

HOMOSEXUALITY AND RELIGION: RELATIONSHIP AND INFLUENCE ON THE
LIVES OF THE LGBT COMMUNITY IN ARMENIA

By

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1. Introduction

Religion and homosexuality have a very long and conflicting history together. Various religious beliefs around the world do not accept homosexuals and highly victimize them. Throughout the history there were many examples of homosexuality being treated as a sin and people being punished because of identifying themselves as gay. Christianity is among the religions that have very little tolerance and acceptance of gay people. There are many examples of religious leader calling out homosexuality as a sin. Christians, from different churches (Protestant, Orthodox, Apostolic, etc.) explain their views on homosexuality through quoting the Bible, saying that there are countless Bible verses

The passage is very often considered to reflect the religion's view on homosexuality; nonetheless it is not the only one that expresses negative outlook on same-sex relationship. Countries where Christianity is the main religion have a big issue with accepting people with "non-traditional" sexual orientation into their societies. While in some countries, with more liberalistic mentality the issue is not as significant, countries with very traditional beliefs, are very negatively disposed to homosexuality. In such societies gay people feel high pressure and discrimination: constant fear of being judged, threatened or physically attacked in public spaces. It is important to be able to overcome the judgments of people with different sexual preferences;

A noticeable tendency is that more religious countries have more negative attitudes towards homosexuality, thus there is a popular assumption that religion's view of homosexuality very much influences its followers' attitudes. Armenia, being a religious country, with most of its population following the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAP) falls into the category of countries with very little tolerance towards homosexuality and the LGBT community in general. While it is not apparent that the national intolerance comes from

entirely religious backgrounds, it is obvious that there is a strongly negative attitude towards homosexuality and the members of the LGBT community are treated poorly by the society. Thus, gaining more knowledge on people's religious belonging and their view on homosexuality gives a better insight on reasons that explain their opinions, making it possible to identify whether or not their perception of the LGBT community is religiously driven.

2. Literature Review

The first LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) movements started back in the mid-20th century, fighting for their rights and equality. During the 60 year struggle they have gone a long way establishing their place in the society. Nonetheless, in many countries and especially in countries with strong religious backgrounds, homosexuals are being mistreated and discriminated in various ways. In many communities, the religion based discrimination of the LGBT community still exists. Whitehead (2010) looks at the views of Christianity on homosexuality and how one's religious beliefs affect their view of homosexuals, same-sex marriages or unions. The study, however, does not fully measure the connection between the two. It focuses on several variables, such as whether "being homosexual is a choice" or "inborn", as well whether "homosexuals have a right to marry". The religious variables measure to which extent the participants are involved in the church activities or how they "view God". Whitehead's study results are similar to the studies done previously, showing that religious beliefs influence their view on homosexuality. However, the key finding was the difference of acceptance of same-sex marriages and unions between different religious traditions. Religious beliefs and behaviors are strongly associated with an individual's perception of homosexuality as well as same-sex marriages or unions. Since religion is a deciding factor in one's attitude towards homosexuality or same-sex unions, it is of utmost importance to take into consideration the all the religious aspects that influence people's opinions. According to Wood, in religious communities, LGBT members are subjected to

religious and spiritual struggle by the leaders of religious communities and the members. A definition of religious and spiritual abuse is the “mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support, or greater spiritual empowerment with the result of weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment”, as mentioned by Wood (2014). There are six types of religious, spiritual abuse as identified by Warn: leadership representing God, spiritual bullying, acceptance via performance, spiritual neglect, expanding external and internal tension and manifestation of internal states (Warn, 2011). As discussed by Wood, the religious spiritual abuse mainly comes from religious leaders, who discriminate and bully members of their communities based on their sexual orientation. The LGBT members are being convinced that they don’t belong to the religious community, which makes many hide and reject their sexual orientation. They become skeptical of the religious doctrine due to lack of spiritual support from the members of religious communities. Moreover, certain LGBT individuals’ mental health is being affected very negatively (Wood and Conley, 2014).

In the Jewish societies, as well as in Armenian, there is a strong emphasis on the ‘nuclear’ families, and thus the LGBT members feel that they don’t belong with their community. Because of high pressure and anticipation from the society, gay people can’t adapt themselves to correspond to both components of their identity. In his study, Schnoor (2006) identifies several types of Jewish homosexuals. Firstly, the more religious homosexuals, who tend to often repress their sexual orientation and go deeper into their religion. Secondly, the “gay lifestylers”, people who tend to have a more liberalistic view on the religion, and are more open about their sexual orientation. The “gay-Jewish commuters”, who are connected to both their religion and orientation, tend to adopt their identity depending on the social situation. Lastly, the author discusses “gay-Jewish integrators”, who fully demonstrate both aspect of their identity in any kind of social interactions (Schnoor, 2006). Thus, shows the difficulties and struggles of the LGBT community in highly religious and traditional

societies. Nonetheless, apart from being judged by the people surrounding them in the major LGBT communities, homosexuals in more rural areas are subjected to even more bullying and discrimination. Hartal (2015) conducted a study in the center and peripheries of Israel. He emphasized that it is important to create spaces where LGBT people will be able to openly express themselves, outside of the 'gay-center' of Israel, Tel-Aviv. Similarly, in Armenian villages the LGBT community is under very high pressure, because of the old-fashioned mentality of the villagers, and tries to escape to the center, Yerevan. According to the study, LGBT members in rural areas and peripheries tend to believe that the life in the center will be more trouble-less for them. This belief results in massive migration from peripheries to Tel-Aviv. However, as the author discusses, their ideas of the 'better life' in Tel-Aviv do not match the reality. Hence, Hartal concludes that it is very important to pay attention to the life of the LBGT individuals outside of centers in order to be able to understand the life and struggle LGBT members go through in their everyday life (Hartal, 2015).

As can be seen in many religious societies, the LGBT individuals are being pressured and discriminated based on their sexual orientation. Armenia, being a highly traditional and religious country in general, has very little tolerance towards gay people. Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion. Thus, it is not surprising that Christianity has become an integral part of Armenians cultures and traditions, dictating the population's worldview in every possible aspect. The Church has been actively involved in government activities and decision makings for years. The Armenian Apostolic Church was subjected to brutal repression and persecution during the Soviet era. Many priests were killed in prisons or in exile, almost all monasteries were closed, and the religious education system was destroyed at the root. As a result, the level of religious practice in Armenia was at its lowest. After the formation of the third republic, in order to regain its power, people's trust and faith,

the State and the Church started leading active policies, to promote Christianity in Armenia, which has influenced the society in various ways (Siekierski, 2014). Despite the long historical influence in the state and huge support from the government, the church currently does not have the same position and authority among the general public, it used to have throughout centuries. After the independence, the freedom of religion is making it difficult for the very traditional Armenian Apostolic Church to keep the younger population devoted to it (Whooley, 2009). While the Church is highly supported by the state, it is losing followers among the younger generation. Despite not being spiritually attached to the Church, Armenian society highly values the standards and traditions coming from historical times, thus are highly judgmental towards anything that does not correspond to their traditional morals. With this ideology, the LGBT community in Armenia is under a high risk of bullying and discrimination. According to the report on human rights violations among the LGBT people in Armenia, gay people undergo massive discrimination in their basic human rights such as, access to education healthcare or employment. According to a survey conducted in Yerevan, Vanadzor and Gyumri, 71% of the population has a negative attitude towards homosexuality (PINK, 2012). Moreover, transgender individuals are not being treated as equal members of the society, both by the general public and the State. It refuses to provide transgender people with proper official documents, hence not recognizing them as having legal personhood (Armenia LGBT Shadow Report, 2012). Overall, the LGBT people in Armenia are undergoing basic human rights violations on the State level. The word 'homosexual' is often used as an insult in Armenia, and is seen as an illness and not an orientation. The level of homophobia is especially high in the army and prison, where violence is being used against LGBT people. Because of poor reporting, there are no official statistics; however, most of the homosexuals are under a very high risk of being exposed to violence in the army (Armenia LGBT Shadow Report, 2012).

Like many Jewish societies, in religious and traditional Armenian society heterosexuality is the only acceptable relationship; gay people have troubles coming out even to their families and close friends, under the pressure of not being accepted by the society. The LGBT community is highly discriminated against and ‘not accepted’, making it very difficult for gay people to be able to openly discuss their orientation and being subjected to bullying and violence. Despite the fact that the number of homosexuals in Armenia is striking, there are only two NGOs, out of 4000 that openly support gay rights (Carroll and Quinn, 2009). Moreover, there are certain set of values that a traditional ‘nuclear’ Armenian family should correspond to. Thus, any kind same-sex unions or marriages are going against the traditional values, and are not welcomed by the majority of the society. The issue is very severe regarding gay women. Women in Armenia are expected to have a certain image and be in some notion subordinate to men. Lesbians are not being taken seriously by the rest of the society because of contradicting to the image of a traditional humble Armenian woman. While homophobia is spread in the society on both individual and institutional level, the image of homosexuals in the media is not flattering. The subject of homosexuality is rarely touched in the media or television. Nonetheless, whenever any media outlets refer to gay people they are being portrayed either as a joke or as people who are ‘morally damaged’ (Carroll and Quinn, 2009).

As it can be seen, Armenia is very homophobic country overall, even though the LGBT community makes a considerable amount of the population. Even though previously done studies very well portray the existing situation in Armenia, none of them actually refer to the causes and reasons behind those attitudes. Most of them are being supported by arguing that ‘it goes against Christianity’. Nonetheless, there is no study done in Armenia, measuring the influence of religion on the LGBT community, their families, and people’s attitudes towards homosexuality in general. Thus, this paper will go a step further and explore the

relationship of Christianity and homosexuality in Yerevan, how much influence Christianity actually has on people's perspectives, if any, and what role it plays in the lives of LGBT individuals.

3. Statement of Central Research Question

Christianity and the Armenian Apostolic Church do not share a positive outlook on homosexuality, and do not accept the members of the LGBT community as equal members of the society. Since religion takes a major role in the lives of Armenians, it also has a big input in shaping the national mentality and worldview. A general overview of the population's beliefs, it stands out that the majority of Armenians are very intolerant towards sexual minorities. Arguably, most of the intolerance towards the sexual minorities and the LGBT community comes from religious beliefs. Armenians search justification in Christianity and the Bible to explain their personal views on homosexuality. The research is aiming to find out the general attitude of the population towards the sexual minorities, the role Christianity and the religious bodies take in the lives of the LGBT community, giving answers to the two following questions:

1. Is it true that religion is the main reason behind the mistreatment of the LGBT community?
2. How does religion in Armenia (Christianity) affect members of the LGBT communities within and outside of their families?

4. Methodology

The findings in the paper are based on a personal research, conducted in the course of 2 month, mid-January to mid-March. The project consists of two stages of research: face to face interviews with the members of the LGBT community, and distribution of questionnaire

among the general public. Before the implementation of the research, both of the questionnaires were tested and approved.

The aim of the questionnaire, consisting of 9 close-ended questions, was to measure public's general opinion on homosexuality. The questionnaire was distributed to 300 participants from Yerevan, chosen through chosen through stratified and random sampling. The sampling included participants from most districts of Yerevan: Achapnyak, Avan, Arabkir, Davtashen, Erebuni, Kentron, Malatsia-Sebastia, Norq and Qanaqer-Zeytun. Several districts were left out of the overall sample due to lack of time and difficulty of the locations. In each district, random buildings and households were chosen. The questionnaire was distributed to the person opening the household door. However, in order to meet the necessary demographical requirements, and due to the limited time, 110 questionnaires were distributed in public areas of Yerevan, to people of various age groups.

During the second stage of the research, 30 members of the LGBT community were interviewed, with the aim to gain more information about struggles and discrimination they undergo in their everyday life from their family members and the society. The participants of the interviews were chosen through snowball sampling. The interview participants were contacted through social media and introduced to the topic of the research. The members who were willing to participate were further informed about the dates and times of the interviews. Because all the personal data of the participants is strictly confidential, no identifying information will be mentioned in the findings or data analysis.

The data collected from both stages of the research was thoroughly analyzed via SPSS. Important and statistically significant findings discovered during the data analysis are presented in the paper.

5. Research Findings and Analysis

According to the Caucasus Barometer research over the last several years, around 95% of the population is believed to belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAP), while a very small percentage belongs to Orthodox Churches (REFERENCE). However, the personal research revealed an alarming difference of statistics, as only 59.7% of the survey participants identified themselves as followers of the AAP. The rest of respondents claimed to be atheist or agnostic (See Figure 1). Not surprisingly, there were no followers of any other religions, 6,7% of the participants who said “other” were not sure about their religious belonging, but were more inclined towards having a faith in something supernatural.

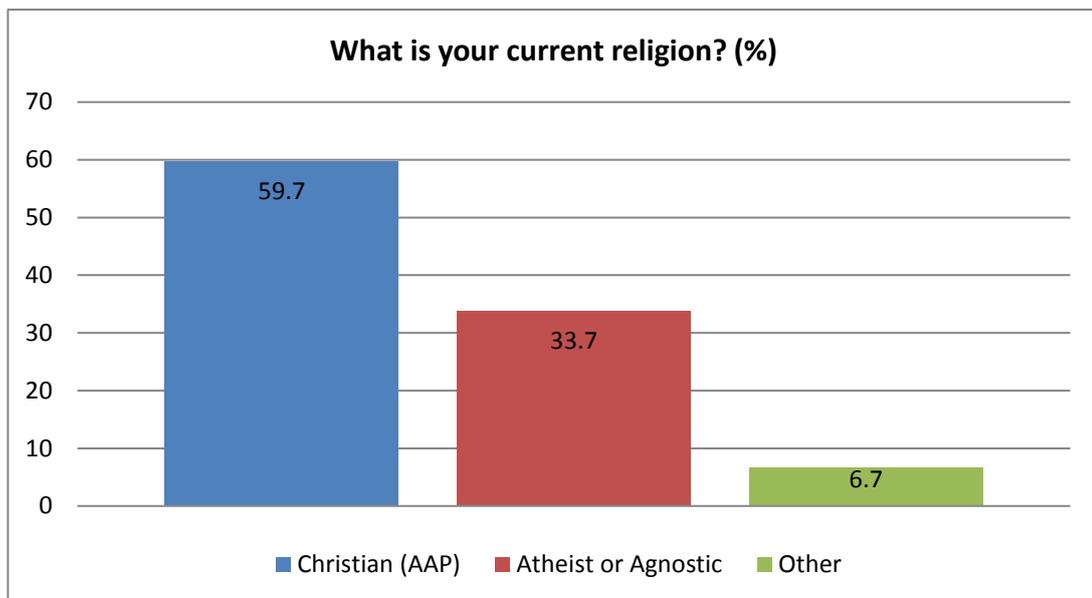


Figure 1. What is your religion? The figure represents the division of the sample by their religious beliefs in percentages.

Among other eye-catching descriptive findings was the importance of religion in daily life of the respondents. As the statistics suggest, a cumulative of only 34.4% of religious participants considered religion a very important part of their everyday life, while 16.3% said it is not important at all. The rest of the participants had very neutral thoughts on religion in their daily life, or did not belong to any religious institution in general. While all the Christian

participants answered that Christianity does not accept homosexuality, the actual percentage of participants who had a negative attitude towards homosexuality was only 18.7, and a striking majority were neutral (See Figure 2).

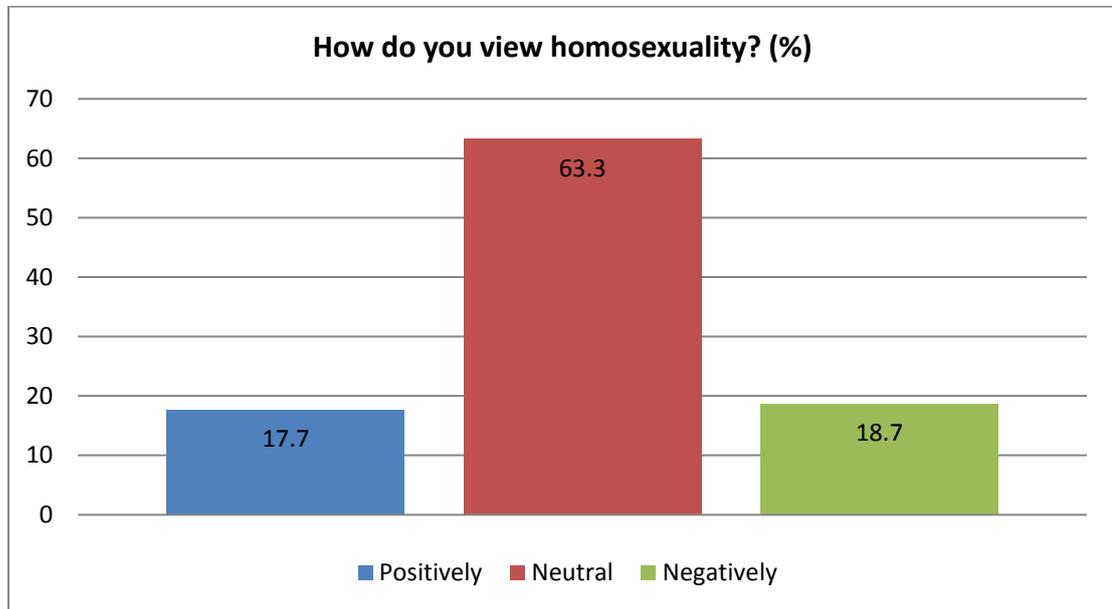


Figure 2. How do you view homosexuality? The Figure demonstrates the sample's opinion on homosexuality in percentages. (%)

No significant pattern was identified between the age of the participants and their religiosity, implying that there is a fairly equal distribution of beliefs among various age groups. Nonetheless, an interesting relationship was found between participants' age and their opinion on homosexuality. It was initially expected that older people would be more intolerant towards sexual minorities. The data, however, suggests that the majority of the participants between the ages of 18 and 25 tend to have a more negative view on homosexuality, while the majority of participants older than 25 had more neutral opinions.

Despite the very large number of participants being Christian, only 13% of all participants mentioned that they very strongly agree, and 21% that they agree with their religion's views. Nonetheless, comparing only Christian participants and the extent to which they share their religion's views, we can see that 57.5% of Christians strongly agree or agree

with Christian views. Interestingly, there is a strong correlation between sharing religion’s views and its importance. The data shows that the participants who very strongly agree with their religion also give it huge importance in their daily life. Similarly, people who consider religion an important part of their life, also strongly share its views, and participants who are fairly neutral towards Christianity’s views are also neutral about it in their daily life.

While the initial data above gives an insight to the public’s general opinion on homosexuality and a surface overview of their involvement with religion, a deeper analysis uncovers possible reasons and relationships between the individual opinions.

A Chi Square analysis of view on homosexuality and current religion revealed a statistically significant correlation between the two variables. Further analysis shows that among all the participants, most of people who viewed homosexuality negatively were Christian. Nonetheless, among the Christian participants, the vast majority said that they are neutral towards homosexuality. Most of the atheist and agnostic participants had either positive or neutral attitude towards homosexuality (See Figure 3).

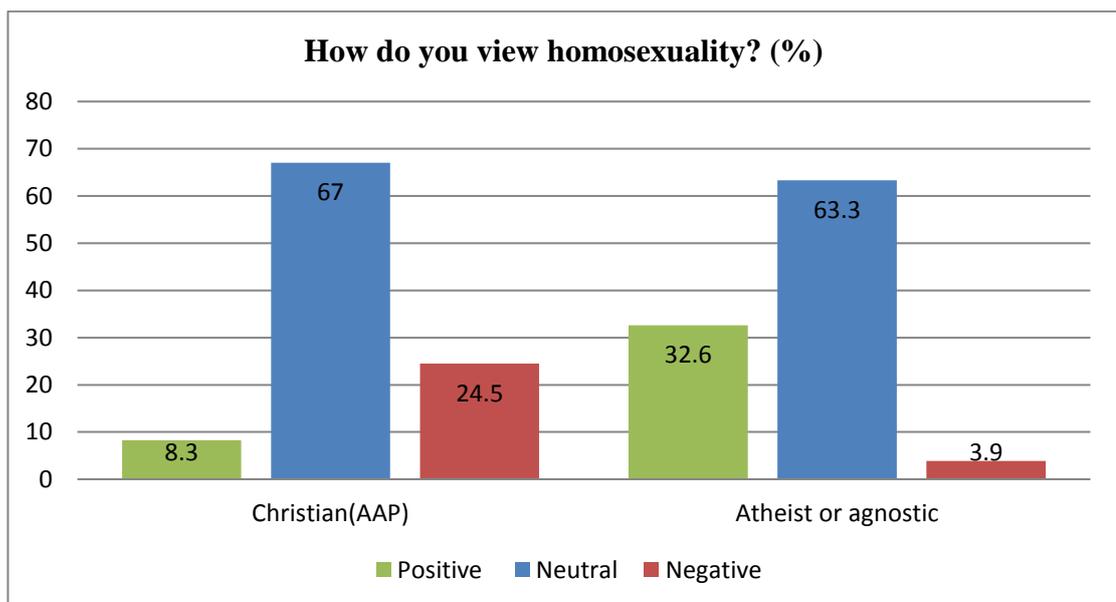


Figure 3. How do you view homosexuality divided by religion. The figure demonstrates what opinion on homosexuality people of different religious beliefs hold.

A statistically significant correlation was also found when analyzing the relationship between the importance of religion in daily life and opinion on homosexuality. The analysis revealed that most of the participants who claim that religion is a very important part of their daily life also have a strongly negative view on homosexuality. Nevertheless, almost all participants who said that religion is important in their life had surprisingly neutral opinions on homosexuality, and the rest of the sample was also dominantly neutral (See Figure 4).

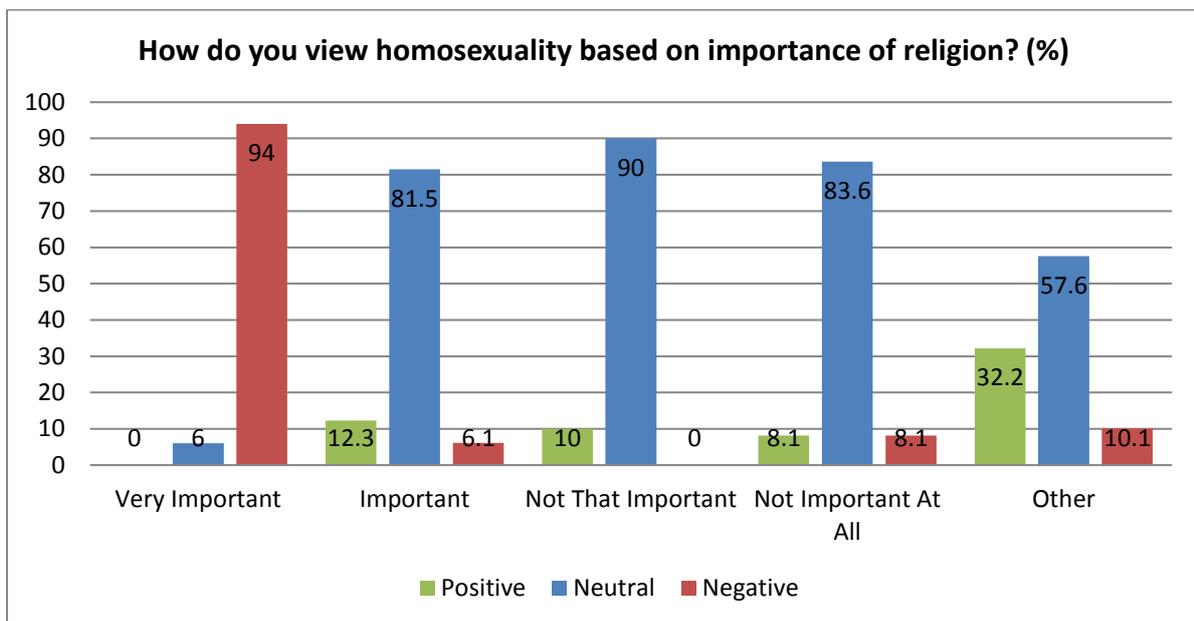


Figure 4. How do you view homosexuality? The figure demonstrates the sample's opinion on homosexuality based on the importance of religion in their life.

Accordingly, statistically significant was also the relationship between the participants' views on homosexuality and the extent to which they agree with their religion's view. According to the Chi Square analysis, participants that very strongly shared views of Christianity had a very negative attitude towards homosexuality while people who strongly agreed with their religion's views were more neutral in their opinion on homosexuality. Most positive answers came from the participants who did not belong to any religion. Interestingly, the correlation between others' opinions on participants and their view of homosexuality was also statistically significant. The participants who were strongly influenced by others' opinion

were also very conservative in their view on homosexuality, while people who were moderately or not at all influenced by the opinion of their surrounding were more supportive and neutral towards the sexual minorities.

Overall, the data collected during the research shows some difference from the official statistics, with only half of participants being Christian, while the rest claimed to be agnostic or atheist. The interesting difference between the official statistics and the results of the survey can be explained by the self-reported nature of the survey. Even though the sampling included participants of various ages and districts of Yerevan, it was impossible to avoid the self-reported participants. While there were various reasons for people to reject filling in the survey, one factor played a major role in their decision: strongly negative view of homosexuality. After initially agreeing to participate in the survey, they changed their mind as soon as they got familiarized with the subject. Thus, the sampling does not fully include Armenians with extreme views on homosexuality. Drawing conclusions from the overall data analysis, it is safe to assume that the majority of participants who were not willing to contribute to the survey, because they had overly negative view on homosexuality, were most likely to identify themselves as followers of the AAP, with strong connection to the religious body and belief.

The age of the participants varies from 18 to 64, most of the participants falling into the category between the ages of 34 and 41, due to sampling limitation, and the difficult accessibility of people of certain age groups. As it is seen from the data analysis, only a very small percentage of people who identified themselves as Christian, said that Christianity has a very important role in their everyday life. These statistics can also be connected to the fact that most of the participants who shared deeper connection to the religious body were not willing to participate in the research. Thus, even though the statistics are not fully accurate, the chosen sample does represent a certain, and rather big part of the population in total.

Despite the fairly neutral responses of the participants that can be seen in the data analysis, personal observations during the data collection show certain mismatches between the reaction of participants and their answers. Since all the surveys were distributed personally, apart from information collected through the questionnaire, the behavior of the respondents and their reaction to the questionnaire was also noted, which will be taken into consideration when making conclusions about the results of the survey.

Comparing the data from the formulated two dominant groups: religious and non-religious, it is apparent that there is not very much contrast between their attitudes towards homosexuality; in general, most of the respondents were neutral in their responses (apart from openly negative responses). Nevertheless, the religious participants that claimed to be very neutral towards the sexual minorities had very apparent mimic changes and reactions to the question. While most of the Christians were highly not pleased with the content of the questionnaire, the non-religious participants did not have any special attitude changes but were quite neutral towards the topic. Apparent behavioral changes, facial expressions and body language suggested that the Christian respondents are not approving of the question; however, they did not register strongly negative opinions. Thus, most of the participants who said that they are “neutral” implied that they are more tolerant of homosexuality rather than accepting. The term “tolerance” very well represents the population’s opinion in general, since not the entire population is either strictly negative or supporting; most of them are simply “tolerant” towards homosexuality.

While it is evident that there is a strong negative view of the LGBT community, there are a number of possible reasons that can drive the public’s opinion. However, religion is arguably one of the most important factors, which with its negative view on homosexuality manages to navigate the nation’s viewpoint and shape the public mind. Thus, both survey results and public observations suggest that people with religious views and backgrounds

tend to be more extreme with their views. Nonetheless, due to the relatively self-reported nature of the survey, there still remains a rather big portion of population, who go further into extremes both in their views on religion, and subsequently on homosexuality: the stronger is their belief, the more negative is their view of homosexuality. Overall, it can be concluded, that most of the Armenian population does not share a positive view on the sexual minorities, claiming homosexuality to be “non-natural” and not supported by religion. However, as the research points out, a very big portion of the population does not associate itself with religion as closely; however it still tends to share the same beliefs as the majority of the population. Even though most of the respondents were fairly neutral in their responses, the real connection between religion and perception of homosexuality comes to sight when analyzing the responses of strictly religious people. As it was evident in the data, people who have a strong connection with their beliefs also share a highly negative view on homosexuality. Thus, it can be assumed, that the part of Armenia’s population, that shares the same worldview as Christianity (more than the half of the population, according to Caucasus Barometer research, 2015), does not accept homosexuality.

Because the number of the interview participants is not very big, the program does not identify any patterns, thus, the following data will not be tested for statistical significance. Nevertheless, there are certain patterns seen in the data. For the interviews, 30 members of the LGBT community were chosen via snowball sampling. Contacting people who would be willing to contribute to the research was a challenge since most of the LGBT members did not desire to openly discuss their sexual orientation, even under the condition that all the information collected during the interviews is confidential. Hence, the sample represented in the research is not fully representative of the LGBT community in Armenia, and showcases only the part of the population who are not afraid to talk out loud about their sexuality. Moreover, because of the general attitude of Armenians towards the LGBT community, many

members have not come out to anyone in their surroundings. It was thus physically impossible to find and contact the people who were hiding their sexuality from the society. Overall, the sample represents a milder picture of the Armenian LGBT community and the attitude they receive from their families, peer and the society in general. The sample does however show the relationships the members of the LGBT community have with their families and friends, as well as the pressure they feel from the religious community and organizations.

Since the interviews were not held in a very formal manner, the participants were free to tell or comment on anything that went through their mind at the point. Due to the informal nature of the interviews, a lot of information was obtained not merely from the collected data, but from personal observation of the participants before, during and after the interviews. Before starting the interviews, all potential participants were personally contacted and briefed about the subject of the research and its goals. Even though all of the contacted members of the LGBT community were very excited by the idea of the research, many of them were not open enough to freely talk about their sexual orientation. While the majority had a very strong desire to contribute to the research, they were initially very uncertain about revealing any personal information to the interviewer. In the course of the interviews, nevertheless, after establishing certain connection and mutual understanding between the interviewer and interviewees, the participants felt more secure and eager to discuss and share various experiences from their personal lives. After the interviews, many participants felt more open, saying “there’s always this desire to tell about our problems to a third party, someone outside of our community, who can understand and support us”.

Because of certain formed attitudes within the community there is a stronger, more negative view towards gay men, rather than towards lesbian women. The participants of the interviews however, were surprisingly predominantly men. Due to the different attitudes

towards gays and lesbian, the two samples will be discussed separately, with parallels drawn between the responses of both groups. The general descriptive findings, however, will be presented of the overall sample.

Despite the fact that more than the half of participants, 53%, said that they come from Christian families, only 20% of participants said that they are also religious. Surprisingly however, when talking about their experiences about coming out to their family, most of the participants, whether they come from religious families or no, said that they have told their family members about their sexual orientation. Thus, the religious beliefs of the family did not influence the willingness of the participants to come out to their families. The responses and reactions of the family members however, were rather diverse. By breaking down the reaction of the family members by their religion, it becomes evident that the more religious families had a more difficult time accepting their children. There were, however, more families that eventually accepted their child's sexuality rather than families who continued to have the same negative attitude. While all of the positive reactions came from non-religious families, the numbers of strictly negative reactions was equal in both religious and non-religious families.

Another general pattern stands out when analyzing the coming out experiences of the interview participants. Only very few of them were open about their sexual orientation to all of the family members, most of the participants have either told one of their parents, or only siblings. In many cases, one of the family members, most commonly the mother, has had assumptions, or have seen them with a partner of the same sex, and thus, had an idea about their child's sexual orientation. Commonly, the family member who knew their child's or sibling's sexuality was also the one to be supportive of them.

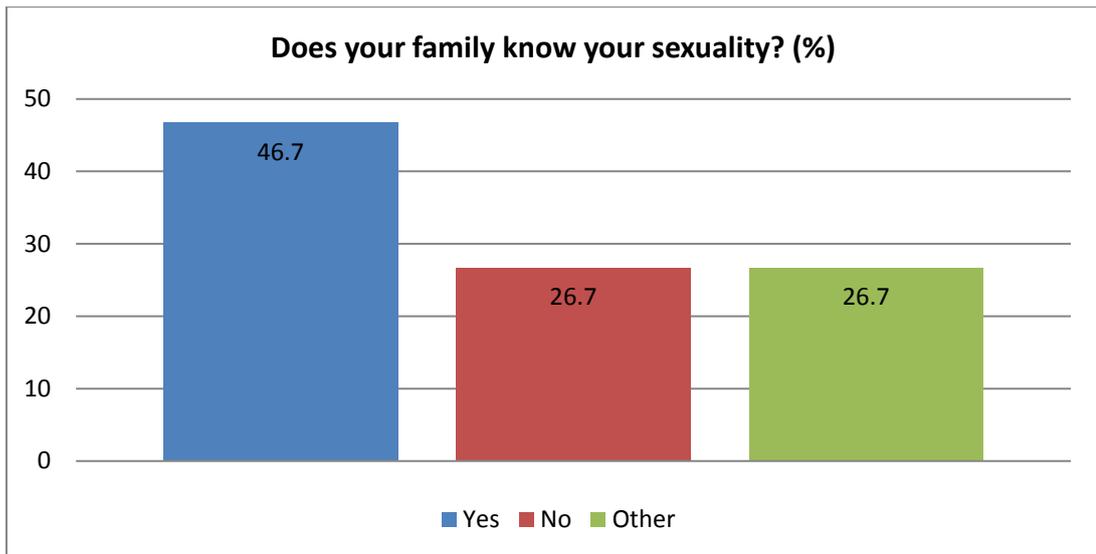


Figure 5. Does your family know your sexuality? The figure demonstrates what part of the participants has come out to their families. (%)

Figure 5 above shows the percentages of participants who have officially come out to their parents. The “other” sector in the Figure refers to those participants, who have not personally spoken to their parents about their sexuality but were either seen with a partner, or parents had certain assumptions. In most “other” answers, however, the respondents have not had any discussion with their parents regarding their sexuality. Others have discussed their sexuality with siblings, or one of their parents. Overall however, not the entire family was aware of their sexual orientation. Many participants admitted that telling their sibling or at least one family member and having their support gave them the emotional strength and confidence to open up to the rest of the family. During the data analysis no significant difference was present among male and female participants who told their parents.

The participants who have come out to their family members were also asked to describe their coming out experience, and the reaction their families had. From the 21 families that knew about their child’s sexuality only 19% were initially very positive and supportive. The biggest part of the participants’ families, 48% had a “neutral” reaction to it. The participants, who answered “neutral”, were asked to further explain what that meant. In

most of the cases, the interview participants tried talking and explaining their orientation to their families, which led to mutual understanding and acceptance. Others said that even though it was very hard for their families, they eventually were able to overcome the difficulties and support them. One of the participants told an interesting story how his family members tried accept him after coming out. “Initially my father was disappointed but he grew to accept it as he saw that in other important ways I was still his son and still the person I had always been. My mother never wanted anyone to know for her own image or reputation. My sister told me to stay away from her children. My other sister has never engaged with me even though I have raised the issue”. While talking about their experience with the families, many revealed how difficult it was, or still is, to start the conversation with their family members. Nonetheless, all of the participants who eventually did have a conversation with their families noted that “no matter what reaction they get, it is very important to tell your family, at the end of the day, we’re their children, and they will learn to understand and accept us”. A high number of participants’ families however, 38%, were very negative towards their children’s sexuality, and even after long time were not able to accept them. Some family members went to extreme solutions, as to asking their child to leave the country, or not contact them anymore. Unfortunately, despite not being the dominant part in the research, the 38% of the sample best represent the Armenian society and their attitude towards homosexuality in general. As it was expected, non-religious families were more supportive of their children’s sexual orientation. Interestingly though, the majority of religious families, that were not very happy with their child’s sexuality at first, gradually came to terms with it.

While for the majority it was very difficult to reveal their sexual orientation to their families, the interviews showed an opposite picture, when it comes to coming out to friends.

According to the data, more than half of the participants, 73.7% were very open with their friends about their sexuality (see Figure 6).

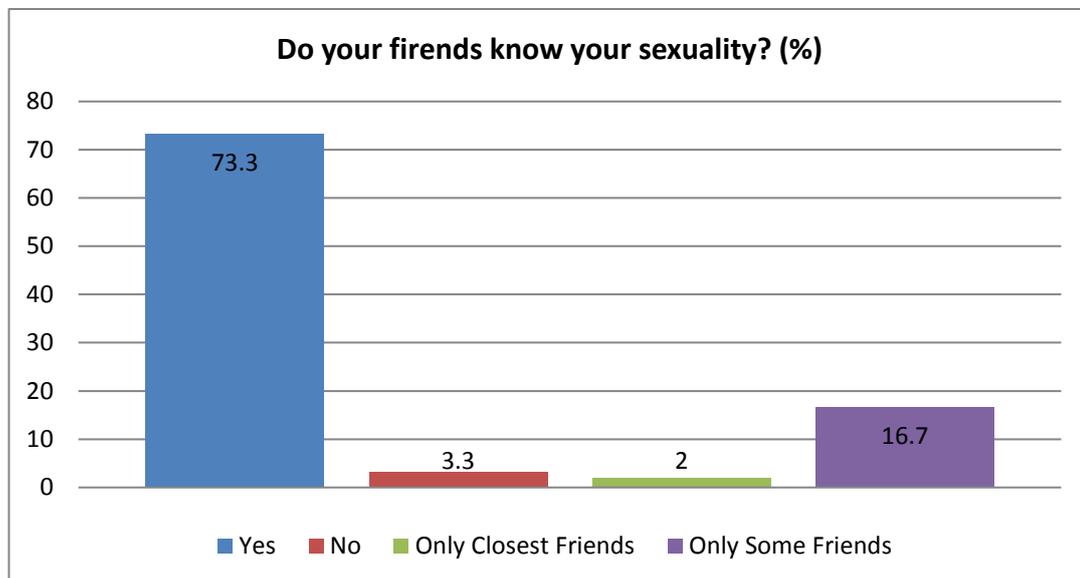


Figure 6. Do your friends know your sexuality? The figure demonstrates the percentages of the sample whose friends know about their sexual orientation. (%)

When asked what was their reaction, the many of the participants offered a remark similar to the following one “They were either very supportive, neutral, or said, ‘me too’”. Another reoccurring answer was that friends were guessing their sexuality; even they haven’t yet come out. The acceptance rate of friends was much higher, than that of the family members. Taking into consideration, that the participants belonged to a certain group of friends, who were either also members of the LGBT community, or more open-minded than the rest of the society, it can be concluded that the results are not fully bias-free. Nevertheless, there were several participants who lost close friends, only because they were not able to accept their sexuality. The number of such cases however, was very low, only 3.3%. Interestingly, the majority of the participants said they came out to their friends when they were drunk, explaining that it helped them to gain the confidence to finally open up.

An interesting pattern appeared while discussing homophobia with the interview participants. Many of the participants’ friends considered themselves to be “homophobes”.

However, finding out that their close friends are homosexual, made them understand that the person's sexuality does not define what kind of person they are. This fact both shows a positive potential in the youth of the country to start gradually accepting homosexuals for who they are without labeling their sexuality, and gives the members of the LGBT community more confidence and reassures them that "what they are" is not wrong.

Due to a certain conviction formed within the Armenian society, the attitudes towards gay men and women tend to take different direction. One of the interview participants was very confused when she first found out about the existing stereotypical way of thinking, saying "I got drunk and started calling one of them a hypocrite because they were more tolerant of female homosexuality than male". Taking into consideration the different attitudes towards gays and lesbians, it was interesting to break down the sample by the gender of the participants and see differences in their responses. While most gay men may not be well perceived by a particular group of people, the same group might have fairly neutral or positive attitudes towards lesbian women. The following statistics further prove the theory that gay men are treated with less respect than lesbians. When discussing physical abuse during the interviews, more men admitted that they have, in fact, been physically attacked or abused because of their sexual orientation, compared to a relatively lesser number of women. As seen in Figure 7, more than half of the male participants admitted to being physically attacked, while the majority of interviewed female participants have not.

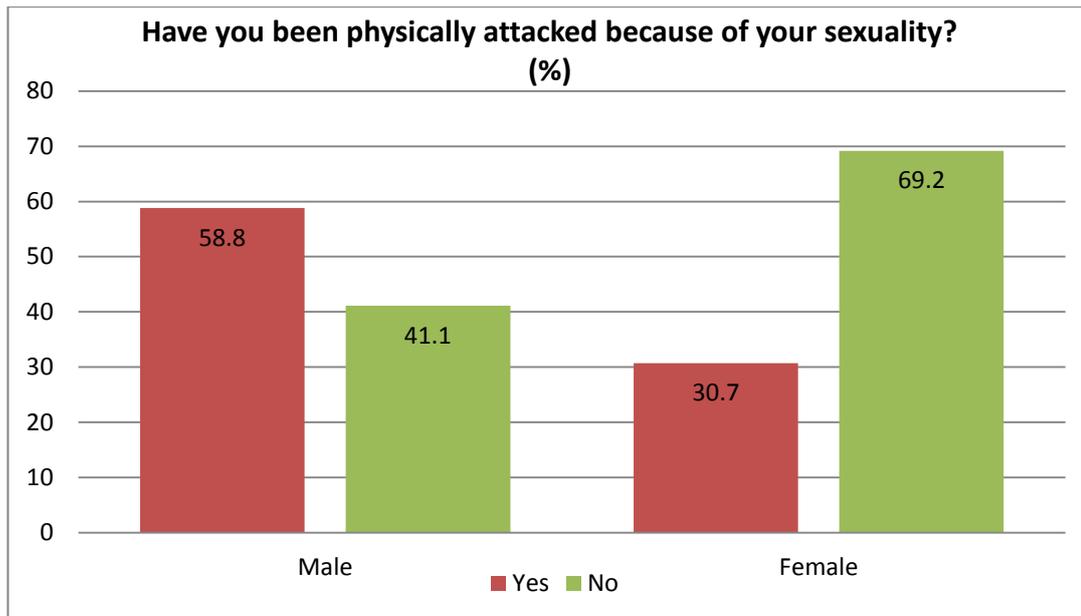


Figure 7. Have you been physically attacked because of your sexuality? The figure demonstrates the differences between males and females that are subjected to physical violence. (%)

Overall, however, almost half of the participants were at least once physically attacked because of their sexual orientation. Accordingly, more male participants (33.3%) were rejected by their peers, rather than females (20%).

The following attitude of the society can be explained by the existing “standards” that men must follow. A 2012 report on the “Human Rights violations of the LGBT people in Armenia” by PINK Armenia has also referred to the issue stating that there is less attention drawn to homosexual relationship between two women than men, “Because of this lack of attention to women who are not heterosexual, and due to the existence of a society in which public affection between women is acceptable and commonplace among heterosexual women, lesbian women may more easily live unmolested by homophobia more than men can” (PINK, 2012).

When looking at the number of participants who came out to their parents from the perspective of both genders, it can be seen that there are not very apparent, but some slight differences between the two samples. The number of males and females that did come out to

their parents was relatively equal; however, more male participants were still not open to their families, compared to the relatively less number of females (see Figure 8). The difference in numbers can be explained by the cultural perception of both genders. Interestingly, however, there was no difference in the gender of respondents and their families' reaction to their sexuality. As the statistics revealed, both the gender of participants did not play any role in reaction they received from their families.

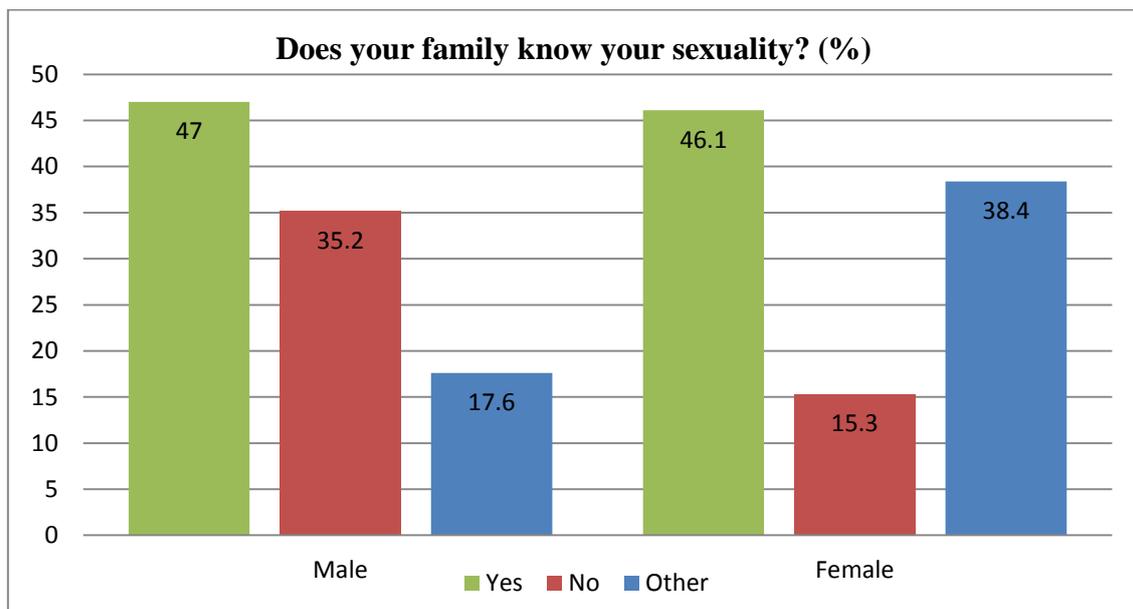


Figure 8. Does your family know about your sexuality? The chart shows the differences between male and female participants that have come out to their families.

While discussing religion and religious organization during the interviews, it was noticeable that most of the participants felt tense and uncomfortable. Even though a very small part of the participants identified as Christian, all of the participants felt pressure and intolerance from the religious authorities. Because of the feeling of being unwelcome, very few participants had any association with religious bodies or places of worship. Some participants could recall interactions with religious people, but did not have any pleasant memories of those, since they were mostly judged and told “you will go to hell”. One of the participants mentioned that she feels hate and aggression in their speech every time she visits any religious gathering with her family. Another respondent said that even though he is not

religious and does not have much experience with religious organizations, he often feels not accepted by his religious friends, even though they say that their religion has nothing to do with it. One of the Christian participants of the interviews offered a very interesting remark regarding her experience with religious bodies “Since my parents are very religious, I constantly feel that they would judge and not understand me. I have the same feeling every time I enter the church”. Nonetheless, she stays faithful to her religion and believes that one day she will be able to enter the Church without feeling judged. The section fully demonstrates the approach religion in Armenia has towards homosexuality, and how well it influences the opinions of the population.

Generally, looking at the data obtained through the interviews, it can be concluded that the members of the LGBT community feel the pressure from the society, their friends and families. Many go through the struggle of staying faithful to their religion, even after they are being told that Christianity does not accept homosexuality. The research mostly features members of the LGBT community who were more open about their sexuality, with their families, friends, and the society in general. At the same time, there are members of the LGBT community who are too afraid to talk about their sexuality publicly, or even mention it to their friends. Thus, the relatively positive image that was acquired from the interviews does not represent the entire LGBT community in Yerevan, let alone in Armenia. The data collected from the sample however, does portray the basic struggles, discrimination and physical abuse the members of the LGBT community, who are open about their sexuality, undergo in their everyday life. While the rest of the community does not attain negative attitude from the society merely because they choose to hide their sexuality, it can be only assumed what kind of treatment they would get if they were open to the public.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of the paper was to demonstrate the possible influence Christianity has on the opinions of the Armenian public and the influence it has on the lives of homosexuals and the LGBT community in general. The research does not include participants from all around Armenia; due to time and resource limitations, it focuses on the population of Yerevan, including participants from various regions of Yerevan. Based on the results analysis and the overall observations throughout conducting the research, it is obvious that there is a connection between the religiosity of the population and their view on homosexuality.

Most of the participants of both stages of survey were religious (or came from religious families), and belonged to the AAP. Even though there were minor mismatches with the official statistics on the religious population, overall, the sample is representative of the Armenian population. Even though the research does not show overall strongly negative attitude towards homosexuality, but rather demonstrates a more tolerant point of view, it is apparent that the opinions of the public are highly motivated by religious beliefs. Consciously or unconsciously, people tend to disregard the LGBT community, due to culturally accepted norms, which mostly reflect Christian traditions. Even though there is no explicitly evident connection between people's mindsets and their religious belonging, certain patterns and examples, discussed in the paper, indicate a subconscious negative link between religion and homosexuality.

The research not only shows that religion has its fair share in shaping the public's opinion on homosexuality, but also demonstrates the existing influence religion has on the lives of the LGBT community. While many LGBT individuals come from religious backgrounds, only very few of them stay faithful to their families' religion. The loss of

spiritual connection can be explained by the very negative approach that the religious bodies and representative have towards the sexual minorities.

The overall image however, shows improvement of people's view of homosexuals and homosexuality. As the data reveals, more members of the society, whose friends and family members are a part of the LGBT community, are open to changing their view on homosexuality. Even though there is a tremendous amount of work that needs to be done in the field, merely the fact that more people are willing to participate and contribute to similar researches proves that the society is heading in the correct direction of eliminating discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Because of limited time, the survey was not able to concentrate on the population outside of Yerevan. Since the situation changes very rapidly, a big difference in statistics might appear in a span of several years. Thus, to get better representation of Armenian community and further expansion of the project, it will be interesting to include participants not only from Yerevan, but from various cities and villages, as well as target a wider range of participants. Comparing the data from all over Armenia will give a more accurate image of how the society views homosexuality. Including members of the LGBT community from rural areas will also give a better understanding of how they are being treated by the society. Finding and identifying possible factors that drive public opinion will bring Armenia, as a society, one step closer to eliminating the negative attitude from their mindsets.

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APPENDIX A

Sample of the questionnaire distributed to 300 people around Yerevan.

1. Your age _____.

2. Your district

- Ajapnyak
- Arabkir
- Avan
- Davtashen
- Erebuni
- Kanaker-Zeytun
- Kentron
- Malatia – Sebastia
- Nor Nork

3. What is your current religion, if any?

- Christian (Armenian Apostolic Church)
- Catholic
- Mormon
- Muslim
- Greek or Russian Orthodox
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Atheist or Agnostic
- Nothing in particular
- Other

4. How important is religion in your everyday life?

- Very important
- Important
- Not that important

- Not important at all
- Other (please specify) _____

5. How strongly do you agree with your religion's views?

- Extremely strongly
- Very strongly
- Moderately
- Slightly
- Not at all

6. How does your religion view homosexuality?

- Positively
- Negatively
- Neutral
- I don't have any religion
- Other (please specify) _____

7. How much does it matter to you that your surroundings share your religious beliefs?

- A great deal
- Somewhat
- Not much
- Not at all

8. How do you view homosexuality?

- Positively
- Negatively
- Neutral
- Other (please specify) _____.

9. How much do other people's opinions influence your own?

- Very much
- Moderately
- Not at all

APPENDIX B

Questions used during the interviews with the LGBT community (the participants were free to elaborate beyond the asked questions).

1. Name _____

2. Age * _____

3. Sex *

- Male
- Female

4. Gender Identity *

- Male
- Female
- Other: _____

5. What is your current religion? *

- Christian
- Muslim
- Jewish
- Atheist or Agnostic
- Nothing in particular
- Other: _____

6. Do you come from a religious family? *

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

7. Do your friends know your sexual orientation? *

- Yes
- No
- Only my closest friends
- Only some friends

7.1 How did you come out to your friends? *

7.2 How did your friends accept your sexual orientation? *

7.3 Please describe any memorable experience with your friends.

8 Have you ever been rejected by your peers because of your sexual orientation or gender identity? *

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

9 Does your family know your sexual orientation? *

- Yes
- No
- Other:

9.1. How did you come out to your family? *

9.2. How did your family accept your sexual orientation? *

9.3 Please describe any standing out experience with your family.

10. Have you ever been treated unfairly by an employer because of your sexual orientation or gender identity? *

- Yes
- No
- Other:

11. Have you ever felt unwelcome in a place of worship? (Church, monastery. religious gathering) *

- Yes
- No
- Other:

12. Have you ever received poor service at a restaurant/cafe/shop? *

- Yes
- No
- Other:

13. Have you ever been threatened or physically attacked? *

- Yes
- No
- Other:

14. Please describe any standing out experience you have had with religious institution/representative.
