



KMOP DISCUSSION PAPER No.104

Report on LGBT refugees and migrants in Greece

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May, 2017

This publication forms part of KMOP's "Discussion Papers" series. It has been produced in the framework of the EU-funded project "Epsilon - Equipping Professionals for Supporting LGBT Migrants & Refugees". Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinions of KMOP.

The "Discussion Papers" series aims at widely disseminating the research results of KMOP's various activities, stimulating academic discussion and offering a forum for new approaches on contemporary social issues.

Abstract

The present report focuses on one of the most vulnerable groups in modern Europe, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) immigrants and refugees. The aim of this report is, first of all, to present the current situation regarding immigrants and refugees as well as LGBT people living in Greece. Next, the report concentrates on the living conditions and real needs of LGBT refugees and immigrants in Greece, while a number of suggestions, which could improve their status, are put forward. The findings provided resulted from literature review, as well as personal interviews with professionals and LGBT refugees, who have settled in Greece. This report is part of the transnational research carried out within the framework of the project “EpsiLon - Equipping Professionals for Supporting LGBT Refugees”, which is funded by the Erasmus+ European Programme. The EpsiLon project, responding to the increasing need for professionals and volunteers’ training who work with LGBT immigrants and refugees across Europe, aims at developing a training programme intended for professionals, which will enhance their skills, with a view to improving the provision of services to the aforementioned group of people.

Keywords: immigrants, refugees, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender), LGBT immigrants and refugees

1. Key objective of the report

This report presents the main findings of the Report on LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) refugees and immigrants in Greece, which is written in the Greek language. The report reviews the current situation regarding immigrants and refugees as well as LGBT people living in Greece, and then the living conditions and needs of LGBT refugees and immigrants in Greece are set out. This report is part of the transnational survey carried out in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Greece, Cyprus and Italy, within the framework of the project “EpsiLon - Equipping Professionals for Supporting LGBT Refugees”, which is co-financed by the Erasmus+ European Programme. The EpsiLon project aims at developing a training programme which is intended for professionals and volunteers who work with LGBT immigrants and refugees with a view to improving the provision of services to the aforementioned group of people.

2. Methodology

In order to record and analyse the current situation in Greece concerning immigrants and refugees, LGBT people, as well as LGBT refugees and immigrants, qualitative research was conducted according to the following methodology:

- Secondary research – desk research: the conduct of a secondary research was deemed necessary in order to report on and fully understand Greek reality in relation to the issue under consideration. Furthermore, secondary research was essential, as it provided guidelines for planning the subsequent field research. Regarding the collection of secondary data, a relevant Greek and international literature review was carried out.
- Primary research - field research using the method of personal semi-structured interviews, through open-ended questions. This particular method was chosen as the most appropriate on the one hand to cross-check secondary data, on the other hand to enrich and specialise existing knowledge, mainly focusing on the gaps observed on the subject matter. Besides, conducting personal interviews contributed to highlighting special aspects of the issue not identified or pointed out in existing literature. Overall, four (4) personal interviews with professionals and volunteers were conducted. More specifically, participants included one psychologist working in a NGO dealing with LGBT-related issues and actively supports LGBT people, two coordinators of refugee accommodation sites, which are coordinated by international NGOs, one volunteer getting involved in a NGO intended for vulnerable social groups, inter alia, immigrants and LGBT people. Moreover, three (3) personal interviews with LGBT refugees in Greece were carried out. On that point, it should be noted that it was very difficult to find LGBT refugees who would be willing to take part in the research. Despite the low number of participants in the field research, the collected information made a substantial contribution to recording the needs of LGBT immigrants and refugees in Greece, as well as the needs of professionals who cater for them.

3. Key findings from the literature review

Immigrants and refugees in Greece

Greece received a very large number of economic immigrants in the 1990s, as a result of the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. The majority of immigrants came from Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. Next, followed immigrants from African and Asian countries. Immigration flows into Greece continued with the same intensity in the decade 2000 – 2010. According to 2011 Census data (Hellenic Statistical Authority/Ελληνική Στατιστική Αρχή, 2014α), immigrant population amounts to 912,000 and constitutes 8,4% of the total population of the country. According to a recent special survey of the Hellenic Statistical Authority (2014β), the main reason for immigrating to Greece is job search (48,0%), while the second reason for immigration included family reasons (27,6%). “Other” reasons follow (6%), 3,4% of the participants stated that “found a job in Greece and came to work”, 1,2% came to study and 0,3% came to Greece for international protection reasons, asylum request.

In the meanwhile, the migration landscape in Greece changed form, due to the refugee crisis, in 2015, when an increased number of refugees and immigrants started to move towards the European Union, via the Mediterranean Sea or Southeastern Europe, mainly through Greece and Italy, so as to ask for asylum primarily in countries of Central and Northern Europe. Given that, Greece, as southeastern border of the European Union, was required to cope with the inflow of an immense number of refugees and immigrants, most of whom originate from Syria, which is plagued by civil war, and other countries experiencing unrest and conflict.

The figures concerning refugees’ arrivals in Greece are indicative, as they were registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2017). In 2015, 856,723 refugees arrived, while in 2014 the respective number amounted to 41,038. In 2016, the number of refugees coming to Greece was 173,450.

With regard to the reasons why refugees were made to leave their own countries, according to a recent survey of the Association of Greek Regions (Ένωση Περιφερειών Ελλάδας) and Kapa Research (Κάπα Research) (2016), 69,9% of the participants mentioned the danger of their own life or their family members’ lives, 19,6% reported military service avoidance or involvement in war avoidance, 18,7% referred to financial reasons (work, poverty), 12,3% stated limited civil and political rights, 11% mentioned family reunion reasons and 10,5% pointed out shortages of essentials/infrastructure (food, accommodation, water).

Refugees consider Greece as a transit country and not as a final destination country. Only 0,4% of the refugees wishes to stay in Greece, while 68% of the refugees want to go to Germany (the Association of Greek Regions and Kapa Research, 2016). The closure of the borders, as well as restrictive measures taken against the entry of refugees in countries like FYROM, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria, which were implemented in 2016 resulted in the entrapment of thousands of refugees in Greece. More than 46,000 refugees remained stranded in Greece, according to data collected by 11th April 2016 (Amnesty International/Διεθνής Αμνηστία, 2016). Due to this fact, many of the trapped refugees applied for asylum in Greece, and according to statistical data of the Greek Asylum Service (Υπηρεσία Ασύλου, 2017), asylum applications noted a significant increase reaching 51,091.

LGBT in Greece

The number of LGBT people in Greece cannot be specified, because, as highlighted by Μπαλούρδος και Μουρίκη (2012), the data in terms of quantity are considered as “personal” and are protected by the Hellenic Data Protection Authority (Ελληνική Αρχή Προστασίας Δεδομένων Προσωπικού Χαρακτήρα). Moreover, the majority of LGBT people are afraid of revealing their sexual orientation, as the societal attitude towards homosexuality in Greece is quite hostile.

Although in recent years Greek society has started accepting LGBT people to a greater extent and anti-discrimination legislation protecting them exists, the people in question constitute one of the most vulnerable social groups and continue to become victims of an imperfect legal status including serious oversights and experience all forms of discrimination against the right to equal treatment (Πετροπούλου, 2011). According to Eurobarometer (the European Commission/Ευρωπαϊκή Επιτροπή, 2015), discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual) and gender identity (transgender -trans- or transexual) form the most common types of discrimination in Greece at 71% and 73% respectively, while the corresponding EU-28 average is 58% και 56%. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that, according to the most recent survey of FRA - European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (Οργανισμός Θεμελιωδών Δικαιωμάτων της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης, 2014), which was delivered in 2012, almost half of the LGBT respondents in Greece (48%) have faced discrimination or harassment because of their sexual orientation in the last 12 months from the year of survey writing.

Discrimination experienced by LGBT people is evident not only in their private (personal and family) life but also in public life (professional, educational, social). More specifically, according to the Greek Ombudsman (Συνήγορος του Πολίτη, 2014), people with “different” sexual orientation often experience humiliating behavior from superiors or colleagues (harassment). Then, as mentioned by the Greek Ombudsman (2014), a field in which serious problems regarding LGBT are recorded is the education sector, in relation both to teachers’ and students’ awareness-raising and to school bullying (homosexual bullying). In general, incidents of violence and attacks against LGBT people are too intense.

Equally worrying is the fact that, as reported by the Greek Ombudsman (2013), phenomena of racist violence have increased in Greece, especially in cases that they are combined with organized and systematic action of extremist groups against members of vulnerable or excluded social groups, including LGBT.

People belonging to the category of Trans are those who are most affected by discrimination, family rejection and public humiliation, given the strong patriarchal values and gender stereotypes prevailing in Greece (KMOP - Family and Childcare Centre & Municipality of Neapoli – Sykies, 2016).

Greece is still behind in issues regarding respect and protection of LGBT human rights. However, important steps are being taken which may improve the situation, like the recent adoption of registered partnership (Law 4356/2015) between two individuals, regardless of their sex, according to which the rights of same sex couples entering into registered partnership are equalized to those of married couples.

LGBT immigrants and refugees in Greece

Very little data was found in scientific literature focusing on LGBT immigrants and refugees in Greece, which is reasonable, given that the phenomenon of immigration is recent in modern Greece, while the arrival of refugees and immigrants in Greece intensified over the past two years. No population statistics could be detected concerning LGBT immigrants and refugees. As mentioned by OLKE (ΟΛΚΕ, 2006), LGBT immigrants experience multiple discrimination, because, in a society where Greek citizens have the absolute majority, they experience double stigma as LGBT and as “foreigners”.

On the basis of Presidential Decree 141 (2013), LGBT people are offered the opportunity to request international protection (asylum), as long as they are persecuted in their home countries for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Also, there are no precise figures on LGBT refugees/asylum seekers countries of origin in Greece, but it is reasonable to assume that the majority of them come from wider Middle East countries, which are too hostile towards LGBT people. Based on Αλεξανδρή and Μάζης article (2016), generally LGBT immigrants /refugees do not request that they stay in Greece, but see it as a transit country.

4. Key findings from the field research

The settlement process of LGBT immigrants and refugees is not significantly different from all the others’ regarding the typical part. Neither they receive some kind of different immigration status. On the other hand, it was observed that their sexual orientation increases the likelihood of granting asylum, particularly in cases where LGBT applicants come from countries, in which, if sexual orientation or gender identity deviates from the norm, it is considered as a criminal offence resulting even in death penalty.

As regards LGBT immigrants and refugees status in Greece nowadays, generally it is not much different from the rest immigrants and refugees’ status, meaning that they live in the same camps, under the same conditions. However, LGBT refugees and immigrants face various problems due to their sexual orientation, like social exclusion, verbal and physical aggression by their compatriots and foreigners and even rape attempts in accommodation structures have been reported.

As for the LGBT reasons for immigration in Greece, firstly mentioned were the difficulties and the persecutions they experience in their home countries, because of their sexual identity. In their countries they cannot live and express themselves freely, they have difficulty in finding a job, they often become victims of violence and their lives are at risk.

LGBT immigrants and refugees feel much safer and comfortable in Greece compared to their home countries, in particular when they come from countries where their life is in danger either because of their sexual orientation or due to a prevailing state of war in countries such as

Syria. Obviously, conditions in Greece are not perfect for LGBT people but in comparison with their countries, LGBT immigrants and refugees feel much better.

Professionals who work with LGBT immigrants and refugees have increased educational needs. To begin with, the growing need for training related to gender identity and sexual orientation was cited. Next, it is important that professionals are trained around issues concerning immigrants and refugees’ culture as well as how they perceive the concept of LGBT and traditional gender stereotypes prevailing in their countries. In addition, the need for training on issues regarding LGBT rights was reported, because there is poor knowledge not only from the relevant services but also from organisations assisting refugees and immigrants. Special emphasis was placed on the need for training volunteers as well as support staff.

5. Next steps and key recommendations

The current survey indicates that LGBT immigrants and refugees face many difficulties and barriers. They belong to one of the most vulnerable groups of our times given the increase in the number of immigrants and refugees and the refugee crisis across Europe in recent years. They have been accommodated to a country which is called upon to deal with this phenomenon without any previous experience and which has assumed the heavy burden of the immigration and refugee crisis. It is therefore expected that they experience the same difficulties and problems addressed by the rest of refugees. At the same time, LGBT people settle in a country where inequalities and discrimination against LGBT continue to exist, while phenomena of homophobia are particularly acute in recent years. Thus, LGBT immigrants and refugees in Greece constitute one of the most marginalized groups, although most of them feel much safer in Greece than in their home countries, where they experience many difficulties due to their sexual orientation. For that reason, LGBT refugees and immigrants in Greece need more support and assistance, in order to be socially and culturally integrated and make a fresh start under safe and dignified conditions. On the basis of the above-mentioned considerations and taking into account the participants’ views and experiences in field research, the following recommendations which could improve the LGBT immigrants and refugees status at both national and European level, are put forward:

| <i>Key Recommendations</i> | | |
|--|----------------|----------------|
| | National level | European level |
| Improvement of accommodation structures and living conditions of LGBT refugees and immigrants, so as they feel safe | √ | |
| Personalised psychological and social support, considering the special needs of LGBT people, aiming at coping with problems they face, as well as integrating them into the new reality, society and country. Particular emphasis should be laid on Trans people who experience more difficulties, not only during the | √ | √ |

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| application for asylum process but also during their stay in the host country. | | |
| Development of training and counselling programmes, based on special needs and skills of LGBT refugees and immigrants in order to be integrated in the job market. | √ | √ |
| Introduction and implementation of specific methodologies and guidelines which concern reception and support of LGBT refugees and immigrants | √ | √ |
| Information and awareness-raising of wider society regarding this particularly vulnerable group | √ | √ |

Besides, as regards the EpsiLon project, the training of professionals and volunteers, who deliver services to LGBT immigrants and refugees, so that they can gain a deep insight of their needs and problems, is highly recommended. Training courses should include:

- Topics concerning sexual orientation and gender identity.
- LGBT rights, as well as legislation and guidelines, which refer to asylum and accommodation procedures of LGBT immigrants and refugees.
- International good practices and cases with regard to the accommodation of LGBT immigrants and refugees.
- Topics dealing with civilization, culture and history but also gender stereotypes of LGBT immigrants and refugees' countries.
- Terminology and politically correct language issues, so as LGBT people would not feel embarrassed or offended.

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