

LATELY | COVID-19

## LGBTQ LIFE UNDER QUARANTINE

By Dafina Halili - 12.05.2020

### HOW KOSOVO'S LGBTQ COMMUNITY IS SURVIVING LOCKDOWN.

At some point in our lives, at least once, all of us have dreamed about disappearing and hiding somewhere. When a particular moment became too difficult many of us would just give into escape. The need to withdraw makes more sense than ever during lockdown in the Covid-19 era, but for the majority of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) persons in Kosovo retreating into lonely corners is a way of life.

Dee\* knows better than anyone what it is to indulge oneself in escapism. She is a trans woman who has bore the cost of being closeted. She has come out only to a very few people from her circle of friends and in the LGBTQ community. Despite the sex that was assigned at birth and male biological appearance, Dee has felt like a woman all along.

Many transgender people remain highly misunderstood. Expressing a gender identity different from the biological sex one is assigned at birth adds to their discrimination as a result. The terms “sex” and “gender” are often used interchangeably and that adds to the general public’s confusion and misconception of trans issues in Kosovo.

Still, compared to trans women (a male-to-female transgender person), trans men in Kosovo — as well in the region as a whole — are accepted more easily by the general public. Trans men’s gender expression finds more approval due

to society's patriarchal stratification — as of now there are no trans women who have come out publicly.

Two trans men, who are also LGBTQ activists and have come out publicly, once shared their belief with K2.0 that due to gender inequality, trans women hold a similar status to all women in the region: Lower than men and they have a higher exposure to violence and are not as accepted compared to trans men.

The patriarchal culture in Kosovo has added to Dee's trust and communication issues with the outside world.

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**"AND I CAN LOOK LIKE THIS BECAUSE I DO NOT NEED TO GO OUTSIDE."**

Dee, trans woman

"It is more acceptable for society to see trans men. That is why you have trans men who are out there — with their gender identity exposed — but you do not know any trans woman," she said.

Dee is still not public about her status and is often misgendered even inside the LGBTQ community. This further contributes to her stigmatization and low self-esteem.

"It had a very heavy impact on me," Dee said. "They [the LGBTQ community] tend to identify me incorrectly. People usually do not imagine a trans woman with short hair and male clothes. They visualize them with feminine clothes and longer hair — the opposite of how I look. But the LGBTQ community cannot be blamed for this as there is a strong image of men and women. But I cannot be blamed either."

In fact, the lockdown and the required physical distancing, despite the emotional implications, paved the way for her to have a few liberties that are almost impossible in her usual daily life. She lives alone in her apartment in Prishtina and has been working online since the first lockdown measures were introduced to help combat COVID-19 in the middle of March.

Every morning she makes sure to cover the camera on her laptop, so that her fully made up face is not seen. Dee wakes up early and experiments with eyeshadows and liners, colors and lipsticks, before participating in her online staff meeting.

“I hang around in the room feeling free. I didn’t have many opportunities to experiment with style and now I am doing it all the time. Sometimes I look more feminine. Sometimes gothic,” she said. “I never had a chance to develop my own style and understand what my style actually is. And I can look like this because I do not need to go outside.”

The persistent feeling of being the wrong sex — with all the discomfort and anxiety — made her life a journey of gender dysphoria, feelings that she cannot be rid of despite her experiments. Sometimes her anxiety is combined with fear and insecurity due to the uncertainty of the pandemic’s outcome and letters are her way of dealing with it.

“I am managing it. I write down those feelings that disturb me. I transform them into poetry,” Dee said.

### The ability to be yourself

The importance of having an open and accepting family, particularly during a pandemic while isolated with relatives is affirmed by Guxim\* (He chose the name meaning courage in Albanian for himself). The 25-year-old gay man

from Prishtina is currently in lockdown with his family who do accept his sexuality. He is adapting to the lockdown and feels that as long as he is healthy he doesn't have any complaints.

"I spend the morning sleeping as my schedule is messed up from watching TV shows until sunrise. During the day I try to help with daily housework such as cleaning and cooking. On sunny days I listen to music and perform in my room since I like dancing and it's been a relatively long time since I've been to any party. Most of my time is spent on social media, as it is the only way to stay in touch with friends and my boyfriends," Guxim said, describing his daily life during lockdown.

The support that he has had under quarantine, is not the case for many LGBTQ people. There is growing evidence demonstrating that because of the stay-at-home restrictions, many LGBTQ youth are confined in hostile environments with unsupportive family members or co-habitants.

Moreover many LGBTQ people are more likely than the general population to live in poverty and lack access to adequate medical care, paid medical leave, and basic necessities during the pandemic.

Activists around the world suggest that given overloaded health systems, the treatment of LGBTQ people may be interrupted or deprioritized, including hormonal treatment and gender affirming treatments for trans people.

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**WHILE HE SPEAKS TO K2.0 HE KNOWS THAT SOMEWHERE, AT ANOTHER HOUSE, A PERSON FROM THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY IS BEING SUBJECT TO VIOLENCE FROM NON-SUPPORTIVE PARENTS.**

Blert Morina, director of the LGBTQ organization CEL (Center for Equality and Liberty) said that in Kosovo, LGBTQ people are more likely to be unemployed and are now dependent on their family members under the quarantine.

“Your house, among others, can become your enemy, during this kind of isolation when you cannot move at all and this can cause depression and anxiety,” Blert said. “Those who are jobless, or have lost their jobs become dependent on their relatives, then those family members can easily use that and create emotional problems.

Blert is a transgender man who came out publicly before beginning his hormonal therapy two years ago. He has been taking the testosterone shot (to facilitate his transition) every two weeks, as administered by his doctors in Skopje who have been following his process. With the borders closed, he has been injecting himself. Any mistake can cause many side effects so he has been trying to maintain healthy habits while quarantined at his family home in his village near Gjakova.

“I enjoy the privilege of being accepted, and I do not need to hide my identity. But this isn’t the case for all,” he said. “Sometimes I think I needed this sort of tranquility.”

Blert left an incredible year behind: In December, the Basic Court of Prishtina affirmed his right to change both his name and sex marker on his identification documents, marking a landmark decision for Blert himself, transgender persons and the whole LGBTQ movement in Kosovo.

While he speaks to K2.0 he knows that somewhere, at another house, a person from the LGBTQ community is being subject to violence from non-supportive parents. In April, K2.0 spoke to a young gay man from Prishtina who told his

story of ever increasing violence from his father since the lockdown began. His mental health deteriorated recently, and due to the sensitivity of the case, details of his experience cannot be revealed.

“The consequences of quarantine and isolation for many LGBTQ people will have a huge impact,” Blert said. “There will be damage to mental health that we will witness long after the lockdown.”

Feature image: Majlinda Hoxha / K2.0.

\*The names were changed to protect the identities.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dafina Halili is a K2.0 contributing editor, covering mainly human rights and social justice issues. Dafina has a master's degree in diversity and the media from the University of Westminster in London, U.K..

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This story was originally written in English.

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