

HANDLING CASES OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

LGBTQI Persons



CENTRE FOR EQUALITY AND LIBERTY OF THE LGBT COMMUNITIES IN KOSOVA (CEL)

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Summary

The Handbook on Social Work: Handling Gender-Based Violence Cases against LGBT+ Persons aims to elaborate more broadly the concept of gender-based violence by focusing on LGBT+ persons, provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks related to social work in dealing with these cases, and to identify the best ways to support gender-based violence survivors. In the contemporary literature on gender-based violence, this category of violence is defined as **“any act committed against an individual on the basis of their gender or gender identity, which results or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm, including deprivation of liberty”** (UN Women, 2020). In socio-cultural contexts with a history of war that have stricter social norms (Kitayama et al., 2024), very often social categories that do not coincide with the defined heteronormative image are persecuted and experience social exclusion. Thus, LGBT+ people are more likely to face situations of violence where this violence can manifest itself in various forms, including systematic discrimination, stigmatization, physical and psychological violence, as well as lack of access to adequate social/support services.

Due to heteronormative social norms, fear of stigmatization, non-acceptance or lack of specialized mechanisms to address cases, violence against LGBT+ people is often not reported nor adequately treated. This aggravates the situation by making LGBT+ people more prone to falling into a vicious circle of marginalization, leading to deterioration of psychosocial well-being and limited access to social services. In Kosovo, despite the fact that human rights are guaranteed in legal frameworks, in reality there are still prejudices and discrimination against LGBT+ people.

Existing research reports show that there is a significant percentage of LGBT+ people in Kosovo who experience (have experienced) violence (World Bank, 2018; NDI, 2015), and that survivors of gender-based violence often do not report it due to fear of stigmatization (ILGA, 2011) or socio-economic challenges (KCSS, 2024). Consequently, the situation in Kosovo shows us that the creation of such manuals that serve professionals in increasing knowledge and competencies for working with LGBT+ cases is necessary. The manual "Empowering social workers to provide social services to LGBTI persons" published by CSGD (2024) emphasizes the importance of specifics and methodology in case management of LGBT+ people, as well as the need to create other supporting manuals that address specific topics of LGBT+ cases. Consequently, the creation of this manual complements the existing literature and assists social service professionals in dealing with cases of gender-based violence against LGBT+ people.

Taking into account social work approaches, such as systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the strengths-based approach (Saleebey, 1996) or trauma-informed theory, this manual provides an overview of theoretical and practical approaches to services and interventions in working with cases experiencing gender-based violence. The aim of the manual is to increase and complement the knowledge and competencies of professionals to understand/address challenges, needs and to provide services.

Contents of the manual

The manual is built on a theoretical and empirical approach that enables the reader to recognize, understand, and apply theories in practical work with survivors of gender-based violence, as well as practically assist professionals in addressing gender-based violence issues.

Through the manual, the below listed topics will be elaborated:

- Key concepts of gender-based violence in cases of LGBT+ persons will be addressed.
- Models of social work interventions, which are based on approaches of psychosocial support and survivor empowerment.
- Best practices for identifying, treating and referring cases in cases of gender-based violence against LGBT+

This manual, in addition to serving as a source of information, also should be understood as a call for action, encouraging institutions and professionals to engage in creating a more inclusive system for LGBT+ people. The purpose of the manual is to complement the professional practice of providing social services, emphasizing the values of social justice and inclusion as indisputable for social work.

Introduction

Key concepts of gender-based violence in cases of LGBT+ persons

Gender-based violence comes from inequalities in power relations and is intended to demean and diminish the dignity of an individual or group, making them feel powerless over their situation. This type of violence is maintained in society because it is often so deeply internalized in individual beliefs, attitudes, and values, especially in patriarchal societies, this kind of behavior constitutes a typical behavior of abuse of dominance (Pandea, Grzemny & Keen, 2019). To better understand what gender-based violence entails, it can be defined as *“any act committed against an individual on the basis of their sex or gender identity, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including the deprivation of liberty.”*

In the academic sphere, historically, the issue of gender-based violence (GBV) has been analyzed through feminist and sociological theories, but sometimes the experiences of LGBT+ identities in relation to violence have remained in the shadows as the main focus has been on cisgender women. Therefore, in order to elaborate and understand gender-based violence in a more comprehensive way, several theories have been developed that take into account the intersection of gender identity, sexual orientation and the systematic oppression that these groups face. One of the most comprehensive theoretical frameworks to explain this is Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) Intersectionality Theory, which explains how multiple identities (gender, sexuality, race, class) interact with each other and how through this interaction of identities that are marginalized then one becomes more predisposed to oppression, exclusion, stigmatization and rejection. Crenshaw created this theory as a result of an event in the US where a black woman experienced discrimination in the workplace because her two identities: being a woman and being black were vulnerable identities that made her predisposed to experiencing negative/exclusionary events.

Consequently, this theory argues that facing any kind of oppression and exclusion for certain individuals/groups cannot be analyzed by considering only one identity category, but should consider the way in which through the interaction of these factors we become targets for facing oppressive situations. In order for gender-based violence against LGBT+ people to be understood in a broader spectrum, the theory of Queer Criminology (Buist & Lenning, 2016) has been developed, which argues that when queer people have experiences with the justice system, the justice system itself often prejudices or criminalizes queer identities, and this then leads to double victimization. Thus, LGBT+ people often do not report violence due to distrust in authorities and negative experiences they have heard. Another theory is the Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) that helps us understand gender-based violence against LGBT+ individuals and how it affects psychosocial well-being. According to this theory, when people, due to the heteronormative and exclusionary mindset that prevails in relation to marginalized identities, are faced with systematic situations of discrimination, stigma and social exclusion, they create chronic stress that results in experiencing mental health difficulties. The study by Llullaku & Selimi (2023) shows that in Kosovo, LGBT+ people, participants in the study reported moderate to high levels of depression, anxiety and stress, where the same were correlated with the social stigma that these individuals experienced.

This model by Meyer (2003) was then expanded by Testa et al. (2015) with the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Model, which focuses on non-binary identities and emphasizes that the incongruence of these identities with the cultural norms and expectations that a context has for gender leads to greater exposure to gender-based violence and consequently more vulnerable mental health.

Another theory that also addresses gender is the Gender Performativity Theory (Butler, 1990) which argues that gender is a social construct that is constructed and maintained by social expectations and not an unchangeable category. Consequently, often when the existence of a certain group challenges the gender norms that society has created, then these groups are placed on the margins of society and labeled as "unacceptable". In this form, social domination and control is carried out by using gender-based violence as a means to punish those who disrupt traditional gender roles and to maintain heteronormativity and gender binarity.

Although feminist theories have established the basis for how we understand and analyze gender-based violence, expanding theories to include other non-binary gender identities or non-heterosexual sexual orientations helps us to more fundamentally understand the structure and dynamics that enable or bring about gender-based violence. Consequently, the idea of theories is not only to empirically describe the issue but also to empower people to advocate and mobilize to challenge the mindset and status-quo that enables the violation of certain identities.

Gender-based violence often goes unnoticed because it occurs in different forms. Among the obvious and typical forms is physical violence that manifests itself in aggression, beatings or bodily harm. Sexual violence includes rape, sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence that violate the integrity of the individual. Psychological and emotional violence manifests itself through threats, manipulation and social isolation. Another form is economic violence, which involves financial control and limiting access to economic resources. For LGBT+ people, the experience of the above-mentioned forms of violence, especially in countries with heteronormative dominance, is very present.

Models of social work interventions in dealing with cases of gender-based violence

Social work intervention models in the treatment of gender-based violence cases are built on theoretical frameworks that start from the premises of social protection, rehabilitation, treatment of the consequences of violence and the creation of protective factors and resilience in survivors. All models are necessarily based on the ethical principles of social work such as social justice, self-determination, recognition and respect for diversity as well as human rights as a fundamental part of any type of intervention. One of the most applicable models for cases of violence is the Crisis Intervention Model that focuses on providing emergency support. This intervention includes addressing emergency needs such as providing safe housing, psychological and legal support, as well as referral to justice institutions to obtain protection orders. Social workers have an important role in this regard, as they act as intermediaries between cases and the social protection system, as well as ensuring that cases have adequate access to services that address the harm caused by experiencing violence (Heath et al., 2020; Cookson et al., 2004). This approach demonstrates the importance of cooperation between all actors in the system to provide comprehensive services and effective treatment.

Another important model is the Community-Based Intervention Model, a model that emphasizes the empowerment and active mobilization of the community to combat negative phenomena, as well as the raising of resources in the community to build a culture of support and collective response. Such programs would include forms such as social activism in the community, the creation of support groups, the organization of awareness-raising campaigns to challenge patriarchal norms, and the building of cooperation networks between civil society organizations, state institutions, and other relevant actors. In this case, social workers are not only service providers, but also advocates for social change, promoting policies and initiatives that reduce oppression and abuse (Hyman, 1990).

Another very important approach is the Multidisciplinary Approach Model, a model that requires the collaboration of different actors in the system to ensure that the most holistic treatment is provided in relation to the needs of survivors. Thus, in order for the results of social work to be sustainable, social workers must be in coordination with professionals from other fields such as psychologists, doctors, police, lawyers and civil society organizations to ensure that cases receive effective support and services (BASW, 2018). In general, social work intervention models in dealing with gender-based violence cases should be adapted to the needs of communities and be based on the principles of social justice and empowerment. In addition to the above-mentioned models, the following section will elaborate on social work theories and their practical application in dealing with gender-based violence cases.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979)

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the ecological/systems theory, a theory that studies the process of human development. This theoretical approach emphasizes that different factors or levels of the system play a role in how we experience things and how we are formed. Although many developmental processes have characteristics that are almost universally similar, the theory explains that the reason why we are formed, behave, react, and experience differently even though we have gone through similar developmental processes to others is the fact that the interaction of the levels of the system in us has been different. Therefore, the development and behavior of the individual comes as a result of the interaction of different factors in the system.

Bronfenbrenner had identified several levels of systems that exist separately but also interact with each other, influencing our reality. Consequently, chaotic situations in a given system make it difficult for optimal development in other systems. For example, a child who faces poverty, neglect, exclusion in his family circle has difficulty functioning at all other levels. Thus, this approach shows that the process of developing and addressing issues should be more comprehensive, that a problem that a person faces should not be treated separately only at the level of the system to which it belongs, but as a result, the consequences it has caused at other levels should also be seen. In social work, this theory is one of the most used frameworks since social work starts with the idea that improving social well-being and overcoming a difficult situation is achieved only through holistic intervention in all factors, but the theory also helps us in prevention since it proves that environmental factors play a role in individual predispositions to face emotional and behavioral problems.

In relation to the issue of gender-based violence against LGBT+ people, this theoretical framework helps us understand how this issue should be understood and addressed at all levels of systems, as well as what interventions should be made in order to bring about substantive changes.

The levels of systems theory are:

1. Microsystem: This level focuses on the individual's immediate environment, such as family, friends, school, and the immediate community (Berk, 2000). This level is the primary, closest, and most directly influential level on individuals as it includes the first socialization agents that shape the individual's personality and behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In the case of LGBT+ people, families can often be a source of support or violence and exclusion. Studies (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009) have shown that family rejection directly increases stress and the risk of depression and suicide attempts.

2. Mesosystem: This level focuses on interactions between microsystems, i.e. the interconnections of the individual's structures, such as the influence of school, teachers, or friends on family relationships.

3.Exosystem: This level focuses on broader social structures that indirectly affect the individual, such as laws, media, and institutions. In many countries, discriminatory policies and laws contribute to gender-based violence against LGBT+ people (Herek, 2009).

4.Macrosystem: This level focuses on the cultural aspect, ideologies and beliefs maintained by society, and in the case of LGBT+ people, studies show that due to prejudice, there is a social stigma that leads to social exclusion and systematic violence (Meyer, 2003).

5.Chronosystem: This level focuses on the impact of time on an individual's experiences. There are two types of factors that influence this, external and internal, for example external factors refer to situations that occur outside the individual's control while internal factors refer to changes that occur within the individual. Both of these influence how we react to different situations over time (Berk, 2000).

Exercises

Case study

Elira is a 17-year-old transgender girl who recently had an argument at school with a peer, which led to her being suspended from school. At home, Elira has not had good relationships since she started talking about her gender identity. The social worker helps her by using an ecological/systems theory approach to identify factors that affect her well-being at all levels of the system and develops concrete steps on how to strengthen her social and legal support system. A case report response based on this theory would include:

- **Microsystem intervention:**

Providing family counseling/information and mediation to improve family relationships.

- **Mesosystem intervention:**

Collaboration with the school/teachers/school social worker to ensure a safe environment and prevent discrimination.

- **Exosystem intervention:**

Engaging human rights organizations to provide support, legal guardianship, and safe housing in the event of eviction.

- **Macrosystem Intervention:**

Promoting better educational and social policies to improve the protection of Elira's rights.

Saleebey's Strengths-Based Approach (1996)

The strengths model is a theoretical and practical approach to social work that focuses on the individual's strengths to overcome the difficult situations they face (Saleebey, 1996). As an approach, it is 'person-centered', meaning that the individual is seen as resilient and capable of coping with change or difficulties. Thus, the approach emphasizes that the "strength" of the individual depends on the way we operate with our thoughts. In practical application, this approach means that we work with our client by encouraging them to identify their strengths but also to reflect on the circumstantial factors that may be penalizing or threatening to their situation. At this point, the social worker identifies the individual's strengths (McCashen, 2016) and connects the client with resources that are helpful for their situation (Rapp et al. 2008). This approach has several principles and elements that should be guiding for working with the client.

Among them are that the social worker must recognize **the client's abilities/potential**, i.e. the identification of strengths that may be related to intellectual, creative, artistic or other personal characteristics related to the person's self-personality. Also, the approach must **focus on an achievable goal** and here the need for support from other sources of assistance arises, such as putting them in contact with services relevant to the individual's situation or the functioning of support groups/mechanisms. Also, **the development of coping strategies** is an important aspect of this approach that focuses on the work that the social worker does with the client to build the skills to manage situations. Equally important is the empowerment that is done through **education and economic independence** with the aim of improving the individual's situation to have stability, but the principle of self-determination is always protected, i.e. the value that the individual is the one who decides on his or her life.

Exercises

Case study

Adrian is a gay engineer from a small municipality in Kosovo who has often had difficulty finding work. Recently, he has faced a situation of violence and discrimination in his family and close circle after they realized that he was in a relationship with a boy. After his family throws him out of the house, he faces major challenges such as lack of housing, economic hardship and social isolation. Using the strengths model, the social worker would help Adrian as follows:

First, the social worker identifies his personal strengths – The social worker would help him identify his strengths, e.g. in the above case it is said that Adrian has a good level of education in the field of engineering, where this is immediately identified as a strength that can help him build a sustainable future through securing a job. Then, since there are some shortcomings in social services at the state level in relation to LGBT+ people, the next step is for the social worker to put Adrian in contact with LGBT+ organizations so that the case can receive legal support for his rights and to benefit from adequate psychological help in accordance with his needs. In this case, he also works on creating a support network and helps in learning coping strategies such as stress management techniques. Finally, starting from a position of empowerment and after working on all risk factors, the social worker takes care to help him find a job and a stable residence through referral to the employment office or vocational training centers.

Trauma-Informed Theory

Trauma-Informed Theory emphasizes that previous traumatic experiences influence the behavior, emotions, and well-being of individuals. Social work as a profession has clients who are faced with a multitude of negative events and trauma. To better understand what is meant by trauma, we define it as an event beyond the person's control and which is seen as an extreme threat (APA, 2013). Trauma also includes microtraumas, i.e. repeated experiences of discrimination, exclusion, or prejudice (Sue, 2007). This theory promotes an approach to social work that focuses on psychological support and treatment of clients by recognizing the impact of trauma and building strategies that avoid retraumatization (SAMHSA, 2014).

The idea of this approach is not to address past traumas but to treat problems by taking into account past traumatic experiences. Also, this method tends to create a safe and trusting environment for the client (Elliot et al. 2005). Therefore, for the situation of LGBT+ people, living in contexts where heteronormativity is the norm, they often face multiple forms of violence and discrimination (Stotzer, 2009; Herek, 2009). These experiences can cause trauma that affects mental health, self-esteem, safety and general well-being (Russell & Fish, 2016; Meyer, 2003). Since studies show us that the stress caused by stigmatization, discrimination and continuous exclusion, increases the predispositions for anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and the experience of trauma in LGBT+ people (Meyer, 2003), then this approach is an effective method for treating such cases.

Key Principles of the Trauma Awareness Approach

The trauma-informed approach has several principles that ensure that the approach is implemented fairly while respecting the well-being of the individual. The first principle is that of safety, which emphasizes the importance of creating a safe physical and emotional environment for clients, in this case LGBT+ individuals. The second principle is trust and transparency, which is about constructive and clear communication with the client in order to create trust between the parties and consequently have positive results in treatment. The third principle is about support and empowerment, which means that the social worker should help cases to develop self-help strategies/mechanisms that help them feel in control of their lives. The third principle is sensitivity to identity and experience, which means recognizing the unique and complex experiences of individuals and how they affect the experience of trauma. Essential to this principle is to avoid retraumatization. Since this approach focuses on the fact that the treatment process also means creating a circle of supportive factors, the last principle is about combining the approach with support networks that include connecting with communities, organizations, and other support groups.

Exercises

Case study

Nita is a 19-year-old lesbian girl who was kicked out of her home after telling her parents about her sexual orientation. After being separated from her family, she had difficulty finding safe shelter, was homeless for a while, and was often the target of street violence. This negative experience has had many consequences for Nita, as she now reports panic attacks, emotional distress, and anxiety. Based on this approach, the social worker would help Nita by considering that what Nita has been through is related to trauma. Consequently, any intervention should be built taking into account the traumatic past, so, since shelter is an important issue in this case and Nita's basic need, the social worker helps by providing shelter (i.e., a safe and supportive environment) where she feels protected and respected. Then, she must build trust and be transparent by explaining the entire service process, and also encourage Nita to make decisions to avoid feelings of helplessness, all of which are done in relation to the ethical principles of self-determination and individual freedom. Throughout the intervention, the social worker must use an approach that does not retraumatize again and instead of focusing only on past trauma, the social worker helps Nita identify her strength and self-help mechanisms. While to make the result sustainable, the social worker relies on personal and social empowerment strategies that aim to develop professional skills, training, connect with the labor market and provide support for housing and finding a job.

Identification, treatment and referral of cases of gender-based violence against LGBT+ people

Gender-based violence against LGBT+ people, as highlighted, includes various forms of abuse, including physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence. This violence is often a consequence of social factors such as stigma, discrimination, power relations and the lack of proper functioning (or absence) of legal protection mechanisms (WHO, 2013). In order for these cases to be addressed effectively from a social service perspective, institutions and organizations should follow best practices based on human rights, a comprehensive approach and a response to the needs of the cases (UNHCR, 2021).

Case identification

Living in highly heteronormative social contexts, cases of gender-based violence against LGBT+ people often remain unidentified or unreported due to high stigma, lack of services, but also the fear of “coming out”. Therefore, social workers should find it necessary to incorporate education on queer issues into their training programs so that they can recognize the signs of violence and the dynamics that endanger/complicate current situations (WHO, 2013). In addition, it is essential for LGBT+ people to have access to reliable mechanisms for them, therefore for reporting violence (UNHCR, 2021), even through help/assistance from queer organizations themselves.

Case handling

Case management is effective when the case benefits holistically from services and when all actors communicate constructively to address the case. Among the fundamentals in case management is the provision of a safe environment, the WHO (2013) emphasizes the environment as one of the key factors that we must consider, which then enables the case to feel free to benefit from access to health care, psychological services, legal aid without fear of discrimination or prejudice. Since violence is a traumatic situation, psychological support is vital (UN Women, 2019). Among the forms that also help in sharing experiences are support groups that help in creating safe spaces for sharing stories, creating friendships, all of which are important for the treatment process (Herman, 1992). However, such groups are lacking in Kosovo, therefore one of the advocacy and objectives of institutions/organizations should also be the establishment of these professional support groups. Also important in handling cases is the protection of case confidentiality, because often, LGBT+ people live in dual identities and face involuntary exposure (outing, unwanted exposure of sexual orientation), where this situation then brings potential risks from others or even self-harming behavior (UNHCR, 2021). Therefore, the need to create clear policies, forms and protocols for protecting personal data and addressing cases is necessary so that benefiting from services is a unifying experience for everyone.

Case referral

Holistic case management is essential for achieving positive outcomes, therefore, referral of cases of violence against LGBT+ persons requires a network of institutions/organizations that have adequate resources to address the needs of clients. In the case of Kosovo, many times the services that need to be provided to improve the well-being of clients are not provided through state mechanisms, therefore continuous contact with relevant institutions/organizations and networking with professional colleagues in the fields is one of the important points in handling cases.

Discussion

The manual "Social Work in Handling Cases of Gender-Based Violence: LGBT+ Persons" addresses a sensitive and important topic in the social and institutional context of Kosovo, providing theoretical knowledge on the understanding of the topic and presenting practical approaches for handling cases of gender-based violence against LGBT+ persons. The discussion on this manual builds on the previous manual on social work and case management published by CSGD (2024), where the current manual focuses on the specific topic of gender-based violence and elaborates on the ways and approaches to guarantee effective and sustainable support for LGBT+ cases.

Through the content of the manual, the reader is informed about the social context of the situation of LGBT+ people, where among the difficulties is also dealing with gender-based violence. The legal framework in Kosovo stands well in relation to protection from discrimination, but in practice, there are still significant obstacles. Fear of prejudice and the lack of social services make this group more prone to experiencing violence and social rejection. In this context, the manual aims to inform and increase the skills of social service professionals to address the topic more comprehensively.

The manual includes theoretical approaches and practical models of social work with survivors of gender-based violence. One of the approaches used is the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), which helps to analyze how multiple identities—such as gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc.—interact and influence experiences of violence or discrimination. Meanwhile, the Strengths-Based Approach (Saleebey, 1996) model shows the importance of treating cases from a position of empowerment and resilience in individuals who experience violence. Then, through different theories such as systems theory/ecological approach and trauma awareness, critical ways of thinking and addressing cases are revealed.

The manual also presents recommendations on how to improve the current situation, where one of the recommendations is to provide specialized training for professionals in the field, as well as to strengthen the social services system through strengthening partnerships between government institutions, non-governmental organizations and the professional community, in order to increase the variety of services and improve their quality. Therefore, in addition to the practical part, the manual serves as a call to action for Kosovo institutions to take concrete steps to strengthen and improve the existing social protection system.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice in Kosovo

- Improving social services through better coordination between state institutions, civil society organizations and professional communities to ensure a variety of services that meet the needs of cases.
- Profiling of social workers, including specializations for working with LGBT+ people.
- Continuous training for social workers and social service professionals to build capacity to handle cases of gender-based violence against LGBT+ people.
- Develop and implement standard protocols for handling cases of violence against LGBT+ people, so that institutions have a unified approach when handling cases.

This manual represents an important contribution to the topic of addressing gender-based violence against LGBT+ people in Kosovo. By integrating social work values, theoretical and practical models, the manual provides a basis for discussing the topic, developing programs, and offers practical ways to address these cases.

Referral contacts

Free legal aid

CEL Kosova info@cel-ks.org
CSGD Kosova info@csgd-ks.org

Free psychological help

CEL Kosova info@cel-ks.org
CSGD Kosova info@csgd-ks.org

Suicide prevention line

Linja e Jetës 0800 12345
www.chat.linja-e-jetes.org

Free voluntary testing and
counseling services for HIV,
Hepatitis and Syphilis

CSGD Kosova
info@csgd-ks.org

Safe public/social
space

Bubble Pub

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