

# Queer people and therapy

*Report on the psychological  
effects of marginalization*



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# Introduction

The societal stigma surrounding the LGBTI+ community in Kosovo undoubtedly contributes to the way in which members of this community are viewed and treated, causing them to live under the weight of discrimination and rejection. While it is widely understood that this stigmatization exists, its impact on queer people's mental health remains overlooked. It's expected that members of the LGBTI+ community face significant mental health challenges, and it's crucial to understand that these challenges are not a result of being queer, but rather stem from the lack of external support and social acceptance of queer individuals in Kosovo. This study examines over 1200 therapy appointments conducted by CEL Kosovo's therapists, from which 132 of people benefited. By analyzing data on issues such as stress, anxiety and trauma, this report addresses the mental health consequences of living in an environment where one is marginalized and unsupported.

The social barriers faced by LGBTI+ individuals in Kosovo must be put into the broader regional perspective. Kosovo continues to be known as one of the most conservative countries in Europe regarding the tolerance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Conservative values are deep-rooted, and combined with insufficient education on LGBTI+ topics and limited state protection, they create an environment where being openly out risks extreme social exclusion, limited job opportunities, and even personal danger. For many, the idea of a genuine life where one can be both open and supported is impossible; instead, they resort to concealing their identity to avoid persecution by family, colleagues, and broader society.

This is in great contrast to the progressive developments in other parts of Europe, where laws and social stances have evolved to promote better treatment towards LGBTI+ individuals, in terms of both inclusivity and safety. Countries like Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany, not only grant the right to same-sex marriage but also offer strong legal protections and continuously foster public discussions related to LGBTI+ issues. But disparities remain regardless, even within Europe itself.

In Kosova, although there are progressive legal frameworks on paper, such as the Law Against Discrimination, implementation is weak, and stigma remains high. This only highlights the need for targeted efforts in bridging the gap between policy and practice, so that LGBTI+ individuals in Kosova can enjoy the same rights and freedoms as those in more progressive European countries.

## Aim

The purpose of this report is to shed light on the mental health challenges faced by the LGBTI+ community in Kosova. By analyzing data gathered from CEL Kosova's therapy sessions, this report aims to demonstrate the significant psychological toll that people suffer as a result of insufficient societal acceptance and systemic support. Furthermore, the report aspires to guide policymakers, mental health professionals, and civil society organizations in developing targeted strategies and necessary interventions.

# Previous research

It's important to mention that there is a significant lack of studies on the topic of mental health among LGBTI+ individuals in Kosovo. A notable and groundbreaking contribution is the publication "Study report: Minority Stress and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youths"<sup>1</sup> by Fortesa Kadriu, which provides valuable insights into the psychological challenges faced by this marginalized group. Kadriu's study evaluates these issues through the approach of minority stress theory. She studies how stressors like victimization, discrimination, identity concealment, and internalized homophobia impact mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.

Data collected from 71 participants aged 14-35, recruited through CEL Kosovo's platforms, revealed that most respondents had encountered psychological distress, often stemming from verbal or physical abuse and societal rejection due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Kadriu's work specifically emphasizes the context of Kosovo, where societal conservatism and weak institutional protections reinforce these stressors, leaving many young individuals at risk.

Kadriu's findings provide a vital foundation for understanding the systemic barriers faced by LGBTI+ individuals in Kosovo, highlighting the intersection of mental health and social marginalization. By situating these discoveries within the broader framework of minority stress, her research underlines the urgent need for inclusive mental health services, public awareness campaigns, and policy reforms to address the causes of psychological distress in marginalized communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Kadriu, Fortesa. "Study report: Minority stress and mental health in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth." Centre for Equality and Liberty of the LGBT community in Kosovo, 2022.

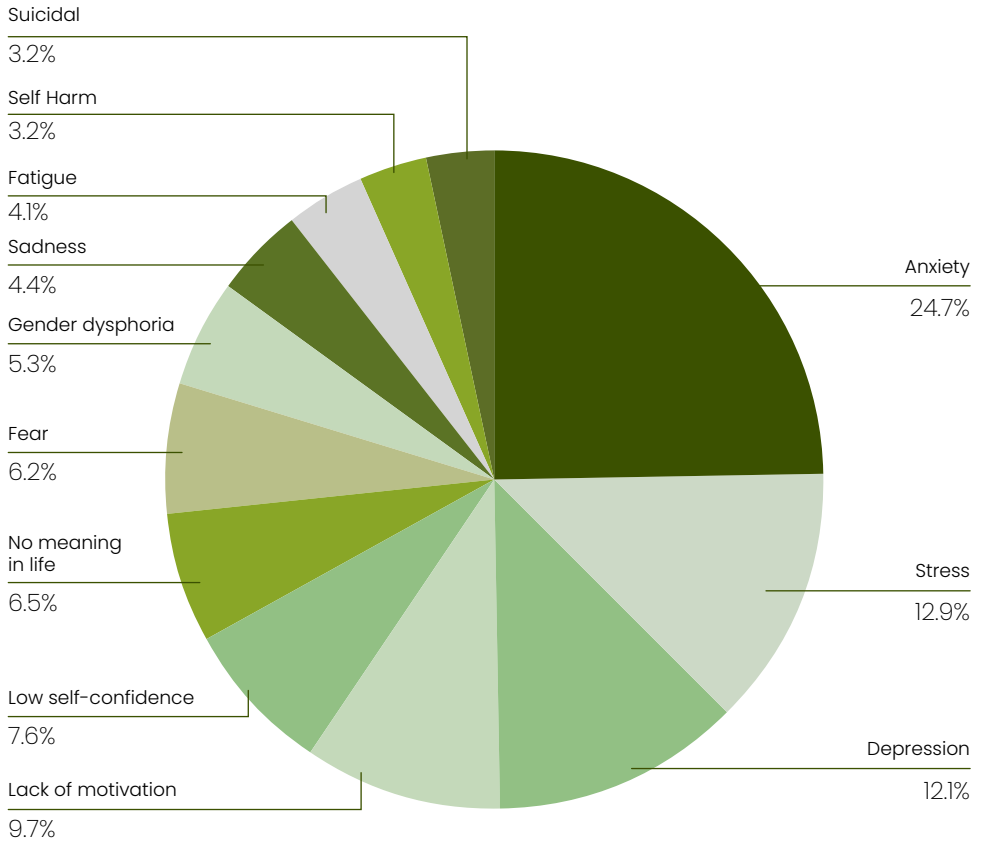
# Methodology

To examine the mental health challenges faced by LGBTI+ individuals in Kosovo, this report is based on data derived from over 1200 therapy sessions conducted by CEL Kosova's team of psychologists and psychiatrists. These sessions provided mental health support to 132 individuals who sought help in CEL Kosova's services.

Through a detailed review of therapy records, statistical analyses were conducted to identify common experiences, conditions, and psychological difficulties reported by the patients. The data reflects the shared experiences of LGBTI+ individuals in Kosovo, testifying to issues such as stress, anxiety, trauma, and other mental health conditions. By documenting these challenges, the report aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the mental health landscape within this marginalized community.

The research conducted by CEL Kosova adheres to the highest ethical standards, ensuring that all information collected from participants was handled with the utmost care and respect for privacy. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the individuals involved, all data was anonymized, with any identifying information removed before analysis. This commitment to privacy ensures that participants' personal experiences and mental health challenges remain private, safeguarding them from any potential stigma or harm. CEL Kosova recognizes the critical importance of protecting private information, especially given the sensitive nature of the issues being studied, such as mental health within the LGBTI+ community. The researchers as well as the psychologists involved understand that such protection is fundamental to building trust and fostering a safe environment where individuals can share their experiences without fear of judgment or exposure.

# Results



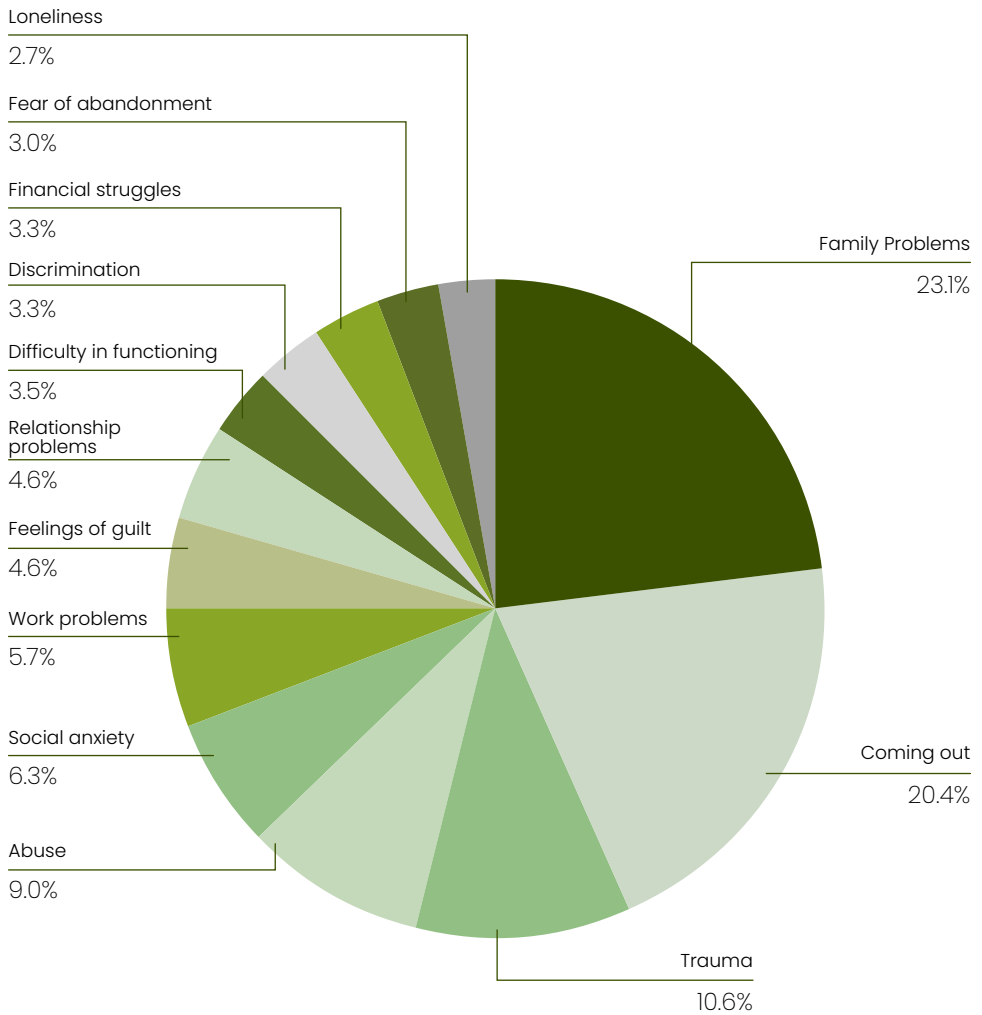
**Figure 1** displays the internal difficulties faced by the individuals who accessed CEL Kosova's services. The data reveals that anxiety is the most prevalent mental health challenge, affecting 24.7 % of participants. This category encompasses not only general feelings of anxiety but also panic attacks and general anxiety disorder (GAD), highlighting the profound impact of ongoing stressors and uncertainty on individuals mental health.



Stress emerges as the second most common issue, reported by 12.9 % of participants. Following closely, depression ranks third, impacting 12.1 % of participants and is characterized by experiences of melancholy, a deep and persistent sadness that often interferes with daily functioning. Other notable challenges include lack of motivation (9.7%) and low self-confidence (7.6%). Low self-confidence is particularly complex, involving insecurity, self-hatred, negative self-image, and low-self esteem. Similarly, seeing no meaning in life (6.5 %) reflects feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness.

Fear, reported by 6.2 % of participants, includes both paranoia and a fear of the future, underscoring the uncertainty and apprehension faced by individuals in environments that offer little security or acceptance. Gender dysphoria, reported by 5.3 % highlights the specific struggles related to navigating one's gender identity when it differs from the sex assigned at birth, in a cis-heteronormative environment where hormone replacement therapy is widely unavailable and the transition process is difficult and often not accessible, both in terms of medical and social support, with trans people reporting feeling like their "body is about to burst".

Less frequently reported, but equally critical issues include sadness (4.4 %), fatigue (4.1 %). Sadness often encompasses worry, while fatigue reflects both mental exhaustion and physical tiredness. Self-harm, reported by 3.2%, not only includes direct self-injury but also extends to eating disorders, which are often linked to body image issues and internalized distress. Finally, suicidal ideation, also reported by 3.2%. While smaller in percentage this finding represents a severe mental health crisis that highlights the critical need for immediate intervention and sustained support for individuals facing such distress.



In **Figure 2**, the data highlights a range of external challenges faced by the people who used CEL Kosova's therapy services, with family problems being the most commonly reported issue at 23.1%. This category encompasses feelings of being overwhelmed by family situations, experiences of abandonment due to one's sexual orientation or gender identity, pressure exerted by family members, often with religious elements.

Coming out is the second most reported difficulty, affecting 20.4% of individuals. This category encompasses not only the fear and pressure of revealing one's identity but also feelings of shame, stress and stigma tied to one's sexual orientation or gender identity. Additionally, internalized homophobia plays a significant role, reflecting the internal struggles many individuals face as a result of societal rejection.

Other notable challenges include trauma (10.6%) and abuse (9.0%), emphasizing the prevalence of adverse and harmful experiences faced by these individuals. Social and interpersonal difficulties are also prominent, with social anxiety (6.3%), relationship problems (4.6%), and fear of abandonment (3%). Additionally, work problems (5.7%) and financial struggles (3.3%) highlight the economic challenges. Feelings of guilt (4.6%), difficulty in functioning (3.5%), and discrimination (3.3%) further illustrate the individual's emotional well-being. Lastly, loneliness, reported by 2.7%, captures the isolation felt by many in the absence of social acceptance.

# Discussion

This study highlights the significant mental health challenges encountered by the LGBTI+ community in Kosova. By examining data from 132 individuals who utilized CEL Kosova's mental health services, it offers important insights into the psychological impact of stigma, discrimination, and marginalization. The study's representativeness is strengthened by its sample size. With 132 participants, it provides a solid dataset, especially considering Kosovo's relatively small population and the size of its LGBTI+ community. This thorough sampling improves the study's relevance to the wider LGBTI+ community in Kosovo, facilitating a deeper understanding of their mental health situation.

The high rates of anxiety, depression, and stress among participants reveal the ongoing psychological challenges faced by LGBTI+ individuals in Kosova, which are made worse by insufficient mental health services and a lack of societal support. Issues related to family, such as rejection, pressure, and religious beliefs, were identified as significant external factors impacting mental health. These results emphasize the critical role of family acceptance in mitigating psychological distress, a connection well-documented in global research. The absence of family support often leaves individuals vulnerable to feelings of abandonment, hopelessness, and isolation, as observed in the study.

Additionally, the data emphasizes the specific vulnerabilities of navigating gender identity in a predominantly cis-heteronormative society. Many participants reported experiencing gender dysphoria and concerns about potential discrimination in the future. This highlights the

pressing need for targeted interventions that cater to the distinct difficulties encountered by transgender and gender-diverse individuals.

Moving forward, these findings provide a foundation for developing targeted interventions and advocacy efforts that address the psychological and structural barriers faced by LGBTI+ individuals in Kosovo. Initiatives that combine mental health support, societal education, and policy implementation are essential to fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for this community. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

The government must prioritize the effective implementation of existing laws, such as the Law Against Discrimination, to ensure that LGBTI+ individuals are protected from stigma, abuse, and discrimination in all areas of life. This includes providing mandatory training for police, healthcare providers, educators, and other public officials to increase their awareness and capacity to address the needs of LGBTI+ individuals with respect and equity.

The government should invest in mental health infrastructure that is accessible to marginalized groups, including the LGBTI+ community. This involves subsidizing therapy sessions, funding LGBTI+-inclusive training for mental health professionals, and developing national mental health programs that address specific challenges such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, as identified in this study.

Comprehensive public awareness campaigns aimed at providing information, reducing stigma and promoting acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are critical. These campaigns should emphasize the harmful effects of discrimination on mental health and

aim to foster empathy and inclusivity within society. Partnering with civil society organizations can help ensure that these initiatives are impactful and community-driven.

Family rejection is one of the most reported challenges for LGBTI+ individuals, as highlighted by the study. The government can address this by providing resources and counseling programs for families to help them better understand and support their LGBTI+ family members. Educational programs that target parents and caregivers can significantly reduce familial conflicts and create safer home environments.

Many LGBTI+ individuals face economic barriers due to workplace discrimination and limited opportunities. To address this, the government should implement affirmative action policies and anti-discrimination guidelines in employment sectors. Additionally, creating pathways for skills development and entrepreneurship among LGBTI+ individuals can reduce financial struggles and foster independence.

Establishing and funding LGBTI+ resource centers across the country can provide safe spaces for individuals to connect, share experiences, and access essential services such as mental health support and peer counseling. These centers could offer support groups, workshops, and community-based initiatives to address issues like loneliness and social isolation, which were identified as significant challenges in this study.

Additionally, there is an urgent need to establish a shelter specifically for LGBTI+ individuals who have been displaced or rejected by their families. Currently, Kosova lacks such a facility, leaving vulnerable individuals without a safe haven, and in some cases having to seek safety in the LGBTI+ shelter

in Albania. A shelter would provide temporary housing, counseling, and reintegration support for those facing homelessness due to familial rejection. This shelter could also collaborate with existing civil society organizations to offer long-term solutions and advocacy for housing rights for LGBTI+ individuals.

Fostering collaboration with organizations like CEL Kosova, CSGD, YIHR-KS, QIPS, Linja e Jetës and international stakeholders is essential to developing and implementing programs tailored to the needs of the LGBTI+ community. Drawing on practices from countries with progressive policies can provide valuable frameworks for designing and evaluating interventions in Kosovo. These partnerships can ensure that initiatives are informed by both local expertise and global standards, fostering sustainable and impactful solutions for the challenges faced by LGBTI+ individuals.