

Situation of the LGBTI+ Community During the Covid -19 Pandemic

Aleanca LGBTI

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This study, which aims to identify the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic among the LGBTI community, led by the LGBTI Alliance, was conducted online through a survey completed by **228** individuals self-identified as members of the LGBTI community, as well as through the realization of various focus- groups. The sample makes this the largest study ever conducted in Albania for the LGBTI community.

The questionnaire was published on social networks during the month of June. The answers include evidence of the consequences the pandemic has had on LGBTI people since March, when a state of emergency was declared at the national level. The questionnaire investigates vital areas such as the economy, employment, housing and security, as well as the LGBTI community's ability to meet basic needs during the pandemic.

The results show that 47 percent of the LGBTI community are unemployed. This figure is notably higher than the figure of a preliminary World Bank study which confirmed that **38 percent of Albanians lost their jobs during the pandemic.** One of the main reasons why the unemployment rate among the LGBTI community is higher than the unemployment rate of the general population in Albania, relates with the fact that the LGBTI community already suffered from a high number of systemic unemployment since before the declaration of the state of emergency. Although it has not been the aim of this study, LGBTI organizations have long identified discrimination, bullying, and the exclusion of the LGBTI community from the education system as one of the main reasons for the high unemployment rate.

30 percent of the LGBTI community has endured this crisis thanks to family support, **but only 1.7 percent** of them have overcome the crisis thanks to state support, despite the fact that **22 percent of them have received the war salary¹.**

On the other hand, **60 percent of LGBTI people say they have succeeded on their own, an encouraging figure that confirms the high level of resilience (ability to adapt) among the LGBTI community.**

Focus groups developed with community members also stressed the importance of psychological and economic support for each other, turning solidarity between them into a key factor in addressing the pandemic.

¹ War salary is an expression used by the PM referring to a small financial aid package given for people who lost their jobs during the quarantine period. (Note from the translator.)

Psychological counseling and food packages have been the basic needs of the LGBTI community during this time of pandemic, a fact that gives to this reality the dimensions of an existential crisis.

The transgender community in Albania finds it very difficult to be employed, almost impossible, a fact that confirms once again that, unfortunately, even within the LGBTI community itself there is a hierarchy of marginalization, where the transgender community, which at the same time challenges more critical norms and gender stereotypes of Albanian society, remains the most discriminated.

Involvement in sex work is seen as the only way to survive by many members of the transgender community. However, during the pandemic, some of them found it impossible to work as sex workers and as a result lost their income, necessary to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, medicine.

Even in terms of housing the situation seems extremely difficult.

It has been found that 1 in 4 LGBTI people (or 25 percent of them) are unable to provide housing. This forces them to return to their families, a phenomenon similar in many parts of the world, a phenomenon that sociologists have called the "boomerang generation effect".

Returning to the family in cases where the family has been aware of the sexual orientation of their children, has been followed by conflict, psychological and physical violence.

The number of chronic diseases seems worrying. Despite their young age (graphs below) **about 11.5 percent of LGBTIs who participated in this study report suffering from chronic illness.**

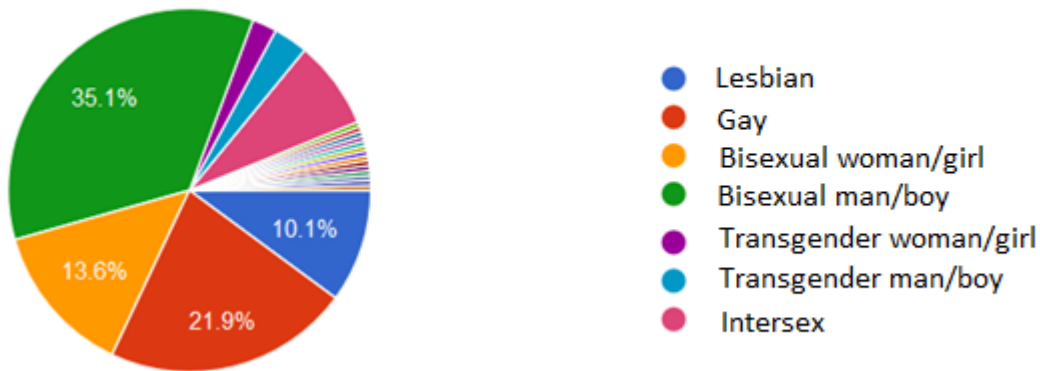
Given this difficult socio-economic situation, the LGBTI Alliance and the LGBTI Shelter took immediate action to help LGBTI people who were hit the hardest by the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. From March to September, the Alliance and the Shelter supported about **117 LGBTI people with 624 food packages.**

About **16 members of the LGBTI community took refuge in the LGBTI Shelter service** during the period May-August (**824** nights). The Alliance and Shelter have **supported through rent reimbursement 28 members of the LGBTI community (52 rents).**

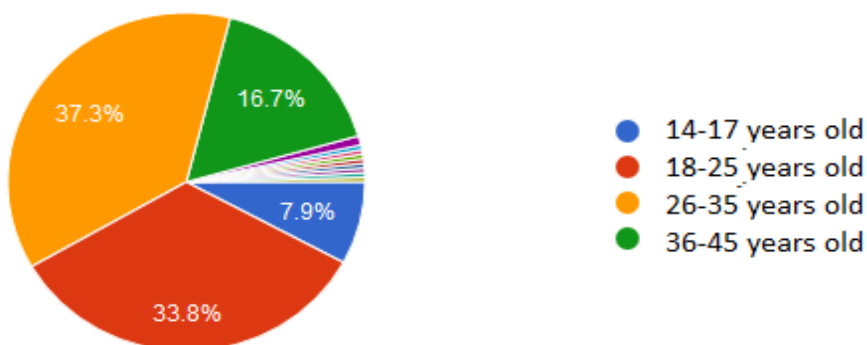
A special focus has been paid to the health of the most vulnerable, it is why the LGBT Alliance and the LGBT Shelter have supported **with medication 25 members** of the LGBTI community, and **23 members of the community have received services in health centers through the mediation of organizations.** During this period, **342 people were tested for sexually transmitted diseases at the LGBTI Alliance, and 473 people received counseling about STDs.**

Questionnaire data analysis

Out of **228** respondents: 21.9% identify as gay boys/men, 13.6% identify as bisexual girls / women, 10.1% lesbian girls/women, 35.1% identify as bisexual boys/men, 7.9% identify as intersex, 5.4% identify as girls/transgender women, 3.1% transgender boy/man and the rest are identified as questioning/queer. (Graph 1).



The age group of persons who answered the questionnaire is: 7.9% age group 14-17 years; 33.8% age group 18-25 years; 37.3% age group 26-35 years; 16.7% age group 36-45 years and 4.7% age group over 46 years; (Graph 2).



Quantitative and qualitative data analysis is divided into several main areas such as:

1. **Employment**
2. **Housing**
3. **Health**
4. **Psychological wellbeing**
5. **Discrimination**

1. Employment

"It has been very difficult for me and it is still very difficult. The municipality has helped me only once, but what can I do in these conditions when I am without support, without assistance, without a home and without income. I receive a bonus from the municipality of 7000 lek, but where can you find a house with a rent of 7000 lek per month nowadays? So I was obliged to go to the bins to collect cans and pay the rent." Lesbian woman.

"At first I did not work because I was too afraid, but then I had problems. I had no money to pay the rent, so I got back to work and I haven't quit my job since that day because I had no economic conditions. I was interested in making money, and it never occurred to me that I could get infected by coronavirus", Transgender girl.

"The economic situation has been very difficult, I had to improvise to even have something to eat". Transgender girl.

As a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic, large numbers of people in the community have lost their jobs, worked without pay, consequently their income has decreased considerably. Almost ½ of the respondents have suffered these consequences, of which the transgender community is even more disadvantaged. The transgender community in Albania finds it very difficult to be employed, almost impossible, especially in the difficult socio-economic conditions created by the pandemic. Inability to find employment is directly related to the strong prejudice and discrimination that exists against this community. Involvement in sex work is seen as the only way to survive by the transgender community. During the period of the pandemic, some of them found it impossible to work as sex workers therefore losing their income to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, medicine. Food packages distributed by the

LGBTI Alliance and LGBTI Shelter and support through rent refunds have been the only sources of support for many of the LGBTI community.

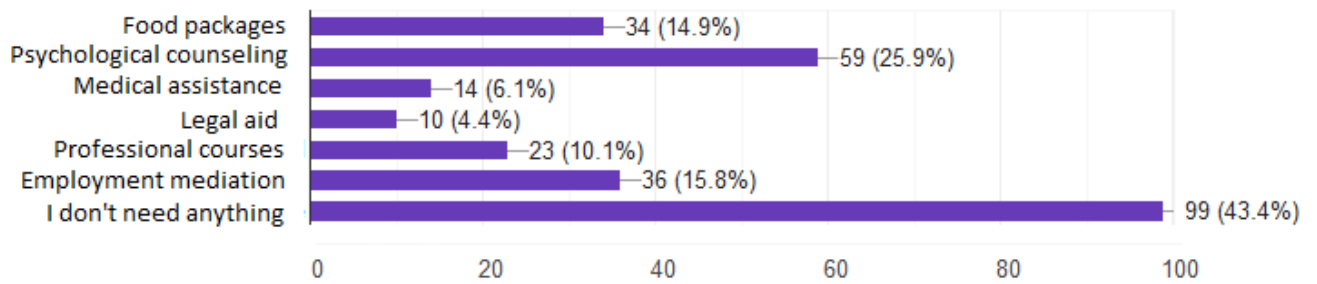
When asked how they managed to meet their basic living needs (food, shelter, medicine) during the Covid-19 period, **60.1%** of the LGBTI community respondents answered that they managed on their own and **30.7%** said that they were helped by their family. About **6%** of them say they have received help from organizations and only 4 out of 228 respondents say they have received help from the state.

Basic needs for food, medicine, clothes and shelter are the most important as estimated by LGBTI respondents, but the inability of **1/4** of them to meet these basic living needs without the help of family members is extremely worrying. LGBTI people are in urgent need of some form of financial or material assistance from the state, as they have lost their job, housing and are at risk. The study points out that the categories most at risk of pandemic consequences are the transgender women community **5.4%** and lesbian and bisexual girls and women **23.7%**. These categories are facing many employment difficulties, while the risk of unemployment and poverty increases even more due to their sexual orientation or their gender identity.

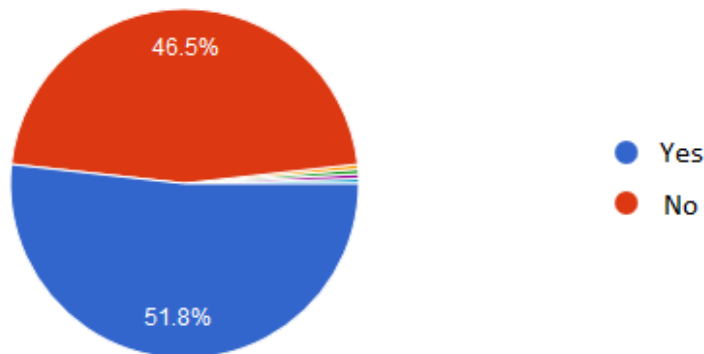
"Every client can be with Covid and you can get infected. I protect myself with a mask and always use disinfectant." Transgender girl/sex worker

"We do this work out of misery, we do not even receive the war salary." Transgender girl/sex worker

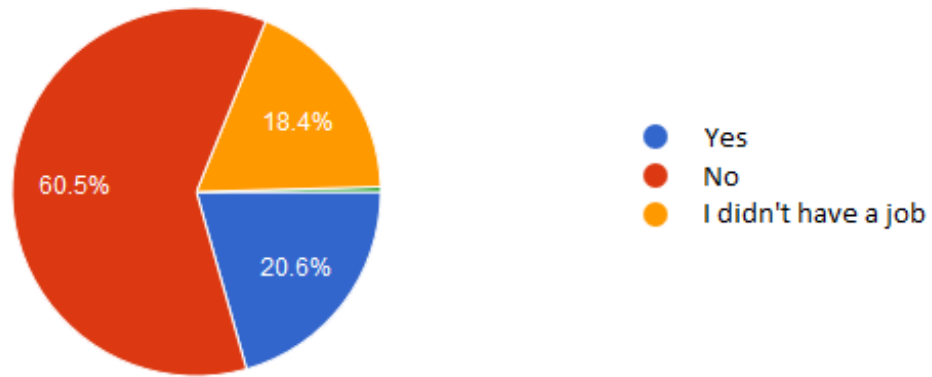
The main needs of the LGBTI community identified by the questionnaire responses are; psychological counseling, specifically **25.9%** of respondents; meanwhile **15.8%** of them need employment mediation; **14.9%** are in need of food packages; **10.1%** express themselves for professional courses; **6.1%** need medical assistance; **4.4%** of them need legal aid.



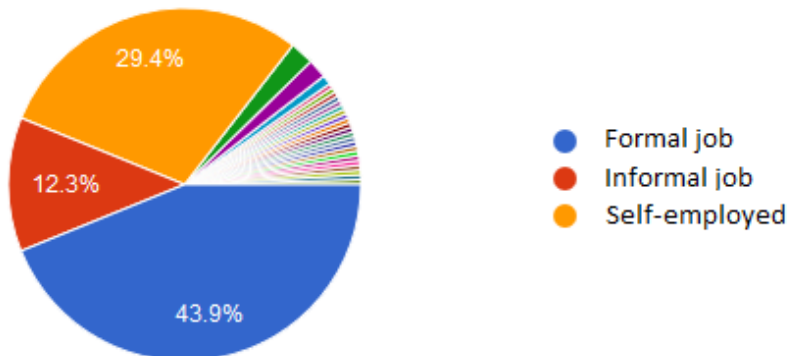
The answers to the employment questionnaire are alarming. Asked if they are currently employed, respondents say that **51.8%** are employed, while **46.5%** are unemployed. Only 4 of the respondents stated that they have received assistance from the state, which shows that the assistance provided by the state has not reached the LGBTI community.



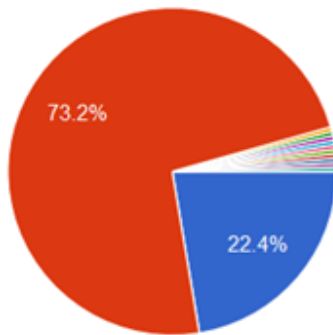
Asked if they lost their job due to the pandemic: **60.5%** say they did not lose their job, **20.6%** say they lost their job due to the pandemic and **18.4%** say they were unemployed even before the crisis.



43.9% of respondents work in formal jobs, **29.4%** are self-employed, **12.3%** work in informal jobs and the rest are unemployed.



Although the Albanian state undertook some policies to help the citizens during the pandemic, from the answers to the questionnaire we notice that the LGBTI community has not benefited enough from them. As a result, **73.2%** of respondents say that they have not received any assistance from the state. Only **22.4%** say that they have received the war salary, only half of the persons employed in formal jobs.



- I have received Covid-19 cash assistance from the state
- I have not received any assistance from the state

After the end of the pandemic and the gradual return to daily life, a large number of unemployed in Albania will try to find their place in the labor market. Knowing the stigmatizing and discriminatory Albanian context but also based on the data of the questionnaire regarding employment, employment and housing opportunities will remain problematic especially for the most vulnerable groups of the LGBTI community.

2. Housing

"When I returned home, it was a complicated situation, because I could not talk on the phone with friends. Our communication was reduced even if I was in profound need of it." Lesbian girl.

"I was afraid of my dad since he is a fanatic and I do not want to lose my family." Gay boy

"My family does not support me financially as it used to because they too are in lack of resources." Gay boy

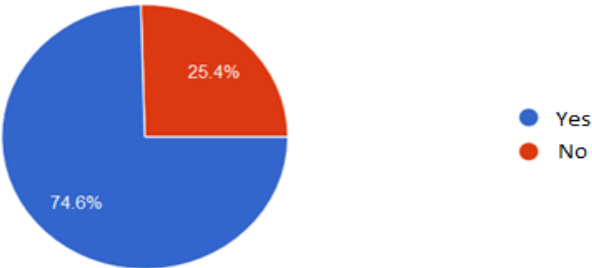
"I lost my job and my family supported me. Many from the community that I know of have lost their jobs and returned home, but I also know of those who have worked online." Gay boy.

"The shelter helped me with the rent issue, I don't know how I could have done it differently." Transgender girl

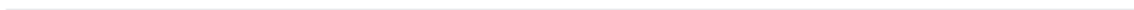
Housing is a daily challenge for the LGBTI community, especially for that part of the community that has come out to their family and has not been accepted by them, or for people whose

appearance does not conform to gender norms, such as transgender people. A big part of them provide income by working in low-wage or informal jobs. Due to the pandemic many of them lost their jobs and as a result remained homeless. Another part of them was forced to return to their families, and others found shelter and support from friends or relatives.

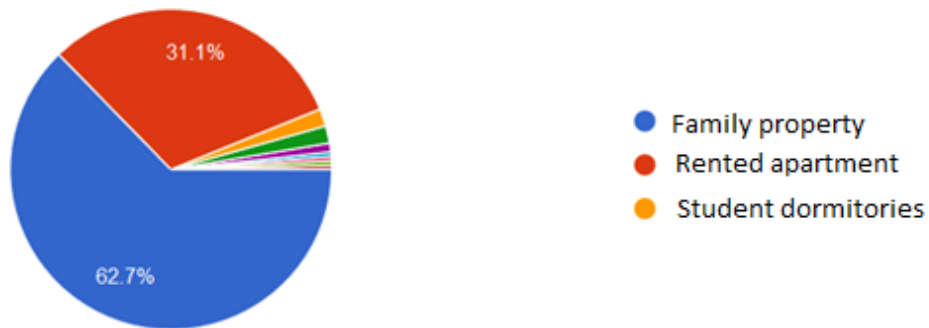
Referring to the questionnaire, a considerable number of respondents, about **25.4%** of them, say they can not meet their housing needs. As a result, many of them have been forced to return to their families during this period. Returning to the family in cases where the family has been aware of the sexual orientation of their children, has been followed by conflict, psychological and physical violence.



When asked who they currently live with, **63.2%** say they live with their family, **18%** live alone and **12.7%** live with their partner.



Rental expenses: **62.7%** of respondents say that the house in which they live is owned by the family, and **31.1%** say that they live in rented apartments. The rest say they live in student dormitories or day homes.

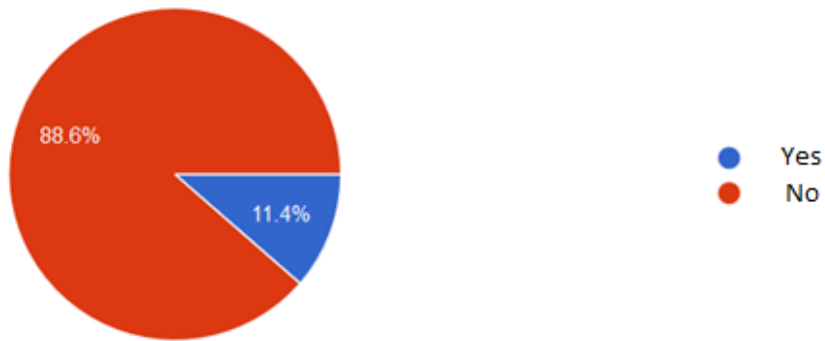


4. Health

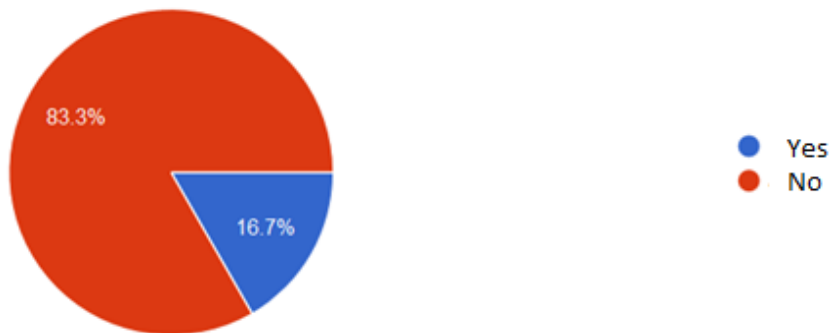
"Being supplied with methadone has been very difficult, because we did not have methadone and I could not stand the pain" Lesbian woman.

Access to health care has always been problematic for the LGBTI community due to discrimination and stigma. Major difficulties have been encountered mainly by the transgender community which due to the lack of legislation and professional expertise finds it impossible to access hormone therapy in Albania.

According to the survey data, **11.4%** of respondents said they suffer from chronic diseases.



Asked if they needed medication during the quarantine period, **16.7%** say they needed medication, specifically 38 of the respondents.



11.5% of those who needed medication stated that they encountered difficulties in obtaining medication on time. The reasons why they failed to provide the medication on time were:

1. **Drug market shortage,**
2. **Lack of public transport,**
3. **Difficulty accessing services at the IPH (Institute of Public Health).**

Difficulty in accessing medication has been problematic mainly for people living with HIV / Aids. During March-May, persons from the community living with HIV / Aids found it impossible to travel to Tirana to receive medication as a result of restrictive measures. A large number of them were forced to discontinue treatment and constantly contacted the LGBTI Alliance to address this issue. This experience should serve as a lesson for the health system which is totally unprepared in managing such situations that can have serious consequences on the health of citizens.

5. Psychological wellbeing

"The third week was the time when the economic problems started and the situation became very depressing" Lesbian girl.

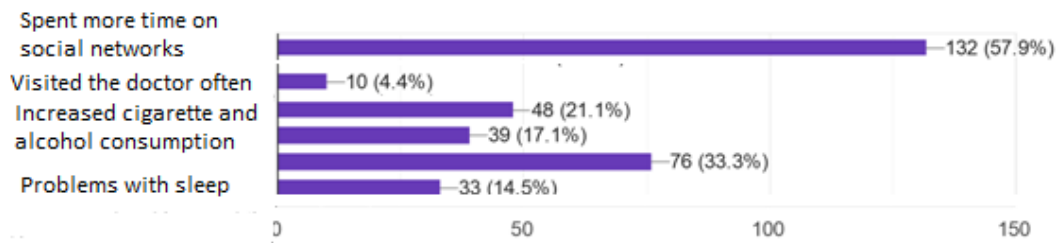
"We are uncertain about the future, what will happen in the future if we close again." Gay boy

"Third and fourth week were the hardest. I experienced prison, I got sad and I ate 1 meal a day out of sadness." Gay boy.

"We rely a lot on each other, on the community. We talked all the time on WhatsApp and in groups." Transgender girl.

"I have felt support from the online activities carried out by the Alliance but also other organizations abroad and I would like these activities to continue to help us psychologically", Lesbian Girl.

One of the biggest concerns that the pandemic and physical isolation has brought to people in the community is the difficulty of socializing with supportive friends. Throughout the quarantine period the only form of communication and maintaining relationships for the community has been through social media and other communication applications. During this period **57.9%** of respondents spent more time on social networks. Other concerns that persons from the community report experiencing are: anxiety symptoms including sleep problems, increased or lost appetite as well as excessive weight gain or loss. **4.4%** have visited the family doctor out of concern that they were sick, **21.1%** have increased the consumption of cigarettes and alcohol, **33.3%** say that they have had problems with sleep.



38% of respondents who participated in the study reported experiencing symptoms of depression as a result of quarantine and physical isolation. People from the LGBTI community have experienced financial insecurity due to unemployment which was present even before the pandemic but **39%** of those surveyed report experiencing financial insecurity as a result of the loss of economic stability during quarantine. **28.9%** of them say that they have uncertainties regarding work and school and what will happen in the future regarding these important aspects of their lives. A good part of the community members have been forced to return to their families during the pandemic and this has also increased the fear of exposing their sexual orientation/gender identity. **79** persons who stayed close to the family during this period reported fears of being identified by the family regarding gender orientation/identity.

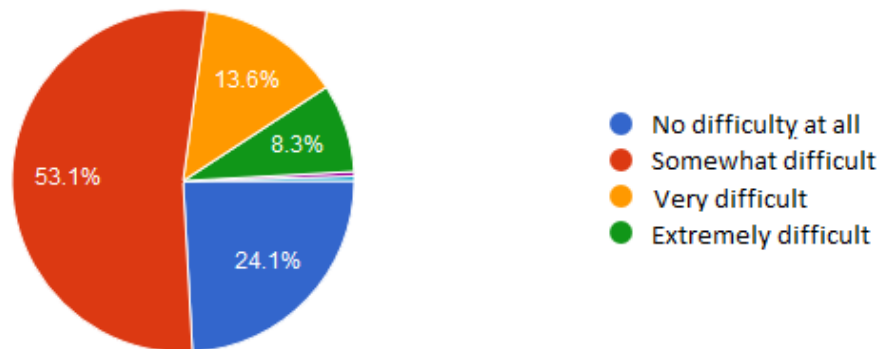
Even before the pandemic, members of the LGBTI community were at risk regarding depression, anxiety and self-harming behaviors leading to suicide. During quarantine **20** people report experiencing frequent panic attacks and **10.1%** of them report having repeated thoughts about death.

Living with family members has been difficult for community members who have not come out to family members regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity. Throughout the pandemic, community members have been forced to coexist in family environments that are not supportive and receptive to them. Lack of freedom and lack of being oneself in family environments, distancing oneself from understanding and accepting social groups has increased the perception of being without support thus bringing emotional as well as physical isolation. For people who lived with family during quarantine it was almost impossible to get psychological service online or over the phone because they did not have an environment where they could talk freely about their experiences, even though they needed this service. The only service offering help that they could use was chat counseling through the platform www.soslgbt.al.

72% of people who participated in the study reported symptoms of anxiety during the quarantine period, including frustration, irritability, nervousness, fear as if something bad would happen. **38%** report symptoms of depression experiencing loss of interest, motivation in daily life, unwanted memories, thoughts about death and hopelessness for the future.

Experiencing these concerns during quarantine has led persons of the LGBTI community, as expressed in the survey, to have difficulties in the functioning and realization of daily activities, taking care of things at home as well as difficulties in the relations with other people.

8.3% say that they have found it extremely difficult to function the same as before in their daily life, **13.6%** say that daily activity has been very difficult as well as taking care of themselves or their home and **53.1%** say that it has been somewhat difficult.



6. Discrimination

*"The community has the right to walk on the streets and sidewalks. "We, the trans community, every time we go out, a police car stops us and prohibits us from walking on the streets."
Transgender girl.*

*"I wish the state did not cause trouble for us on the streets. When we leave the house, the police stop us and their behavior depends on the cop. There are cops behaving well, and there are those who behave intolerably, 1 week ago, I was struck with a cop who came without a mask screaming at me to leave the sidewalk. I got his spit on me. The state wants us to act by the rules, but the state itself why doesn't it follow the rules and leave the cops without masks?"
Transgender girl.*

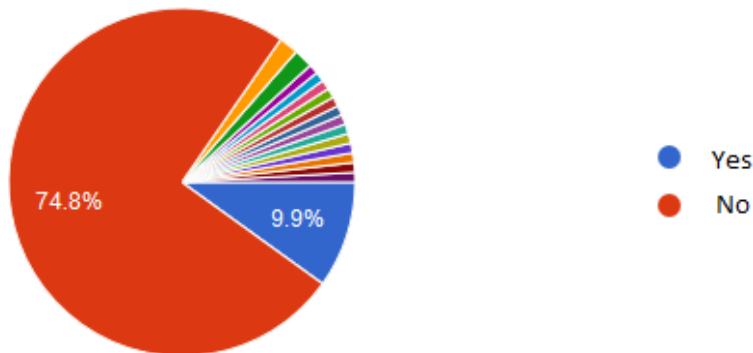
"In many cases, the police do not know how to deal with us. There are those who say: You have all become like Angela. It is typical of you, to slit your veins. Fuck off. This is abusive behavior from the police." Transgender girl.

Physical isolation, interruption of the daily routine, return to homophobic/transphobic families, lack of socialization with friends or partners, longer stay in social networks, have, as a result increased the possibility for people in the community to be more at risk from various forms of violence or discrimination. **13.2%** of the respondents state that they have experienced psychological violence and have been bullied, **4** of them have been physically abused; **5** of them were sexually harassed, and **1** of them was abandoned and experienced disinterest from the family.



The most frequent places where discrimination and violence occurred are reported to have been; social networks, on the streets, in the neighborhood and at home.

As can be seen from the graph below, the vast majority of those who experienced violence did not report it, about **74.8%**, while only **9.9%** reported it. These data show that reporting continues to be an issue that needs to be addressed.



As identified in the introductory sentences of this section, one of the problems constantly encountered by the transgender community is the constant clash with the police. Given that the transgender community is also the most visible part of the LGBTI community, its confrontation with discrimination exercised not only by citizens but also institutions is many times higher and more systematic. It is very important that the rights of the transgender community to live openly their gender identity be respected especially by representatives of institutions such as the State Police who must guarantee the rights and freedoms of this community and not turn into a threat and violator of them.

Recommendations

1. The Albanian government must ensure that all emergency measures adopted during the pandemic as well as socio - economic emergency support and compensation do not leave anyone behind, but take into account the liability of the most vulnerable groups such as the LGBTI community.
2. Special attention should be paid into supporting members of the LGBTI community who work in informal jobs and insecure environments, who should be provided with access to social services, health care and basic needs.

3. The state must ensure the protection of rights related to physical integrity, especially for that part of the LGBTI community which is most at risk in crisis situations.

4. All specific initiatives aiming to address the problem of increasing domestic violence should also include the high risk of LGBTI persons, and especially young people exposed to domestic violence. In the longer term, widening the definition of domestic violence to include, in particular, violence perpetrated by family members against LGBTI persons, will help and ensure that preventive measures are more comprehensive, thus not leaving behind LGBTI persons who are emotionally and physically abused by their families.

5. The state should adapt the procedures of health care and housing services to the LGBTI community members who are rejected by the family due to their sexual orientation and gender identity, in order to guarantee the fulfillment of the basic needs related to housing, health and food, near the city where they reside, especially during periods of time declared by the state to be a "state of emergency".