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Navigating Human Rights Realities: Traditional Societal Norms and LGBTQ+ Hate Crimes in Contemporary Armenia

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the impact of traditional societal norms on LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Armenia. Grounded in anthropological and human rights theories, it employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews and secondary sources such as human rights reports and academic literature. The research reveals that deeply entrenched societal norms and institutional barriers significantly contribute to the prevalence of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals. Findings indicate that while LGBTQ+ organizations provide essential support and advocacy, their efforts are often hindered by legal and societal challenges. This study concludes that comprehensive legal reforms and increased societal awareness are crucial for improving the safety and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia.

List of Abbreviations
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Armenia, hate crimes, societal norms, human rights
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1. **Introduction**

Armenia, a nation rich in history and culture, stands at a crossroads where tradition meets modernity, and societal norms intersect with evolving understandings of human rights and equality. Within this complex tapestry, the LGBTQ+ community navigates a landscape shaped by deeply entrenched cultural values, legal frameworks, and socio-political dynamics. In recent years, amidst global movements advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, Armenia has found itself grappling with questions of inclusivity, tolerance, and justice for its LGBTQ+ citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Despite progress in some areas, challenges persist for LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia, as they confront discrimination, violence, and marginalization due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Traditional societal norms, deeply rooted in religious and patriarchal traditions, often clash with principles of equality and non-discrimination, creating a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ individuals (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2010: 5). Moreover, the absence of comprehensive legal protections aggravates their vulnerability to human rights violations, including hate crimes and systematic discrimination (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2010.: 8).

The research problem at the heart of this study lies in unraveling the intricate web of factors influencing LGBTQ+ rights and hate crimes in Armenia, within the broader context of human rights advocacy. This research seeks to address critical gaps in our understanding of the coping mechanisms employed by LGBTQ+ individuals, organizational interventions by LGBTQ+ NGOs, and the implications for human rights within Armenia's sociopolitical landscape. By delving into these complexities, this study aims to illuminate the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, identify effective strategies for combating discrimination and violence, and advocate for evidence-based policy interventions to foster inclusivity, equality, and justice for LGBTQ+ communities in Armenia.

Central to this inquiry is the recognition of LGBTQ+ individuals as agents of change, resilient in the face of adversity, and committed to asserting their rights and identities within a challenging socio-cultural context. Through a comprehensive exploration of coping mechanisms, organizational responses, and human rights frameworks, this study endeavors to amplify the voices of LGBTQ+ individuals, shed light on their struggles and achievements, and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on LGBTQ+ rights in Armenia and beyond.

1.1.**Research Problem**

Examining Human Rights Violations in Armenia: The Impact of Traditional Societal Norms on LGBTQ+ Communities and Strategies for Coping and Intervention

1.2.**Research Questions and Aim**

This thesis aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the complex dynamics surrounding LGBTQ+ rights and hate crimes in Armenia, with a particular focus on understanding the interplay between traditional societal norms, religious influences, coping mechanisms, and organizational interventions. By exploring the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, analyzing the impact of religious beliefs and cultural attitudes, and evaluating the effectiveness of organizational interventions by LGBTQ+ NGOs, this research seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community and identify paths for advocacy and social change within the Armenian context.

Furthermore, this research aims to contextualize these findings within the framework of human rights principles. By exploring how LGBTQ+ individuals navigate challenges to their rights and dignity, this research underscores the importance of upholding human rights principles in promoting equality, non-discrimination, and social justice for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Through this lens, the aim is to contribute to evidence-based policy interventions and advocacy efforts aimed at fostering inclusivity, equality, and respect for human rights within Armenian society.

Research Question:

How do individuals and organizations in Armenia advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, navigate the impact of traditional societal norms on hate crimes, and what strategies do NGOs implement to combat these norms within the framework of human rights advocacy?

1.3.**Thesis Overview and Delimitation**

In recent years, the discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ rights has undergone significant evolution, reflecting a growing recognition of diverse challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, in varying socio-cultural contexts. This thesis embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the intricate dynamics between traditional societal norms and LGBTQ+ hate crimes within the unique context of Armenia. By employing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates

anthropological perspectives, human rights frameworks, and organizational interventions, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted issues at hand.

Embarking on such an exploration necessitates certain delimitations to maintain focus and coherence within the research:

Geographical Scope

The research primarily focuses on Armenia, a nation situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, with a particular emphasis on urban areas, notably the capital city, Yerevan. While acknowledging potential variations in LGBTQ+ experiences between urban and rural regions, the study predominantly concentrates on urban contexts due to accessibility, the concentration of LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations, and the higher visibility of LGBTQ+ communities in urban settings.

Temporal Scope

The temporal scope of the study encompasses contemporary perspectives up to the time of data collection, without extensive historical retrospection. While recognizing the historical roots of societal norms and LGBTQ+ discrimination, the thesis predominantly examines present-day manifestations and responses within Armenia's current socio-political landscape. Historical analysis beyond this scope is deemed beyond the purview of this study.

Focus on LGBTQ+ Hate Crimes

The thesis on LGBTQ+ hate crimes is a crucial point of analysis within the broader context of LGBTQ+ rights. While acknowledging intersecting issues such as discrimination and marginalization, the primary focus remains on understanding hate crimes and their implications for LGBTQ+ individuals and their human rights in Armenia. Other forms of violence or discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, while relevant, are not the primary focus of this research.

Qualitative Research Approach

The research adopts a descriptive and qualitative research design, limiting the scope to qualitative data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and ethnographic observation. Quantitative analyses or experimental approaches are not within the scope of this study due to the nature of the research question and the need for in-depth exploration of lived experiences and perceptions.

Anthropological and Human Rights Frameworks

The study utilizes anthropological theories and human rights frameworks as primary analytical lenses. While recognizing the multidisciplinary nature of LGBTQ+ studies, the thesis delimits its analysis to these two frameworks to maintain depth and coherence. Other theoretical perspectives or disciplinary approaches, while potentially valuable, are not explicitly incorporated into the analysis within this scope.

Focus on Coping Mechanisms, Religious Influence, and Organizational Interventions

The thesis delineates specific sections for an in-depth analysis of coping mechanisms, religious influence, and organizational interventions by LGBTQ+ NGOs. Each section provides a focused examination of these aspects within the Armenian context without extensive diversions into vague topics. While acknowledging the interconnectedness of various factors influencing LGBTQ+ experiences, the research maintains a clear focus on these key thematic areas for comprehensive analysis.

By delineating these delimitations, the thesis ensures a clear focus on understanding the interplay between traditional societal norms and LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Armenia while acknowledging the broader complexities inherent in LGBTQ+ rights advocacy.

2. **Background**

In this chapter, I will define and give context to various essential concepts that underpin the research problem of understanding the impact of traditional societal norms on LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Armenia. These concepts include sexual orientation, gender identity, LGBTQ+ struggles, and hate crimes.

By defining and contextualizing these key concepts, this chapter aims to lay the groundwork for analyzing the impact of traditional societal norms on the prevalence of LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Armenia. It will provide a foundational understanding necessary for exploring coping strategies, organizational interventions, and human rights implications in addressing the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenian society.

2.1. **The state of LGBTQ+ Lives in Armenia**

"At this point in Armenia, we don't even want equality we just want to live."
- *Interview 1, 2024*

The LGBTQ+ situation in Armenia presents significant challenges, as the community grapples with widespread discrimination and negative attitudes. Despite the decriminalization of same-sex acts between men in 2003, societal views towards LGBTQ+ individuals remain largely unfavorable (Bonder, p-26, 2016). For example, the violent attack that took place on May 8th, 2012, at the D.I.Y bar in Yerevan, Armenia, perpetrated by suspected neo-Nazis. There was clear CCTV evidence implicating the attackers, but the initial report attributed the blaze to a short circuit, which raised concerns about investigative biases. Eventually, two individuals associated with nationalist groups were apprehended but swiftly released, which raised questions about the justice system's response to hate crimes (Avetisyan, 2022).

Furthermore, on August 21st, 2023, a transgender woman named Adriana was killed in Yerevan, which highlights the dangers faced by transgender individuals in Armenia. Adriana's death underscored the lack of legal protections and support for LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia. This case was mentioned in the majority of the interviews I conducted. Lilit Martirosyan, who is a human rights activist and the founder of Right Side NGO, reflected on the speech she gave at the National Assembly in 2019, claiming "…I raised this issue in the parliament, I said that they burned one transgender person and cut their throat, and the second one is when they burned the apartment," (Interview 3, 2024) she continued referencing Adriana's case, "I warned them, I talked about that in 2019, in my speech at the parliament,

and it happened in 2023" (Interview 3, 2024). This showcases that despite raising concerns in the National Assembly about such incidents, the government's response has been inadequate, adding to the sense of insecurity among the transgender community.

"I can say about especially the transgender community, I am a transgender woman, I am the founder of this organization [Right Side NGO]. The society doesn't understand gender identity and sexual orientation, it is so bad. Because they don't have knowledge about LGBTIQ people, especially transgender, specific to transgender community. I can say that the society is heteronormative, Christian, and very homophobic and transphobic society, they don't want to accept LGBTIQ community, especially transgender community."

- *Lilit Martirosyan, Interview 3, 2024*

The influential Armenian Apostolic Church condemns same-sex acts as grave sins, adding to the societal stigma (Bonder, p-44, 2016) (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, n.d.: 6). LGBTQ+ individuals often feel compelled to conceal their sexual orientation and suppress their gender identity due to societal pressure, leading to a lack of openness even within their own families and social circles (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, n.d.: 6). Notably, acceptance levels vary between urban and rural areas, with rural regions exhibiting more hostility towards LGBTQ+ individuals (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, n.d.: 6).

Armenia's LGBTQ+ community faces institutional barriers as well. Though there are three LGBTQ+ NGOs, their registration processes encounter bureaucratic hurdles, and explicit references to LGBTQ+ issues in their charters can lead to difficulties in approval (Bonder, p-58, 2016). Lilit Martirosyan mentioned this issue, claiming that without support from the international community, organizations like the Right Side NGO may cease to exist, leaving LGBTQ+ individuals even more vulnerable (Interview 3, 2024).

Additionally, hate crimes targeting LGBTQ+ individuals are not legally recognized, and incidents of abuse and harassment often go unrecorded and uninvestigated due to the absence of legislation in this regard (Bonder, p-33, 2016). Despite constitutional rights theoretically protecting LGBTQ+ individuals, these rights usually fail to be upheld in practice, with negative attitudes towards the community also prevalent within law enforcement bodies. Highlighting this issue Lilit Martirosyan emphasized that the government's claim of Armenia being a generally safe country does not resonate with the LGBTQ+ community (Interview 3, 2024). Interviewee 1 also expressed worries about constant harassment when walking in public or

being in clubs. She stated, "…well at least for the past 2 years, when I started looking more gay, I walk and every 10, 5 minutes I hear 'արա էս ով ա, արա' ('who the hell is this') or 'գյոք' (a homophobic slur in Armenian) shit like that…" (Interview 1, 2024) she continued by claiming that it is a form of harassment and that the threat of physical harm is always on everyone's minds (Interview 1, 2024).

It is also important to recognize the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan have also had an influence on LGBTQ+ lives. The conflict and militarization in Armenia have reinforced transphobic and homophobic environments that uphold cisnormative and heteronormative values. There have been several effects on the LGBTQ+ community, however I will summarize them for the purpose of this study. During and after the conflict, the lack of legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals has become more pronounced (Notaro, 2021). In Interview 5, the psychologist mentioned how many families are grieving because of the war and are filled with hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community, expressing with anger how they lost their 'good, traditional' son to the war and 'homosexuals' are just living here (Interview 5, 2024). Additionally, the war has caused significant psychological and social strain on the LGBTQ+ community. However, Pink Armenia and similar LGBTQ+ and feminist organizations have been actively involved in humanitarian efforts, providing food, clothing, medicine, and shelter for those displaced by the conflict (Notaro, 2021).

"I understand right now there is a more difficult situation in Armenia because we are at war situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan about the Nagorno-Karabakh. The government focused to solve the war situation, they are not interested to focus on LGBTIQ people's problems."

- *Lilit Martirosyan, Interview 3, 2024*

The conflict has also provided a platform for political parties to exploit anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. National and right-wing groups have used homophobia as a tool to gain political leverage, portraying LGBTQ+ identities as threats to traditional values and national unity (Notaro, 2021). This political manipulation has increased hostility towards the LGBTQ+ community, further marginalizing them and making them targets for scapegoating during the crisis (Notaro, 2021). Furthermore, the conflict has overshadowed human rights issues, including those affecting the LGBTQ+ community. With national attention focused on security

and military concerns, advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights has faced significant obstacles (Notaro, 2021).

In this short introduction, I aimed to paint a foundational understanding of the overall day-to-day situations in Armenia that LGBTQ+ individuals face. The cases mentioned as well as additional cases will be reflected in the analysis chapter.

2.2. **What is a Hate Crime?**

A hate crime is a criminal act directed at an individual or group due to their perceived race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or other protected characteristics (Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino, 2002: 208). What sets hate crimes apart from regular crimes is the underlying bias, prejudice, or hatred toward the targeted group (Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino, 2002: 208). Hate crimes can manifest in different ways, such as physical assault, vandalism, harassment, or even homicide (Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino, 2002: 208), (Brudholm, 2016: 3). The primary aim of hate crime is to instill fear, intimidate, or harm not just the immediate victim but also the entire community associated with the targeted group (Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino, 2002: 208). These crimes are particularly horrific because they not only inflict harm but also carry a message of intolerance and discrimination to the broader group (Brudholm, 2016: 4). Hate crime laws vary in definition and application across jurisdictions but are generally acknowledged as severe offenses warranting enhanced penalties (Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino, 2002: 207, 208). Legislation has been enacted to formally acknowledge and address the harm caused by hate crimes and to provide legal recourse against them.

The connection between hate crimes and human rights is intricate and diverse. Hate crimes are frequently viewed as breaches of human rights since they single out individuals or communities based on their inherent traits, violating their fundamental entitlements to life, security, equality, and dignity (Brudholm, 2016: 7). Moreover, hate crimes foster an environment of fear and instability, undercutting the principle of equality and posing challenges to the delicate balance between hate crime laws and freedom of expression (Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino, 2002: 212, 213). International human rights mechanisms and frameworks offer possibilities for confronting hate crimes and advancing tolerance, equality, and non-discrimination values (Brudholm, p-5, 2016).

For this study, it is relevant to have a clear definition of what a hate crime is. The focus group in this context is the LGBTQ+ community in Armenia.

2.3. **LGBTQ+ definitions and struggles**

Sexual orientation encompasses a person's emotional, physical, and/or sexual attraction, often reflected in their behavior. It differs from sexual identity, which is how individuals perceive and label their orientation (The Trevor Project, 2021). Similarly, gender identity refers to one's sense of being masculine, feminine, neither, or both, independent of biological sex. Gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct concepts, with the former typically established by early childhood and the latter emerging later in life, often after puberty. Gender expression involves how individuals outwardly represent their gender identity. Terms like heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and transgender describe various orientations and identities within the LGBTQ+ community, acknowledging diverse experiences (Dellar, 2022). While some terms, like "gay" and "lesbian," are widely accepted, others, like "queer," are being reclaimed by the community. The complexity of identity extends the behaviors, as not all individuals who engage in same-sex relationships identify with LGBTQ+ labels (Dellar, 2022). The journey of self-acceptance, often marked by coming out, varies for each person and can involve ongoing challenges with internalized biases and societal discrimination. Allies play a crucial role in challenging heterosexism and promoting inclusivity (The Trevor Project, 2021). Discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, rooted in homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormative privilege, occurs on personal, institutional, and societal levels, impacting their rights and well-being. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using the umbrella term "LGBTQ+" referring to those who identify as non-heterosexual and non-cis-gendered.

3. **Previous Research**

Understanding the impact of traditional societal norms on LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Armenia is a multifaceted exertion, encompassing coping strategies employed by LGBTQ+ individuals, organizational interventions by LGBTQ+ NGOs, and the broader human rights implications within Armenia's sociopolitical landscape. This chapter delves into previous relevant research, laying the groundwork for the current study's exploration.

3.1. **Topics**

Coping Mechanisms of LGBTQ+ Individuals

Previous research has highlighted the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia due to traditional societal norms and the subsequent hate crimes (Ziemer, 2023: 9) (Public Information and Need of Knowledge, 2016: 16). Studies have clarified various coping mechanisms employed by LGBTQ+ individuals to navigate these challenges while striving to assert their rights and identities. These coping strategies range from individual-level strategies such as concealment of sexual orientation or gender identity to communal support networks and online activism (Public Information and Need of Knowledge, 2016: 16, 19). According to Wilkinson and Dall'Agnola (2024: 4), these coping mechanisms can prove to be very complex. For example, they mention that internet activism can be helpful, as well as harmful in some cases, such as religious, anti-LGBTQ+ online activism targeting LGBTQ+ individuals (Wilkinson and Dall'Agnola 2024: 2, 4). Notably, research has underscored the psychological toll of concealing one's identity and the resilience exhibited by LGBTQ+ individuals amidst adversity (Public Information and Need of Knowledge, 2016: 12) (Pink Human Rights Defender, 2024: 39).

However, gaps remain in understanding the nuanced interplay between coping mechanisms, societal norms, and human rights implications for LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia. Further exploration is necessary to determine the effectiveness of these coping strategies in mitigating the impact of traditional norms on hate crime targeting the LGBTQ+ community and to clarify their implications for human rights advocacy.

Organizational Interventions by LGBTQ+ NGOs

The role of LGBTQ+ NGOs in addressing hate crimes and promoting LGBTQ+ rights in Armenia has garnered scholarly attention. These organizations are pivotal in advocating for legal reforms, providing support services, and fostering community resilience in the face of discrimination and violence. Research has documented various initiatives undertaken by

LGBTQ+ NGOs, including legal advocacy, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building programs (Public Information and Need of Knowledge, 2016: 12, 15).

However, empirical studies assessing the efficacy of these interventions and their impact on mitigating hate crimes and advancing LGBTQ+ rights in Armenia are limited. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of organizational interventions, identify best practices, and address challenges encountered by LGBTQ+ advocacy groups in the Armenian context.

Intersections of Coping Mechanisms and Organizational Responses

The intersectionality of coping mechanisms employed by LGBTQ+ individuals, organizational responses from LGBTQ+ advocacy groups, and societal norms in Armenia constitute a dynamic landscape, shaping the discourse and implementation of human rights protections for LGBTQ+ communities. Previous research has examined how these intersecting factors influence policy outcomes, social attitudes, and lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, the research by Public Information and Need of Knowledge (2016), uses qualitative methods to identify these intersections, specifically looking into societal attitudes. Studies have explored the symbiotic relationship between grassroots activism, advocacy efforts, and institutional responses in effecting societal change and promoting LGBTQ+ rights (Public Information and Need of Knowledge, 2016: 52). However, gaps continue in understanding the interactions and tensions between these intersecting factors and their implications for human rights protections in Armenia. Further investigation is necessitated to interpret the complex dynamics and inform evidence-based policy interventions to foster inclusivity, equality, and justice for LGBTQ+ communities.

3.2. **Controversies, Gaps, and Relation to Literature**

Examining controversies, gaps, and the relationship to the existing literature is essential in framing the research problem and shaping the direction of the current study.

Gaps in the literature, including the scarcity of secondary sources on LGBTQ+ issues in Armenia and the lack of specified theories or methods in some materials, present further research and exploration opportunities.

In examining human rights violations in Armenia, particularly focusing on the impact of traditional societal norms on LGBTQ+ communities and strategies for coping and intervention, this study addresses several significant gaps in existing literature. Firstly, while there is a wealth of research on LGBTQ+ issues globally, there remains a scarcity of secondary sources

specifically addressing LGBTQ+ rights in Armenia. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a focused investigation into the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia due to traditional societal norms and corresponding coping mechanisms and intervention strategies.

Secondly, existing literature often lacks specified theories or methodologies, which limit the depth of analysis and understanding. This study seeks to address this gap by employing a comprehensive theoretical framework and thorough methodological approach to provide a nuanced examination of the complex dynamics at play.

4. **Theory**

4.1.**Anthropology within Human Rights**

Anthropology serves a vital role in human rights by offering valuable insights into the cultural, social, and political dimensions within which human rights issues emerge. It facilitates a deeper understanding of cultural diversity, acknowledging the varied practices, beliefs, and values that influence individuals' perceptions of human rights (Goodale, 2006: 485, 497). Furthermore, in Anthropology the concept of "everyday" lives is very focused on (Boyce, Engebretsen and Posocco, 2017: 884). These recognitions underscore the necessity of interpreting human rights within specific cultural contexts, recognizing that different societies uphold different norms and values.

Furthermore, anthropology challenges ethnocentrism by advocating for cultural relativism, which entails respecting and comprehending diverse cultural viewpoints on human rights. It underscores the absence of a universal standard for human rights, acknowledging the existence of varying interpretations across cultures (Goodale, 2006: 501). In documenting human rights violations, anthropologists often collaborate with human rights organizations, employing ethnographic research techniques to gather evidence, conduct interviews, and provide testimonies for legal proceedings or advocacy campaigns (Goodale, 2006: 506).

Moreover, anthropologists engage in advocacy and activism to advance human rights, collaborating with marginalized communities, raising awareness about violations, and advocating for policy changes. They also play a crucial role in addressing ethical considerations in human rights research, ensuring that studies are conducted ethically with informed consent and respect for participants' rights and dignity (Goodale, 2006: 503).

Additionally, anthropology offers critical perspectives on human rights frameworks, scrutinizing their universality and effectiveness. Anthropologists examine the implementation negotiation and human rights controversy in diverse contexts, shedding light on their limitations and challenges (Goodale, 2006: 496). By giving voice to victims through ethnographic research, anthropologists aim to provide a platform for individuals affected by human rights violations to share their experiences and seek healing.

Furthermore, anthropologists critically assess the practices and institutions involved in human rights work, analyzing power dynamics, bureaucratic processes, and structural inequalities. This critical perspective helps identify areas for improvement and advocates for more effective and ethical approaches to human rights (Goodale, 2006: 504). By contextualizing human rights issues within cultural, historical, and social frameworks, anthropology adopts a nuanced

understanding of human rights and promotes more effective and culturally sensitive approaches to their realization.

4.2. **Everyday Life**

Drawing from an everyday concept lens, the integration of anthropology and human rights theory into the analysis of LGBTQ+ rights and hate crimes reveals a multifaceted understanding that incorporates coping mechanisms, resilience, and queer theory. This theoretical approach emphasizes the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within the broader socio-cultural and political landscape, highlighting their agency in navigating and resisting systems of oppression (Boyce, Engebretsen and Posocco, 2017: 884).

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Anthropological theory recognizes the diverse coping mechanisms employed by LGBTQ+ individuals in response to discrimination, violence, and marginalization. These coping strategies may include seeking support from chosen families or LGBTQ+ communities, engaging in activism and advocacy, or adopting strategies of concealment or passing to navigate hostile environments. Through ethnographic research, anthropologists can document and analyze these coping mechanisms, shedding light on the resilience of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities in the face of adversity (Boyce, Engebretsen and Posocco, 2017: 846).

Queer Theory and Intersectionality

Queer theory provides a critical framework for understanding the complexities of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences beyond simplistic categories of sexual orientation and gender identity. This theoretical perspective acknowledges the intersectionality of identities, recognizing that LGBTQ+ individuals may also face discrimination based on factors such as race, ethnicity, class, and disability. By centering intersectionality in the analysis of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals, anthropologists can illuminate how multiple forms of oppression intersect and compound to exacerbate vulnerability and violence (Boyce, Engebretsen and Posocco, 2017: 844).

Structural Violence and Human Rights

Anthropological theory emphasizes the role of structural violence in perpetuating inequalities and human rights abuses against LGBTQ+ individuals. Structural violence refers to the systematic inequalities embedded within social, economic, and political structures that disproportionately harm marginalized groups. In the context of LGBTQ+ rights and hate crimes, anthropologists can examine how institutionalized discrimination, lack of legal

protections, and social stigma contribute to heightened vulnerability to violence and injustice. By situating hate crimes within broader structural contexts, anthropologists can advocate for policy changes and legal reforms aimed at addressing systematic injustices and upholding the human rights of LGBTQ+ individuals (Farquhar, 2021).

<u>Agency and Resilience</u>

Despite facing systematic oppression and violence, LGBTQ+ individuals demonstrate agency and resilience in resisting and challenging heteronormative and cisnormative ideologies. Anthropological theory highlights the importance of centering the voices and experiences of LGBTQ+ communities to document their experiences, amplify their voices, and support grassroots activism and advocacy initiatives to combat hate crimes and promote social justice (Farquhar, 2021).

5. **Methodology**

This thesis adopts a descriptive and qualitative research design, chosen for its appropriateness in providing a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between traditional societal norms and LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Armenia. The descriptive nature of the study allows for a thorough examination of the phenomena being studied, providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals within their socio-cultural context. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for this research as they enable researchers to delve deeply into individuals' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, allowing for the emergence of rich, contextualized data that captures the intricacies of the studied phenomena.

5.1. **Data Collection**

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals and experts, and through examining secondary sources such as newspaper articles, academic literature, and human rights reports. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences while delving deeper into relevant themes and topics (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021: 1361, 1363).

5.2. **Interviews and Secondary Sources**

A total of seven interviews were conducted with participants who varied in age, gender, and sexual orientation. Six interviews were with individuals residing in Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia, and one was with an Armenian student studying abroad in Europe. All interviews were conducted face-to-face to create a safe environment for discussing sensitive issues. All participants, except one, self-identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. The exception was a psychologist and expert in LGBTQ+ issues. Additionally, two other participants were experts: a social worker specializing in LGBTQ+ cases and the founder of one of three Armenian NGOs focusing specifically on LGBTQ+ issues, Lilit Martirosyan. The interviews were conducted in different locations, such as queer-friendly cafes, the participants' apartments, NGOs either focusing on LGBTQ+ issues or supporting them, and other places that will not be disclosed.

Participants were provided with consent forms covering the ethical aspects of the research. These forms included a short introduction, the study's purpose, an explanation of the procedure, a guarantee of confidentiality, and the risks and benefits of participation. These

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steps were chosen based on the guidelines found in the article by Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021: 1361, 1362).

To ensure confidentiality, specific details like locations, pronouns, and names will not be mentioned unless the participants consent to be disclosed. Interview recordings will be erased after the thesis review for participants' safety.

Secondary data sources were systematically reviewed to gather contextual information and supplement the primary data collected through interviews. These sources included newspaper articles, academic literature, and human rights reports.

5.3. **Data analysis**

The qualitative data from interviews and secondary sources were analyzed using a multi-stage approach, including coding, categorization, and thematic analysis. This approach ensures that data is systematically examined to uncover patterns, themes, and insights that address the research questions.

5.3.1. **Manual Coding and Categorization Process**

In this research, coding and categorization of qualitative data were conducted manually without the use of digital tools. This decision was driven by the need to ensure the utmost confidentiality and security for the participants, given the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Only the interviews that were directly quoted in the research were transcribed by hand. The remaining interviews were reviewed and used to gain a broader understanding and context without full transcription.

For the transcribed interviews, key phrases, sentences, or paragraphs were highlighted using different colored pens, with each color representing different preliminary themes or codes (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021: 1359, 1364). Margin notes were made next to highlighted sections to capture the essence of participants' statements, such as "fear of violence" when a participant discussed their fears due to their sexual orientation. This manual process ensured that sensitive data remained offline, reducing the risk of unauthorized access.

To develop a codebook, index cards were created for each identified code, each card included the code, its definition, and an example from the transcript. These cards were organized in a binder for easy reference and consistency in coding (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021: 1364). Axial coding involved grouping related cards together and using whiteboards and notebooks to create visual maps of code relationships, helping to identify broader categories.

These categories were further organized using folders, each labeled with the category name, and summary sheets were created to describe the codes and their relationships.

The refinement and validation process included continuous review and refinement of categories and themes, re-reading transcripts, and reassigning index cards to different categories (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021: 1364).

This manual approach was chosen primarily for confidentiality and security reasons. Given the sensitive nature of the research involving LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia, it was crucial to ensure that no digital records existed that could be accessed by unauthorized individuals. Manual methods provided an added layer of security, as physical documents can be securely stored and controlled, and eventually destroyed. This approach also aligned with ethical guidelines for research on vulnerable populations, prioritizing participant safety and privacy. By conducting the coding and categorization manually, the research maintains a rigorous and secure approach to data handling, reinforcing the commitment to protecting participant confidentiality and ethical integrity.

5.4. **Research Limitations**

Despite careful planning and execution, this thesis has certain limitations that could affect the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. One limitation is the focus on LGBTQ+ individuals primarily in urban areas, especially Yerevan, which may not fully represent the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in rural regions of Armenia. Additionally, the subjective nature of qualitative research and potential researcher bias may impact findings. Language differences also pose a limitation; translation issues might arise since interviews were conducted in both English and Armenian. Edits were made for grammatical purposes, an unavoidable limitation in multi-language studies.

5.5. **Data Verification**

Various data verification strategies were employed to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings. Direct quotes and excerpts from interviews and textual sources were meticulously referenced to ensure transparency and traceability of the data. This process helps maintain the integrity and accuracy of the collected information, providing a solid foundation for the study's conclusions.

6. **Analysis**

In this chapter, I will explore the multifaceted challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Armenia from a human rights perspective focusing on hate crimes and the broader issue of discrimination. The analysis will be structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-legal environment in which LGBTQ+ individuals navigate their lives.

I will examine the legal framework governing LGBTQ+ rights in Armenia. This includes an assessment of existing laws, international obligations, and the extent to which these legal instruments protect – or fail to protect – LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination and violence. Particular attention will be paid to gaps in legislation that leave LGBTQ+ people vulnerable and the enforcement mechanisms that are either lacking or ineffective.

I will explore the societal influence on LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia. This section will delve into specific factors that contribute to the stigmatization and marginalization of LGBTQ+ persons. Additionally, the role of NGOs and advocacy groups will be discussed in both challenging and mitigating negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia.

The chapter will discuss the impact of discrimination and hate crimes on daily lives of LGBTQ+ individuals.

The role of LGBTQ+ organizations will be a focal point of this chapter as well. Highlighting the critical support these organizations provide. The challenges these organizations face will also be explored.

I will focus on the coping mechanisms employed by LGBTQ+ individuals and communities in response to the hostile environment.

6.1. **Human Rights Perspective**

Human rights principles serve as foundational frameworks for understanding and addressing LGBTQ+ rights and hate crimes in Armenia. These principles are embedded in various international and regional human rights frameworks, including treaties, conventions, and declarations ratified or adopted by the Republic of Armenia. Such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) (International Justice Resource Center, 2020). Furthermore, "Armenia is a Member State of the Council of Europe (COE) and of the United Nations (UN), and has human rights obligations at the regional and universal levels." (International Justice Resource Center, 2020). Additionally, the Constitution serves as the main

protector of human rights in Armenia, asserting the highest importance regarding basic rights and freedoms (Pink Human Rights Defender, 2024: 9)

Legal Framework and Protection

"This is even more horrific because we don't have a law about discrimination."
- *Interview 6, regarding the legal and political situation*

Armenia became a member of the Council of Europe in 2001 (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, n.d.). Armenia's membership in the Council of Europe and its commitment to protecting human rights underscore the legal framework for safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms. However, barriers persist due to weaknesses in the judiciary and the absence of specific anti-discrimination laws (Pink Armenia and Eastern European Coalition of LGBT+ Equality, 2019: 2). The Constitution affirms equality before the law and protection from discrimination in Article 29, "Discrimination based on sex, race, skin colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion, world view, political or other views, belonging to a national minority, property status, birth, disability, age, or other personal or social circumstances shall be prohibited" (The President of the Republic of Armenia, 2015).

In Article 3.1 of the draft of the Law of the Republic of Armenia "On Ensuring Equality Before the Law," it is stated that, "Discrimination is prohibited in political, economic, social, cultural and public life as well as other fields" (The Equal Rights Trust, 2018: 6).

However, there is no clear mention of gender identity and sexual orientation in either case. This issue was mentioned in Interviews 5 and 6, by two experts who work with LGBTQ+ cases, emphasizing the need for specific terminology when it comes to laws or even a direct anti-discrimination law. This creates a paradox where legal guarantees exist on paper but may not be effectively enforced in practice, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ rights (Pink Armenia and Eastern European Coalition of LGBT+ Equality, 2019: 2).

Stigmatization and Discrimination

LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia confront pervasive stigmatization and discrimination fueled by homophobic and transphobic attitudes within society. This discrimination manifests in verbal and physical violence, threats, and insults, impeding their ability to exercise their rights

and live freely (Pink Human Rights Defender, 2024: 6). These forms of discrimination are manifested in different societal settings. For example, in school settings, not only by their peers, but also by teachers (Pink Armenia and Eastern European Coalition of LGBT+ Equality, 2019: 5,6)

Traditional societal norms, deeply rooted in conservative values, uphold heteronormative standards and perpetuate the marginalization of LGBTQ+ individuals. Such norms reinforce binary gender roles and traditional family structures, relegating LGBTQ+ identities to the margins of society and subjecting them to discrimination and exclusion (Beukian, 2019: 150, 151).

Freedom of Assembly, Association, and Expression

Constitutional guarantees of freedom of association and expression, mentioned in Articles 42 and 44 (The President of the Republic of Armenia, 2015), extend to LGBTQ+ individuals, facilitating the registration of LGBTQ+ NGOs and allowing for the free expression of opinions. Nonetheless, instances of violence and obstruction against activists threaten freedom of expression, especially when reporting on LGBTQ+ issues. There is no official statistical documentation of how common this is. However, in doing research, one will come to many cases of LGBTQ+ activists being discriminated against. To paint a clearer picture, I will bring up a few examples of these cases.

One example is the attack on the vigil for Adriana, a transgender woman who was violently killed in her apartment the day before. The vigil took place on August 21, 2023, when a group of attackers targeted participants of the candlelight organized by Right Side NGO in Yerevan, Armenia (Front Line Defenders, 2023). This underscores the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in exercising their rights freely and without fear of reprisal or discrimination.

Another example took place in Syunik, southern Armenia, in 2018. The activist that was attacked, Hakobyan, was targeted by a crowd of fifteen people, eventually thirty, who gathered near Hakobyan and other LGBTQ+ allies and ordered them to leave the village, among other several threats (Chilingaryan, 2018) (RFSL, n.d.). Eventually, the crowd started chasing the LGBTQ+ members and their allies, assaulting them with punches, kicks, and stones, while yelling homophobic chants (Chilingaryan, 2018).

Hate Crime Legislation

While hate speech related to homophobia/transphobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is not criminalized, committing a crime with a

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homophobic/transphobic motivation can be considered an aggravating circumstance. However, this does not mean it is. There have been no responses from the government whenever this is the case (Pink Human Rights Defender, 2024: 55). When it comes to hate speech, the term "homosexual" is used as an insult in society, as well as by politicians in the National Assembly (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, n.d.: 8).

Additionally, Human Rights Watch (2024) reported that "Local LGBT rights groups and activists documented 37 cases of physical violence, including 17 cases of violence committed by family members from January through August 2023. The groups recorded 14 cases of psychological and economic violence and harassment by family members over the same period" (Human Rights Watch, 2024). However, there are no official statistics on actual hate crimes.

"As a result of the lack of legislative regulations hate crime incidents on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity are being examined as general crimes, without considering the motives of the perpetrator. Despite reported hate crimes there are no statistics lead by investigative bodies" (Pink Armenia and Eastern European Coalition of LGBT+ Equality, 2019: 7).

During interview 6, the social worker addressed how the police usually handle cases like this in various examples. One was the attitude of police officers, and the issue of mocking victims of discrimination when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community. The participant stated that even those who turn to the police after being discriminated against they, "… on top of that, they [the police] mock us. It's not enough we have already been mocked, I don't know, beaten, and so on… and then they just close the issue and move on" (Interview 6, 2024). This is not the first documented case of police being disrespectful or even discriminating against LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced some form of harassment, assault, or discrimination. The case of Yerevan's D.I.Y. club, a beloved spot for Armenia's LGBTQ+ and feminist community, was vandalized on May 8th, 2012. Armine 'Tsomak' Oganezova, co-owner of the club and a prominent member of Armenia's LGBTQ+ community, pursued justice through the European Court of Human Rights (European Human Rights Advocacy Centre, 2020) (Avetisyan, 2022). On top of other discriminating factors, Oganezova argued that she faced discrimination based on her sexuality and that the authorities' inadequate response forced her

into exile for her safety (Avetisyan, 2022). When the police arrived at the scene, they left without conducting a proper investigation, and forensic experts quickly claimed no fingerprints were found (European Human Rights Advocacy Centre, 2020). Following the attack, a hate campaign ensued, involving threats, vandalism, and intimidation by members of the "Black Ravens," a known fascist group, personally against Oganezova. She was threatened, spat at, and warned against reopening the club. More relevantly, despite her repeated reports of violence and harassment, the police did nothing, while MPs and media endorsed the arson and hate campaign as pro-Armenian (European Human Rights Advocacy Centre, 2020).

The absence of explicit criminalization of hate speech presents challenges in addressing hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals effectively. Additionally, there is a lack of trust as well as fear when it comes to law enforcement, resulting in many cases that go unreported (Pink Human Rights Defender, 2024: 6) (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This legal gap contributes to a climate where LGBTQ+ individuals are more vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and violence without adequate legal resources or protection (Pink Human Rights Defender, 2024: 48, 47, 57).

Family Rights and Recognition

"When there is no law about discrimination, our arms reach short in different places, like forming a family, having children…"
- *Interview 6, meaning to say that there is not much they can do.*

Despite constitutional guarantees of the right to marry and found a family, recognition is limited to heterosexual couples. Same-sex marriages are not recognized, stating in the constitution in Article 35.1, "A woman and a man having attainted the marriageable age shall have the right to marry and form a family with free expression of their will" (The President of the Republic of Armenia, 2015), highlighting specifically *woman* and *man.*

Moreover, transgender issues remain unregulated, with no legal provisions for name changes or altering sex records in legal documents. Lilit brought up various examples in our interview stating, "For example, our passports, our gender in our passport. You open your passport in a bank, in different places, and when [they] look it's a woman but the gender in the passport is different, and after that it starts, the discrimination… also in the airport. In airports more transphobic people are working…" (Interview 3, 2024). These legal limitations perpetuate

societal stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals and undermine their rights to family life, dignity, and equality before the law.

Moreover, same-sex relationships lack legal recognition in Armenia, as the Family Code confines marriage to unions between man and woman (Pink Armenia and Eastern European Coalition of LGBT+ Equality, 2019: 4). This absence of legal recognition extends beyond martial rights to affect inheritance, decision-making in emergencies, and adoption rights, further disenfranchising LGBTQ+ individuals. Traditional societal norms, steeped in patriarchal traditions and religious doctrines, uphold heteronormativity and exclude LGBTQ+ relationships from legal protections and benefits. The emphasis on traditional family values and procreation perpetuates discrimination against LGBTQ+ couples, denying them equal recognition and rights under the law (Beukian, 2019: 150, 151).

Access to Healthcare

While everyone in Armenia has the right to benefit from medical aid and services, gender reassignment treatment is not included in the country's care and services, and transgender issues lack legal regulation (Pink Armenia and Eastern European Coalition of LGBT+ Equality, 2019: 4,5). Referring to this issue Lilit emphasized, "…hormonal therapy in Armenia, it is not a figure yet, the sex reassignment surgery. We have a lot of transgender community representatives who need the hormones, but the Ministry of Health has a new law that every person must go to the doctor to take a prescription and go to the pharmacy to take the medicines. [However], in Armenia, we don't have an endocrinologist who knows more specifically the transgender community." This creates barriers to accessing essential healthcare services for transgender individuals and may exacerbate existing health disparities and vulnerabilities within the LGBTQ+ community.

In conclusion to this chapter, the protection of LGBTQ+ rights and the mitigation of hate crimes in Armenia remain deeply intertwined with the broader human rights frameworks established both nationally and internationally. Despite Armenia's commitments through its Constitution and international treaties, significant legal and social barriers persist. The lack of explicit anti-discrimination laws, pervasive societal stigmatization, and ineffective enforcement mechanisms exacerbate the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Additionally, gaps in legal recognition of same-sex relationships and transgender rights further entrench systematic discrimination. The hostile environment, marked by instances of violence, harassment, and inadequate governmental response, underscores the urgent need for

comprehensive legal reforms and robust enforcement to ensure equality and protection for all citizens.

6.2. **Coping Mechanisms and Resilience**

Coping strategies are deeply intertwined with cultural, social, and historical contexts, reflecting both individual agency and collective responses to adversity. By applying anthropological perspectives to the coping mechanisms observed in the context of Armenia, a deeper insight can be gained into the resilience and strategies of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

Seeking Support from LGBTQ Organizations

One prominent aspect of coping mechanisms observed in Armenia is seeking support from LGBTQ+ organizations, such as PINK Armenia or Right Side Human Rights Defender. By coming together in LGBTQ+ organizations, individuals create spaces where they can share experiences, resources, and emotional support. This sense of community not only provides practical assistance but also serves as a source of resilience and empowerment in the face of societal challenges. However, these services are not known to many, of the seven interviews I conducted, only one expressed that they used to go to one of the NGOs, aforementioned, to cope and feel safe (this is not including the three experts who work in similar settings) (Interview 7).

Due to confidentiality reasons, there are no public testimonies of individual experiences with these organizations. However, on the website of Pink Armenia it is stated in 2023 they have had 206 legal counseling, 1717 psychological counseling, and 1159 events (PinkArmenia.org, n.d.). These services will be further discussed in Chapter 6.4.

Spaces like Queer Sister offer numerous aid and support systems for the LGBTQ+ community. The Queer Sister organization is a very underground safe space for community members, where firstly, individuals can just spend time and socialize. Additionally, they have game nights, pizza nights, camps, and movie nights. The space publishes announcements on its private Instagram account only. Members need to pass various authentication steps to be accepted for safety reasons. For this reason, I will only be able to share their Instagram name, with their consent (queersista).

Additionally, the alliances formed with LGBTQ+ organizations and coalition groups, such as The Human Rights House Yerevan, highlight the role of social networks and collective action in coping with discrimination and advocating for rights as well as support for human rights

activists and experts working in the field (Human Rights House Foundation, n.d.). Showcasing resilience in this context, Lilit stated, "…I have the support of many international organizations, local feminist organizations, like Women's Fund Armenia, Women's Resource Center Armenia, Pink Armenia, and different organizations. Of course, I feel strong when I feel that I have many supporters. Also, we have the best trans activists who stand with me, and we work together to raise all these issues about the trans community." By forging alliances with other social justice movements or progressive organizations, LGBTQ+ individuals, specifically activists, and groups amplify their voices, challenge power structures, and advocate for systematic change. This collective action not only addresses immediate concerns but also contributes to broader social transformations, challenging dominant norms and fostering inclusivity.

Emergence of Online Communities

Furthermore, the emergence of online communities, such as The Hye-Phen Magazine and Collective Facebook page, reflects the adaptation of LGBTQ+ individuals to modern technologies and virtual spaces (The Hye-Phen, n.d.).

The Hye-Phen is an independent digital publishing collective established in 2014, dedicated to fostering a sense of community among Armenia artists, scholars, activists, and writers. It provides a platform for sharing stories, challenges, dreams, ideas, critique of contemporary issues, and future aspirations, all while celebrating diverse Armenian identities. Maintained by a small group of LGBTQ+ Armenians from around the globe, the Hye-Phen also produces physical zines, which have been featured at various zine festivals. The collective has received selective media coverage from outlets such as The New York Times, Hyperallergic, Artsy, and Popsugar (The Hye-Phen, n.d.). Additionally, various magazines have sections for LGBTQ+ individuals, such as Azad Archives' collection of 'Queer Voices' (Azad Archive, n.d.).

Educational online platforms are growing day by day. Most relevant is the website "Սեռականություն," which translates to "sexuality." The is an educational website for both parents and individuals going through puberty. It covers topics of hygiene, sexual relations, and most relevantly sexual orientation. The website, created by Women's Resource Center Armenia, is the only educational platform that explores all these 'taboo' topics in Armenian, where individuals can learn about themselves, as well as how to have discussions with their children (serakanutyun.org, n.d.). For more engaging platforms, Pink Armenia organizes online events, such as "Queerantine," an online exhibition and competition, giving the LGBTQ+ community opportunities to engage in art and express themselves freely (Pink Armenia, 2020).

These platforms offer opportunities for individuals to connect across geographical boundaries, share narratives, and access resources, even in contexts where physical LGBTQ+ spaces may be limited or unsafe.

<u>Navigate societal expectations and concealment</u>

"The hostile attitudes towards the LGBT community have a major psychological impact on its members, as many of them are forced to hide their sexual orientation and suppress their gender identity and expression."
- *(The Danish Institute for Human Rights, n.d.: 6)*

In conservative and heteronormative contexts like Armenia, individuals may strategically conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity to navigate societal expectations and protect themselves from harm (Pink Human Rights Defender, 2024: 39) (The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2010.: 3) (Public Information and Need of Knowledge, 2016: 19). In an interview in Istanbul, Nvard Mafaryan, at the time being Pink Armenia's Project Coordinator addressed this issue. She mentioned that in everyday life, there is minimal visibility for LGBTQ+ individuals, leading many to hide their identities to avoid societal backlash. Being openly gay, lesbian, or transgender can result in harassment, hate crimes, or threats (Kazaz, 2015). She emphasized that particularly transgender individuals, who are among the most visible in the community, frequently face physical attacks (Kazaz, 2015). Lilit Martirosyan emphasized that unlike many members of the LGBTQ+ community, the transgender community face unique challenges in this context. She also emphasized that she sees and validates all LGBTQ+ issues stating, "I don't want to discriminate [against] lesbian, gay, bisexual people, but they are not more openly visible, they can access bars, restaurants, work in restaurants, but transgender community have many issues in this country." She mentions about how many public places, like cafes, parks, and stores, are closed for trans people. She highlights the fact that even the customers will threaten to leave the place if they serve trans people (Lilit Martirosyan)

Moreover, Mafaryan explains that the concealment is largely driven by widespread homophobia and societal prejudice, which is often state-supported. As an example she mentions the trans community, who are many times forced into sex work, stating, "These attacks cannot be properly brought to court, because the police file counterclaims. Instead of

investigating the perpetrator, the police file charges against you for being a sex worker" (Kazaz, 2015). These situations and the societal atmosphere make it even more critical for LGBTQ+ individuals to keep their identities hidden (Kazaz, 2015). In summary, the decision to conceal one's identity is a coping mechanism adopted to navigate the harsh realities of Armenian society, characterized by deep-seated homophobia and transphobia. This practice reflects a complex negotiation between individual agency and structural constraints, illustrating how individuals adapt to and resist dominant cultural norms.

Coping through migration

"Societal pressures and rejection drive some LGBTI persons to find acceptance in other countries. According to approximate estimates, 5,891 citizens of Armenia emigrated due to discrimination between 2011 and 2013"
-   *(Public Information and Need of Knowledge, 2016: 19)*

The coping mechanism of migration to more accepting societies underscores the role of mobility and displacement in shaping LGBTQ+ experiences and identities.
Mafaryan addressed this coping mechanism in the same interview mentioned before. She explained the reason for this coping mechanism is due to the oppressive environment the LGBTQ+ community faces at home (Kazaz, 2015). Mafaryan emphasizes that the reasons behind migration are evident. The pervasive homophobia and societal prejudice in Armenia make many LGBTQ+ individuals feel unsafe and marginalized (Kazaz, 2015).

"How can they feel safe and secure? [In] this country where their friends are killed in their apartments, the harassment, hate speeches, beaten in streets, they close many places for transgender community. We don't have a transgender community representative who finishes university or school, because discrimination is so high."
-   *Lilit Martirosyan, Interview 3, 2024*

This was brought up in Interview 1 while discussing how the participant navigates life in Armenia while also identifying as part of the community, the participant stated, "I don't. I just, I left the country. [Because] I don't think it's possible to…for a long term to stay there [Armenia] and to be openly gay. Meaning, like if you want to hold hands with your girlfriend just don't live in Armenia. Because that just goes against societal rules."

Migration provides LGBTQ+ individuals with the chance to live in places where they can freely express their identities and be part of communities without fear of persecution (Kazaz, 2015). However, migration also entails challenges such as cultural adaptation, isolation, and loss of cultural ties, highlighting the complexities of identity negotiation and belonging in transnational contexts. Additionally, LGBTQ+ individuals might also simply not want to leave the country they are from. Lilit mentioned, "I don't feel comfortable in any places in Armenia. Sometimes I go to different countries, but I like this country and I don't want to leave for another country, I like this country. I like this country without [the] homophobic and transphobic society. Because I like our weather, water and [so on]. But society kills me, [it] kills my insides. After 2, 3 months I am in a burnt-out situation."

Support from friends and chosen families

"Regarding friends, they are super supportive. In my friend group I came out first, when I was 14, and they were still I guess learning about things like that or being so more accepting, but it was okay. I did not get any negative backlash, because my friends, half of them are gay."
- *Interview 2, 2024*

"You just find your own people, they're okay with it."
- *Interview 1, 2024*

Seeking support from friends and family highlights the importance of familial and communal ties in navigating gender identity and sexual orientation. Transgender individuals may rely on chosen families or supportive networks within their communities to affirm their identities, seek emotional validation, and access resources for transitioning. Additionally in interviews 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7, friends and "chosen family" were brought up when reflecting on how they cope and find resilience.

6.3. Religious Influence and Marginalization

"The society, speaks [of] the Christian country, speaks about God, about Jesus, about Christianity. And afterward, they start talking about wanting to kill LGBT members. It's not about Christianity, I am also a Christian transgender, I go to different churches, but I can say that I am the Christian because I never hate people, the society representatives."

- *Lilit Martirosyan, Interview 3, 2024*

In understanding hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community in Armenia, it's essential to delve deeper into the socio-cultural context that shapes these incidents. Research highlights the persistent influence of religion, particularly Christianity, in perpetuating discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ individuals.

The majority of Armenians identify with the Armenian Apostolic Church, which holds negative views towards the LGBTQ+ community (Hyusisyan, 2017: 2). This religious stance significantly influences societal views, leading to discrimination, bullying, and violence against the LGBTQ+ community (Hyusisyan, 2017: 26).

Moreover, there is a correspondence between religious beliefs and negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. Among Christians, a significant majority agree with their religion's views on homosexuality, indicating the impact of religious teachings on individual perspectives. This religiously fueled stigma contributes to the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly concerning family acceptance, social integration, and access to support networks.

"Although in terms of freedom of thought, conscience and religion there is nothing in law which enshrines discrimination against LGBT people, the primacy of one church (there are about 80 registered in Armenia) with profoundly homophobic doctrines, and whose values permeate every aspect of Armenian life, is a matter of concern."

- *(Carroll and Quinn, 2009: 59)*

The Armenian Apostolic Church's stance also contributes to the absence of legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in Armenian law (Carroll and Quinn, 2009: 25)

The experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals are challenging in Armenia, particularly concerning family acceptance and social inclusion. Coming out to family members is often met with resistance and rejection, with religious beliefs exacerbating negative reactions in some cases. Additionally, Hyusisyan (2017) mentions that "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 (Hyusisyan, 2017: 18).

The interviews reveal the importance of friendships as a source of support and acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals, highlighting the role of chosen families and supportive peer networks in coping with familial rejection and societal stigma.

6.4.**Organizational Interventions by LGBTQ+ NGOs**

In this section, I will present a comprehensive examination of the complex organizational interventions implemented by LGBTQ+ NGOs in Armenia to advocate for the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals. These interventions include a diverse range of strategies aimed at addressing the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities and promoting inclusivity and equality within Armenian society. By employing various approaches, LGBTQ+ NGOs attempt to navigate the complex landscape of societal norms, legal frameworks, and cultural attitudes that impact the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia.

Advocacy and promoting efforts constitute a foundation of LGBTQ+ NGOs' initiatives, as they strive to effect policy change and advocate for legal reforms to safeguard LGBTQ+ rights. Through engagement with policymakers and legislators, these organizations seek to influence the development and implementation of laws and policies that foster equality and non-discrimination.

For example, Pink Armenia conducts and releases annual reports on the human rights situation of LGBTQ+ individuals. The reports seek to highlight the state's failures in protecting individuals from discrimination and ensuring their rights. They emphasize the necessity for comprehensive legal protections and effective remedies for victims, call for clear policies and measures to prevent and address crimes committed with discriminatory motives, and advocate for a supportive and sensitive approach from law enforcement and other state institutions toward victims of hate crimes and discrimination. Additionally, the reports aim to raise awareness about the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment for all members of society, urge the state to fulfill its obligations in preventing and prosecuting violations, and highlight the need for training and education for professionals to ensure respect for human

rights and sensitivity towards marginalized groups. They also promote state accountability and responsibility and encourage public discourse on the importance of human rights, non-discrimination, and equality in Armenian society.

Moreover, the reports aim to document and summarize the human rights violations experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia, analyze the state's obligations to protect human rights and prevent discrimination, assess the implementation of recommendations given to the state by international bodies, address the impact of religion on safeguarding LGBTQ+ human rights, tackle issues of hate speech and freedom of expression against LGBTQ+ people, and provide recommendations for improving the human rights situation of LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia. Right Side NGO conducts similar studies and legal reports. Despite encountering resistance from conservative elements within both the government and society, LGBTQ+ NGOs continue in their advocacy campaigns, employing strategic planning and coalition-building to advance their cause.

In parallel, awareness and education campaigns are essential in challenging stereotypes, combating discrimination, and fostering acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ+ issues.

An example of this is the hosting of roundtable discussions. Pink hosted one in 2022, "10 Years of Impunity," attended by embassy representatives from various countries in Armenia, international organizations, the Office of the Ombudsperson, local civil society, government officials, organization beneficiaries, supporters, and victims of cases represented in Pink's strategic litigations (Pink Armenia, 2022).

In October 2022, Pink Armenia held the 7th Rainbow Forum with over 140 participants. The theme was "Strengthening the LGBT+ Movement." During the forum, LGBTQ+ individuals and supporters discusses various topics, queer artists showcased their films, and there was a queer performance titled "Berneberan" ("Mouth to Mouth") (Pink Armenia, 2022).

Additionally, the organization has several ongoing projects.

By organizing workshops, seminars, and public campaigns, LGBTQ+ NGOs aim to shift societal attitudes and cultivate a more inclusive environment. However, these initiatives face obstacles such as resistance from conservative groups or cultural barriers that inhabit open discourse about LGBTQ+ topics.

Moreover, the provision of support and counseling services is essential for LGBTQ+ individuals who experience discrimination, harassment, or violence. LGBTQ+ NGOs offer a range of resources, including helplines, support groups, and individual counseling sessions, to provide emotional support, guidance, and assistance. Nevertheless, the availability and

accessibility of these services may be constrained by factors such as limited funding or a shortage of trained professionals, underscoring the need for sustained investment and capacity building within these organizations. Queer Sister has a safe space that is only disclosed to those who pass many safety precautions, offering community support, mental health support, and a safe space where LGBTQ+ individuals can spend their time. Both Pink Armenia and Right Side NGOs provide legal assistance to victims of discrimination. This includes legal counseling, legal advice, legal aid with documentation organizations, as well as the support of social workers and reporting of crimes.

Capacity building and training programs are another crucial aspect of LGBTQ+ NGOs' interventions, aimed at empowering activists, community leaders, and allies with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective advocacy. These programs cover topics such as advocacy tactics, community organizing, human rights principles, and legal literacy, contributing to the development of a robust network of advocates and change-makers. For example, training for students who specialize in mental health by Pink Armenia (Pink Armenia, 2024). Or the training of police officers, investigators, and prosecutors on investigating hate crimes and sensitively handling victims (Pink Armenia, 2022). However, ensuring the accessibility of these programs, particularly in remote or marginalized communities, remains a challenge that requires ongoing efforts to address.

Collaboration and networking initiatives further enhance the impact of LGBTQ+ NGOs' interventions by facilitating partnerships with other human rights organizations, civil society groups, and international stakeholders. By participating in coalitions, alliances, and networks, LGBTQ+ NGOs leverage collective resources, expertise, and influence to amplify their advocacy efforts and advance LGBTQ+ rights agendas.

7. **Findings**

This chapter presents the findings of the research, addressing the central research question: "How do individuals and organizations in Armenia advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, navigate the impact of traditional societal norms on hate crimes, and what strategies do NGOs implement to combat these norms within the framework of human rights advocacy?" The findings are based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals and experts and a review of secondary sources. This research aimed to understand the complex relationship between societal norms and the incidence of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia.

The research reveals a strong correlation between traditional societal norms in Armenia and the prevalence of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals. These norms, deeply rooted in conservative values and religious doctrines, uphold heteronormative standards and marginalize non-conforming sexual gender identities.

a) The Armenian Apostolic Church plays a significant role in shaping societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals. The Church's condemnation of same-sex acts as grave sins perpetuates homophobic attitudes, leading to social ostracism and violence against LGBTQ+ people. Interviewees frequently cited the Church's influence as a major barrier to acceptance and safety. The Church's teachings reinforce traditional gender roles and heterosexuality as the norm, marginalizing LGBTQ+ individuals and legitimizing their discrimination

b) Despite Armenia's constitutional commitments to human rights, the lack of explicit anti-discrimination laws for LGBTQ+ individuals exacerbates their vulnerability. Hate crimes are not legally recognized, and there are no specific protections for LGBTQ+ individuals in the legal system. This legal void allows perpetrators of hate crimes to act with impunity, as evidenced by cases presented in the analysis. Additionally, the dismissal of complaints addressed to law enforcement reflects institutional bias and reinforces a culture of impunity.

c) Societal stigmatization of LGBTQ+ individuals is pervasive. Traditional family structures and gender roles, upheld by both cultural and religious norms, contribute to

widespread discrimination. LGBTQ+ individuals often face verbal and physical violence, threats, and insults, not only in public spaces but also within their own families. Many feel compelled to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid harassment and violence. This societal pressure to conform to heteronormative standards leads to a lack of visibility and representation for LGBTQ+ individuals, further perpetuating their marginalization.

d) Acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals vary significantly between urban and rural areas. Urban areas, while still challenging, offer slightly more acceptance and support due to the presence of LGBTQ+ organizations and a more diverse population. In contrast, rural areas are characterized by heightened hostility and isolation for LGBTQ+ individuals, making it more difficult for them to find support and safety. This divide highlights the need for and importance of localized support mechanisms and interventions in rural communities.

Despite the challenges, LGBTQ+ individuals and communities in Armenia demonstrate remarkable resilience. The study identifies several coping mechanisms employed by LGBTQ+ individuals to navigate their hostile environment.

a) LGBTQ+ organizations like Pink Armenia and Right Side Human Rights Defender provide critical support through advocacy, legal assistance, and psychological counseling. These organizations also engage in awareness campaigns and policy advocacy to promote inclusivity and equality. However, the reach of these services is limited, and many LGBTQ+ individuals remain unaware of their existence. These organizations face significant challenges, including limited funding, governmental opposition, and societal backlash.

b) Forming supportive communities within the LGBTQ+ population helps individuals share experiences and resources, creating a sense of solidarity and mutual support. These social networks play a crucial role in providing emotional and practical assistance, although their impact is constrained by societal pressures to remain hidden. These networks provide a vital source of resilience, enabling individuals to cope with discrimination and violence.

c) Many LGBTQ+ individuals adopt strategies of concealment or "passing" to protect themselves from discrimination and violence. While this allows them to navigate public spaces more safely, it also reinforces their invisibility and limits their ability to advocate openly for their rights. This coping mechanism, while protective, also perpetuates the cycle of stigma and discrimination by preventing LGBTQ+ individuals from living authentically.

The role of LGBTQ+ NGOs in Armenia is pivotal in both providing immediate support to individuals and advocating for long-term policy changes.

a) NGOs actively engage with policymakers to influence the development and implementation of laws and policies that protect LGBTQ+ rights. Despite facing significant resistance from conservative elements within the government, these organizations continue to push for legal reforms and greater state accountability. These efforts are crucial for addressing the systematic barriers that perpetuate discrimination and violence.

b) Educational initiatives aim to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding of LGBTQ+ issues. These organizations strive to shift societal attitudes and foster a more inclusive environment through workshops, public campaigns, and community events. These initiatives are vital for creating a more supportive and accepting society.

c) Providing legal counseling and psychological support is crucial for helping LGBTQ+ individuals navigate the challenges they face. Expanding these services is essential for ensuring that LGBTQ+ individuals have the resources they need to protect their rights and well-being.

The research findings underscore the profound impact of traditional societal norms on the prevalence of LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Armenia. These norms, perpetrated by religious doctrines and conservative values, create a hostile environment that marginalizes and endangers LGBTQ+ individuals. The findings affirm that traditional societal norms, as influenced by the Armenian Apostolic Church and reinforced by legal and institutional barriers

significantly contribute to the prevalence of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals. While LGBTQ+ organizations provide essential support and advocacy, their efforts are hindered by legal and societal barriers. Comprehensive legal reforms increased societal awareness, and robust enforcement of anti-discrimination laws are crucial to improving the safety and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia.

8. Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This thesis has explored the impact of traditional societal norms on LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Armenia, revealing the significant role that conservative values and religious doctrines play in perpetuating discrimination and violence. The research highlights the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, including societal stigmatization, legal voids, and the influential role of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Internal Validity

The study's internal validity is strengthened by the use of multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews and secondary literature. However, potential sources of error include the limited scope of interviews and the possibility of bias and self-reported data. The study's qualitative nature means that findings are context-specific and may not capture the full diversity of LGBTQ+ experiences in Armenia.

External Validity

The external validity, or generalizability, of the study is limited period while the findings provide a detailed understanding of the situation in Armenia, the specific cultural, legal, and social context may differ significantly from other countries. Further research is needed to compare these findings with those from other regions to better understand the broader implications for LGBTQ rights globally.

Relation to existing research

The findings of this thesis align with existing research on LGBTQ+ rights and hate crimes, which often highlight the role of societal norms and institutional barriers and perpetuating discrimination. However, the study adds a specific focus on the Armenian context, contributing valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals and conservative, religious society.

Implications for policy and practice

The research underscores the need for comprehensive legal reforms to protect LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia. This includes the implementation of explicit anti-discrimination laws, recognition of hate crimes, and legal recognition of same-sex relationships and transgender rights. Public awareness campaigns and education initiatives are crucial for shifting societal attitudes and promoting inclusivity.

Recommendations for further research

Further research should aim to expand the scope of interviews. Include a broader range of participants from diverse backgrounds to capture the full spectrum of LGBTQ experiences in Armenia. Conduct comparative studies with other countries to identify common challenges and successful strategies in advocating for LGBTQ rights. Examine the long-term impact of legal reforms and societal changes on the safety and well-being of LGBTQ individuals.

This thesis highlights the urgent need for comprehensive legal and societal changes to protect the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ individuals in Armenia. While significant challenges remain, the resilience and advocacy of the LGBTQ+ community and their allies offer hope for a more inclusive and equitable future.

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