ or b) due to their specific ethnic and/or cultural background. It is worth noting that the answers to these questions are also very similar, to the point of being almost identical.

4.4 Involvement of the LGBTQI+ community in politics

Here, we have statistically significant differences in the responses to all of the questions (p-value; p < .001). Overall, the LGBTQI+ community seems more hesitant to agree that their involvement in politics is adequate, compared to the opinion of representatives from political institutions. On whether the LGBTQI+ community is equally represented in the political life of Cyprus or whether there are openly LGBTQI+ people in the political parties, the community seems to have a tendency to disagree, whereas the other three target groups tend to agree. Representatives from the political institutions stated that openly LGBTQI+ people had a presence in the political parties in the last elections, but the other three target groups responded with more uncertainty on this topic. With regard to the adequacy of representation of LGBTQI+ people in politics in Cyprus – and whether there are enough

opportunities for this to happen – representatives from political parties tend to agree, whereas LGBTQI+ participants tend to disagree. The means of participation of LGBTQI+ individuals in politics in Cyprus are mainly "through lobbying/advocating through NGOs" (participant from LGBTQI+ community).

Note that 72% of the LGBTQI+ people in the sample feel that they cannot engage in political processes without the risk of discrimination, and 63% feel that if they do engage in political processes in Cyprus, their position/opinions will not be taken into account as much as those of cisgender heterosexual politicians. One participant stated: "I would def[initely] need to perform myself in a more macho way, adopting a different body language and vocabulary" (participant from LGBTQI+ community). Another participant mentioned that "political processes in Cyprus are sexist, patriarchal and homophobic. And many women holding positions of power in politics also act in sexist ways in order to conform, which is sad. There is also a lack of solidarity amongst minorities in politics".

Government officials seem very sceptical about how involved the LGBTQI+ community actually is in Cyprus politics. 82% disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that the LGBTQI+ community is equally represented, 68% disagree or strongly disagree that there are openly LGBTQI+ people in their political party or in other political parties, 86% disagree or strongly disagree that there are enough openly LGBTQI+ people involved in Cyprus politics, and 68% disagree or strongly disagree that there are enough opportunities for LGBTQI+ people to engage in politics in Cyprus.

4.5 Need for policy reform

Although the target groups all seem to agree that policy reform is necessary in Cyprus, there were statistically significant differences between them on the extent of the agreement in all questions (p < .001). In response to whether policy reform is needed in social protection, family rights protection, and the provision of social services, there are statistically significant differences between the LGBTQI+ community (closer to "strong agreement"), the general public (between "strong agreement" and "agreement"), and the representatives from political institutions (between "agreement" and "no decision"). Statistically significant differences also appear in relation to the need for policy reform regarding civil rights protection, anti-

discrimination laws, and labour policy between the representatives from political institutions on one hand, placing themselves between "agreement" and "no decision", and the LGBTQI+ community and the general public, on the other, who appear between "agreement" and "strong agreement". Concerning public services, the LGBTQI+ respondents tended to "strongly agree" that policy reform is needed in this area, while the other three target groups tended to simply "agree". Regarding education, there is statistical difference between the opinion of representatives from political institutions, that are between "agreement" and "no decision" on whether reform is needed, and the opinion of the rest of the target groups that are between simple "agreement" and "strong agreement".

5. Discussion and recommendations

5.1 Discussion

The findings of this research illustrate discrepancies between the four target groups' perceptions relevant to the following categories of analysis: a) the current legal framework for ensuring LGBTQI+ rights ii) the prevalence of discriminatory incidents against the LGBTQI+ community, iii) the representation and inclusion of LGBTQI+ individuals in political institutions, and iv) the need for policy reform. However, in order to obtain a comprehensive and broader understanding of the discrepancies, each category needs to be approached separately and compared to prior research on both the national and regional level. While some of the results of the present field research are in line with research on issues concerning LGBTQI+ individuals in Cyprus, others seem to diverge. We compare these below.

Regarding perceptions on the current legal framework for LGBTQI+ rights, our research shows that LGBTQI+ individuals are highly aware of their legislative rights, while the general public seems overall lacking in knowledge around the topic. In fact, the general public believes that the current legal framework offers more rights than it actually does. For example, the general public believe that LGBTQI+ individuals can foster or adopt a child in Cyprus, when there are currently no such provisions in the law. The misconception of the current situation can be linked with the low level of public discourse on LGBTQI+ issues (FRA, 2014: 46). This lack of awareness may be partially due to the relatively recent development of the NGO landscape with regards to LGBTQI+ rights. It is also worth noting that the civil sector in Cyprus does not enjoy substantial support by the government, which would help in carrying out further awareness-raising activities.

The field research showed that representatives from political institutions believe that LGBTQI+ individuals are legally protected from discriminations and from hate speech crimes. The fact that politicians feel that LGBTQI+ individuals are already adequately protected by the law is due to a lack of knowledge around the subject, which is in turn due to a lack of LGBTQI+ voices (and therefore narratives) in the country's political institutions. At the same time, a significant percentage of LGBTQI+ individuals and general

public (25% in total) answered the same questions saying that they are "not sure" whether LGBTQI+ individuals are legally protected from discrimination and hate speech crimes. This could be seen as an indicator of the complexity of the issue: the actual legal protections in place for LGBTQI+ individuals versus the effectiveness of those protections. As in the incident concerning the Bishop of Morphou, while legislation protecting LGBTQI+ individuals may exist, whether the provisions of the law are effectively implemented or not are a separate matter.

As mentioned above, statistical differences emerged between the perception of the four target groups regarding LGBTQI+ rights. However, with regards to the questions on whether LGBTQI+ individuals *should have* equal rights with cisgender heterosexual people (same-sex marriage, adoption, foster care, changes of gender in legal documents, equal representation in political life), all target groups seem to be in favour of securing LGBTQI+ rights (all means were above four[12], with minor standard deviation). The majority of the participants from all four target groups replied that they either "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statements. This is in contrast with the recent EU survey that was published in 2019 by the European Commission, in which the majority of the participants from Cyprus expressed their disagreement or discomfort with LGBTQI+ people acquiring equal rights with cisgender heterosexual people (see section 4.1 above). This gap can be explained if we consider that the sample we gathered was mainly through the Accept and QCA networks. As a result, the participants were more likely to be open and positive towards the topic at hand, hence the results could represent an approach that is skewed positively. On the other hand, there were some questions that a substantial percentage of the non-LGBTQI+ groups (approximately 15-20%) were hesitant to agree or even disagreed on. Those questions were the ones relating to rights that are not yet legally secured, i.e. adoption, foster-care, same-sex marriage and change of gender in legal documents. As mentioned above, LGBTQI+ rights represent a relatively new topic in public discourse in Cyprus, and so further research is necessary to determine the reasons behind the reluctance of Cypriot society in securing these rights.

In examining discrimination, the questionnaire was split into three sections. The first was addressed to all target groups and focused on the frequency at

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[12] The scale was from 1 to 5 with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.

which participants believe discriminatory incidents occur in Cyprus. The second and third part were respectively addressed to LGBTQI+ individuals *with no* minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds and to LGBTQI+ individuals *with* minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds; the questions focused on whether respondents had personally experienced such discriminatory incidents.

In the first section, the results showed that the groups all agree on the prevalence of discriminatory incidents in Cypriot society. While certain statistical differences emerged in 5 out of 15 questions examining the perceptions of the four target groups, those differences were mainly concerned with the frequency of those incidents, with participant opinions mostly falling between "sometimes" and "often". Here we note, while also acknowledging a limitation of the survey, that the pre-determined choice of answers could, at times, be ambiguous or irrelevant ("never", "rare", "sometimes", "often", "always"). The participants of the study also noted this weakness in the space that was provided for comments. What was also commonly agreed between the groups, was that the LGBTQI+ community is not generally accepted in Cyprus (70% of all participants replied negatively).

The results from the second and third section of the questionnaire on discrimination highlighted that the participants did not personally experience a high degree of discrimination, despite their belief that such incidents are prevalent in Cyprus. This gap could be seen through the lens of the demographic characteristics of the survey sample. As mentioned, a high proportion of the LGBTQI+ sample comprised of highly educated and relatively young individuals, so it was not particularly diverse or wide in range. What was very surprising was the fact that LGBTQI+ individuals with minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds did not report experiencing additional struggles due to their minority status compared to those which do not identify as minorities (and identify as LGBTQI+). Taking into consideration the current status of ethnic minorities in Cyprus as described above, this seems like an incongruous result. It is possible that the survey sample – even though there were participants with minority ethnic or cultural background – did not manage to include participants specifically from Black or Asian communities, immigrants or refugees and asylum seekers. The narrowness of the sample and the low participation of minorities are therefore limitations of the survey, and show the need for further research that would use a more diversified LGBTQI+ sample.

In the set of questions connected with the representation of the LGBTQI+ community in the political sphere, the perceptions of the four target groups all presented statistical differences. The main contrast was between the LGBTQI+ individuals and the rest of the groups.

LGBTQI+ individuals are hesitant to confirm the adequacy of the involvement of LGBTQI+ individuals in politics, they are unaware of any openly LGBTQI+ in politics (apart from the Adviser to the President for Multiculturalism, Acceptance & Respect to Diversity) and they agree on the fact that opportunities for LGBTQI+ to access the political arena are inadequate. This is in line with existing research which shows that Cypriot society would feel uncomfortable (44% of the participants) with an LGBT individual in the highest elected political position in Cyprus (European Commission, 2019: 10). In addition, two questions that were addressed only to LGBTQI+ participants asked a) *[can you] engage in political processes without bearing the risk of discrimination in Cyprus?* and b) *if you are engaged in political processes, would your positions be taken into account as much as [those of] a cisgender heterosexual citizen in Cyprus?* In response, 72% and 63% of the participants respectively replied in the negative. Since space was provided for comments, many participants utilised this opportunity to elaborate on their responses. They pointed out that the stereotypical politician is a macho, cisgender heterosexual man who follows the patriarchal norms of society. Participants also critiqued the lack of space for gender non-conformity in political representation, such as female masculinities[13] or male femininities.

5.2 Recommendations

Considering the limited research available concerning LGBTQI+ issues on the local and regional level, and the limitations of the present field study, further research is necessary in order to better understand the current status of the LGBTQI+ community. Research needs to focus on the diverse experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals, including on the intersection of race, gender, age, and social class with the LGBTQI+ experience, in order to do justice to the complexity of the issue. Apart from research focused on the LGBTQI+ spectrum and its nuances, further studies should be conducted on heteronormativity,

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[13] The term "female masculinities" is taken from Halberstam (1998).

patriarchy and other dominant forces that affect political and social life in Cyprus.

With regards to legal protections, the key recommendation is to take a bilateral approach, which was also mentioned by the participants. As one individual from the general public stated, "[w]hile it is necessary to change the legal and structural framework… it is [also] absolutely necessary to push for the implementation of legislation and policies". Steps should therefore be put in place for the implementation of the existing legislation. For example, the hate speech law went into effect in 2015, however it has yet to be used in any court cases (ILGA-Europe, 2020). It is important to seek strategies that will not only lift Cyprus in European rankings, but that will also affect practices at the political and societal level, so that LGBTQI+ equality can be realised in all aspects of public life. Moreover, further rights need to be secured for LGBTQI+ individuals (including minorities), such as parental rights, adoption, change of gender marker in legal documents, and equal access to health care.

Another important recommendation is to find nuanced ways to combat discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender expression. For example, educational programmes on LGBTQI+ rights could be specifically designed and implemented for managers as well as employees. Similar programmes could be designed for people in the public sector or members of political parties. In addition, the education system should move towards a more LGBTQI+- inclusive curriculum. Discussions on LGBTQI+ rights and issues, and discussions around diversity more generally, should be mainstreamed across all areas and levels of education. Many participants expressed a desire to see policy reform on the level of education. The following response outlines the layered nature of the issue: "We need to introduce different narratives in education (about health, sexuality, LGBT+, national narratives that are harmful to the above and towards T/Cypriots and gendered roles, toxic masculinity, etc.)".

With respect to the participation of LGBTQI+ individuals in politics, inclusion needs to be enhanced, as does the level of political discourse around LGBTQI+ issues. The following steps are recommended: a) increasing support to NGOs working in the field of LGBTQI+ issues, b) political party engagement in projects investigating sexual citizenship (to assist in the process of acknowledging sexual diversity and the associated legal and

political implications), c) organisation of debates or discussions that will help target groups in bridging the gap created by misconceptions or stereotypes, d) allocation of a percentage from the budgets of political parties for training and education around sexual orientation and gender identity, and e) creation of bodies or committees within political parties that will raise and address LGBTQI+ concerns.

Our recommendations could be implemented through a variety of avenues. While implementing specific measures towards inclusion and equal participation are key, what will ultimately influence the rate of progress is the state's willingness to shift towards the values of sexual and gender diversity and inclusivity, and commit to projects which deepen democracy.

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