Sexual Orientation in Cyprus:  
Mapping the Sociopolitical Climate, Experiences, and Needs.

Executive Summary

This is an executive summary for two studies conducted on behalf of the Cyprus Family Planning Association and accept-LGBT Cyprus. This publication was made with the support of ILGA-Europe within its Human Rights Violations Documentation Fund. The opinions expressed in the document do not necessarily reflect any official position of ILGA-Europe.

Background

Throughout Cyprus history, colonial and post-colonial legacy prosecuted and marginalized LGBT people. Same-sex sexual relations among men were criminalized until 1998, and abolition only occurred following repeated pressure from the European Court of Human rights, following an appeal by Alecos Modinos. To this date, Cyprus remains a socially conservative country when it comes to issues pertaining to sexuality, or diversity, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) issues. This conservative climate is reflected through public opinions, inadequate legal or institutional provisions through its institutions to ensure equal rights, and, generally, a lack of discourse on LGBT matters, which are still considered taboo, and are thus lacking visibility. In a recent classification of the legal situation for LGBT people in Europe by ILGA-Europe (2011), Cyprus was the only EU member state classified in ILGA-Europe’s “red zone”, indicating “gross violations of human rights and discrimination”. This low ranking is partly attributed to the failure of Cypriot legislation to make any mention of sexual orientation or gender identity in its anti-discrimination and hate speech measures, the lack of any legal recognition of same sex partnerships and its unequal age of consent for straight and for same-sex couples. Moreover, Cyprus has never hosted a gay pride event, and has no legislation addressing homophobic, homophobic hate speech or homophobic motivation for a crime on the grounds of sexual orientation. As a result, homophobic hate speech and homophobic hate crimes are dealt with as indistinguishable from other crimes, and remain undocumented.

At the same time, public opinion in Cyprus as documented by Eurobarometer reports and national surveys, ranks among the most conservative and least tolerant in Europe, and remains wary of the prospect of legalizing same-sex partnerships. Studies on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) issues among youth document limited knowledge on sexuality and sexual reproductive health among young people in Cyprus, a powerful influence of the church in sexual development, and wide prevalence of myths and misconceptions regarding sexuality. Sexuality Education is neither legally mandated, nor implemented on a regular basis in schools, and LGBT issues are not yet part of the curriculum, and not explicitly incorporated or referred to in any of the courses that include relate to sexuality. Non formal education in relation to sexuality, including LGBT issues is also lacking.
Given this conservative prevailing climate, public discourse on LGBT issues in Cyprus is limited. The actual impact of this prevailing homophobic climate for LGBT persons living in Cyprus has received little scrutiny. This project includes two studies, in a first systematic attempt to document the situation and needs of LGBT issues in Cyprus.

**Study 1: Mapping the Socio-political Climate**

Study 1 aimed to collect and map information regarding the types of discourse pertaining to LGBT issues as it appears in contemporary Cypriot media. Articles pertaining to LGBT issues published in widely circulated island-wide, daily newspapers in Cyprus (Phileleftheros, Politis, and the English language newspaper Cyprus Mail) in the past three years (2008-2010) were collected, coded and analyzed, in an effort to map the current social and political climate. Articles were retrieved using a list of keywords including words, terms, and names considered relevant to LGBT issues in Cyprus, compiled by the research team and used to search newspaper websites and archives, in order to retrieve relevant articles. A detailed Code Frame, which defined headings and indicators as codes to collect information, was used to code the articles on key indicators, which included key phrases expressed by politicians or key figures suggesting acceptance or discrimination for LGBT people, frequency and types of homophobic expressions and expressions of opinions, attitudes of decision-makers towards LGBT rights, type of coverage by the media, and perceptions projected by the media on LGBT rights.

Analyses were conducted separately for each newspaper, as well as across newspapers, aiming to identify overlapping issues, themes and patterns present throughout the press for the three-year period. Similarly, an overall analysis was conducted for the entire three-year time span studied, as well as across years, in an effort to delineate changing patterns and trends throughout the period. For the 314 relevant articles identified and coded, content ranged from instances of a single mention of LGBT-related keywords to articles with a main or exclusive of focus on sexual orientation. The total number of articles, for all newspapers, appeared to steadily increase throughout the three year period, with the most pronounced increase noted in 2010. LGBT-relevant references in articles appeared most frequently under “International News”, although a consistent shift from a predominance of European/International-only focus to a predominance of local focus was apparent throughout the three-year period, such that, in 2010 articles in the column/commentary sections became the most frequent.

The main topics covered in relation to LGBT issues included discrimination and violence on the basis of sexual orientation, recognition of LGBT rights as Human Rights and legal recognition of same sex relationships. Coded articles were subdivided into articles containing or presenting predominately positive, negative, or neutral (or “no-attitude”) attitudes toward LGBT rights, and opinions of stakeholders were mapped. A major gap identified was the striking absence of political opinions or positions. Few public figures expressed a clear stance, for instance, on the topic of same-sex unions. In 2010, the discourse was largely monopolized by one conservative Member of Parliament (MP), while other key political figures appeared remarkably silent. Besides the Ombudswoman and Equality authority, and on some occasions, the Ministry of Interior, local and national authorities refrained from any debate. The main stakeholders identified as allies, along with LGBT and other NGOs and activists, were the Ombudswoman and the Equality Authority; with few exceptions, religious figures, both nationally and abroad were the most negative; while opinions of other national officials, politicians, the local business/industry and media sectors, as well as laypersons, were mixed, with a wide spectrum of opinions ranging from strong opposition, neutral or mixed attitude, and explicit support being expert throughout. An in-depth examination of content of views expressed on marriage equality was conducted, as this was the most popular issue identified in the articles. In sum, overall, pro- same-sex marriage arguments rested primarily on
legal and human-rights grounds, with occasional references to economic benefits. Positions against same-sex marriage relied, for the most part, on the position that it is “against nature” or “against ethics” and would bring about negative “consequences” (which were not specifically defined).

Since newspapers are among those institutions that influence social perceptions and shape social reality, the main issues presented as associated with LGBT issues through newspapers, and representations and discourse associated with the presented issues, are potentially critical in reflecting ongoing public discourse. The most pronounced pattern observed in the frequency of articles published in the three year period of study, for all newspapers studied, was the great increase in articles published in 2010 compared to the previous two years, particularly for the Greek language newspapers. Such progress can contribute to increased visibility of LGBT and promote public dialogue about LGBT rights in Cyprus.

Nevertheless, despite the increases in coverage, overall coverage of LGBT issues was limited. Newspaper space devoted to LGBT issues is minute compared to other topics that take-up the majority of the attention of the press. Most articles throughout the three year span studied are found in middle pages of newspapers, with a significant percentage located in International News and small commentary sections. A striking gap noted was the absence of any coverage of the most locally-relevant pride event, the annual Athens pride, in either of the three years.

Current LGBT representations in the Cypriot press, in both local and international mentions, appear overwhelmingly pessimistic; it would even be accurate to claim that LGBT people are portrayed by the Cypriot press as passive victims of discrimination, subject to the mercy of a ruthlessly homophobic society, whose rights rely on competent authorities such as law makers, migration authorities, or the attorney general in order to be secured. Thus, more work may be needed, by LGBT advocates themselves, but also by journalists who wish to contribute toward the coverage of LGBT issues, to portray the LGBT community as socially active, and as an active agent for positive change.

Study 2: Mapping the Experiences and needs of the LGB community in Cyprus

The second study provides insight into the experiences of LGB persons in Cyprus, obtained through questionnaires completed by LGB people throughout the island. This study aims to explore the experiences and needs of LGB people in Cyprus and thus provide evidenced-based information about LGB people in Cyprus. These experiences, and perceptions of acceptance of rejection of their sexual orientation for LGB, were compared men and women of various ages in Cyprus. The study documented experiences of violence or psychological harassment, acceptance or discrimination in relation to work, housing, health and other services, faith, school and university, family, relationships, and social attitudes. Participants also provided information regarding the extent to which family members, friends, and colleagues were aware of their sexual orientation, reception of their sexual orientation by those who were aware, and how comfortable they felt expressing their sexuality.

Participants from the LGB community (136 persons who self-identified as LGB, Mean Age = 29.35 years), recruited through a combination of convenience sampling methods, completed a questionnaire, in paper or online, which included questions on perceptions and social attitudes including the impact of these social attitudes in the free and open expression of sexuality types of physical violence or psychological harassment experienced by LGB people, type of support sought in instances of physical/ psychological violence (e.g., reports to police), experiences of acceptance or types of discrimination experienced in relation to work, housing, health, faith, school and university, family, relationships, and needs.

Social acceptance. Perceived social acceptance of LGBT persons in Cyprus is moderate to low. Participants, both in ratings provided through scales, and comments provided in response to open
questions, rate LGB women as being somewhat more socially accepted compared to LGB men (bisexual women were the group rated highest in perceived acceptance), while for Trans persons, social acceptance was perceived at almost the minimum, with the mean score being closer to “not at all accepted” than any other response.

**Openness and acceptance.** Participants were most likely to be out to friends, sisters, and mothers, and least likely to be out to extended family members; for fathers most were “unsure whether they are aware”. Perceived initial and current reactions to their coming out were most supportive from friends, colleagues, and sisters, and least from fathers and mothers. Older participants were more likely to be open about their sexuality to extended family members and colleagues, reported receiving more supportive reactions from their environment, and felt more comfortable expressing their sexuality around their families compared to younger participants. Compared to women, men were more likely to be out to brothers and at work, and reported experiencing more supportive reception in their work environments.

**Homophobia and discrimination.** This study also documents high rates of psychological violence and abuse which, most frequently, takes the form of malicious gossip and offensive comments, by strangers (e.g., in the street, cafeterias, or bars); as well as by acquaintances and friends (e.g., in social groups or the workplace). Harassment and threats over the internet were also present. Cases of psychological violence and harassment were more commonly reported than cases of physical violence, yet in both cases impact was evaluated as moderate to very severe. Severity of these incidents was variable, and ranged from negative comments and gossip, which were experienced as hurtful by some, and as less important by others, to very serious cases of beatings, threats with clubs and even rape.

Men reported experiencing physical (and psychological) violence because of their sexual orientation more than women, and younger individuals more than older ones. Participants who had reported experiencing physical violence on the basis of their sexual orientation rated average discomfort as moderate to severe, although somewhat less profound for psychological violence. On several occasions, the impact of physical or psychological harassment, but also of the daily life experienced as an LGBT person was profound. They resulted in participants becoming “cautious”, imposing restrictions to their self-expression and appearance, having negative thoughts, symptoms of depression, and, on at least one occasion, even suicide. For some, they were reasons to leave their job, or the country.

The frequency and extent of homophobic bullying, violence, and harassment experienced in schools is particularly alarming. Not only were reports of bullying and homophobic attacks in school frequent, but some recounts were very disturbing; severe incidents of beating, spitting, intimidation, and ridicule were not only common, but repeated, and most worrying, were apparently neither reported to, nor addressed by school teachers or authorities. Despite these alarming findings, and despite the often severe impact of such harassment (some participants stated they were led to believe they were “sick”, and became “depressed”, or suicidal), very few sought help after these experiences; what is perhaps most striking, is that no-one reported them, primarily due to mistrust of the police or authorities, as well as out of fear and shame about their sexual identity. Such incidents, along with the overall low acceptance and the prevailing homophobic climate, seem to greatly restrict LGB person’s freedom to openly express their sexuality publically, or even at all.

At work, over half of the participants reported that they concealed their sexual orientation from *all* their colleagues, and the majority reported that they concealed their sexual orientation from their employers. Some participants also reported that their career was negatively affected because of their sexual orientation. Discrimination concerned refusal of employment, refusal of promotion, dismissal when their employer became aware of their sexual orientation, and having higher expectations from employers compared to heterosexual colleagues.
When asked specifically whether they had experienced any types of discrimination from a given list of service-delivery settings, in relation to their sexual orientation, while in Cyprus, the majority (83%) of both men and women, reported having been treated unfairly because of their sexual orientation, in at least one of a list of service-related settings. Almost half (42%) also indicated having experienced discrimination while receiving certain types of services from a given list at least once. Many stated that they avoid kissing their partner or holding hands in public places, and some even said that authorities and government refused to help them and that there was unjustifiable delay during service because of their sexual orientation. Some reported that nurses and doctors had criticized the way of life while receiving medical care, and even having been denied assistance by medical personnel, and having been rejected as a blood donor.

**Needs.** Finally, respondents pointed out several needs of the LGB community in Cyprus, ranging from very concrete needs to more general needs for education, information, and support. Concrete needs that emerged from these responses included needs for specific services (e.g., support for Sexually Transmitted Infections), and needs for more gay-friendly gathering places.

Results from this preliminary analysis are very disconcerting and point toward the need for more proactive strategies to prevent and tackle discrimination on all levels, legal, social, and private. They stress the need for further research, and for interventions and policies. Findings highlight once more the conservative culture of Cypriot families, since coming out seems to be received most negatively within the family. LGB persons in Cyprus are very selective as to where to disclose, and only express their sexuality freely in certain settings and under certain conditions. Coming out at younger ages is probably hindered by the lack of open discussions about sexuality in general, as well as the lack of any formal support structures for families.

The invisibility of female homosexuality in this context is reflected in the greater difficulty expressed by women in opening up about their sexuality. Hence, gender mainstreaming appears to be essential in the context of any efforts to tackle discrimination toward LGB persons, and to provide support for these individuals on their coming out process.

**General Discussion/Recommendations**

Both studies provide valuable insights into perception, portrayals, and experiences of LGBT persons in Cyprus. The first study provides a systematic study of contemporary cultural representations and discourse of LGBT issues in the Cypriot press. The second study is the first systematic attempt to examine the experiences of LGB persons in Cyprus, particularly their experiences of acceptance or discrimination in various settings such as their families, school, workplace, and services.

In Cypriot Greek culture, visible positive LGBT role models seem entirely absent: no authorities in public positions, nor any other public figures or celebrities have come out openly about their sexuality as LGB. References to LGBT issues in the press, rarely if at all appear as primary, and a large percentage is found in international news sections and in the back or middle pages of newspaper; while issues of discrimination and homophobia appear to receive increased coverage in the press, suggesting that relevant discourse is on the rise, instances of positive presentations of LGBT figures are less frequent.

Homophobia is manifested both through public discourse and through behaviours in daily life, and it adversely impacts LGBT persons in multiple ways, including their freedom to openly express their sexuality, self-esteem, and, often, their daily functioning, while instances of depression, suicidal thoughts, and even threat to bodily integrity by homophobic violence were also identified. Disclosure to and acceptance by family members, especially parents, presents a major concern and challenge for LGB Cypriots, many of whom report that the issue of their sexual orientation is often met with denial. The frequency and severity of incidents of discrimination and bullying are
particularly disturbing in the school and army settings. Such incidents may disproportionately affect gay and bisexual men, as any female sexuality remains, to a large extent, invisible. At the same time, mistrust for police and authorities prevails. Although homophobic incidents do occur, and a few were severe, they are neither being reported, nor publicized, as no police reports or articles relevant to such incidents were identified in the press.

An imperative need appears to inform and educate the general public about issues of sexual orientation, that can contribute to increased acceptance, and reduction of homophobic and violence phenomena. Awareness raising can be achieved through information campaigns addressed toward the general public and through educational programs for various institutions and target groups (parents, teachers, journalists, police officers, etc.). Such training should be provided within the context of trainings on gender and sexuality, and include the notions of gender mainstreaming. Most importantly, regular, and mandatory Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) from an early age, that includes clear and evidence-based references to sexual orientation, can serve to dilute prevalent myths, misconceptions, and prejudice that permeate society-at-large. Because, currently, the topic of sexual orientation is treated as taboo and avoided in schools, most people receive no accurate information regarding the issue, and instead, their opinions and views are shaped through the prevailing ignorance and misinformation.

On a legal and state level, legislation needs to safeguard protection of all persons from discrimination in the workplace, education, and from hate speech. In accordance, institutions (schools, universities, NGOs, services), should consider implementing policies and guidelines for ensuring non-discrimination for their staff, students, or beneficiaries, and during provision of services.

Further investigation of the needs and experiences LGBT persons, particularly through qualitative research, should follow. Financing disciplines that deal with gender, identity, sexuality, and related fields of study, and support for young and experienced scientists and researchers in these fields can be conducive for promoting LGBT-research that will enhance our understanding of how sexual orientation is experienced in Cyprus.

Evidence provided through these studies could further contribute toward promoting visibility of LGBT issues. Recommendations provided to competent authorities and stakeholders can be taken into account inform decision-makers and stakeholders on the status of LGB(T) issues in Cyprus and encourage mobilization to prevent and address discrimination and eradicate homophobic behaviour experienced by LGB(T) persons.

For more information on this study, contact the Principal Investigator, Margarita Kapsou, Chair, Cyprus Family Planning Association: 20 Lefkonos St., 2064 Nicosia, Cyprus, tel. 357-22751093, email kapsou.margarita@ucy.ac.cy