



Society, gender, sexuality, sexual health and MSM in Macedonia

Community-based research

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This community-based research paper aims to provide a description and in-depth analysis of the different gender and sexual identities, sexual behaviours and practices, and sexual health needs of men having sex with men in different socio-cultural environments in Macedonia.

Our main motivation for investigating the complexities related to each of the subjects and problem areas set out in the research goal was to provide a context-sensitive and analytical overview and baseline data that can be used for the purposes of creating future programmatic interventions by stakeholders responsible for HIV prevention among MSM and for positive prevention of PLHIV and HIV prevention in general.

The study has been conducted in a society in which 91.6% of the citizens disapprove of homosexuality and where there is no inclusive law to protect people from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Although the Republic of Macedonia does not have any official data which would show the concrete situation of human rights violations and discrimination against sexual minorities, watchdog reports indicate a high level of human rights violations, stigma, social exclusion and discrimination. An MSM Internet Survey of all European countries found Macedonia has the second-lowest proportion of MSM who report being happy with their sex life.

Macedonia is a country with low HIV prevalence (<0.1%). However, the 2010 UNGASS Country Progress Report indicates that almost three quarters of all HIV cases are male. The 2010 annual report of the Public Health Institute shows that more than half of all new cases of infection were MSM. Although there is solid knowledge of sexual behaviour and some data about the legal and political context, there is evidently insufficient information to provide a comprehensive background on the position of MSM in Macedonia describing the correlation effects of social factors on gender and sexual identification.

The data gathered and the analysis provided in the frames of the research offer broader insights into the variety of identification models and identity-construction practices across the axes of gender and sexuality and their multilayered intersections and interferences with other variables such as class, social status, ethnicity and age. Investigating the multiple gender and sexual self-identifications of MSM, we also provided analyses of the complexities involved in identity-negotiation, presentation and incorporation in social interactions, practices and networks—i.e. how these different identity positions model and determine social life at micro and macro level among MSM and, vice versa, how different rules of social interaction, existing power relations, norms, roles and social stratifications are effectuated in the very processes of identification. In these terms this research investigates the impact of stigmatizing interpellations on the processes of identification and navigation among various identity choices. Finally, we wanted to explore and create a basis for future investigation of the possible connections that could be mapped between these various sexualities, identity positions and practices, on the one hand, and sexual behaviour, sexual health and risk assessment on the other.

The problems tackled with this research are thus intended to foreground more sensitive policies and changes and improvements in the current national response to HIV defined within policies, strategies and programmes, thereby making them attentive to the lived experiences, problems, needs and everyday lives of men having sex with men in Macedonia. Furthermore, human rights NGOs will have data to advocate for legislative changes and to develop a

mechanism for protecting the rights of sexual and gender minorities, as well as to use these findings for designing research-based actions and strategies for mobilizing and strengthening MSM/LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) individuals and communities. This last benefit and impact of the research, we believe, is provided in the form of the insights the research offers into the different modes of perceiving one's identity and gender/sexuality—i.e. the extent to which one's self-perception is determined by a more or less privatized and intimate understanding of one's identity as compared to what extent one's self-consciousness is politicized, including the different social and political factors that structure such self-understandings of one's sexual and gender identity. This knowledge is crucial for developing future public health interventions aimed at improving the sexual and reproductive health of MSM in Macedonia.

For reasons mentioned above, we have decided to employ qualitative data collection and analysis. The study was conducted on a diverse sample in terms of ethnicity (Macedonian, Albanian and Roma), age (above 30 and below 30) and social status (below average and above average) in order to reflect different facets of the phenomenon in question. In total, 28 respondents participated in the focus-group discussions and 39 were involved in in-depth interviews.

Gender Identities

What seems to unite all the participants involved in the research is an unquestioned perception of the **masculine gender position**, with which the majority identify **as a matter of common sense**. We hypothesize that this common-sensual and uncontested identification with masculinity provides the participants with symbolic capital that compensates for losses or possible losses to which they are/may be subjected in a homophobic society, noting that complying with the masculine gender norm provides one with social recognition and social and symbolic capital, thus protecting one from the risk of coercion and violence as well as from symbolic and social exclusion.

The most dominant differentiation that is constitutive in determining the specificity of masculinity is differentiation from the feminine gender position. This is posited mostly as an absolute difference, though differentiation and opposition to effeminate gays as 'subordinate masculinities' is also one of the core binary positions in relation to which they claim their masculine gender identity. Among a few of the participants we identified an ambivalent and critical stance towards the gender binary, and some enounced queer gender positioning, refusing either of the hegemonic binary-divided gender positions, which is to say exclusively masculine or feminine identity.

Another important finding derived from the research is that among the majority of the participants there is an implicit assumption that gender difference is necessarily predetermined by the already existing order of the two sexes (essentialized sexual difference), which further determines the symbolic investments and self-perceptions of the biological sex with attributes and meanings related to gender norms. Namely, a significant number of the interviewees emphasized the primary and secondary sex attributes as gender markers (hormones, chromosomes, genitals, body hair, etc.), as well as body figure and physical appearance as the bearers of gender/sexual difference. The description, including beliefs, attitudes and perceptions related to the sexed body image included 'strength', 'muscles', 'body size', 'bodily comportment', 'gesticulation', 'sexual potency', 'bodily decoration', 'bodily aestheticization and stylization', 'muscular and sports' body', etc. Related to the discussion on the habitual security which masculine identification provides for the participants, we hypothesize that the repertoire of sexual difference represents a strong marker and strategy for confirming the stability and commonsensicality of their gender identification. The descriptions and attributes the participants provided as elaboration of their gendered *self-perceptions* confirm that the hegemonic cultural repertoires for gender differences (masculinity/femininity) are inscribed in the meanings, perceptions, conceptualizations and understandings of sexed bodies (male/female).

Interaction and sociality with other men, mostly heterosexual, particularly for the majority of the Albanian and Roma participants, is the condition and possibility for the enactment of hegemonic masculinity. Amongst these cases, a homosocial environment represents a social space for the performance of homophobia, the consequence of which is the division it entails among homosexual and heterosexual friendships, the second always being publicly avowed and enacted while *homosexual sociality is either made invisible with no social recognition or is reduced only to the status of random sexual encounters with no social, cultural and political significance.* The majority of Macedonian self-identified gay and bisexual men and a small minority of self-identified gay Albanian interviewees perceive the homosocial environment as a source of uncomfortable feelings and shame. *For a significant number of the participants, this dramaturgy of homosociality represents a pressure for keeping up normal appearances, requiring constant vigilance and monitoring of one's behavior, bodily comportment and suppression of possible 'effeminate' gestures and signs, managing information related to one's sexual life or identity, as well as protecting oneself from the possibility of being discredited, excluded and shamed.*

A few participants demonstrated *a severely critical stance towards these social (homosocial) groupings, subjecting them to critical scrutiny and irony* (a few of the self-identified gay men among Macedonian participants, and only one Albanian gay identified man).

The majority of participants reported a strict gender **division of labour in the household** among their mothers and fathers or among themselves and their wives (mostly Albanian and Roma participants). Alternative and equal division of labour (as practiced among those living outside their family or mostly as an attitude, understanding of gender roles) is noticed among the majority of self-identified gay and bisexual men, mostly Macedonians.

Alternative and equal, gender-non-specified division of labour is noticed as a result of transformed social practices, economic circumstances and different forms of life outside the nuclear family. Higher levels of education and higher economic status also show a positive correlation in the majority of cases with equal gender division of labour, in particular in regards to attitudes and beliefs, and not exclusively as a practice.

A heteronormative organization of sexuality and emotions is most noticeably expressed among the majority of Roma and Albanian interviewees, and a minority of the Macedonian interviewees, mostly those with lower social status and with highly emphasized sexual identification determined by the masculine normative gender paradigm. The sexual and intimate relations practised by the majority of the interviewees demonstrate a departure from the dominant model of masculinity in several respects (exclusively those participants self-identified as gay or bisexual from all ethnicities, although predominantly Macedonians). This is evident not only in the choice of the object of desire, but even more importantly, inversion of the prescribed sexual roles wherein the receptive sexual role ('passive') is also included as an equally potential site for the performance of masculinity. A significant number of participants do not consider emotional expression as unmanly and reported a high awareness of the social and cultural nature of this norm of masculinity. This opposition to the normative emotional and sexual ideals of masculinity is further confirmed in their more open and intimate friendship relations with women.

Sexual Identity

Having sex with men and establishing short-term and long-term intimate and emotional relations with same-sex partners is the main basis on which the majority of gay and bisexual self-identified participants define their own sexual identity. From the total number of 39 individual interviewees, 16 identified themselves as gay or homosexual. In

terms of ethnicity, 10 of these were Macedonian, 5 were Albanian, and only one Roma. Eight participants identified themselves as bisexual, of whom 5 were Macedonian, 2 were Albanian, and 1 was Roma.

Proportionally correlative to this understanding of one's gay or bisexual identity is a stronger understanding of sexual identity as a private affair and a deep part of one's self and one's intimacy, while reducing the political, social and cultural significance of identity. Our analysis shows that the privatization of sexual identity, and its salience and the opportunity to be played out in some instead of other conditions, is highly determined by the different situations the social actor enters into and the possible rewarding or 'punishing' feedback these situations provide for the participants.

Hence, not being committed to this same identity in constellations which seem not to confirm this identity seems to be more strongly effectuated by the intense negative feelings (shame, withdrawal, fear, anxiety etc.) the participants experience in those contexts, and the need to cope with and bypass these painful feelings.

Indicative in this regard is also the *moderate level of consciousness and awareness among participants of the structures of heteronormativity and homophobia*. Most of the interviewees recognize homophobia as manifested mostly in visible acts of violence and exclusion, rarely tracing the everyday insidious forms of violence and oppression enacted and lived by the structural parameters of heteronormativity, even less the everyday interactive politics of shame embedded in homosocial, microsocial and wider political structures and institutions.

Gay friendships and environments are the social environment in which the expression and salience of minoritarian sexual identity for most of our participants is accepted with positive attunement. Most of our self-identified bisexual and homosexual participants have *deep ties with their homosexual friends and consider them to be a significant source of support and means of self-expression*.

Some of the Albanian interviewees and the majority of the Roma participants defined sexual identity exclusively as being marked by gender role rather than sexual orientation, behavior or desire, whereby 'normal', 'mannish' sexual identity is equated with the active and penetrating sexual role. Only a few Macedonian participants, with below average social status, equated their sexual identity with 'normal masculinity' and an active sexual role.

Several, mostly Macedonian gay men showed an understanding of their *sexual identity as a political and social category and as a way of life*. They pointed to the social conditions influencing the creation of homosexual identity and awareness of one's homosexual identity, hence positing it as a social effect with the possibilities of transforming social stigma and insidious or overt social trauma into a potential for creativity and transformation. Cultivating one's sexual identity as a way of life included politically and socially motivated critical positioning towards existing gender norms, nurturing alternative social environments and ties, transformative and creative use of personal histories of shame and stigma, political involvement in claims for sexual equality and human rights, and political affiliation with the gay community.

A significant finding of our research is the tendency of *in-group differentiation (from other gay men) based on normalizing constructions and discourses of sexuality and gender identity, mostly interiorized heteronormative projections and homophobic imageries about homosexuality and same-sex acts*. Among the majority of those participants using this strategy of self-differentiation and, in some cases, purification or devaluation of those who embody the homophobic figuration of the hypersexualized and effeminate gay, it has the function of confirming one's normalcy—of which they are *a priori* deprived in a homophobic social setting—and of acquiring and maintaining a 'phantom' tolerance from the majority of 'normals'!

Sexual Encounters

The homosocial, masculine and homophobic hegemonic demand for sexual reputation limits the possibility of finding sexual partners and developing sexual cultures to available internet dating sites and secretive networks of friends. Hence the focus groups reported that the most common ways in which sexual and intimate contacts and encounters are realized is through internet and social networks (all of the focus-groups), friendship environments and social life (the Macedonian group of above average social status), nightlife, phone calls and arrangements with persons already known to be gay (the Roma and Albanian focus groups), cruising areas, looking for partners via sending text messages on live TV shows, and through networks of friends (the Macedonian group of below average social status).

Sexual Pleasure

For the majority of Albanian and Roma participants, the latter in particular, the sources of sexual pleasure and the sexual scripts and practices leading to fulfilling sexual relations are marked by phallocentric imagery, whereby emotions, tenderness, intimate exchange, mutual sexual understanding and negotiation and love are foreshadowed by the objectification of the sexual partner as the one playing the 'correct' (the 'passive') sexual role and thus providing the informant with the pleasure he seeks. Exceptions to this general image include those younger Albanians with higher social status who self-identified as gay or bisexual, and a very few Roma participants, who emphasized the importance of all aspects of sexual relations, including bodily pleasures, intimacy, emotional relations, closeness, etc. The majority of Macedonian participants related sexual pleasure to emotional exchange and romantically organized intimacies, and they further report a wider spectrum of pleasure-seeking sources.

The main factors cited by Albanian participants as obstacles to having pleasurable sexual relations were related to hygiene, lack of cosmetic care for one's body, psychological problems and worries, everyday problems and fear of disclosing one's sexuality. The main obstacles cited by the Roma group included lack of private and intimate space, the characteristics of the sexual partner, i.e. the appearance, hygiene, previous sexual histories and experiences and sexual skill of the partner. The uneasiness caused by lack of intimate space, being forced to have sexual acts in cars or open spaces, is also the main obstacle to accomplishing gratifying sexual relations for the Macedonian participants. The list among these interviewees also included everyday worries, problems at the workplace, sexual incompatibility with partners, hygiene, etc. The lack of free conditions and a privately organized intimate environment prevents the organization of sensual, romantic and emotional sexual scenes, which seem to dominate the sexual and intimate imagery of the participants, and consequently prevents the possibility of establishing a fulfilling and pleasurable sexual life. Considering condom use, after an additional question by the interviewer, most of the participants claimed to be aware of the pleasure reduction sometimes caused by the use of condoms, although they do not consider this a significant obstacle.

Stigma and Shame

Among almost all of the interviewees reported that the experience or anticipation of stigma and shame influenced the differentiation of their self-presentation and their different gender and sexual identity enactments in different environments. This division is most saliently orchestrated among those men strongly identifying with the masculine gender role based (hetero)sexual identity position, whereby audience segregation provides them with the opportunity of managing information related to their sexual behaviour.

In this situation, what determines and drives the processes of segregation is the management of information related to one's sexual behaviour and same-sex practices. Some of the Albanian interviewees emphasized that they make a clear-cut division even on the level of ethnicity, thus evading sexual contacts with people of Albanian ethnicity because of the danger it involves of losing one's sexual reputation and social status and competence.

Some interviewees explicitly reported **feelings of shame induced by the possibility of being seen with 'faggots'** by their friends or closer social environment and significant others.

The Macedonian participants also expressed a significant degree of role-segregation and audience-segregation as part of their *daily routines in managing information about their sexual identity and sexual behaviour*.

A significant number of Macedonian and Albanian interviewees, mostly self-identified as gay or bisexual, have more nuanced and developed **close relationships of friendship and love with other MSM and gays**, and they describe these relationships as a valuable source of emotional exchange, talk on topics and discourse shifts different from those exercised in homosocial surroundings. Some of them claim a feeling of greater freedom in MSM and homosexual friendship circles that enable them to exercise a more authentic version of themselves. The social spaces involving MSM and other gays are mostly privatized spaces with no stronger public visibility or developed culture, yet, represent spaces of freedom and comfortable expression wherein information does not need to be managed nor tensions to be negotiated and resolved.

Most of the interviewees who declared that they had disclosed their homo/bisexual identity to their heterosexual friends confirmed that they avoided confessional moments or indulged only in **controlled sharing of information related to their emotional, intimate and sexual life**. In these situations they seem to negotiate the promise of equality, which may sometimes look like a promise to maintain the difference that might expose him as being different and thus not break the contract of abstract and universal equality between participants in interaction rituals and thereby not be subjected to interactional misinvolvement. The "**phantom acceptance**" which is evident in these situations may easily lead to the development of dependency relationships. Dependency relationships put the stigmatized in situation of permanent assimilation of one's behaviour in accordance to the expectancy codes in communication rituals with the 'normals'; just for the sake of keeping the acceptance granted under limiting conditions (acting as the others expect and not violating the comfort of normative situations) and maintaining ones social competence and tolerance.

A few participants provided stories that testify to the transformative potential and political, social and personal rearticulation of the shaming histories.

Risk Assessment and Prevention

A trend identified among Albanian and Roma participants is that condoms are not being used with permanent female partners or male partners with whom the participants claim to be familiar or whose health status is allegedly known to them. Very often the assessment for condom use is based on generalized, random and provisional emotional and moral appraisals about 'the others' perceived as a health risk. More precisely the decision to use condom is based on the impression the partner leaves, or knowing, believing or expressing confidence towards the partner. An example of this tendency is the fact that the participants claim to regularly use condoms when having sexual relations with strangers, inside and outside of Macedonia, and sex workers. Condoms are used only during anal sex, while rarely during oral. On the other hand, those participants who stated they used a condom with everyone except with their

close female partners (wives, fiancées and girlfriends), in their sexual practice with men, for whom they claim to be also carefully selected, well-known and regular male partners, don't use a condom. Therefore, by way of successive questions, it can be established that such risk evaluation results in accidental and rare use of condoms and cannot be a safe prevention strategy.

Although among the Macedonian participants we identified sufficient knowledge and good information and strategies for protection from HIV and STI, misinformation and generalized and confusing assessments of their partner's health status based on physical appearance was also noticed among these participants, as well as a pattern of using condoms with new or unknown partners while not using them with familiar or permanent partners.

A specific finding from among the Macedonian participants, mostly those identified as gay or bisexual, is that mutual agreement and mutually undertaken prevention measures through dialogue and agreement are most common. Again, condoms are mostly used with unknown partners, but it was significant that some of the respondents insist on condom use at all times.

Sexual Health

The major source of information and services related to sexual and reproductive health for all the participants are the services provided by the citizens' associations working in the field of harm reduction, sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention and protection. The primary health system and health and private health clinics are very rarely visited by our participants, the reasons for which vary, some of which include lack of information, lack of confidence, fear of possible sexual shaming, financial and insurance obstacles, lack of service availability, etc. The majority of Albanian and Roma participants have used the services provided by NGOs, although a few Albanian participants reported using SR health services abroad. The Macedonian participants reported using state and private clinics as well, although the majority also referred to the services provided by HERA, EGAL and HOPS¹.

The services our participants use most often are related to HIV testing and STIs, the second of which are for diagnostic or medical intervention purposes. The services needed to have been provided by a urologist, gynaecologist or dermatologist. Several participants have reported visiting mental health professionals concerning sexual identity formation and social pressure because of their sexual orientation.

A worrying finding notice is that a few participants also reported that when demanding SRH counselling they have been faced with receiving counselling and services directed towards the normalization or conversion of their sexual orientation.

Only few of the participants were in need for counselling related to sexual and reproductive health as an integral and regular part of SR health services. More precisely, most of them do not register/identify counselling as being within the frames of SR health services. Apart from the already existing and available services generally provided by the centres and services of the NGOs working in the field of SR health, the participants did not mention any other service they found to be lacking or needed, although a very few of them emphasized the need for developing wider services related to men's sexual and reproductive health and counselling in particular.

¹ HERA –Health Education and Research Association, Skopje; EGAL- Equality for Gay and Lesbians, Skopje; HOPS- Healthy Options Project, Skopje.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PUBLIC HEALTH

1.1 HEALTH SERVICES

Responsible state institutions should:

- ◆ Ensure the financial sustainability and recognition of MSM-friendly sexual health services provided by NGOs within the National HIV prevention programme
- ◆ Form a task-force that will provide strategies for improving the existing public network and providing greater accessibility to men's sexual and reproductive health services
- ◆ Initiate public health campaign for creating demand for medical and counselling services for men's sexual and reproductive health.

NGOs already working with MSM and the LGBTQ population should:

- ◆ Proceed with current service provision and open new service delivery points in different cities in the country tailored for all communities living in Macedonia
- ◆ Develop strategies for utilizing existing horizontal social modes of knowledge-sharing within MSM and gay environments as a means of preventing HIV/STI.

1.2 BEHAVIOUR CHANGE COMMUNICATION

Future public health campaigns focused on HIV prevention should apply the following insights:

- ◆ Using condom in every single sexual intercourse (both for anal and vaginal sex) is the most efficient HIV and STI's protection strategy
- ◆ There are no specific groups who are transmitting HIV and STIs, but specific sexual behaviors that are more risky in the context of HIV and STIs
- ◆ Everyone is responsible for the protection of his/hers own health and wellbeing
- ◆ Risk-assessment strategies based on moral and emotional evaluations of partners are not effective
- ◆ Myths and stigma about HIV positive people need to be dispelled by informing the public about the ways of transmission and about the fact that PLHIV are just patients with chronic disease
- ◆ Nurture and use the already available peer and support networks among MSM and gay men as a valuable medium for implementing and developing prevention programmes.

2. IDENTITY

The relevant state institutions and state officials should:

- ◆ Improve the current curricula content and programmes with regards to education on gender, gender identity, gender equality and sexuality, as well on sexual and reproductive health at all levels of education, in a way accessible for all communities, including Roma and Albanian.

- ◆ Initiate public campaigns targeting gender stereotypes, traditional gender roles and sexual stigma.

Citizens' associations which target MSM and gay and bisexual men in their work, as well as associations working in the field of gender equality, should:

- ◆ Foster Coalition building with women's rights organizations in order to strengthen alliances for human rights and gender equality
- ◆ Foster actions for community strengthening by developing and implementing educational programmes on gender among MSM and the LGBTQ community.

3. STIGMA

For overcoming the current stigma state institutions and state officials should:

- ◆ Initiate a campaign involving state representatives, academia, and different health and social care professionals in order to delegitimize the unscientific statements and claims that stigmatize non-heterosexuals (such as the unscientific statement that homosexuality is not natural and not healthy) from the public discourse and state education curricula.
- ◆ Include information on sexual diversity within the curricula and build the capacities of teachers at all educational levels in order to enable the young generation of LGBTQ to live in an environment free of stigma, bullying and coercion.
- ◆ Provide a supportive atmosphere by recognizing sexual and gender identity in the national law against discrimination and by adopting relevant legislation on hate crimes against the LGBT community.
- ◆ Develop policy measures, strategies and campaigns to combat hate speech directed against sexual and gender minorities.
- ◆ Ombudsman and Commission for Protection from Discrimination should act in accordance to their legitimacy and initiate reactions and preventive measures for discriminatory, stigmatizing and homophobic hate speech.

INTRODUCTION

In contrast with the reforms recently adopted by neighbouring countries to their anti-discrimination laws, prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, Macedonia has not yet adopted an inclusive law and a series of homophobic debates have arisen in reference to the inclusion of sexual orientation as grounds for protection in the same law. The lack of legal provisions for the protection of non-heterosexuals and the absence of political will to raise issues related to the human rights of sexual minorities are especially worrisome given the high level of fear of social exclusion and stigmatization that still remains among non-heterosexuals, which is in reciprocal correlation with the shockingly high rates of homonegative attitudes among the general population. Recent studies have shown that the majority of citizens disapprove of homosexuality (91.6%) (Klekovski 2009), while another study conducted a year earlier (Simoska 2009) showed that the majority of Macedonian citizens think it is not acceptable to have neighbours who have sexual relations with people of the same sex (62.2%). More than ten years after the decriminalization of male homosexuality, every third participant in the survey shared the view (33.7%) that same-sex relations should be considered a criminal offence. Eight years after the removal of homosexuality from the list of diseases by the Macedonian Psychiatric Association, and 17 years after this measure was undertaken by WHO in 1991, almost half the interviewees still see homosexuality as a disease (48%), while one-third (33%) does not agree with this position. At the same time, every fifth interviewee (19%) answered "do not know" in terms of defining homosexuality (ibid.).

The Republic of Macedonia does not have any official data with which it would be possible present the concrete situation regarding human rights violations and discrimination against sexual minorities. None of the human rights institutions undertakes permanent monitoring of these problems in a systematic manner. This includes not only the Ombudsman but also, when physical and psychological violence is involved, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice. Although they do not provide an integral picture or a precise and completely accurate insight into the problem, NGOs have, however, developed appropriate mechanisms for the monitoring and documentation of human rights violations and discrimination against different marginalized communities, including sexual minorities.

The reports published by LGBTQ human activists and organizations show a high level of human rights violations, stigma, social exclusion and discrimination (MASSO 2008). This has further been confirmed by reports issued by international organizations and human rights bodies, such as the Progress Reports for Macedonia of the European Commission for 2008 and 2009.

NGOs have reported cases of discrimination and violations of human rights perpetuated by different actors, including non-state as well as state actors and institutions. In the *Annual Report on the Situation of Human Rights of the LGBT Population in Macedonia* published in 2008, the Macedonian Association for Free Sexual Orientation (MASSO) reported 20 documented cases of discrimination against LGBTQ people. They further reported that a great degree of violence is suffered by transgender people from the Roma community. Some information of particularly great concern gathered during the process of documentation is that a great deal of infringements of the human rights of the LGBT community are committed by the police (MASSO 2008: 133). As a most striking case of human rights violation, MASSO reports a violation of the right to freedom of assembly that occurred when the Municipality of Centar banned the holding of the closing open party of the Queer Skopje Festival that was supposed to take place in the city centre by the monument to Mother Theresa. The party was banned with the mayor's explanation that she did not find it "morally suitable to hold

such an event in the proximity of Mother Theresa's monument, a religious monument where people lay flowers." (Ibid: 139)

The Coalition for the Protection and Promotion of the Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalized Communities reported that individual cases of violence against LGBTQ people and an individual case of discrimination were documented in 2009 (Trajanoski 2009). As a result of the lack of confidence individuals have in the state and juridical institutions, the Coalition reports that no-one wanted either to instigate any kind of official procedure or report the case. Further, the fear of psychological and physical violence and discrimination in the workplace, in the family, and in public, as well as the fear of being forced to 'cure' their sexual orientation, prevents individuals from expressing their sexual orientation in front of their families, friends, colleagues and public. As a result of inhibitions deriving from fear of violence, there are no public non-heterosexual relationships in the Republic of Macedonia and the number of public advocates for the sexual rights of LGBTQ and men who have sex with men is limited. Hence, few LGBTQ and MSM individuals are willing to realize their right to the protection of their sexual rights in the existing state institutions (ibid.).

In its 2011 Progress Report, the European Commission also indicated that the country's Law on Anti-Discrimination is not in line with the EU acquis because "discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation is still omitted".² The report particularly stresses that the LGBTQ community "continues to be subjected to discrimination and stigmatization" and that there is a need to raise awareness not only of the new legal provisions, but also of the principles of respect and tolerance of diversity.³ In June 2011, the Council of Europe published the report *Discrimination on the Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Europe*, which includes numerous remarks on the situation in the Republic of Macedonia.⁴

Men Who Have Sex with Men and HIV/ AIDS in Macedonia

Macedonia is a country with low HIV prevalence (<0.1%).⁵ However, the 2010 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on AIDS (UNGASS) Country Progress Report Of Republic of Macedonia indicates that almost three quarters of all HIV cases are among males.⁶ Furthermore, the 2010 annual report of the Public Health Institute shows that more than half the cases of new infection were among MSM.⁷ Besides regular epidemiological surveillance, the main data source on HIV and MSM in Macedonia comes from the bio- behavioural studies conducted in the period from 2005 to 2010 by the Institute for Public Health within the Global Fund Programme. These studies were designed in order to provide data about knowledge and behavior among MSM in line with the UNGASS indicators, but also to measure the prevalence of HIV among this population. While the 2006 study involved a sample that was not representative, showing that HIV prevalence among MSM (2.17%) was highest in comparison with other groups, the last study from 2010 indicates that the prevalence in the sample is 0.0%. This study has great significance because it involved a large

² Progress Report, 2011, p. 18, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/mk_rapport_2011_en.pdf. The Macedonian translation still reads: "Discrimination on the grounds of sexual determination".

³ See also, p. 19.

⁴ For instance, in the 2004 report Macedonia was listed among the 12 countries in which there was a case of prohibition and/or administrative obstacles for "Pride" events or other mass public culture LGBT events, and among the 10 countries without any identified legislation regulating legal recognition of gender.

⁵ HERA (2012).HIV Prevention Report Card for MSM – Macedonia. Skopje: HERA.

⁶ UNGASS COUNTRY PROGRESS REPORT 2010, Ministry of Health of the Republic of Macedonia, accessible at: http://www.unaids.org/en/dataanalysis/knowyourresponse/countryprogressreports/2010countries/macedoniafyrom_2010_country_progress_report_en.pdf

⁷ Public Health Institute of the Republic of Macedonia (2010). Report on the Implementation of Preventive Health Programmes in 2009. Skopje: Public Health Institute of the Republic of Macedonia.

and representative sample of 388 respondents. Also, the study employed a Respondent-Driven Sampling methodology indicating that MSM in Skopje amount to approximately 3.8% of the whole population of men aged between 18–58. Extrapolating this result to national level indicates there are approximately 19,300 MSM in Macedonia.⁸

The study also shows that while the level of information about HIV prevention is relatively high, prejudgments about the ways HIV is transmitted are still persistent and only 22.7% of respondents answered correctly to all the questions related to the key UNGASS indicators. With regards to their first sexual experiences, one third of respondents had their first sexual intercourse before the age of 15, while the rest (70.3%) did so at 17 years of age. Only 21.7% of the respondents reported continuous use of condoms for anal sex during the previous month, a fact that is very similar to findings among the general population of men, 23.4% of whom reported using condoms in every sexual experience during the previous month.⁹ **With regards to the aims of this study, it is important to note that the 2010 bio-behavioural study indicates that most of its respondents (77.9%) had regular intercourse with both women and men.** When asked about HIV testing in the previous 12 months, only 15.5% of the respondents answered that they had taken such a test. The study emphasizes that a large proportion of the respondents (41.5%) are confident that their behavior is not risky. Taking all these findings into consideration, the study concludes that MSM are the group most vulnerable to HIV and STIs in the country.

In 2010, using a methodology developed by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, the Global Forum on MSM and HIV (MSMGF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and HERA in partnership with EGAL, published the *HIV Prevention Report Card for MSM – Macedonia*.¹⁰ The Card analyses four key components: the legal and social context, the accessibility and availability of services, participation and rights. This brief research on MSM was one of the first in the country to go beyond the bio-behavioural approach and take into consideration the social wellbeing of MSM. Also, the card's methodology enables MSM representatives to share their thoughts alongside with statements from policy-makers about legislation, policies, programmes and services in the country. The HIV Prevention Report Card for MSM indicates that "there is no specific legislation in Macedonia that protects MSM from stigma and discrimination". Like many other studies conducted, the Report Card shows that the school curriculum does not provide basic information about sexuality and stimulates homophobic attitudes by defining homosexuality (in textbooks) as an illness. Correspondingly, this research shows that "HIV stigma and homophobia exists at every level of society (among health and social providers, decision-makers, the media, among the general public, and young population. Internal homophobia among MSM is also present." One of the Report Card's recommendations for future actions to improve the lives of MSM in the country is to "Conduct different surveys in partnership with MSM/LGBTQ organizations on the self-identification and wide-ranging needs of MSM in urban and in rural areas to address the different health, social, cultural needs of the MSM population in the country."

In this context it is important to mention the community report from the European MSM Internet Survey¹¹ (EMIS) in 2010, although the results should be treated with a great deal of reserve since the questionnaire was not available in the Macedonian language. The EMIS indicates that Macedonia is one of the European countries with the lowest proportion of MSM who are "out" (13.6%) to their family, friends, and work or study colleagues about their same-sex attraction. Also remarkable is that only 44% of the respondents from Macedonia answered that they were happy with their sex life. This

⁸ Vladimir Mikik, Gordana Kuzmanovska, Shaban Memeti. (2012) Bio- behavioral study and population estimation among MSM in Macedonia. Skopje: Institute for public health of Republic of Macedonia

⁹ Borjan Pavlovski (2012). An Assessment of sexual and reproductive health and rights in Republic of Macedonia. Skopje: Association for the Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women.

¹⁰ HERA (2012).HIV Prevention Report Card for MSM – Macedonia. Skopje: HERA.

¹¹ Robert Koch Institute (2010) The European MSM Internet Survey (EMIS) Community Report. Berlin: Robert Koch Institute.

makes Macedonia, right after Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country in Europe with the second lowest proportion of MSM who are happy with their sex life.

All of these studies indicate that stigma and a high level of homophobia isolate MSM within society, that there is a small number of NGOs working and outreaching with this population, and that the activism of the LGBTQ community is still at grassroots level. Although there is a solid background about sexual behavior and some data on the legal and political context, there is still evidently insufficient information to provide a comprehensive background on the position of MSM in Macedonia describing the effects of the correlation of social factors and identity.

This is the main reason why the following community-based research aims to explore possible links between different gender and sexual identities, sexual behaviours, sexual risks, and sexual health needs of MSM in different socio-cultural environments in Macedonia.

METHOD

The study used qualitative data collection and analysis in two stages.

Stage one used focus-groups and had a more explorative character with the purpose of discovering and detecting basic terms, categories and beliefs concerning sexual identities as well as the sexual health needs and practices of the target population.

The second stage employed semi-structured in-depth interviews in order to gather information on identifying practices and sexual health practices and needs among the MSM population.

The data was collected, using both focus groups and interviews, in the period from April 2012 to September 2012.

ELIGIBILITY

The eligibility criteria included males above 18 years of age who reported having had one or more male sexual partners in the previous two years.

SAMPLING

The research aimed to provide a diverse sample in terms of ethnicity, age, and social status in order to reflect different facets of the phenomenon in question.

Most of the Macedonian respondents were residents of Skopje. The respondents from the Albanian community were residents of Skopje and Tetovo and most of the interviewed Roma came from the Skopje' municipality of Suto Orizari. The main reason for this is that there is no MSM scene other than the one in capital and those living in other cities in Macedonia are hard to reach. Tetovo was included because NGO EGAL has developed some contacts and is starting with outreach activities in this city.

The criteria for social status were defined with regards to the monthly income of the respondents in the following manner:

- ♦ Above Average Social Status: income 30 % higher than the national average wage¹²
- ♦ Below Average Social Status: income equal to or lower than the national minimum wage.

Given the high level of unemployment and the prolonged period of economic dependence on parents in the country, the study took into account the sources of income in the total amount that the participants in the sample received on a monthly basis, including not only salaries but also different kinds of income such as pocket money, allowances, parental support, etc. During the pre-selection process, information about the participants' education, profession and employment was also gathered to determine social status.

With regards to age, the sample was formed on the basis of two groups: those aged from 18–30 and those aged over 30.

STAGE ONE – FOCUS GROUPS

Six focus groups structured by nationality (Macedonian/Albanian/Roma) were organised. The focus groups among Macedonians were structured according to two additional criteria: age (18–30 and above 30) and social status (above average/below average). Some of the focus groups represented cliques (groups of friends interacting regularly).

The research team, with support from outreach workers from NGO EGAL, recruited the participants of the focus groups. Two team members were involved in gathering data. One of these was responsible for facilitation using the discussion guide, while the other was taking notes. The discussions of the focus groups were audio-recorded.

All the 28 participants with different ethnic backgrounds live in Skopje. The focus groups and their respective criteria are presented in the following table:

	Nationality	Age	Social status	Number of participants
1	Macedonian	All	above average	7
2	Macedonian	All	below average	4
3	Macedonian	18 - 30	All	4
4	Macedonian	Above 30	All	4
5	Albanian	All	All	4
6	Roma	All	All	5
TOTAL number of participants				28

STAGE TWO – INTERVIEWS

A total number of 39 respondents were interviewed. The respondents from the Macedonian sample represented two age groups (18-30 and above 30) and two social groups (above / below average). Three of the respondents lived in Tetovo, while the others were from Skopje. Most of the Roma respondents were residents of the municipality of Suto Orizari in Skopje.

The members of the research team selected and recruited the interview participants using contacts within the gay network. In addition, NGO EGAL facilitated the recruitment process with the inclusion of MSM who use its services.

The interviews with Albanian respondents were conducted in the Albanian language. All the interviews were audio-recorded and some of them were additionally voice-modulated at the request of the respondents. The table below represents the profile and number of interview respondents:

	Location	Nationality	Number of respondents	Social status	Age
Skopje 36 in-depth interviews	Skopje	Macedonian	5	above average	Above 30
		Macedonian	2	below average	
		Macedonian	6	above average	18 - 30
		Macedonian	6	below average	
	Tetovo 3 in-depth interviews	Albanian	8	All	all
		Roma	9	All	all
TOTAL number of respondents		Albanian	3	All	all
					39

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Both stages were implemented by the research team, meaning that the team members were responsible for facilitating and analysing the focus-group discussions as well as for conducting in-depth interviews. The members of the research team had previous experience working with the targeted population as activists, scholars, outreach workers and service-providers (voluntary and confidential counselling and testing for HIV). The research leader is a scholar whose main theoretical and writing interests are related to issues of gender, cultural theory, political philosophy, identity and narration, deconstruction of subjectivity and queer theory. Also, some of the members of the team were involved in developing and implementing national HIV policies and strategies and were also part of the research team that conducted the previous bio-behavioural studies on MSM and other LGBTQ studies in the country. It is very important to emphasize that the team members included some of the founders of citizen activism on LGBTQ rights in Macedonia. In addition, the interviewers undertook a one-day consolidation and training session on ways of conducting interviews and following the semi-structured questionnaire.

The focus groups and the interviews were conducted in safe places in Skopje, more precisely in the offices of EGAL¹³ and HERA.¹⁴ In addition, the time was set outside working hours and additional precautionary measures were taken to prevent any encounters with staff. All of the participants in the focus groups and the interview respondents signed informed consent forms before being involved in the research process. This form lays out the aims of the research, the implementing organisations, the way of dealing with and protecting recordings as well as clearly stating the possibility for participants to cancel their involvement at any time.

The participants in the focus groups and the interviewees received a financial incentive in the form of 400 MKD for focus-group participation and 1000 MKD for taking part in the interviews.

INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

In the course of the interviews we used a semi-structured questionnaire. Although this involved using a concrete and organized set of questions, the possibilities for answers and interruptions from the participants were very much left open, including the possibility for interviewers to pose further questions where clarification was needed, in accordance with the directions and guides previously set by the main researcher.

The focus groups had a more explorative character, with the purpose of discovering and detecting basic terms, categories and beliefs concerning gender and sexual identities as well as the sexual health needs and practices of the target population. A wider set of research questions, concepts and categories were in the focus of interest and were the baseline for developing the guide to focus-group discussion. Guided by the findings from the focus groups, as well as the specificity of the in-depth interview, the semi-structured individual questionnaire was reduced to several main categories.

The interview questionnaires were organized in accordance with the main research goals and the basic research problems, i.e., gender identity, sexual identity, stigma/shame, social life and community involvement and sexual health and risk assessment. For each of these research groups of problems, a series of questions was developed covering as varied and as comprehensive as possible a set of aspects of the problem under investigation. For example, the research

¹³ Equality for Gay and Lesbians -Skopje

¹⁴ Health Education and Research Association

question about gender identity was investigated by gathering information from the interviewees related to their self-identification and self-perception, including the meanings they ascribe to their gender identification, gender positioning and practices encompassed within the registers of labour, cathexis (sexual and intimate relations), power relations, body image, gender performances in homosocial environments, and practices of gendered behaviour policing, etc.

Further on, we wanted to investigate the relations which sexual and gender identity establish towards their own politicization and consequently the transformation not only of oneself in terms of one's sexual/gender identity but the wider gender/sexual system. This entailed assessing the level of awareness among the participants of being oppressed/marginalized in the society, which is to say the recognition of unequal social conditions and this being a prerequisite for political mobilization and societal transformation. Consequently, it was also important for our research to investigate the participants' sense of community, shared identity and social conditions of existence and of belonging to a wider community or group. In a wider perspective, this cluster of questions provided us with an insight into the different modes of perception of the participants' identity and gender/sexuality, i.e. the extent to which one's self-perception is determined by more or less privatized and intimate insights into one's identity, and to what extent one's self-consciousness is politicized and thus brought into the wider field of social and political antagonisms and transformations, including the different social vectors that determine or influence these perceptions.

Another section of questions examined experiences of shame and fear or stigma, considered in their social and relational dimension. This section of the research questions aimed at gathering information on the general social context in relation to non-normative sexual and gender practices and identities, and how the hegemonic categories imposed by society reflect the construction of identity and its variations in different social contexts. This cluster of research questions was set in order to investigate the impact of stigmatizing interpellations on processes of identification and navigation among various identity choices, as well as to provide information on the various impact stigma has on accepting or rejecting identity categories, as much as on the re-articulation of hegemonic identity categories. This further led us not only towards the self-perception men have of themselves in relation to stigma but also how they perceive and relate to others marked by the stigmatizing labelling, which is to say how they reproduce or negotiate and struggle with the stigmatizing effects of gender and sexual normativity.

Further on, in relation to the lived and social experiences of sexual identity, we wanted to explore and where possible to mark the differences in world-building projects among non-heterosexuals and in hegemonic social relations (friendship, everyday life, sexual practices, love relationships, nightlife, etc.) and how both are interconnected, whether in the form of opposition, negotiation or complicity. Even more important, we aimed at gaining an insight into the ways heteronormative representations of homosexual, bisexual and queer sexualities and identities get to be parodied, subverted, re-evaluated, and enacted within communities of sexually and gender nonconformist behaviours and identities. Experiences of discrimination and social exclusion, experiences of coming out and reactions following such coming out were investigated and analysed, especially from the perspective of their influence on identity formation and emotional imprints.

Another cluster of questions aimed at investigating the heterogeneity or the homogeneity of sexual scripts reflected in the sexual practices and sources of sexual pleasures among men having sex with men and how they are related to and conditioned by the social and cultural positioning of sexual and gendered marginalized identities. We also tried to gather data to investigate the sexual cultures developed among sexual minorities and the topography of sexual encounters and how these relate to the general and hegemonic social context and to identity formation. Other questions of concern for our research included how the variety of erotic pleasures and modes of sexual practices are

overshadowed by sexual identity grounded on the axis of sexual orientation and what other possibilities for sexual self-identification are opened by the practicing of certain sexual behaviour.

The final group of questions tried to investigate the practices of risk-taking and how risk is being negotiated in sexual encounters with partners, lovers, 'fuck-buddies' or occasional sexual encounters. The understanding of risk was taken into consideration with special regard to HIV and STIs. Furthermore, we were interested in the attitudes of the respondents towards preventive messages about the risks associated with HIV and STIs that are most commonly provided by public health institutions and civil society organizations, as well as the impact these messages have on day-to-day practices (in the focus-group interviews).

The survey aimed at exploring the most common individual risk-strategies and risk- management models used among MSM. The use of condoms in different sexual practices, such as intercourse with regular partners outside of a relationship, was also discussed in this context.

In this cluster we also tried to provide data on access to and use of information and health services, such as knowledge about and use of available services like Voluntary Counselling and Testing for HIV and those that are still unavailable such as Post-Exposure Prophylaxis. In this way the research attempted to identify the sexual health needs of the respondents which are being met and those which are not.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The qualitative method we used for the purpose of conducting the research and analysing the data gathered was that of thematic coding (Saldana 2009) and descriptive and interpretative analysis. Thematic coding is the process of identifying and analysing patterns within data, capturing important themes and problems related to the research questions and goals. The process of thematic coding was conducted in several phases, including:

- a) **Detailed transcription of the interviews;**
- b) **In-depth reading and re-reading of the transcribed data** in detail as a way of familiarizing ourselves with the data and getting an initial set of ideas about the data. Thus we devised a coding framework based on specific topics and words reoccurring in the data and some theoretical concepts that seemed to underlie different data sets.
- c) **Initial coding of features organizing the data into meaningful groups of basic themes** (Attride-Sterling: 2001) and referring to 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998: 63).
- d) **Sorting the data codes into organizing themes**, whereby we named many organizing themes, some of which included cross-referential codes that appeared in several themes and some of which were coded inclusively comprising wider elements of the previously coded data so that we could keep in detail the complexity of the surrounding context
- e) **Reviewing, refinement and naming of the final list of organizing themes.** In this phase, some of the initial codes were discarded, either because they were found unimportant for the research focus or did not provide enough data supporting the themes, or because they were merely subtle variations in relation to other codes and therefore superfluous, thus few themes subsumed into one. In this process we oriented ourselves by bearing in mind the dual criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of the themes (Patton, 1990), accompanying this with a final rereading of the dataset to assure ourselves "whether the themes 'work' in relation to the data set...and to code

any additional data within themes that has been missed in earlier coding stages. The need for re-coding from the data set is to be expected as coding is an ongoing organic process." (Braun and Clark: 2006)

The final list of organizational themes we came up with included

- ◆ Masculinity as common sense
- ◆ Conflation of gender identity with biological determination and sex
- ◆ The masculine body image
- ◆ Strict gender division of labour
- ◆ Exclusion of homosexuality as constitutive for masculine identification
- ◆ Binary differentiation from femininity
- ◆ Heteronormative cathexis
- ◆ Non-Heteronormative cathexis
- ◆ Masculinity as homosocial performative
- ◆ Gender policing
- ◆ Alternative division of labour
- ◆ Fluid gender identification
- ◆ Passing
- ◆ Self-presentation and audience segregation
- ◆ Sexual identity as normalized gender position
- ◆ Sexual identity as a penetrating and active masculine position
- ◆ Sexual identity as a subordinated gender position
- ◆ Equivalence of sexual identity with intimacy, sexual behavior and desire
- ◆ Distance and ambivalence towards non-heteronormative sexual identity
- ◆ Naturalization and biologization of sexuality
- ◆ Non-correspondence between sexual identity and sexual practices
- ◆ Sexual identity as a social category with political implications
- ◆ The privatization of sexual identity
- ◆ Gay friendship
- ◆ Shame
- ◆ Fear
- ◆ Normalization
- ◆ De-politicization

The decision as to what counted as a theme (ibid.) in the process of disaggregating the data material was reached in accordance with the prevalence of the occurrence of certain problems throughout the data gathered, as well as in accordance with some of the core epistemological assumptions and research background, the latter being made in proportion to their accuracy as a reflection of the content with the dataset itself, hence avoiding abstract theorizing of the concrete content made available with the interviews.

In the process of identifying the themes we used two methods: an inductive bottom-up method of identification and theoretical identification. By using the first method, the themes identified were strongly linked to the data, hence being

inclined towards the grounded theory method. However, although the themes identified through deploying theoretical concepts and analytical concepts by means of which the interview questions were organized and the concepts through which the themes were identified and mapped are not identical to the statements comprising the data themselves, congruency with the data material also guided the theoretical model of identification. However, we emphasize that the second model of identification of data patterns was used by providing, in the research analysis and discussion report, an in-depth account of the relationships and divergences between the data material and the layers defining the concept used as a theme.

An important decision made in the process of identifying the themes was the use of two levels, namely the semantic and explicit level of expression, as well as the latent or interpretative level whereby we tried to identify the underlying discourses, assumptions and ideologies behind the explicit or semantic level, in particular the second being used in coding experiences and feelings of shame and fear (more on this in the epistemological framework below and the introduction to this chapter in the research discussion). However, these two levels were not isolated through the analytical process since progression was used in the course of data analysis, whereby the patterns in the semantic content were further submitted to interpretation with already available theoretical and research discourses throughout a wide range of disciplines, and vice versa, we identified a wide range of initial codes and themes from which the interpretative themes were derived.

We should also clarify that in the process of coding and organizing the themes, we did not deduce the organizing themes into overreaching core or global themes, although the preparation of the report and the conduct of the analysis was done in several chapters which encompass and have a conceptual connection to the organizing themes and initial codes. We decided not to undertake the available and final phase of the coding process for the sole purpose of: a) keeping the distinguishing features of each of the organizing themes and not reducing their specificities into general concepts, although analytical categories such as gender identity, sexual identity, sexuality, sexual health, shame and stigma, role segregation and identity presentation, risk assessment, etc., govern the analytical process and the final analysis and description of the organizing themes; and b) keeping open any possibility for cross-cutting and multiple analytical functions that each of the organizing themes might have in the process of analysis and within each of the general research questions and problems.

A descriptive method of analysis was used for the predefined categories of interest with regards to sexual pleasure, risk assessment, protection and sexual health. This data was processed in the following manner. The statements of the participants related to categories in focus were selected from the transcripts and organized into tables defined by the variables of ethnicity, age and social status. Then the frequency of the statements was notified for each of the subgroups within the ethnic variable. (For example, the group of Albanians, below 30 years and of above average social status). After obtaining the results from each of the ethnic groups, a short comparative analyses of the main findings was conducted. Finally, where possible, analytical intersections were made between these categories and the other themes identified throughout the process of coding the data.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Our research and epistemological position in relation to gender and sexual identities is closest to the constructivist paradigm, though we are also critical of this paradigm and expand upon its original insights. According to this paradigm, "identities are regarded as the product of negotiation, interpretation, and presentation rather than biologically preordained, structurally given, or dispositionally determined. Language and interactionally based discursive processes, such as framing, figure prominently in identity construction." (Ritzer; 392:2005)

Our framework for investigating identities observes them through the notions of **socialization** and **identification**. The notion of socialization has been strongly argued in the context of gender identity by Ann Oakley, according to whom the construction of gender identity is related to acts adapted in relation to societal expectations and norms related to one's sex, a process in which one learns the norms and values of society related to one's sex and within which the influences on gender identity include multiple agents of socialization such as family, religion, school and the workplace, etc. Furthermore, with a degree of reservation, we used the paradigm for analysing sexual identities developed in the broad interactionist and 'frame' theories developed by Gagnon and Simon (Gagnon and Simon, 1974, p. 262) and Ken Plummer, close to the gender identity model developed by Oakley, conceiving of sexual identity in relation to the stereotyped social expectations of other social actors that constrain the multiple possibilities of sexual behavior and routes of desire, a model in which individuals internalize and enact these various social scripts and norms.

As Wendy Hollway (1998) has argued, we explore the complexity of gendered and sexual identifications depending on the specific location of the actor whose gender identity is being brought into being, and the ways in which actors draw on different discourses in accordance with changes in circumstances and depending on in front of whom they perform their gender and sexual identity. Although these agencies are to be considered as conscious **negotiation with hegemonic gender and sexual identity scripts**, we emphasize that the discourses stemming from the historical, cultural and biographical can have an impact at an emotional and psychological level that influences actions and inculcates certain dispositions which cannot be explained in terms of conscious calculation and rationalization on the part of the social actor but rather are marked by various emotional and bodily logics and experiences, including shame and stigma, which further create psychological and identity conflicts within the individual.

This point is even more important when considering the cultural, social and political conditions in which one forms one's identity—or in which one's identity is being formed—since it leads us towards a crucial distinction between **homosexual behavior and desire** on the one hand and **homosexual identity** on the other. Namely, whether one practices homosexual acts does not necessarily lead us to an *a priori* identification of a certain identity (homosexual in this case), since as Mary McIntosh (1968) argued in her highly influential paper on 'The Homosexual Role', there is a difference between the '**institutionalised homosexual role**' constructing homosexuality as a type of person and a recent modern invention, and **liaisons between males who are otherwise self-identified as heterosexual**, involving same-sex behavior and acts but not a sexual identity or self-identification as a homosexual. A homosexual identity, therefore, is "mediated not solely through same sex activity *per se* but through an individual's willingness or ability to deal with being labelled as homosexual. Whether one is 'out' as a homosexual or in the 'closet' (maintaining heterosexual identity but with desire and/or sexual involvement with the same sex) depends not so much on biological drives but on the individual, social and political circumstances that will or will not support the chosen identity". (Taylor and Spencer 2004:36)

This epistemological grid also led us towards investigating the tensions, conjunctures and disjunctures between sexual and gender identity, which is to say how they overlap in accordance to hegemonic social scripts and prejudices (the effeminate homosexual), or in relation to conscious resistance to **heterosexist masculine norms** (queering gender and sexual norms), or **homosocial** patterns of masculinization and the creation of networks of solidarity and intimacy expelling effeminate traces from its identification and group processes, or how they deviate from this concordance, reinforcing hegemonic gender norms while adopting a Western-centred model of sexual identity (masculine gay, for example).

Of great interest in this context is the distinction R.W. Connell draws between the concepts of **complicity** and **subordination**, describing the various forms by which men relate to the **hegemonic masculinity**. The first form of relation to hegemonic masculinity refers to the attachment to the symbolic profits which complicity with the norm brings and the various forms of domination it entails, while the second concept marks alienation from hegemonic masculinity and includes what is normatively described as unmanly. The second concept was expanded by being explored through two variations—**oppositional and nostalgic subordination**. Oppositional implies that criticism is being directed at the dominant masculinity (T.Johansson 2000) while nostalgic “implies the defence of traditional male ideals. This often has to do with a longing to return to a time in which masculinity was not constantly being threatened.” (T.Johansson 2007)

Identity is here conceived as a more or less conscious and unstable effect of **identity work**, which includes all activities by means of which individuals and groups give meaning to themselves through selective (re)presentation, negotiation and maintenance of identities in accordance with their various interests. Grounded on this model, we tried to evade any reductionist and exclusionary consequences that an essentialist perspective might produce, even in its most emancipatory versions, such as claims for equality in identity politics representing an alleged fixed and trans-historical and universal identitarian essence. Of special importance for our research were the reasons for the **identity salience** of different sexual and gender identities, as much as **identity commitment** towards one's identity in relation to all other social and individual identifications which articulate the complex of identity, i.e. the **identity hierarchy**.

Instead of presupposing any genetic or biological predispositions determining the lines of future development of gender identity, we associate our position with the Bourdieuan concept of **disposition and habitus** as the generative and structuring and structured structures generated in the field of unequal social power relations and relations of unequal distribution of various forms of capital, which while being structured in a certain sex/gender system, structure the frames of appreciation, evaluation, perception, cognition and schemes of bodily hexis, which is to say gendered bodily postures.

Additionally, we analyze identity as the effect of a relational and differential signifying system naturalized through dyadic/binary logic (homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, normal/abnormal, Macedonian/Western, etc.) which always produces the isolation of a constitutive outside (being the opposite pair of the position—the feminine, for example) and excludes an unanticipated horizon of identities eluded by the binary framework (such as identifications based on different sexual attributes, practices, sources of pleasure, etc., or gender identification that does not comply with the strict binary division of masculine vs. feminine). The relational perspective of gender identities is highly dependent on social changes inducing perturbations in the general social order and the gender order in particular. These changes indicate the internal dynamics inherent in this system, and thus we see the relations of hegemony that produce and reflect the social dynamic as always being under contestation in accordance with the internal dynamics of the system. Thus we were cautious of different masculinities and the relations between these masculinities, of alliances, of subordination and domination, of inclusion and exclusion, practices that intimidate, exploit and so on. Relations of hegemony “reflect and produce a social dynamic: struggles for resources and power, processes of exclusion and incorporation, splitting and reconstitution of gender forms. To analyze this dynamic is to explore the crisis tendencies of the gender order as a whole”. (Connell 1992) Furthermore, this point of view inserts gender relations into a complex system of relations with other divisions and vectors of the social field, including race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc., which induce varieties and differentiations, as well as constant dynamics in the hegemonic gender order, relations and identities.

Joan Scott also emphasizes the constitution of gender in the dynamics of social relations which are always marked by unequal distribution of power as well as the permanent relation of forces as the unstable constitution of power. Even more importantly, she emphasizes the constitutive role gender has in social relations (Scott 1986). This point is of particular importance to our research because it serves as the ground for analysing the implications that gender identifications have for different world-building projects and the variety of social relations and situations.

Scott's point brings us very close to another crucial epistemological grid for our research investigations, which is one marked by the Foucaultian concept of power relations as being actualized through the so-called technologies of governmentality linked very tightly to the production of the truth of the individual him/herself. These technologies are technologies of subjection (*assujettissement*) in both meanings of the word: to subjugate someone (subjectification) and to bring a subject into being, to make oneself a subject (subjectivation).¹⁵ Conceptualized in this fashion, the exercise of power as a set of actions upon the actions of others is possible only when it is exercised "over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available." (Foucault 2003: 139)

Further on, since gender is conceived as the perceived differences between sexes, another important repertoire for gender identities analysis is found in **symbolic representations of gender** and the questions related to them, such as which cultural representations are used in gender construction and self-positioning, and in which different contexts they are invoked, especially considering the fact that these representations are very often contradictory. In this constellation, **normative concepts** (Scott 1986) were important for our interests, as these limit the possibilities of interpretation and the use of symbolic concepts in accordance with the binary gender matrix of fixed gender identity positions.

Personal identity and the self, as always bearing the gender marker and sexual self-positioning, is interwoven in its own instability and undoing with the other since it is involved and constituted through the **dialectics of recognition** on a micro- as well as a macro-level through categories coming from the other but preceding the concrete other as well, since they have the burden of institutional, social, cultural and discursive history. The concept of recognition (Hegel, C. Taylor, J. Butler, etc.) severely contests the essentiality, autonomy and fixity of sexual and gender identity, or self-knowledge as discovery/disclosure, since the very same concept implies the social, cultural and political limits of **recognisability**, which is the same as the terms that make possible one's recognition by another social being.

In trying to understand gender and sexual identity, we refer to the notion of **performativity** as it is framed within the theoretical complex of Judith Butler, that is, as a "reiterative (repetitive) and citation practice which serves the discourse to create the things it names", as a coercive and forcible repetition of cultural intelligibility which, concealing its own genealogy, determines identity frames, subject positions and gender roles, and finally, sharply dichotomizes and materializes sexual difference.

Our research endeavours to define also the regulatory and normalizing mechanisms set into play by identitarian categories, but also the transgression and dislocation of the paradigms of what Gayle Rubin (1989) in *Thinking Sex* calls "bad" and "good" sexuality".

¹⁵ Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg distinguish between: 1) "subjectification" (*assujettissement*), or the ways that others are governed and objectified into subjects through processes of power/knowledge (including but not limited to subjugation and subjection, since a subject can have autonomy and power relations can be resisted and reversed); and 2) "subjectification" (subjectivation), or the ways individuals govern and fashion themselves into subjects on the basis of what they take to be the truth. See Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (2008).

However, the sexual or gendered subject is not exclusively caught in the all-determining network of regulatory mechanisms and strategies of governmentality. Every discursive practice, creating the elements it articulates, opening the position for plenty of speech subjects, and being always surrounded by a certain accompanying field, is dependent on the field of use in terms of its own identity. For example, Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) point out that identity is a '**negotiated performance**'. Coates (1996) suggests that although 'heterosocial relations' are viewed by women as normative, they are nevertheless able to generate 'resistant' discourses, even though this may lead to forms of talk that are apparently contradictory. In line with Althusser's claim that the possibility of being a subject is necessitated by processes of **interpellation**, that is one's being hailed and **mis/recognizing** one's subjectivity as the 'imaginary relationship' one has to one's 'real conditions of existence', we investigate the situations in which one does not reply to the hail of the other when considering the other as always incorporating the ideological apparatus designating a concrete identity position in the ideological order.

Finally, as the construction of identity is set into motion by **labelling** in social interaction (Ken Plummer) and structural interpellation, we did consider processes of labelling as imbued with **stigmatizing and shame-inflicting implications**, and considered the extent to which shame determines one's identification as a non-normative identity in the social order, and to what extent it facilitates the matrix of **inferiorization** in the bodies and minds of those who contravene the norms. Most gay men learn about their identity through the force of insult, which immediately reveals the existing and real asymmetry in the power relations organizing the social field. As Didier Eribon claims (2004), insult as a linguistic act and performative force produces the effect of "establishing or renewing the barrier between 'normal' people and those Goffman calls '**stigmatized' people** and to cause the internalization of that barrier within the individual being insulted. Insult tells me what I am to the extent that it makes me be what I am".

But as Eve Sedgwick Kosofski (2003) has magnificently demonstrated, the wound inflicted as the mark of shame and stigma can also open a field of possibilities for queer performativity and disidentifications, as much as experimentation, transformation, subversion, etc. As she claims: "the forms taken by shame are not distinct 'toxic' parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the process in which identity is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation; but unavailable for effecting the work of purgation and deontological closure". (ibid.:13)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I. Gender Identification and Positioning in Hegemonic Gender Regimes

The gender identification patterns among the interviewees, including the practices, performances, relations and social positioning entailed by respective gender identities, show a diversity and complexity determined by different variables, some of which include ethnicity, social status and sexual identification. Throughout the research we have identified several major and most frequently occurring themes that organize the corpus of registers related to gender identity among the participants.

I.1. Masculinity, Common Sense and Habitual Security

The core common place in gender identification among the majority of the interviewees, including those participating in the focus groups with different ethnic and status profiles, and the individual participants, is the perception of **the masculine gender position as a matter of common sense**. This conclusion is made on the grounds of several of the most frequently recurring themes throughout the interviews, including: a) a lack of any awareness of their gender position as a performative practice; b) a tautological, auto-circulating definition of masculinity by means of repetitive and empty reference to 'normal masculine behaviour'; c) an unquestioned equating of masculinity with what is considered as being normal; d) a self-perception of oneself as masculine considered as emerging by default with no outside or environmental influences and limits; e) a lack of understanding of questions related to gender self-identification, with many of the participants in the interviews requiring either extra explanation or needing a longer time to answer these questions; f) an understanding of the imposed norm (mostly from the father) as a 'science'; g) self-identifying as masculine/a man despite considering oneself as not fully complying with the 'standard stereotype of what is masculine'; and h) a feeling of comfort in the masculine role.

"Well, I have intercourse just like any normal man. I behave like a normal man." (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

"Ah, to be a man, in my opinion, is to feel comfortable in the role in which other men mostly also feel comfortable." (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

The perception, or, to be even more precise, the misperception of the gender order as a matter of common sense can be better understood by taking into consideration the concept of habitus as developed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, the habitus represents the system of 'durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively regulated and regular without in any way being the product of obedience to rules.' (Bourdieu 1977: 72) The system of habitus is thus itself generated within a concrete and segregated and organized social field, a social structure already organized through an unequal distribution of power relations

which generates and inculcates dispositions amongst social actors as a way of being and a habitual state that directs and organizes the perceptions, tendencies, cognitive and emotional schemas, predispositions and inclinations of the social actors. The agencies different actors make in the social field according to their respective embodied habitus ('bodily hexis') are thus functioning as organized and unified strategies reproducing the habitus, as taken for granted with no need for reflection upon them.

The masculine habitus is effectively reproduced exactly by means of forgetting its social and political history and turning it into 'nature'. Since the masculine habitus effectuates itself upon and through the entire class of man within a concrete social field, it provides the objective conditions for the harmonization of men's experiences, generates a structured organization of the possible relations and interactions among actors (man and women) that causes future practices to be immediately foreseeable and intelligible, and finally, and 'magically' and naturally reinforces these experiences by means of the reflection they receive of their own actions through individual and collective expressions of the same habitus in the social field.

What is even more important for our context is the habitual effect by means of which the products generated, that is the gendered identities, correspond to the conditions and necessities of the pre-organized objective field, hence endowing the masculine habitual actor with symbolic profit without the need for pursuing symbolic capital. As Connell (1992) argues, although with a particular focus on gay man, the emphasis on masculinity gives the opportunity to "enjoy the general advantages of masculine gender, and even effeminate gay men may draw economic benefits from the overall subordination of women. In our culture, men who have sex with men are generally oppressed, but they are not definitively excluded from masculinity." This involvement in the game producing the game provides our interviewees with symbolic capital in the gender order which compensates for the losses or possible losses they are/may be subjected to in a homophobic society that a priori represents their sexual practices and sexual identities as discredited or discreditable. The possibility, therefore, of being discovered, shamed, delegitimized, excluded, abandoned, stigmatized, discredited, discriminated and left with no symbolic or social capital is compensated for by the habitual security the masculine gender order provides. The social practice of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987) based upon the gender habitus, for the discreditable/discredited sexual male subject implies "self-conscious acceptance of his habitual fate, as readily accepted pressure. This security manifests itself in a naturally performed, taken for granted positioning in the gender-relation (...) not regarded as a result of intended action. On the contrary, in the case of such an intentional presentation one would already have lost one's masculinity." (Bahnke and Meuser: 160)

I.2. Hegemonic Masculinity, Femininity and Homophobia

Related to the habitual security which masculine gender identification and performance provides for this group of men is another point that appears to be common among the participants, which is connected to what Bob Connell has called '**structurally induced conflicts about masculinity**' among gay men (Connell 2005), tightly related to their social presence as men, on the one hand, and their sexuality and the collective and structural homophobic representations (orchestrated by the hegemonic masculine position in the gender order) of gay men as less masculine, feminine and gender inverts. Their gender positioning and self-identification seems to be agonized in the tight space between their self-perception and self-presentation as masculine and the normative and dominant masculine and homophobic exclusion of their allegedly subordinate masculinity.

This is most notably confirmed by the fact that the contexts in which they discuss masculinity and their lived experiences as men, almost without exception, evoke the hegemonic homophobic representation of homosexuals, or

they attach the masculine identification right next to the declaration of their sexual identity, such as 'straight-looking gay' or 'normal-looking gay' whereby 'straight' and 'normal' refer to hegemonic masculinity. Their own **self-identification as men is constitutively connected to the dialectic of negation of their negation as men**, which is to say their opposition to the homophobic representation of gay men, mostly noticed among those interviewees who identify themselves as homosexual/gay or bisexual.

For instance, I am not feminine or I don't know... I really qualify as a male. I am not effeminate and I am not drawn towards wearing women's clothes, but I am a typical gay who looks quite normal (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Considering the long cultural and scientific tradition in western discourse constructing the homosexual as indicating gender deviance (Seidman 2011, Redman 2000, Foucault, Kimmel 2005, Weeks 1981, Connell 2005), non-heterosexual subjects, as many researchers have shown, are "eager to demonstrate that they were not 'failed' men", thus opposing popular images. As Kimmel argues, "many gay men became extremely successful as "real" men, enacting a hypermasculine code of anonymous sex, masculine clothing, and physical appearance, including bodybuilding. The 'clone' as he was called, comprising about 35 percent of all gay men, was perhaps even more successful at masculinity than were straight men." (Kimmel 2005: 18)

What also appears to be common among almost all the interviewees is their self-positioning in the gender order as highly determined by the differentiation and exclusion of two gender positions and roles in the gender spectrum. This specificity of the gendering of our interviewees confirms the constructivist and deconstructivist claim that identity represents an effect of the relational and differential signifying system naturalized through dyadic/binary logic (homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, normal/abnormal, etc.), whereby in a hierarchic organization each of the terms acquires its definitional capacity through its differentiation from the opposite term, in such a way that the masculine position subordinates the feminine spectrum of meanings and values and thus produces the isolation of a constitutive outside (Foucault), which is to say the exclusion of an unanticipated horizon of identities eluded by the binary framework. The process of external differentiation is further complicated by the strategies of internal differentiation, which is to say hierarchically orchestrating the internal divisions, multiplications and variations of the allegedly unified category of masculinity. Thus:

a) The first differential position is the feminine gender position, the most dominant differentiation in determining the specificity of masculinity. This binary differentiation in the process of defining one's masculine identity has been traced through the following attitudes on the part of the participants: emphasising lack of femininity as a prerequisite of masculinity; positing masculine difference from femininity as absolute; biologization and naturalization of gender difference, reflecting itself apparently in the differences in thinking, acting, feeling across gender lines; characterization of men as stronger and tougher than women; demanding female femininity and less emphasized masculinity from sexual partners as a condition for their self-perception as masculine; expressed disgust towards the linguistic self and inter-identification of gay men with feminine gender in the context of everyday interaction etc.

Well, for instance, first in the way I dress— I dress like a man, not like a woman. Then my behaviour, my movements, if we consider all this as a part of my daily routine, also the way I communicate... In every respect in a normal human way, nothing effeminate, if this is what you meant... (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

Let's say that if the woman is the gentle one and in need of protection, while the man is the "stable" one who gives her the support, then this is who I am. If I have to do some traditionally male chores, I have no problem with this. I don't feel the need to

dress like a woman, even though there are a lot of men who dress like women, although in terms of gender they identify themselves as men. I don't know, I find this question difficult to answer, but I feel like a man, not like a woman. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

A man. I never wanted to be a woman, nor have I ever felt like a woman, and I've never had the need for anything like that. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

b) The second binary definition of one's masculinity is enacted in opposition to effeminate gays as 'subordinate masculinities' (Connell 2005). This second division is still highly determined by the first identification strategies of differentiation, since what seems to underlie the anti-effeminate-gay attitude is fear of and repulsion towards any possible feminine trace on the male body and his sexuality, or the sign of 'lacking' masculinity.

To have a normal conversation with you like a man, not to act like a woman, let's say, like a gay, for example... (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

I think completely different from most of them. Because for a homosexual, a gay, they declare themselves like that... effeminate and all other characteristics that go with it. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

While masculinity is predominantly culturally coded and conceived as indicating phallic 'possession', femininity is coded as 'lack' (Grosz 1990). From this perspective, effeminate gays appear to stand "as a radical refusal of or failure to recognize the value of phallic possession" (Redman 2000). Among those interviewees, mostly of Albanian and Roma ethnicity, whose sexual identity is grounded along the lines of the masculine active and penetrative sexual role, this differentiation serves the purpose of distinguishing also one's 'normal', 'masculine' or 'heterosexual' sexual identity, not only gender identity, from the supposedly effeminate passive and receptive gay. Consequently it follows that gender expression becomes the constitutive feature of homosexuality and not sexual preference. By identifying homosexuality with effeminacy and gender inversion, this group of participants set the performance of homophobia as an essential factor for their masculine identification.

Michael S. Kimmel has persuasively argued that homophobia is the core organizing principle of cultural definitions of manhood, enacting not so much the fear of gay men as fear of being perceived as a gay man, which is closely connected to the fear of being perceived as being sissy, untough, uncool, a faggot, etc. Homophobia, according to Kimmel "is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear." (Kimmel 2005: 35). This fear further leads to shame of being seen as afraid, and in a spiralling extension, shame presses one to silence, the silences "that keep other people believing that we actually approve of the things that are done to women, to minorities, to gays and lesbians in our culture." (ibid.) The effects of this cycle of fear-shame-silence is most paradigmatically exemplified through the testimonies these interviewees make in relation to their participation, silent approval, laughter or withdrawal in homosocial interactions when sexist or homophobic jokes are being made.

In contrast, among those interviewees who self-identified as gay or bisexual, mostly Macedonia and Albanian, their differentiation from effeminate gays is made predominantly for the purpose of asserting masculinity.

The third function of this complex of masculine identity formation is related to its use as a **disidentification marker**, or a **source for holding an ambivalent position towards belonging or non-belonging to the gay community**, or **self-differentiation from the supposedly unifying and stereotyped gay identity**. This third function of this binary is mostly identified among gay and bisexual Macedonians, particularly emphasized among those Macedonian interviewees who define their sexual identity with an insistence on 'normalcy' or 'normal sexual being', and among almost all Albanian and Roma interviewees regardless of their sexual identification.

Well, I am not sure... the beard let's say, although it doesn't have to mean, the biggest gays who are effeminate also have beards, I don't know... a very normal look, there is nothing that separates me, the muscles or anything else, like for example a specific physique, I am really quite a normal guy, that's it... (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

What is most strikingly indicative in these sets of strategies is that the standard list of stereotypically effeminate behaviours which all of these groups provide, such as pointing to certain ways in which effeminate gays walk, talk, dress or act, are actually used in a reverse way as the 'not to do/not to be' things, or a set of rules for behaviour or an oppositional set of characteristics taken for granted and necessary for the masculine performativity or one's differentiation from the 'negative' gay stereotype and popularized images of gays:

Well, when they talk, they pronounce the words slowly. The way they walk and act is completely different... They walk like women. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

c) Refusal of the Gender Binary and Queer Gender Positioning is the third subgroup we could identify in relation to how one's gender identity is constituted in the differential frame.

Three Macedonian self-identified gay men and five Albanian gay/bisexual men either refused to accept any of the available gender identifiers, either by pointing to an undifferentiated transversal crossing through multiple-identity positions in the gender spectrum, or, in the case of the Albanian participants, by adopting a double gender-identity based on their non-heteronormative standing on the axis of cathexis. In the second, the Albanian group, it is evident that the active/passive and inserting/insertee masculine division of sexuality plays a crucial role in gender identification, and this seems to be a cultural specificity in the existing gender order. Hence, their being the insertee or the passive sexual actor in the sexual intercourse determines their self-identification as being "sometimes feminine". Unlike them, in the Macedonia group of 'gender benders' this gender position is based exclusively on conscious refusal of and resistance to the existing gender norms and division of roles. Thus, one of the participants claims:

I refuse to accept roles that are traditionally considered to be male or female, I cannot say about me that I am a man or a woman... I am not interested in and I don't do things recognized to be male, like for instance, sport, physical activities. Nor do I do female things. I am annoyed by the division of male and female things. I am also annoyed by women who refuse to do more difficult physical chores, only because they are women, while they are physically more capable than me. I cannot say about myself whether I am a man or a woman. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30.)

I.3. Gender, Sex and the Body Image

Another major repertoire for gender identification cuts across the biological sex, the sexed body and the bodily image. Although the question that opened the gender identity section in the questionnaire addressed gender identification and gender self-perception, not only did the majority of interviewees have difficulties understanding and responding to this question (mostly Albanians, Roma and Macedonians of below average social status), but even more importantly, almost all of the interviewees established equivalence between their supposedly male sexual characteristics and the gender spectrum of identification and meanings. Further on, connections and causal relations were also frequently made between biological sex differences and gender differences, leading to the conclusion that the second follow or derive from the first. Exemplifiers of this tendency include the perception of gendered differences in 'manners of thinking' as determined by innate physiological/brain differences among the sexes, or defining gay effeminacy, and gay and feminine sexual 'passivity' as caused by the presence of female hormones, etc.

A significant number of the interviewees emphasized primary and secondary sex attributes as gender markers (hormones, chromosomes, genitals, body hair, etc.), as well as body figure and physical appearance as the bearer of gender/sexual difference. Their descriptions—encompassing their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions related to the sexed body image—included 'strength', 'muscles', 'body size', 'bodily comportment', 'gesticulation', 'sexual potency', 'bodily decoration', 'bodily aestheticization and stylization', 'muscular and sport body', etc. Their certitude in the alleged natural innocence of sexed body and their individual belief in the social independence of the bodily image they have of their sexual bodies, have the function of being an irrefutable marker and proof of their masculine gender position.

However, what emerges from this picture is the complexity and the multiple networks of significations, discourses, cultural beliefs, attitudes and intersubjectivity interactions through which one's bodily image is developed, maintained and changeable. Over the last two decades, cognitive scientists have exerted great efforts in showing the multiple ways in which one's perceptual experience, conceptual understanding and emotional attitudes of/towards one's body is highly informed by various sources, discourses and practices, including cultural codes, gender ideology, social interactions, etc. Even more importantly, body image not only shapes our perceptions of other bodies and the world around us but has a profound impact on our bodily capacities and abilities for movement and doing things with our very body, or the body schema as the pre-reflective, non-conscious system of sensory-motor functions that play "a dynamic role in governing posture and movement" and the "automatic performance of the body." (Gallagher 2005: 25-8) As Shaun Gallagher has argued, following Brian O'Shaughnessy's (1995) distinction between long- and short-term body images, "certain established beliefs or dispositions concerning my body, even very basic ones concerning my human shape, may have an effect on my current body percept (short-term body image), and on the way that I move, and even on the way that I perceive the world. On the one hand, to the extent that the body image may be responsible for such non-conscious or tacit effects on movement, it ordinarily informs or has its effect through the body schema system. On the other hand, to the extent that we can become aware of what the body schema usually accomplishes preoientally, this awareness becomes part of the body image" (Gallagher 2005: 35).

In a similar vein, Iris Marion Young in her legendary essay "Throwing Like a Girl" (2005) elaborates the ways in which female bodily comportment, engagement with things, ways of using the body in performing things, bodily self-image, bodily motility and use of bodily spatial and lateral potentialities, as well as bodily extension and style, are deeply modulated, formed and constrained by the structuring en/dis/abling conditions provided in a cultural, social and political system which systematically oppresses women and constructs the gender order and sustains females' self-perception marked by timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy.

Although confusing sexual with gender specificities, what remains problematic is the severe binary division that their perceptions and self-understanding seem to institute between two absolutely different sexes, which seems to be highly inculcated by the prevalent cultural, popular, and ideologically imbued scientific discourses. As Anne Fausto Sterling has argued, absolute and complete maleness and femaleness represent extreme poles of a continuum and spectrum of possible body types. Following, Sterling, we could also note that the coincidence that "these extreme ends are the most frequent has lent credence to the idea that they are not only natural (...) but normal (that is they represent both a statistical and a social ideal). Knowledge of biological variation, however, allows us to conceptualize the less frequent middle species as natural, although statistically unusual" (Sterling 2000: 27).

Besides the idealized and normalized effects on gendered social imaginary produced by these two most frequent yet extreme cases of the sexual spectrum, what seems even more interesting in our case is the deep interweaving the conceptions of the sexed male body have with the social and cultural images related to the two respective genders, which is to say how the various cultural repertoires for gender differences (masculinity/femininity) are inscribed in the

meanings, perceptions, conceptualizations and understandings of the sexed bodies (male/female). This interweaving of the gender/sex system confirms G. Rubin's definition of the same as "a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (Rubin 1975).

"Well, I was made like that biologically. I can't feel different from the way nature made me, as a man!" (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

"... I don't know what it means from a woman's point of view, because I am not a woman, right, and I don't think like a woman. I suppose they think quite differently from us. They have completely different... well that's just how their physical and biological is..." (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

"I don't wear make-up... what makes a woman be a woman, and what makes a man be a man? I don't know... I can say that if 70% of those who have XY feel comfortable in their skin, and have sex with women, I feel comfortable in my skin and have sex with men". (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

"A beard, the jaw dimensions, the body part where they store the fat—men store it in the stomach, while women on the hips and the behind—and hair, penis, testicles, deeper voice, pronounced Adam's apple, oriented towards analytical thinking so more use of the left hemisphere, bodily dimensions different than the ones in a woman, higher, heavier, as opposed to a girl my age and with my dimensions, she would be heavier, while I would be thinner and taller than her...." (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Especially indicative in this context is the association between: a) phallocentric sexual scripts, fantasies and roles centered on the active, penetrating, pleasure-providing and controlling masculine subject; b) gender hegemonic masculine identity; and c) the sexual difference ascribed to the masculine body on the grounds of identifying the penis and 'bodily strength and toughness' as the main marker of gender difference among the same interviewees. Most striking are the correlations that can be noted among those interviewees who offer a strongly masculinized and phallic version of their gender and sexual identity and who also emphasize the penis as the major and primary source of gender/sexual difference. This allegedly natural and socially and culturally innocent materiality of the gender difference coincides in all these descriptions with an image of a phallic and potent masculine body, the body which has a long Western tradition of being idealized as a symbol of power as well as a glorious aesthetic object.

To better understand these complex and not-so-innocent interferences, we might approach the problem from the perspective of the concept of the body image as it is being developed within psychoanalysis, phenomenology, neurology and the cognitive sciences, as well as feminist appropriations of these insights in deconstructing the binary of sex/gender and the underlying binary of body/mind and nature/nurture, a work most significantly undertaken by Elisabeth Grosz (1990) with the model of the Möbius strip and Moira Gatens with her extensive work on the body image and the body double (1996). Gatens' application of the concept of 'body image' introduces the phenomenological concept of the lived experience, thus bridging the gap between the person's biological body and the social and personal significance of that body as lived. The 'body's morphology' and 'imaginary anatomy' represent the necessary condition for the possibility of bodily movement in the world, and yet are connected to the body image of others, hence are socially and historically constructed by shared language, the psychological significance of different bodily zones, institutional practices and discourses, all of which act on and through the body (Gatens 1996: 12). Through this perspective the connection between sex and gender is contingent, though not arbitrary, and "masculinity and femininity as forms of sex-appropriate behaviours are manifestations of a historically based, culturally shared phantasy about male and female biologies." (ibid. 14)

The attachment to phallic bodily images might be approached from a variety of socially determined sources, all of which are based on the collective representation of the sexed body as the ultimate and universal site of natural, biological and sexual determinacy and necessity. Specifically, this attachment and investment in an upright, strong, strength-flooded and mastered body can be correlated to the stigmatized and shamed social status of non-heterosexuals, which is to say the shame and stigma of being the abjected body of the gender invert and hence the object of medical and psychiatric discursive overinvestment and homophobic objectification. This hypothesis can find its analogue in Bourdieu's analysis of women's over-self-investment in bodily appearance, bodily insecurity, shame and symbolic dependence (Bourdieu 2001: 65-6). Considering the socially determined imaginary of the 'invert's body', compensation for and bypassing of shame inflicted and knowledge of the potential of being discreditable can assuredly be performed through the social appearance of embodied maleness. This compensation and investment in what 'the normal' have deprived non-normative sexualities of can be logically explained if one takes into consideration the fact that the body is the most obvious and primary element of our appearance and site of the perception others have of us, unlike other gender nonconformist positions and regimes which can be expressed in the closeted space of privatized politics. This relation of the histories of abjection and politics of shame with personal investment in (hyper)masculine bodily morphology is best illustrated by Halperin and Traub when claiming that: "After more than a century of scientific efforts to correlate deviant sexual desire with abnormal or deficient body types, not to mention the age-old association of same-sex desire with masculine lack and female monstrosity, it is eminently understandable that the culture of gay pride should have generated an attachment to able-bodiedness and morphological normality...and the hyperperformance of masculinity by gay man. In this context nothing is more shameful than having the wrong kind of body." (Halperin and Traub 2009: 12)

I.4. Homosociality and Interactional Enactment of Hegemonic Masculinity

The place which our participants secure for themselves in the gender order, as always being under threat and insecure, as well as the effects it has on their bodily experience, personality and social relations, is strongly enacted through a set of social practices, among which interaction and sociality with other men, mostly heterosexual, plays a crucial role. The homosocial groups where these gender practices are performed represent "communities of practice" whereby "a group of people brought together by some mutual endeavour, some common enterprise in which they are engaged and to which they bring a shared repertoire of resources, including linguistic resources, and for which they are mutually accountable." (McConnell-Ginet: 209). For the participants included in our research, straight male friendships represent a) a social space for the enactment of hegemonic masculinity (almost all of the Albanian and Roma participants; b) a source of uncomfortable feelings and shame (the majority of Macedonian self-identified gay and bisexual men, and a few of the self-identified gay Albanian interviewees); c) a social space for the ritual exclusion and devaluation of femininity and homosexuality (most of the Roma participants and a few Albanian participants); d) distanced sociality subjected to critical scrutiny and irony (a few of the self-identified gay men among the Macedonian participants, and only one Albanian self-identified gay man); and e) a forbidden zone for emotionality and intimate sharing (the majority of all participants).

The homosocial life of our participants bears witness to the interactional frames (Goffman) that govern the processes of socialization among men and the series of strategies deployed for the purposes (below self-reflective intentionality and consciousness) of enacting masculinity. The macho attitude appears to be still highly cultivated in these circles of friendships and sexist jokes as well as homophobic insults directed towards homosexuals or gender nonconforming

men generates the mutual focus of attention, emotional attunement (R. Collins 2004) and group solidarity and group and individual strength/emotional energy (*ibid.*). For a significant number of the participants, this dramaturgy of homosociality represents a pressure point for keeping up normal appearance, requiring constant vigilance and monitoring of one's behaviour, bodily comportment and suppression of possible 'effeminate' gestures and signs, managing information related to one's sexual life or identity, hence permanent 'impression management' (Goffman 1964) as a way of securing the consistent production of masculine lines and alignments, as well protecting oneself from the possibility of being discredited, excluded and shamed.

Their recognition of the possible insult that evokes the image of homosexuality, same-sex behaviour or 'effeminacy', as being always already inevitably subsumed under the imagery which the homosocial in-group has for the out-group, does not restrict these masculine strategies as being exclusively a projection of the secreted (homosexual) subject. On the contrary, the figure of the 'fag' in masculine imagination represents one of the core instruments for homosocial in-group regulation and disciplining. Even in-group jokes directed towards masculine heterosexual members represent the same mechanism, whereby the figure of the fag does not have an exclusively same-sex sexuality connotation, but to a greater extent represents the fluid symbol of penetrated and disempowered masculinity, a threat to the social order performed within the in-group dynamics. As Pascoe claims in her research on adolescent masculinity (Pascoe 2009), addressing someone as a fag has to "do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity. This fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the spectre of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police most of their behaviours out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behaviour and strive to avoid it." (Pascoe 2009:71) This insulted and discredited figure functions as a potent tool necessary for repetitive masculine gender performance and the constitution of the threatening spectre of the constitutive outside (Butler 1993). This fluidity and constitutive relation of the insult contained in the figure of the fag is best exemplified by the statement of one of the participants, a bisexual Macedonian, who narrated a horrifying story of his being molested and bullied in his school years. The reason he gave for the insults and violence to which he was subjected to by his male classmates—even including an attempted rape—was not related to his being gay, since that was something he didn't even feel as a desire in those years of his life, but rather because:

I was the best student in the class and in my generation, the most polite. Everyone said so, the teachers and the kids. I never took part in fights, I was peaceful, I didn't do any sports, that was the main reason to discriminate me. I even discovered at the end that the people who I trusted, who were my friends, conspired against me with the other children from my generation to change me because I was too polite. But how could they have changed me by ruining my life? (Bisexual Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Straight male fellowship creates, further, a regulated group solidarity and "boundaries in relation to the surrounding world." (Johansson). These boundaries appear to be fixated in the strongest way towards homosexuals, effeminate men and females, who are addressed either as a sexualized content of identity talk or as sexual/intimate partners deprived of the privileges of being a member of the 'sacred' male group. This is one of the main reasons why a great number of the participants maintain severely separated audiences and social lives, thus preventing conditions for interference of their homosocial straight and gay friendship. Most saliently, one of the effects of this organization of masculine interaction is the creation of a public/private divide of social life, which is to say gay friendships are either reserved for private space, hence become deprived of their social visibility and public social life, or communication with gay men is strictly reduced to random sexual encounters. This situation is most noticeable among Albanian and Roma participants (with no regards for their sexual identity). Gay sociality and world-building project and publics thus becomes deprived of its

possibility by being the forbidden and unimaginable domain foreclosed a priori by the interactional homosocial frames of organization of the actors' relations. The abjection of the homoerotic, or even more of any publicity and sociality of the subordinated or marginalized (non-hegemonic) masculinities, becomes or is constituted as necessarily excluded in order to sustain the security of the otherwise ever-threatened masculine sociality.

The strategies that most of our participants apply in these situations in order to maintain impression management and not break ritual rules include the following: a) withdrawal from conversation, followed by negative feelings and uneasiness (most of the gay and bisexual identified men from the Albanian and Macedonian ethnic group); b) carefully provided counterargument and opposition to homophobic jokes based on defending the rights to privacy of every human being, thus using generalized and abstract argument as a protective strategy, or denying the veracity of the information for the outsider subjected to collective jokes and derogation (without disclosing one's sexuality and sexual behaviour); c) joining the talk and atmosphere (very few of the participants); or d) evading the same homosocial circles and selectively organizing socialization.

The focus groups and individual participants who expressed the highest level of consciousness and awareness of the gender relations system, gender stereotypes in particular, (Macedonians of above average social status and younger Macedonians below 30 years of age, almost all of them self-identified as homo/bisexuals) denied the existence of socially and psychologically existing gender differences and also proportionally expressed the highest awareness of gender-doing and gender-performance tactics among men, including awareness of gender talk interactions, gender policing involved in homosocial interaction, and mutual scrutiny as regulative practice in maintaining masculine conservatism, self-regulation in relation to appropriate gender appearance among men, continual repudiation of bodily comportment and performance that might get to be easily associated with the female gender, etc. A few of the participants expressed a notable distance from homosocial rituals and presented an ironical stance, such as:

"I can notice today that there is a great competition, something like a Tarzan complex, they have to keep proving they are men, they have to be the best in everything. In Macedonia this is very common, because, after all, our tradition is such, but the people I mostly socialize with don't have this, there is no competition. No one is above or below. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

"I think that men who aren't gay that I mostly contact with are typical traditional men and are interested in traditionally male things which I don't care about at all." (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

"We mostly talk about women, which I find boring. When they start talking about football I have to pretend in front of them and I mostly avoid them." (Gay, Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

I.5. Gender and Division of Labour

The groups that expressed the highest level of complicity with hegemonic masculinity were the groups with participants of Albanian and Roma ethnicity, as well as the Macedonian participants either with below-average social status or, mostly, those who identified their sexuality and sexual identity with normalized masculine roles and 'normality'. Their beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and performances of gender are more or less in conformity with one of the three major and hegemonic organizations of the gender structural inventories and their subsequent gender regimes, including labour, power relations and cathexis (Connell 2005). They also equate at the highest level the relation between the sexual body and gender practice, thus setting an imminent relation of determination between one's sexed body and one's gender role and identity. Gender specificities are most commonly detected in the gendered

division of labour in the household and the different obligations and tasks that each family member has in the household. This division includes everyday tasks such as dishwashing, cleaning, caring for the house, which are reserved for women, in opposition to public activities such as breadwinning, providing financial security, being the guardian and protector of the family, responsibilities for the wellbeing of the family, jobs involving physical labour, etc., which are prescribed for men, thus reflecting the cultural and traditional meanings ascribed to each of the sexed bodies, male and female.

Except for a few interviewees, almost all reported a relatively strict division of labour in the household of their family, that is between their mothers and fathers, or among those who reported being married (mostly Albanians and Roma), between themselves as the man in the house with their wives taking care of traditional feminine obligations. The fathers in many cases appear as being the voice of the Phallic Law, enforcing and transmitting the norm to their male children.

Alternative and equal gender-non-specified division of labour was noticed as a result of transformed social practices, economic circumstances and different forms of life outside the nuclear family.

Specifically, one gay Macedonian informant of above average status reported that after his mother had lost her job she took the traditional role of the housewife, although a gender division of labour had not been a characteristic in their household before.

Other participants, because they are living as single, have been engaged in a complete rearrangement of the traditional division of labour, which is to say doing the traditionally feminine and traditional masculine work at home.

In a few cases, the appropriation of the masculine gender role and the performing of the traditionally respective obligations in the household was enforced either by the loss of their father or the divorce of their parents.

The macrosocial and political advantages of feminism were also pointed out by some of the participants, although not in these terms but as general social changes in gender relations that have led to a transformation of the traditional gender order in the regime of labour.

Higher levels of education and higher economic status also show a positive correlation in the majority of cases with an equal gender division of labour, in particular in regards to attitudes and beliefs and not exclusively as a practice.

Finally, the great majority of participants who expressed a more egalitarian perception on the gender division of labour were self-identified gay and bisexual men, mostly Macedonians.

"My family isn't a typical example of the division of roles, and I think that fortunately this has remained from the times of Yugoslavia, at least in terms of professions, so the division is relatively fine. For instance, in former Yugoslavia the women and men used to earn the same salary for the same position, while in the USA and lots of other places this is not so. Unfortunately, some roles and things are related to the idea that they should be practiced by women or men as professions ... For example, I myself am very open-minded, but the first time I saw a female pilot I was surprised. I felt comfortable, but also amazed, although at the time I was thirteen years old, so you see... The female taxi drivers in Skopje are also very few. There are no more than three. In addition, the role of, to put it roughly, cleaning women is customarily performed by a woman. There are similar examples. Not to mention that an actress has to be a woman, hahahaha, although, like I said, women have the same salary, but they also have to clean and iron clothes in their homes, which wasn't right. It happens even nowadays. Also there is the cooking and similar things." (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30, Gay)

"I know many men who help in the so-called female things, such as cooking, ironing, cleaning, etc. Take me, for example, I am very fussy. I like clean spaces, I really like cooking, ironing, I do all those things and I don't consider them to be female things. At work, I don't know... I also don't divide things strictly into male and female, except for giving birth." (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30, Gay)

"There is a division, a big one, and I try to put it aside but I can't because I live in a society where a man is a man and a woman is a woman... I don't accept that a woman has to stay at home and take care of the children, because the man also has to take care of the children." (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30, Gay)

This alternative of gendered division of labour can be assumed to be caused either by the social and political position non-heterosexuals hold in relation to hegemonic masculinity, on the one hand, or by the transformation of the cultural code by the strong influences of liberal politics, human rights and feminist discourses and gender equality policies. However, we should emphasise that when we trace the change in gender cultural code as the possible source of these attitudes and practices we do not refer to the cultural gender code as a unified structure and principle of organization of gender relations, but do consider the multiple social practices through which it is being effectuated and reified. The clearest example of this is the persistence of the masculine habitus in its effects on bodily perception and expression and the gender power regimes reflected in the strong hold on habitual security, as elaborated earlier in this chapter.

I.6. Masculinity and the (Non) Heteronormative Cathexis

The heteronormative organization of sexuality and intimacy, the cathexis, as the third structural inventory and model of gender relations, is visibly pervasive amongst the majority of participants. Namely, their utterances mirror the three main discourses that have historically organized gender relations and the unequal power distribution, as well as the construction of gendered subjectivity (Hollway 1998). Visible traces can be identified of the 'male sexual' discourse, according to which **men have naturally stronger sexual needs** that have to be gratified. Hence, one of the participants identifies men's specificity as follows:

... [Men] penetrate and by those means dominate. Men think more often about sex. They are freer and use it more, with no selection, give whatever you have to offer, with no emotional attachment. (Focus group with Macedonians of below-average social status)

Another participant of Albanian ethnicity, in describing his lived everyday aspects of masculinity, said the following:

To dominate in sex is a male role, more robust, more aggressive, going crazy when I see a beautiful woman... especially when a woman provokes... but a man can also provoke me as a woman can, if he provokes since provocation is the female stuff. (Focus group with participants of Albanian ethnicity)

This statement at the same time reflects the '**have/hold discourse**' (ibid.) which posits men as the providers of the security position requested by women, embodying the figure of protection and procreation, most paradigmatically exemplified in the statements of many of the interviewees that: "initiative is the male thing, always", or "I think that men should be emotionally stronger than women and more stable... to take responsibility and do things that a woman wouldn't or should not do", or that it is a "female characteristic" to "want to belong to someone", etc., all of which also confirm the '**permissive discourse**' positing men as naturally 'active' while females are 'passive'. However, this permissive sexuality is constructed, not in its alleged potential for uncontrollable excessiveness, but as what expresses power, control, activity and potency, deprived of any signs of weakness, passivity or subordination, which is always relegated to the feminine domain or that of unmanly gay men, the fairies and faggots (Reynaud 2004).

This latter attitude was most notably expressed among the majority of Roma and Albanian interviewees, as well as a few of the Macedonian interviewees of below-average social status and highly emphasized masculine sexual identification.

An interesting exception in this context were the few Albanian participants whose sexual identification was gay or bisexual and for whom sex with men is not considered a composite part of their masculinity, but on the contrary an expression of their femininity, and even more as a direct consequence of female hormones. Although this model of self-positioning in the gender order inverts the traditional gender identification matrices in relation to sexuality, it still conserves the congruity of sex, gender and desire (Butler 1990), whereby heterosexual desire and relations remain the only intelligible form of sexuality. Namely, although he identifies as feminine, this identification is determined by his taking the 'passive' role in the sexual act, and 'passivity' consequently remains feminine, not re-evaluated being part of the masculine identification paradigm. Finally, his feminine role derived from his 'passive' role as the 'insertee' retains the heterosexual logic of desire, whereby the masculine desires the feminine and desires it in an active and penetrating way.

However, the heterosexist negative construction of homosexuality as excessive and uncontrollable sexuality or emotional expression is also reflected in the attitudes of other groups of interviewees. These interviewees, strongly emphasized their differentiation from other gay men flaunting their sexuality in public, hence becoming complicit with the homonegative exclusion of subordinate masculinities and minority sexualities from the public domain and the horizons of visibility. They are further, by these means, involved in the construction of true masculinity as being in charge of one's body, whose movements, desires, pleasures and experiences are strictly relegated to the private sphere, the bedroom. Therefore, if masculinity is considered as valued through the diverse forms of power exercised and habitually taken for granted, including control over women and over other men with subordinated masculinities, we also need to consider the power of control over men's own bodies as well (Segal 1993).

We should also stress that among the majority of interviewees the practiced model of cathexis demonstrates a departure from the dominant model of masculinity in several respects. There is evident not only the choice of the desiring object but even more importantly an inversion of the prescribed sexual roles wherein the receptive sexual role ('passive') is also included as an equally potential site for the performance of masculinity. The statement of one of the Macedonian interviewees testifies to this paradigmatically:

I absolutely don't think so. I haven't answered this question yet, but I don't consider myself, as someone who is a so-called bottom or passive, to be a lesser man than an active one. It is just a stereotype which I don't know. I think that most of the guys who are masculine will refuse to be passive only because of fear of disqualification, rather than because it is what they want. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30, Gay)

A significant number of participants in the groups did not consider emotional expression or indulgence as unmanly, showing awareness of the social and cultural nature of this 'stereotype' about masculinity. This positioning in the cathexis relations undermines homophobic masculine fears of homosexuality as the embodiment of the risk of being 'sexually appropriated' (Reynaud) and the symbol of humiliation. The way these men relate to women and socially engage with women, including identification with some women inside the household (mothers, grandmothers, but also female friends), also points towards a more 'liberating' account on masculinity.

Even in this model, however, there seems to be a certain holding on to the polarities of gender dichotomy and overemphasized complicity with the representations of masculinity which are one of the main sources of exclusion of same-sex sexualities. This complicity is expressed not so much at the level of identification (except for some Albanian, Roma and below average social status interviewees), as much as at the level of erotic desire, whereby the most

gratifying object seems to be that of dominant images of misogynous maleness. As Leo Bersani would put it: "[T]he cultural constraints under which we operate include not only visible political structures but also the phantasmatic processes by which we eroticize the real...the economy of our sexual drives is a cultural achievement. Perhaps nowhere are we manipulated more effectively and more insidiously than in our most 'personal' choices or tastes in the objects of our desires."

In general, interviewees showed a diverse range of relations towards normative masculinity, from the highly stressed **complicity** of some men displaying their strong relationship to hegemony, through a more **negotiated position** (different gender practices correlative to different gender structural inventories and regimes), **oppositional identification** among a few of the interviewees, to **nostalgic positioning** (Johansson 2000). The last model of relations is particularly evident among the older generation of interviewed men, as well as in the Roma group, exemplified in a longing to return to a time when masculinity was endowed with more assuredly present social and moral attributes (the older group) or the imagined absence of submissive gay men (Roma group).

II. Sexuality and Sexual Identity

Sexual identity was defined among the interviewees across multiple lines:

- 1) **Conflation of sexual behaviour, desire, emotional attachment and developing intimacy with sexual identity** (including joint intimate life with a same-sex partner, thus distinguishing it from exclusively sex-based relations, or same-sex behaviour);
- 2) **Defining and subsuming sexual identity under gender identity and the masculine role axis**, either as
 - 2a) a normalized masculine gender position;
 - 2b) an active and penetrative masculine position; or
 - 2c) a subordinated gender position
- 3) **Minimal essentialist accounts of sexual identity**, and
- 4) **Sexual identity as a way of life and political identity**

Their personal sexual identifications seem to vary, mostly across an ethnic axis, although the positioning towards the hegemonic masculine ideal has a significant correlation with the self-determination of some of the participants. The multiple paradigms in which are embedded a variety of meanings and meaning-giving attitudes towards one's desire, behaviour, emotions and identity which we have chosen to map in the frames of the research are based on some of the core researches and discourses within contemporary sociological, cultural, gender and sexuality studies.

This analytical recourse is taken by considering the cultural, social and political conditions in which one forms one's identity or in which one's identity is formed, since it leads us towards a crucial distinction between **homosexual behaviour and desire**, on the one hand, and **homosexual identity** on the other (Horowitz and Newcomb 2002). Namely, whether one practices homosexual acts does not necessarily lead us towards an a priori identification of a certain identity, homosexual in this case; for, as argued in Mary McIntosh's (1968) highly influential paper on the 'The Homosexual Role', there is a difference between the '**institutionalised homosexual role**', constructing homosexuality as a type of person and a recent modern invention, and **liaisons between males who are otherwise self-identified as heterosexual**, involving same-sex behaviour and acts but not a sexual identity or self-identification as a homosexual.¹⁶

A homosexual identity, therefore, is "mediated not solely through same sex activity *per se* but through an individual's willingness or ability to deal with being labelled as homosexual. Whether one is 'out' as a homosexual or in the 'closet' (maintaining heterosexual identity but with desire and/or sexual involvement with the same sex) depends not so much on biological drives but on the individual, social and political circumstances that will or will not support the chosen identity." (Taylor and Spencer 2004:36)

What seems to unite all participants, including those from the focus groups and the individual interviewees, is that their understanding of sexual identity is significantly vague, meaning one can easily get the impression that sexual identity categories are empty signifiers open to multiple chains of significations and fluidity of meanings. Those groups of interviewees among whom the sexual identification as gay and bisexual is most clearly expressed, including the stronger ties and identification they express in relation to the 'gay community', express opinions according to which identity is more strictly defined on the grounds of one's sexual behaviour and desire, although when asked about attributes and characteristics or specificities of gay subjectivity, their answers are floating and undetermined, the heterosexual identity becoming the exclusive mark of differentiation. Even in these cases they do not identify any essential differences among gay and heterosexual men, except for the gender of the object-choice in the sexual interest or emotional attachments and intimacy.

II.1. Sexual Identity as Intimacy, Sexual Behaviour and Privacy

Almost all of the participants who identified themselves as being gay or bisexual conceive their sexual identity as deriving its meaning from the interpretation of and equivalence established between same-sex sexual acts, behaviours, intimacy and desire. Having sex with men and establishing short-term and long-term intimate and emotional relations with same-sex partners, or with women, is the sole reason for their sexual identification. From the total number of 43 individual interviewees, 16 identified as gay or homosexual, of whom 10 are of Macedonian ethnicity, 5 of Albanian ethnicity, and only one of Roma ethnicity. Eight (8) participants identified themselves as bisexual, of whom 5 were Macedonian, 2 Albanian and 1 Roma.

What was noted is a correspondence between the intimate, personal and privatized understanding of sexual identity and its positioning in correlation to social/political aspects and personal/private matters. Thus, those interviewees conceiving sexual identity as a category for the nominalization of same-sex sexual and emotional attachment show a greater understanding of sexual identity as a private affair and a deep part of one's self and one's intimacy. Their sexual identity remains tied to 'private life' and 'the bedroom', with no interest in ascribing identity saliency to their homo/bisexual identification in their socializing practices or in making it visible in the environment in which one dwells. It is a general trend among the interviewees from all focus groups, as well as the majority of individual participants, to equate sexual identity with the sphere of the private, intimacy and sexual practice, and to differentiate it from political and social matters.

This understanding of sexual identity as a matter of privacy leads us to a consideration of the complex settings in which one's homo/bisexual identity is central, important or prominent and 'salient' for the actor. It is incontestable that one's

¹⁶ As Stephen O. Murray argues: "Gay consciousness is no more automatic a product of homosexual behavior than class consciousness is of 'objective class position' or ethnic consciousness of genealogy. As we know from our own society, not all the persons with a characteristic consider themselves defined in any way by it, and some deny it altogether. The existence and importance of a characteristic must be realized if there is to be a consciousness of kind: characteristics are only potential bases and, if they are not publicly affirmed, tenuous bases."

sexual identity does not have prominence in all of the different situations into which the social actor enters, and each individual chooses, in accordance with their personal history, which of the many identities he embodies will be prominent. However, this should not lead us in the direction of losing sight of the fact that some situations do not offer rewarding conditions (support from others) for enacting one's prominent identity. Hence, sexual identity gets its salience and opportunity to be played out in some conditions instead of others, gay friendships and environments being this social environment for most of our participants. Sociologists have claimed that negative emotions are the usual outcome when one's prominent identity is challenged in certain settings, and individuals invest great efforts and number of strategies to avoid negative painful feelings. Selective perception, such as ignoring cues that do not support one's identity, selective interpretation as a strategy of misinterpreting disconfirming cues as confirming cues, criticizing others for lack of support, withdrawing from interaction, switching to another identity that can easily be confirmed in the situation, etc., (McCall and Simmons in Stets 2006: 205-7). All of these strategies can be traced among our participants as tools for avoiding identity disconfirmation and should be taken into consideration when analysing the exclusive understanding of one's sexual identity as a private affair.

On another level, which is an important consideration given the situational saliency of one's sexual identity, is the level of commitment to that identity, dependent on the number of persons with whom one is connected through that identity and the depth of the ties with which one is connected through an identity—sexual identity in this case. (Stryker and Serpe 1994) Considering that most of our self-identified bi and homosexual participants have deep ties with their homosexual friends and consider them a significant source of support and self-expression, it is expected that this identity will have higher place in their identity salience hierarchy. On a quantitative level, some of them have a wide network of gay friends and a frequent gay social life, and still this identity is declared not to have a major saliency in their self-view, which seems to be determined by the much wider social networks and the homonegative social environment that does not create rewarding conditions for identity expression. Indicative in this direction of argument are also the reported positive and strong feelings most of them experience in networks based on sexual identity. Reciprocal relations can be further found between the degree of self-identification as homosexual/bisexual and the intensity of socialization processes with other gay people, interest in gay topics (politics, culture, movie with gay thematic, social aspects, life-styles), which is to say higher overlapping of desire, behaviour, life-style and identity, as well as the identity claim and self-labelling, on the one hand, and the set of practices that come to be associated with the identity one identifies with, on the other.

Hence, not being committed to this same identity in constellations which seem not to confirm this identity seems to be more strongly effectuated by the intense negative feelings (shame, withdrawal, fear, anxiety etc.) which the participants experience in those contexts, and the need to get rid of this painful feelings by the strategies elaborated above, although the same is hard to be avowed, the reasons for which can be speculated with the material we have available through this research. Burke (1991) has claimed that a feedback loop accompanies the activation of identity in every social setting. Switching identities or changing behaviour is the usual outcome in those situations when feedback from others, based on one's perception or reflected appraisal (more important in the context of our participants), gives cues for undesirable and unwelcome behaviour based on the expected identity standard (the masculine heterosexual in this case). The negative emotions that emerge because one has not met the expectations of others "encourage the self to do something about the identity disruption and obtain verification so that one remains a group member and is not excluded" (Stets 2006: 211).

The only explicit understanding of sexual identity as a matter of political importance is expressed with regard to matters of discrimination and abstract and generalized references to human rights, which is to say exclusively problems related

much more to the juridical system, and to some degree to politics, but not as a political problem related to substantial equality and common public life. Almost all of those participants who identified discrimination as a political dimension of their sexual identity made this connection in broad and general terms, but not in relation to their embodied and lived relation to the wider political spectrum or the interferences between their lives and their sexual identities and the social environment, political institutions and structures. Very few participants emphasized the constraints in the public sphere, or to be more precise, expressions of intimacy in public space (holding hands, the right to marry, to kiss in public space, hugging, etc.). Even this reference to the public space is only insignificantly highlighted by a few participants. This becomes even alarming when one considers the frequency of occurrence of feelings of discomfort they have or do experience in a variety of homosocial or homonormative settings. To be comfortable—a feeling which the majority of those participants who successfully perform masculinity in public settings claim to have experienced—means to be at ease with one's social environment to such an extent that the boundaries between one's body and the world outside become indistinguishable. In feelings of comfort, Sara Ahmed claims, "bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies", and heteronormativity functions on exactly this ground, as "a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape" (Ahmed 2004: 148). The shape public spaces take are the result of the histories of repetition of certain bodily extensions and certain forms of life and relations, mainly heteronormative ones. Their shape is provided by the iterative performance of heterosexual conduct, which is a process unnoticed by the heterosexual subject whose body extends freely in the space, having taken its shape already before its arrival (Valentine 1996: 149).

The political regimes in knowledge production and identity construction as such, and the historical and cultural specificities and differences in sexual identity (Halperin, Foucault, Kosofsky, Rubin, Chauncey, Halberstam), as well as the complex interweaving of sexual pleasure, behavior, fantasies and relations with cultural understanding and social sexual and gender scripts (Gagnon), are almost totally excluded from observation or not noticed by any of the participants.

The low level of politicization of sexual identity or understanding of this identity as deeply interwoven with various power structures, ideological mechanisms and discursive regimes, cultural norms and historical strata is also correlative to the insignificant number of participants identifying themselves as possible agents of political struggle and involvement in political claims for sexual citizenship. The future of the social and political struggle for sexual emancipation is mostly ascribed to various figures of political representatives, including politicians, the Government, NGOs, individual activists, etc., all of which exclude the possibility of grassroots activism or bottom-up, collectivist and community-based struggles for equality.

Indicative in these regards is also the moderate level of consciousness and awareness of the structures of heteronormativity and homophobia. Most of the interviewees recognize homophobia as manifested mostly in visible acts of violence and exclusion, rarely tracing the everyday insidious forms of violence and oppression enacted and lived by the structural parameters of heteronormativity, even less the every-day interactive politics of shame embedded in homosocial, microsocial and wider political structures and institutions.

This is even more telling given that the utterances of most of the interviewees indicate experiences of an unequal distribution of the right to 'sex and intimacy talk' among homosocial circles and in the heterosexual environment and the insidious shaming mechanisms involved in the contexts of what Goffman has termed the phantom acceptance of the stigmatized by the 'normal' (Goffman 1963). What is even more indicative in this context is that there is a strong resistance in acknowledging shaming experiences, fear of exclusion and threats to social ties and relations, as the possible reasons for keeping their homo/bisexual identity and sexual life in the private sphere. The claim by the majority

of interviewees that sexual identity is reserved for the private sphere, understanding this claim and relations towards one's sexuality as being 'the way things are and should be', is contradicted by statements which testify that their everyday social life and homosocial environments are marked by identity talks that have sexual topics, sexual experiences, sexual fantasies and desires as a regular content of conversation, all of which remain unmarked in their heterosexuality.

Another contradiction that undermines the participants' claim that their sexual identity is reserved to the private sphere is that the participants report spending a significant amount of time in their daily lives with heterosexual pairs as friends. For example, one informant explained that he no longer sees his friends on a regular basis in part because of their spending a lot of time on family obligations, going on family holidays and engaging in other social activities determined by their heterosexual life. This reflects the wider social implications of sexuality and intimacy. As Sara Ahmed has argued, sexual orientation and sexual identity involve much more than the sexual object of one's desire; rather, orientation affects many other things, involving "bodies that leak into worlds; it involves a way of orienting the body towards and away from others, which affects how one can enter different social spaces [...] even if it does not lead bodies to the same places... Orientations affect what it is that bodies can do." (Ahmed 2004: 145) Finally, as many scholars have already argued, sexual orientation and sexual identity organize the visible and recognizable social horizon into a free dwelling place for normative gendered bodies expressing the congruency of gender, sex and desire, whereby masculinity performs the gender position for which the female is the desired object and vice versa.

Amongst some of the participants, a notable reason for their privatization of their sexual identity is that of negating their fear of discrimination and exclusion. However, they claim that:

No, I have no fear of that. Many of my colleagues at work know that I was in a relationship with a guy. Of course they have no idea what I did in bed with him, but they know I was in a relationship with a man. The friends around me, the closest ones also know. Either I have told them, or they guessed somehow, asked me and I confirmed it, etc. I am not afraid that I could be harmed if someone finds out. Because no one can harm anyone if this person has nothing proper to say, to comment. For someone to say that I am 100% gay and I like men, he will have to prove this somehow. He can talk all he wants, but I will only say this: The dogs bark, but the caravan goes on.

(Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Another Macedonian informant who self-identifies as gay asserts his sexual identity to be a private matter but also claims that:

Well I am most worried that my mother might find out, because I still live with her and I depend on her financially. It would be really painful for her, and I would feel guilty, although I guess, knowing my mother, she would accept it, but still... I don't think there is a reason for her to discover as long as I can prolong it, hide and live under a mask.

(Macedonian, Above Average Social Status, Under 30.)

In support of this argument is the statement of another Macedonian informant who self-identifies as gay:

Intimate above all, because it is my opinion that the society shouldn't care about who I sleep with and share my feelings. That is it... it is relative, each man for himself. I don't think that I should come out in front of everyone and say I am gay, bearing in mind the society we live in, the discrimination and the stigma. (Macedonian, Below Average Social Status, Under 30.)

Or as another Albanian self-identified bisexual claims:

It would matter to me [if they find out about my sexuality], particularly my family, it will be difficult. The gossip among people would be a big problem. This fear has a great influence in my life, because I am always careful in my actions, my movements and everything else that might arouse suspicion. I see myself as part of the gay community, but I don't socialize with others from fear that everybody might find out who I am. So, for the sake of discretion, I am not active in the gay community.

Interesting to note is that the strategies of informal social control are not recognized as coercive tools for aligning one in the 'normal' heterosexual and gender binary order, and consequently as the reason for enforcing the closure and secrecy of one's sexual identity. Thus one Roma participant claimed:

I don't function the way society functions. I function as I want to. Do you know what I mean? I don't like anyone meddling and I do everything that crosses my mind. No one has ever forbidden me something, or said something...

But only minutes later he went on to contradict this claim by saying:

Yes, I have had discussions on this subject. I mean, we have never started a conversation on this subject, you know, to the degree that they will say "don't be like that", it's just people can notice and see things, you know? When a normal parent tells his child not to wear women's clothes... it means the discussion wasn't about sexual relation with men, you know? They say don't do those things, don't act like that... even when it comes to socializing, because you can be like that even when socializing. It is told just like that, like the word of science, just to show you how things are.

Another informant confidently claimed that sexual identity was one's private affair, while responding to another set of questions as follows:

You see, it depends on the surrounding where you live. If I didn't live where I do now, because the people where I live now won't accept me the way I am so I have to be careful. But if I lived somewhere else, I'd let them know who I am, I don't care. Not that I care what people say, I don't live for other people, but still, they will point with a finger, you know, they don't understand some things and don't share the same opinion, so it's better when it's private. (Roma, Above Average Status, Under 30.)

The social psychology of shame goes some way to explain these mechanisms for consciously negating the mechanisms of protection and privatization of one's identity (partly analyzed above in this section), but what also seems to be an indicative source for analysis is the masculine attitude that negates the possibility of one's expression and avowal of vulnerability and social dependence as being constitutive for individual life, self-presentation and socialization. Individualism, as being introduced with the accomplishments of Modernity, with its deep-rootedness in the Western and liberal tradition, might also be analyzed as one of the underlying reasons for bypassing the influence of social norms, homosocial policing and coercion imprint in the shaming practices of heteronormative micro and macro sociality.

Overall, it appears that the possibilities opened and made available for sexual identification, the socially intelligible forms of sexual and gender recognition, the frames and norms of social interaction, the cultural and scientific resources available and circulating in the current context, as well as the prohibitive, exclusory mechanisms and stigmatizing practices, all of determine and constrain the possibilities and choices one has for interpreting and expressing one's sexual identity, although they remain strongly disavowed, neglected or bypassed.

II.2. Sexual Identity as Gender Expression and Hegemonic Masculinity

Among some of the Albanian participants and the majority of the Roma participants, sexual identity was defined exclusively as being marked by gender role rather than sexual orientation, behaviour or desire. Only a few Macedonian participants, with below average, social status, equated their sexual identity with 'normal masculinity' and an active sexual role. The heterosexual sense of self is saliently emphasized in these cases (mostly among Albanian interviewees) and is highly correlative with the predominance of traditional gender roles that consider the 'real' man as the penetrator, excluding deeper emotional attachment or the development of long-term relations, or placing these exclusively in the traditionalist form of the marriage nest.

This type of identity-formation is highly complicit with the model of 'phallic sexuality', understood as being a form of sexuality centred around the penis and its penetrative role in sexual intercourse, whereby the biological dimension of the penis is confused with symbolic inventories of the omnipotence of the Phallus and thus set in patriarchal frames comprising the penis' activity and relegating the vagina as the signifier of female passivity. Many sociologists have emphasized that in this model of sexuality male-to-male penetration is symbolically equivalent to vaginal penetration. Gagnon and Simon (1973) in their study on sexual contact and sexual scripts in prison show that 'homosexual' acts between men serve the purpose of confirming and affirming masculine identity.

The language used in the participants' descriptions of sexual conduct also testifies to the enactment of sexual scripts which exclude passive language on behalf of the active, deprive description of sensual content, negate sensuality as part of sexual conduct with other men and exclude emotional or romantic imaginary—a specificity usually found in research to characterize gender difference in constructing sexuality. (Kimmel & Plante 2004: 124-9)

Hence, one interviewee from the Roma group, demonstrating a strongly emphasized complicity with hegemonic masculinity, emphasized that "earlier it used to be better, masculinity was what was appreciated, just to fuck, not both. There didn't used to be faggots in earlier days—it's something new. There were no faggots. Or there were, but with no relationships with men, It was not public, just the style....". Homosexual identity is here determined by the gender role one takes in the sexual act, hence being the feminine, 'passive' insertee as a mark of anal powerlessness (Hocquenghem 1978), the all-powerful masculine and active inserting/penetrating phallus standing on the opposite site. Hence, one Roma participants says that:

I am a man. I want to have sex with gays [...] I am a guy who, for example doesn't kiss, doesn't touch, so I pleasure myself and in a sense, I want to pleasure the gay partner to a small degree.

Even more interesting is that the heterosexual or masculine sexual identification position is left almost completely unmarked, as if a matter of common-sense and something that goes without saying, not even named but absolutely equated with identification as a 'man' and with 'hegemonic masculinity' and the 'normal' which is supposed to a priori presume heterosexuality as the derivative sexual identity of the gender position.

Another characteristic of this model of self-identification further necessitates the exclusion, abjection, degradation and ridicule of 'faggots' and 'passive gays', whose life is seen immediately as lost and unhappy because it does not fulfil and follow the regular and normal line of social life (marriage, wife, children, household, etc.). The same interviewee from the Roma focus group even expresses pity for his gay friend. This position comes in agreement with the constitution of the homosexual identity as the 'constitutive outside' (Foucault, Butler), the repudiated and abjected possibility a priori made impossible as an object of choice or life-form.

One of the Albanian interviewees conceives sexual identity to be determined by the social environment in which one

dwells: "it depends on which circle of people you move in, which circle of male friends—there are circles of mafia men, of sportsmen and gay. For example if mafia men or policemen have sex with men I think that they are not gay". Again there is an exclusory relation established between certain masculine regimes of identification and homosexuality, deprived of its manliness, set as subordinated masculinity or non-masculinity. This account continues with pathologizing implications for homosexuality: "...depends on whether we settle the gay company amongst the socio-pathological manifestations...he is suffering from it. I do not know whether gay is a socio-pathological manifestation or is determined by childhood traumas or by personal development, the environment, the company..."

Their sexual involvement is based on exclusively "fuck and run" encounters, evading the very possibility of establishing durational and sustained communications or socialization patterns with sexually non-normative individuals. Stigma and shame exert a strong influence in this context, which can be confirmed in the way they create audience segregation, avoiding being seen with 'faggots', evading sexual encounters with Albanians, fearing gossip and shame infliction, etc.

The alleged voluntary and free choice of the heterosexual/masculine identification model seems to be complicated and self-problematized when one takes into consideration the following statement made by one Albanian informant:

The parent can have an influence... if they don't accept you as gay, in time you get used to being bisexual.

Further on, the story told by the previously quoted Albanian interviewee narrates the compulsory cancelling of same-sex intimate relationships and possible minoritarian identity formation and his subsequent bringing back by his family into the 'normal' flow of life, accompanied by self-reproaching and self-correctional reflections ("I did exaggerate a bit with my freedom"), which is the heterosexual family. Recent studies have also confirmed the higher level of homophobia and maintenance of patriarchal values among the Albanian population in Macedonia in comparison to the ethnic Macedonian population (Albert Simkus, forthcoming).

The social exclusion of homosexuality as a possible identity or social form of life, in these cases is much more effectuated in the social exclusion of the possibility of even mentioning or publicly discussing one's sexuality and sexual behaviour or practices without them necessarily being attributed as belonging or determining homosexual identity. Hence one of the Roma interviewees claimed that although the majority of his masculine friends practice same-sex behaviour with 'gays', not only is this not a source of their sexual identification but more importantly it is a topic excluded from discussion. They all know that most of them practice sexual intercourse with gay men, yet sexual talk about women is the only possible and avowed sexual experience to be shared.

Same-sex behaviour represents the source of social exclusion and ultimate shame, equalling social death, as pointed out by one Albanian interviewee whose sexual identification is based across the masculine gender axis and the heteronormative cathexis:

It is a private matter, it's only for me. I don't want to talk about my intimacy with anyone else, because the information might spread... I would feel very bad if my wife and children found out. The others won't stop gossiping. It's like burying me alive. You get divorced, the children stay out on the street, there's no shame bigger than that....Of course it is a big influence [the fear of others finding out about the person's same-sex sexual behaviour]. I don't socialize in public with gays. I am careful when I make dates and discretion is very important to me.

However, we should emphasize that this sexual-identity formation can be further complicated if we read more deeply into the interviews with the Roma participants and try to make an analysis apart from the models of sexual identity

already available in the West, which are more highly appropriated as sources for the interpretation of one's desire and behaviour among the Macedonian participants and some of the Albanian participants. Namely, what seems to be a pressing conclusion from the Roma interviewees that we include in this model of sexual identification is the almost complete absence of the western model of sexual identity based on the line of the object of sexual intercourse or desire. Normative gender identification (masculinity or manliness) and gender-inversion (masculine femininity) seem to be driving the identity formation process more strongly. Unlike the majority of Albanian participants for whom gender normativity and gender inversion define sexual identity, among the majority of Roma interviewees there is a lack of knowledge of the very concept of sexual identity as it is classified in the categories of homosexuality, heterosexuality or bisexuality. A significant number of Roma participants, mostly with social status below average, were not familiar with the meanings of these categories and some tried speculating what they might mean, although this speculation did not confirm the usually applied and adopted meaning.

What distinguishes the modern homosexual as a sexual classification, as David Halperin argues, is its particular unprecedented unification of three distinct entities which were not correlated in such a way in the previous forms of reception and conception of love between men: "1. A psychic notion of a perverted or pathological *psychosexual orientation*, derived from nineteenth-century medicine, which applies to the inner life of the individual and does not necessarily entail same-sex behaviour or desire; 2. A psychoanalytic notion of same-sex *sexual object-choice*, which is a category of erotic intentionality and does not necessarily imply pathology or deviance [...] and 3. A sociological notion of sexually deviant behaviour (...) that does not necessarily refer to erotic psychology or psychosexual orientation" (Halperin 1998, 108). This recently constituted notion of sexual identity unifies different entities, such as sexual style, sexual taste, disposition, character, sexual acts, gender presentations, and assigns them all to the new species called the homosexual. Unlike the modern notion of homosexual, including the heterosexual and bisexual identity, does not exist in the cultural and discursive repertoire for available self-understanding and identification among this group of participants.

One could claim that these sexual identities remain persistent without being named and that they are constituted on the grounds of active/passive gender sexual roles. The total absence of knowledge of these categories among some of the Roma participants, however, forces the conclusion that sexual identity is not a separate identity among the many identity positions they might occupy, but that it is totally subsumed under the category of gender identity and the cultural codes of masculinity and is expressed through these terms. However, this problem remains highly complicated and the question of whether heterosexual identity is just so normalized that it remains self-evident and unmarked requires separate and more extensive research.

II.3. Homosexual Identity as a Universal Paradigm of Characteristics

Some of the interviewees attempted to define sexual identity, and gay identity in particular, in accordance with some universal attributes, abilities and characteristics. The most often cited characteristics include: an ability to accommodate more easily to different situations, resourcefulness, a more liberal outlook, more emotive, stronger and more successful in career seeking and professional life, profession choices, etc. However, one needs to take into consideration the social determinants, political exposure and constraining conditions, including conditions of shame and stigma, life opportunities and constraints, all of which can provide a structurally and socially determined explanation for the existence of the alleged sexual identity constants, and thus empty the identity fixations of their essentialist pretensions. The universalizing tendency in determining sexual identity is contradicted immediately, also,

when one considers the multiple forms of in-group differentiations and segregations that the interviewees trace among men having sex with men and gay men.

II.4. Homosexual Identity as a Way of Life and Political Identity

The social significance and positioning of homosexual identity through the various mechanisms of social exclusion and sexual stigma and the possibilities for minoritarian identity opened up by these social conditions are best exemplified by the statement of a Macedonian informant, self-identified as gay with non-hegemonic gender identification:

I don't know, it might sound stupid, but it's a way of life, a course of life which is set and has certain qualities and negative sides... I think that homosexuals think about life harder and longer than other people. Then fantasy builds on creativity, you want to escape yourself and be yourself at the same time, which is a very difficult struggle and when you win this struggle and balance your life... I don't know I think this is how you progress. If your soul makes progress, I think this is the way to evolve. They are more aware of their surroundings, the society... so all the negative sides that I mentioned at the beginning might turn into qualities that can be used in a more proper way, all traumas, fears and embarrassment can be overcome and turned into something useful in your further life.

(Macedonian, Below Average Status. Under 30)

This statement resembles some of the statements made by participants whose conception of gay identity inclines towards universalist notions, yet differs significantly in pointing to the social conditions influencing the creation of homosexual identity and awareness of one's homosexual identity, hence positing it as a social effect with the possibilities of transforming social stigma and insidious or overt social trauma into a potential for creativity and transformation. The statement further exteriorizes the alleged interiority of homosexual subjects by observing this as an agonistic field reflecting the social position and struggle of the individual with same-sex eroticism and with the social environment. The supposedly 'interior ghetto' of the homosexual subject as the effect of social stigma and shame becomes transformed into a social position for future performativity and the creation of oneself and, consequently, of existing social norms. Understanding one's homosexual identity in its socially marginalized status becomes an occasion for revaluing and rethinking and subversively appropriating gender norms in order to generate alternative gender positions and self-identification. Hence, the same informant, refusing to set himself in either of the available normative gender positions, claims:

I don't know, sometimes I feel like a woman, sometimes I feel like a man, sometimes I feel like a father, sometimes like a mother. Sometimes I feel like a genderless child—that is most of the time. When I cook I feel like a woman, when I go to the supermarket I feel like a father, when I drive a car I feel like a man, when I have sex sometimes I feel like a man, sometimes like a woman.. Sometimes when somebody else drives the car I feel like a woman. When I cook sometimes I even feel like a man. When I do housework I feel like a mother and if I relax I can talk to myself from the perspective of a mother. Things can go crazy.

While reflecting on the explicit possibility of situating his identity across the lines of private/personal and social/political, the informant makes an interesting chiasmic folding of the second into the first and vice versa, the agonistic reversion of the first into the second:

What I am is my private matter, but what I am is my privacy that sticks out in society and gets a social dimension, so it turns out that I fight if not a battle, well maybe even a battle with society, and automatically there is defence, so it includes both things.

The other two participants who emphasized the social significance and political meaningfulness of their gay identity described it across the lines as a particular way of life which included: a) different patterns and circles of socialization; b) different interactional frames (in particular ironizing or distancing oneself from homosociality); c) alternative gender positioning; d) transformative possibilities opened up by histories of insult and shame; e) participation in non-normative social groups; f) non-hegemonic gender readings of one's body; g) active participation in 'political struggles for LGBTQ equality'; and h) the 'economic significance gay people have in relation to the general kinship order', etc.

When asked about the significance 'way of life' has for him after determining his gay identity in those terms, a younger Macedonian gay man said:

Socializing with gay people, I am interested in things connected with LGBTQ rights. I fight daily in a certain way for progress, I have no idea. Let's say from listening to music, to places where I go out, it is all related to the gay life we live in Skopje. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

The same interviewee later on defined his gender identity as genderqueer, through which he emphasized:

Genderqueer, I refuse to accept roles that are traditionally considered to be male or female. I cannot say about me that I am a man or a woman... I am not interested in and I don't do things recognized as male, like for instance, sport, physical activities, nor do I do female things. I am annoyed by the division of male and female things. I am also annoyed by women who refuse to do more difficult physical chores only because they are women, while they are physically more capable than me. I cannot say about myself if I am a man or a woman.

What is significant to emphasize is that all of these three participants consider themselves as being part of the gay community, whereby this belonging is not understood across the lines of shared sexual orientation exclusively, as most of the other self-identified gay and bisexual interviewees noted, but most significantly on the grounds of the shared abjected and socially excluded status and political position in the general order. In these terms, the third informant says:

Probably it is the political aspect or actions you take when you don't speak only in your name but in the name of the community... When you place your sexuality in a political context you can't speak about yourself only, but about something broader that identifies you—probably this is a gay community. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

II.5. Normalization

In the course of the interviews, the majority of participants did insistently point towards multiple axes of differentiation with other gay man, including individual and personal differences, class, vocation, life-styles, 'fairies' ('тетки' in Macedonian), accentuating one's gayness and one's sexuality, feminine and sexual excess, sexual/gender role in the sexual act (active/passive), gender identity and expression (drag queens, transvestites, transsexuals), sexual identity, modes of practicing one's sexuality (hunks, twinks, bears, 'terminalki', whores, masseurs), etc. Interesting to note is that some of the most frequent distinctions the interviewees make among MSM are based on grounds of confidentiality, i.e. their proneness to gossiping or disseminating/disclosing information related to one's intimacy, sexuality, emotions and identity, or those who break the vow of silence and 'discreetness'. In general, what seems to align together most of the frequent distinctions is the complicity/deviation pair related to the masculine norm, or even more precisely, their complicity/exception from heterosexist and homonegative discourse on homosexuality.

A possible conclusion that might be drawn from this tendency is that the in-group differentiation reflects the heteronormative discourses on homosexuality and same-sex acts, which is to say the stereotyping and colonizing discourses of othering and fetishisation through which all individual differences and nuances are reduced to the gender-inverted projection of the homosexual being. This is even more indicative considering the negative and ridiculing attitude they express towards the nominated sub-categories. The descriptions they use for defining these sub-categories operate with the vocabulary of "excessiveness in sexual and gender expression", "flaunting with their sexuality", "too feminine", "demanding attention", "attracting attention", etc. On the other hand, these divisions they make and their descriptions seem to undermine the previous claims made by some of the interviewees in relation to gender roles, since, unlike their claims on the erasure of essentialist gender accounts, their utterances on 'feminine' gay men seem to reflect gender normativity, including the bodily comportment, manner of dress, talk and manners of interaction assigned as appropriate to each of the binary defined genders. Following Goffman, we can claim that these frames of perception and cognition are determined as stigma, embarrassment and shame effects. Embodying the signs of stigma, disgrace and exclusion and collective representations of the disqualifying attribute in their visible appearance, they represent a reminder of one's discreditable social status, a stigma cue that initiates the triggering of shame, hence distancing, withdrawal and differentiation and dis-identification as a means of protecting and maintaining one's social status and deference, which can only be granted depending on complicity with an adoption of deference and prestige symbols and rules of interaction and behavior.

At times this might lead to acts of in-group purification and attempts at normifying, cleaning up and normalizing the conduct of others, as attested by the story of one of the interviewees who has come to adopt a change in his gender behavior, a 'correction' which has been induced by corrective remarks made by one of his gay friends. As Goffman (1963) argued persuasively: "He (the stigmatized) may prefer surreptitiously to realize the other person's secret and to maintain a gentlemen's agreement that both should play their 'as if' roles to having the other person challenge his pretence by confiding his own."

This position becomes even more emphasized when some of these same interviewees point to 'negative representatives' of the gay community individuals like Boki 13, or 'excessively dressed' people on gay parades, again using the same argument of overexposure and appeal for attention. One Macedonian bisexual informant distanced himself with a dose of disgust from gay promiscuity, attributing it as an imported commodity from Western gay culture:

You can't say that all gays are promiscuous whores, they aren't. Let's take the West for example, a movie from the West, let's say "Queer as Folk", I can't stand the film. Here, the race is to fuck as many people as possible. I reject this, I don't belong to something like this. I don't have a feeling that I am part of something like that, a community like that. Or to dress in really tight clothes and parade, so my ankles will look like [...inaudible...], no. I act the way I feel. (Bisexual Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

On the other hand, those who seem to be discredited for their gossiping inclinations and for breaking the vow of discreetness are likely to be grouped under a single category (and they are often conflated with those who are characterized as 'fairies' 'flaunting their sexuality', hence those making the disqualifying attribute obtrusive) because of the threat they represent to information management strategies and the protection of one's social identity and status, representing the danger of contagion of the fragile boundaries of audience segregation, and the strategies for keeping the secret by means of 'collusion' and thus negotiating identity in accordance with the social context.

The core underlying strategy that underlies these attitudes, perceptions and differentiations towards/of the gay community among our participants is, we assume, the tendency for normalization. While on one side of the spectrum

are those participants whose sexual and gender identification is marked by the masculine and heteronormative paradigm, hence using normalization strategies to reassert the supremacy of their identification and of the hegemonic gender and sexual order as unmarked common sense, on the other side of the spectrum there are the self-identified gays and bisexual men as well as a few self-identified gay men who refuse to use the label of homosexuality as their representational identity and confine sexuality to the strongly defended domain of privacy. Amongst the second group of normalizing subjects, sexual morality seems to have not only the function of controlling the sexual lives of others but also, more importantly, to say something about themselves and their own sexual morality at the same time as saying something about others. Raising their self-image, they indirectly put down others considered as representing shame and excessiveness or everything that heteronormative society finds to be discreditable in them as homosexuals as well. Social psychologists call this type of claim to one's moral superiority 'downward comparison.' (Fischer 2011: 39) As G. Rubin points out in "Thinking Sex", the politics of sexual stigmas and regulations sort good sex from bad sex through a series of hierarchies like good, normal, natural, heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, in a relationship, in private, same generation, no pornography, etc., and on the other side all the opposite terms that would attribute the paradigm of bad, abnormal and unnatural. In a significant number of texts there is a noticeable tendency to classify homosexuals in the first class.¹⁷

The normal gay is presented as fully human, as the psychological and moral equal of the heterosexual, and accordingly gays should be integrated (...) as respected citizens. However, the normal gay also serves as a narrow social norm. This figure is associated with specific personal and social behaviours. For example, the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride. Although normalization makes it possible for individuals to conduct lives of integrity, it also establishes a moral and social division among gays. Only normal gays who conform to dominant social norms deserve respect and integration. Lesbians and gay men who are gender benders or choose alternative intimate lives will likely remain outsiders. ... The normal gay implies a political logic of tolerance and minority rights that does not challenge heterosexual dominance.

Including the strategy of normalization as an integral part of our analysis of sexuality and sexual identity among men having sex with men has been simply forced by its insistent occurrence, even obsessively on occasions, throughout the majority of the interviews. The initial themes that were organized under the concept of normalization in the interviews included references to: a) normal life as separated from purposely organized groups and parties of gay people; b) personal difference from other gay people as marker of their having a common, normal life; c) approving of the public visibility of same-sex intimacy exclusively if being purified from vulgarities; d) differentiation from the gay stereotype; e) self-differentiation from hypersexual, shallow and sexually unhealthy gay men, f) insistent self defining as normal men; g) discomfort with the political alignment of gay men with transsexuals and other sexual 'perverts'; h) contempt towards gender-inverted communication between gay men; and i) the pursuit of a respectable public job as a counterforce to sexual shaming politics.

¹⁷ In a text from 2002, Seidman would explicate these practices of normalization in the following way: The normal gay is presented as fully human, as the psychological and moral equal of the heterosexual, and accordingly gays should be integrated (...) as respected citizens. However, the normal gay also serves as a narrow social norm. This figure is associated with specific personal and social behaviors. For example, the normal gay is expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride. Although normalization makes it possible for individuals to conduct lives of integrity, it also establishes a moral and social division among gays. Only normal gays who conform to dominant social norms deserve respect and integration. Lesbians and gay men who are gender benders or choose alternative intimate lives will likely remain outsiders. ... The normal gay implies a political logic of tolerance and minority rights that does not challenge heterosexual dominance.

One Macedonian gay man of above average social status said the following:

In any case, sexuality should be intimate. I even think that the manner in which homosexuals seek their rights today is wrong. This is not the 60s, 70s or 80s where an occurrence has to be manifested in order to be noticed. Today maybe we need parades to show how similar we are, not how different. I am also not pleased with the idea that everything has to be classified under the definition "gay", like the transvestites and transsexuals and freaks, it is fine that we all have our freedom, but I have nothing in common with them except that we have sex with men, with an exhibitionist or a transvestite or, you know? Why should we parade together? I never liked that identification when gay people speak of themselves in feminine gender. It's quite different when they joke. But people from the gay population, a large group of them like to address themselves in feminine, and this creates repulsion, the humour quickly disappears and what remains is a strange atmosphere, which is not funny, especially when there are men who aren't effeminate at all in this company. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Interestingly, these statements confirm Michael Warner's claim that the politics of the contemporary gay movement have become antipolitics and that they "have lost sight of that politics, becoming more and more enthralled by respectability. Instead of broadening its campaign against social stigma beyond sexual orientation, as I think it should, it has increasingly narrowed its scope to those issues of sexual orientation that have least to do with sex. Repudiating its best histories of insight and activism, it has turned into an instrument for normalizing gay men and lesbians" (Warner 1999).

The possibility of multiple and alternative sexual identification based on grounds different from object choice (pleasure, sexual practices, sexual life-styles, eroticization of different body part, political position, etc.) is also excluded from the horizon of thinking sexual identity.

II.6. Sexual Encounters

The everyday organization of their sexual lives and the life routines in managing information for the purpose of protecting themselves from stigma and discrimination effectuates the way sexual encounters and relationships are made possible and realized. The focus groups provided the information that the most prominent ways in which sexual and intimate contacts and encounters are being realized is through internet and social networks (all of the focus groups), friendship environments and social life (the Macedonian group with above average social status), nightlife, phone calls and arrangements with persons already known to be gay (Roma and Albanian focus groups), cruising areas, SMS on TV, through networks of friends (the Macedonian group with below average social status).

The homosocial and masculine hegemonic demand for sexual reputation limits the possibility of finding sexual partners to the available internet dating sites and secretive networks of friends. The lack of involvement in or development of any kind of sexual sociality and culture restrains the possibility of engaging in other forms of seduction, eroticism, attraction, communication, and thus of dwelling in a space with bodily encounters and direct contacts, like nightclubbing life, coffee bars, gay friendship circles, gay-friendly bars, etc. Since most of the Albanian, Roma, and some of the below average status Macedonian interviewees identified gayness as being determined by forming and participating in a certain type of sociality and sexual environment, which is to say a certain alleged homosexual lifestyle and salient effeminacy, being the distinction mark for their overemphasized masculinity and heterosexuality, their gender performance is founded on the grounds of exclusion and repudiation of these 'dangerous' and identity-porous

surroundings. In this way their sexual horizons are enclosed in the anonymous space of virtual identity plays, a space which provides a safe zone for maintaining one's masculinity and sexual reputation, self-presenting oneself as the masculine penetrating agent with no danger of being associated with the 'faggot slam'. More extensive analysis of this phenomenon has been provided in the previous chapters in the frames of the analysis of homosociality and gender identity.

The three Macedonian focus groups including older and younger men with above average social status who have already shown a higher degree of community involvement and identifications enlist a wider range of opportunities for sexual encounters of establishing contacts and initiating same-sex relationships. Besides internet sites, their list includes also public spaces like clubs, coffee bars and nightlife venues and occasions, as well as gay friendship networks. The internet medium is noted as exclusively a site for one-night-stand opportunities, while emotional involvement and forming of relationships is more tightly related to the other spaces.

II.7. Sexual Pleasure

Among the Albanian group of participants over 30 years of age and with below average social status there prevails the identification of sexual pleasure with the successive phases of sexual intercourse, in which successiveness of acts and tenderness, i.e. caressing during sexual intercourse, are emphasized. This group of participants states that their frequency of sexual intercourse is from twice a week to twice a month. One informant demonstrates fantasies for such sexual intercourses in other countries, stressing that in his surrounding this type of intercourse is impossible.

If I find an ideal guy, I would do anything, kissing, caressing, oral sex, anal sex. It is difficult to find guys like that in Macedonia, only in Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece. Whenever I go there I have great sex. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

I enjoy good foreplay. I want to be on fire, then have oral sex, and finally fucking, which I want to last, since when I already want sex I don't want it to be simple instinct, but enjoyment. I can have good sex twice a month. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

Younger Albanians from the same social groups are almost unanimous in their statements that the crucial thing for satisfying sexual intercourse is the partner's looks (regardless of whether the partner is a man or a woman), though also the partner's skills in making love. Only one of them stated that emotions and love matter, while the rest stated that they perceive the partner as an object with certain physical characteristics who is able to perform certain sexual activities, mostly passive, which have the aim of pleasing the informant. In other words, the partner should know "his/her role". However, this type of sexual intercourse, as many of the participants stated, does not occur often:

A good fuck is a good fuck, the partner has to be good and know what he is doing, to know his role. Well, no, some aren't good at all. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

It should be stressed that most of the participants have regular intercourse with women and do not identify themselves as gay.

I am a sexually active male, who fucks everything in his way, be they gay, faggots. But, I am not. I simply fuck them, when I don't have a girlfriend. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

In response to the question about the sexual pleasure, young Albanians with above average social status answered quite differently from the rest of the Albanian participants, indicating the importance of all aspects of sexual intercourse, including physicality but also intimacy, closeness and relationship with the partner. This not only contributes to "being relaxed" but according to them is the main reason for having frequent intercourse filled with pleasure:

A nice guy, pretty face, pretty smile, good teeth and good body. Well, at the moment I am seeing my boyfriend and we have very good sex. We've been together for two and a half months, but before that there was nothing special.
(Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

The reasons given for not achieving pleasure by the participants from the Albanian group included the partner's hygiene, insufficient cosmetic maintenance of the body (*hair not removed*), possible psychological problems, daily problems, debt worries, and fear of the possible occurrence of violence. Very rarely, the use of condoms is cited as a barrier to pleasure. An interesting statement is that a barrier can be the practice of discourse during sex, i.e. when the partner "interrupts" intercourse by talking, though also the use of verbal violence.

Talking, insulting words, beating, things like that. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

When the partner talks during sex, the sexual pleasure decreases for me, and hygiene is also an important factor for sex. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

We would like to stress the statement of a younger informant from this group who indicates self-condemnation as the main factor in the inability to achieve pleasure:

After sex I often regret doing it. (Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

The danger of revealing sexual orientation was indicated as a possible barrier to a fulfilled love life within the ethnic community from the Albanian focus group:

Sexual orientation can be a barrier. Ethnicity as well. For instance if he is an Albanian I can be afraid of him. (Albanian Focus Group participant)

In their statements on the question of sexual pleasure with male and female partners, younger participants from the Roma community of below average social status indicated their preferred manner of performing sexual intercourse, including whether they preferred oral or anal sex. Also, they stated that their pleasure could be related to gradual foreplay, seduction and successive "rough or tough" sex. Almost half of them stressed that feelings have great importance, including mutual pleasure with the partner, while one emphasized the romantic relationship:

When something is romantic. Well, I don't know, a lovely dinner, a nice room, candles, this is generally romantic for me. While for good sex... a good man. A man who can seduce you with a look, a word, not a stupid guy, with a conversation. Someone passionate who knows what fucking is, who knows how to fuck, knows how to put it in, and pull it out, rough sex. Both of them should fuck well. (Roma Below Average Status, Under 30)

Asked how often they encountered such sexual intercourse, most of the participants stated that it happens often. While one informant stated that this was the case with every sexual intercourse they had, a larger part of the group gave a number of once to twice a week, while only the informant who considered pleasure part of a romantic atmosphere stated that this happened rarely.

There was an interesting statement from an informant (with below average social status and over 30) who claimed that bodily attraction was the most significant but that satisfying intercourse within the community occurred very rarely because of the mechanical realization of the phases in sexual intercourse and lack of intimacy and relaxation:

Well, very rarely... I don't know. Usually I think that the Roma population doesn't have that "full" sex you know, coming together, foreplay, and this completely minimizes my pleasure in sex. It just doesn't exist. People only fuck, and have oral sex and that is it. There isn't some other pleasure we could achieve in sex. (Roma, Below Average Status, Over 30)

One informant over 30 years of age but with higher social status emphasized the importance of protection, i.e. sexual intercourse in which partners feel safe because they use condoms and because of the trust between the partners:

Good sex, good sex – safe sex. For example using a condom during sex... Having trust in the other person, having anonymous sex between the two of us, good sex. Well, not very often, but 70% mostly I have good sex, I enjoy. (Roma, Above Average Status, Under 30)

The Roma group of participants stated that the main barrier for achieving pleasure during the sexual act was the lack of private locations—intimate locations that are not the “bedroom”—and the need to have sexual intercourse outdoors.

Location. It can decrease my pleasure when it is outside, if I am fucked in a bush, this decreases my pleasure, someone can pass by and... I mean, this decreases my pleasure. It's completely different when you are indoors, you can completely relax. This is when the pleasure during sex for me is complete. (Roma, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Well now, it's different in an indoors space from the street. The street is no good, you have to be careful... the last time, for example, I had sex with a woman in a house that was being built and I didn't feel good, it was uncomfortable, you feel good, but it's just not it, you can't do anything, move or things, you know what I mean? ((Roma, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Furthermore, the participants stressed the influence of the partner's characteristics, i.e. their appearance, hygiene, behaviour, previous experiences and sexual skills. Although some mentioned the use of condom as a possible cause of reduced pleasure, there is the opinion that condom use does not make much difference. Some of the younger participants stated that the use of drugs influenced their pleasure, so they use marijuana, rather than heroin, to help them relax from the daily stress.

The mood is the most important for the entire sex. If you aren't in a good mood and didn't get enough sleep the sex is no good because you won't feel good when you are tired. So the mood itself determines the sex. In situations when you are stoned, then you feel more relaxed and sex is much better. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

In the case of the majority of Roma interviewees (the focus groups in particular), the dominative masculine position became emphasized when talking about their sexual encounters with gay men, even though they fit perfectly their image of masculinity, being defined as the repudiation of intimacy, relationship and emotional investment. Namely, their descriptions of sexual encounters are flooded with masculine sexual rhetoric exhibiting masculine sexual potency and power, as well as the homosocial share in mutual self-reflection. It seems as if the joint conquering of the submissive territory requires the gaze and respectable confirmation from other men in the homosocial brotherhood so that the 'looking-glass self' (Cooley) can be immediately reflected and secured in its masculinity for-itself. Their utterances overemphasized their active role in arranged sexual (fuck) encounters, represented themselves as the ones who are

invited in all their potent glamour to satisfy the demanding and subordinate needs of the anally hypersexualized faggot, or in some cases invited and seduced by the feminine nature of the passive gay. Finally, in this domain of this almighty insertive subjectivity, tenderness is represented as the highest object of disgust and abjection (no kissing allowed). A similar trend has been noticed also among the majority of Albanian interviewees, the focus groups in particular, and the individual interviewees who identifies their sexual identity with the insertive and active sexual role and the hegemonic masculine position, although there are salient differences in the language used to describe sexual encounters and sources of sexual pleasure. The prevailing sexual and dominative language is counterpoised among significant number of interviewees, mostly self-identified gay or bisexual men, and younger Albanian interviewees, with sensual language in describing the fulfilling sexual act and sexual pleasures.

In their statements on pleasure during sexual intercourse, Macedonian participants under 30 years of age with below average social status listed the most desirable ways of making love and stressed the physical (*I get turned on by a man's eyes*) and other, different characteristics of partners, such as education. However, most of them indicated the value of a quality relationship established with the partner.

I don't know, let's say when there is some magic, spontaneity, when it doesn't look like a porn movie and the action is like a pattern or a concept. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Similar statements recorded among few of the participants contribute to this conclusion. According to them they often achieve pleasure during sexual intercourse, and the reason for this is an intimate and relatively regular relationship with the partner.

There has to be an intimate connection with the person for good sex. He has to mean something to me, otherwise I can't do it and it's difficult for me. [...] Since I've been in a monogamous relationship at the moment. [...] Yes, often. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

For the others who indicate the phases of the sexual relationship among the features of pleasure, and for the only informant who claimed to achieve greater sexual pleasure with his wife, the frequency of pleasurable sexual intercourse varies from *every time to average*.

Statements regarding satisfactory sexual intercourse that related exclusively to the partner's physical appearance and size of penis could be also perceived among the group of participants over 30 years of age with below average social status. Here, the frequency of pleasurable sexual intercourse varies from once a month to twice a week.

He should be handsome, with a good body, and a beautiful face. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

The main reasons for not achieving pleasure range from too much sexual intercourse (*For example when I have sex 3-4 times a day, it might decrease the pleasure*), daily routines (*Everyday problems, when I start thinking of them during sex...*), the use of stimulating substances (*sometimes when I consume too much alcohol*), then the partner's behaviour (*Well if the person I am having sex with makes me angry*) or other intimate relationships the partner has (*there was a problem, he was married*). (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The barrier Risky most mentioned in the statements was that of locations for sexual intercourse:

Well, for example, let's say you are having sex in a car, first consider the space itself, you are tense because someone might come, the police or something like that. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The place is important, for example I can't have sex outdoors, regardless whether it is out in nature or someplace else, I want an indoors space, where we can be alone and relaxed. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

In addition, the places and the ways in which partners are looked for, as well as the kind of communication had with partners, can also influence intercourse:

For example, when you meet someone at 'the terminal' or somewhere else, you never know what you get, I mean, you have no idea how the thing will continue because there are some who doesn't want to kiss, or doesn't want to give blowjobs, something I like for example. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The unfavourable homonegative social environment and conditions that determine the manner in which sexual and intimate encounters with other men are made possible and limit them evidently also implicitly determine the obstacles to pleasure-seeking and sexual fulfilment. Namely, lack of intimate space makes it necessary to explore other, secretive and open, yet not publicly recognized spaces for managing sexual encounters and feeling sexual pleasure. The lack of free conditions and privately organized intimate environments prevents the organization of sensual, romantic and emotional sexual scenes, which seem to dominate the sexual and intimate imagery of the participants, and consequently prevents the possibility of establishing a fulfilling and pleasurable sexual life. Considering that love, intimacy and sexual pleasure can be fully developed through the support of social environments, this conclusion becomes much clearer. As Tim Edwards has argued:

These limits are essentially applied on two mutually supporting and perpetuating levels. First, on the level of institutional discrimination as same-sex meeting places do not occupy the same prevalence as their opposite-sex counterparts and, on top of this, the workplace and often the home are implicitly heterosexual... the difficulty quite clearly is first, fears of rejection and retaliation; second, interpersonal or group pressures and conflicts; and third, actual institutional discrimination. In addition, this sense of deviance can have its psychic consequences as the gay existence is often dominated with a sense of distance or difference that can potentially create a psyche so convinced of its isolation that relationships are put under particular stress and intensity. (Edwards 1994: 107)

Regarding the use of condoms, after an additional question by the interviewer, all participants stated they were aware that it decreases pleasure. However, they didn't indicate it as a particular and insurmountable obstacle.

As opposed to this, an informant of the age of 30 with below average social status cited the condoms as the main obstacle:

I personally don't use a condom, I don't have that feeling... I can't have an orgasm. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

The participants from the Macedonian group under the age of 30 with above average social status indicated in their statements that the primary pre-condition for achieving sexual pleasure is a comprehensive understanding with the partner regarding physical attraction, understanding of mutual sexual needs, even if they are different, including feelings and love.

The sex where only one of the partners is satisfied isn't good sex. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Well, I don't know, probably both of us should be dedicated to what is going on and to targeting the partner's needs from both sides, to give the pleasure that he wants or that I want. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

[...] filled with love, passion and emotions, passion is very important, as well as love. The best sex I have ever had was with the person I love the most, a person with whom I am emotionally connected. It is the most important moment for me. I understand sex as a way of expressing emotions, etc. I don't think of it as an animal instinct. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Interestingly, for some of the participants in this group the attention paid to communicating the other's needs is not strictly related to constant partners. Rather the partner's needs and feelings are always important, even with a causal partner: e.g. *Sex where only one partner is satisfied isn't good sex*, or *It doesn't have to matter whether you are with the constant partner or a causal partner*.

The statements around the reasons for the frequency of this type of sexual intercourse vary. Similar to other groups, some indicate that pleasurable intercourse is achieved more often in a steady intimate relationship. One informant even indicated that it was crucial for achieving a steady relationship:

You know what, when you are in a relationship I think it is more likely to have good sex, because if you don't have good sex you won't start a relationship. While if you are with some random faces and sex dates, without knowing the person, I am not sure if I can have a good sex, unless you've been with the partner before. So, I don't know, according to me it is relative, I think that it depends mostly on whether you are in a relationship or not.

(Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Responses differed as to how often sexual intercourse was pleasurable, with some saying this happens daily, some twice a month, and others very rarely. We would like to indicate the statement of one informant who claims not to have this type of intercourse often: his opinion is that *It doesn't have to be often, as long as it's good*. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

The main reasons indicated in this group as obstacles to achieving pleasurable intercourse are lack of hygiene and daily problems. Location is mentioned by only one informant, while, similar to both groups, the opinion is also present that while condom might be a problem they are not the main obstacle.

It can be many things. Lack of hygiene, using a condom, daily problems. Most often it happens that the sexual pleasure decreases when in the middle of sex I start thinking of what preoccupies me, and I can't concentrate.

(Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Generally speaking, no, because when I use a condom it is with a new partner and you are always passionate then and I have never felt that this has decreased my passion. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

In the following statement, among other listed problems, similarly to the Albanian group, there is the fear of revealing information about sexual orientation and of possible further stigmatization.

Trust with the partner is important. I have to trust him that he won't gossip around the whole of Skopje.

(Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

The older Macedonians participants of above average social status, similar to those under 30, prioritized bonding and mutual understanding with the partner.

In order to have good sex with somebody you have to know this person very well. Or you need to be in a relationship with this person, so to know him pretty well, to have the daily energy and fluid that functions between the two of you and to surrender to the beauty that is the act of love and sex. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Only this can provide *intensive long sex or mutual and good orgasms*. Some of the participants consider feelings to be the main pre-condition for bonding (*It might sound stupid, but for me a good sex is when emotions are included*), i.e. the communication is non-verbal (*when both enjoy and there's no need to speak, when the communication is bodily and sufficient*). (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

All participants stated that this type of intimate relationship was rare, while the frequency was directly conditioned by whether or not they were in a relationship, when the pleasure is achieved very often.

Regarding obstacles to achieving pleasure, the response of the older Macedonian group of participants with above average social status who had experience of living together in a relationship was specific. Contrary to the other groups, where the obstacles indicated were mostly related to one-time sex or short-term relationships, this group mostly gave statements related to intimate and long-term relationships. Thus, here the problems are typical of the misunderstandings and usual problems in a long-term relationship that influence the quality of intercourse and sex life. Among others, they list tiredness, work obligations and daily problems that prevent them from being with their partner.

When you are in a relationship and you share things, sometimes you have sex mechanically, you can feel this, and it happens.

If it's related to some personal complexes, conversation about certain things, but this is in the context of a relationship. In a relationship all of a sudden you can start a conversation about jealousy... (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

An additional difficulty cited was that of finding the right partner and this was indicated as a barrier to intimacy and thus for pleasure as well. One informant pointed to location as a major barrier, but this was mostly related to safety:

It is important that the sex is safe. For me the location is important, and the partner, of course, as I already mentioned, (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Interesting to note is that in an almost opposite manner from the previously elaborated interviewees, this group of interviewees related sexual pleasure to emotional exchange and romantically organized intimacies. There were, however, more salient variations in the mapping of pleasure-seeking sources, including passion, initiative, seduction, flirtation, pure sexual relations with no emotions, penis size, tenderness, and fidelity/devotion. Only two interviewees, younger Macedonian men, cited mutual agreement on sexual experimentation and exploration of alternative pleasures, including SM sexual practices.

Considering the list of pleasurable sexual relations and the related sources they draw upon, a possible conclusion is that this group of interviewees is more inclined towards romanticized and bourgeois models of sexual pleasure-seeking and gratification. The capturing of a multiplicity of pleasure sources and intensity capacities and the potential of the body cartography under the flag of general emotionality (can be correlated to various sources. Amongst these, including the cultural codes for sexuality determined in monogamous and devotional love relationships, the cultural codes of romanticized sexuality, all of which have been captured in the heterosexual binary and thus have deprived same-sex intimacies of access to this sacred domain. Following this last line of argumentation, another possible hypothesis can be derived. This explanation circulates around phantasmatic and melancholic investment in the lost object of desire, hence impregnating the heterosexual norm with surplus and excessive value, wherein the same is incorporated as one's idealized and ultimate emotional and cathectic attachments (a thesis previously put forward by Heather Love, Wendy Brown, Douglas Crimpt, Leo Bersani, Michael Warner).

Worth noting, also, are the differences between the ethnically and class marked groups in their perceptions of possible barriers to achieving full sexual pleasure. While the Macedonian interviewees placed greater emphasis on issues related to personal matters (lack of intimate space, nausea, daily preoccupation, personal insecurities, everyday concerns and problems, alcohol, bad moods, not feeling comfortable, etc.) as well as individual sexual incommensurabilities between the sexual partners, the other groups pointed to obstacles with their origins in social background or that are

determined more or less by cultural determinants, codes and fears. We could mention as representative examples the fear of a sexual partner being of the same ethnicity and thus exposing and endangering one's sexual reputation and social status, the fear of a person gossiping or being indiscreet, cultural codes of cleanliness and purity, fear of HIV and STIs, the sexual partner being promiscuous, fear of strangers and their phantasmatic association with diseases, HIV in particular. etc., all of which seem to be highly correlative to collective representations and fears, morality codes, cultural norms of normalcy and sexual prohibitions, social competence and status, etc. However, we should not be naively misled to reaching a quick conclusion that would place the first group on the other side of ideology, norm and collectivity, free choices and individualist voluntarism. One needs to examine more closely the impact that neo-liberal and modernization processes have had on the formation of the individualist type of personality, the certain class privileges enjoyed by these groups and the opportunities as well as enforcement these socio-political processes open or exert on their formation and the alleged detachment from social dependency granted by these very same privileges, as much as the contemporary hegemonic images disseminated about gay subjectivity. The dominance of individualist culture will also be evident in the following discussion on bypassing shame experiences, much more evident in the Macedonian group of participants, unlike the Roma, and particularly, the Albanian participants, who speak much more openly about cultural codes and community norms as important for their social being.

III. Stigma and Shame, Social Interaction and Community Involvement

III.1. Stigma and Shame as Social Effect- Introductory and Epistemological Clarifications

The data provided regarding the Macedonian political, social and legal context in which we situated the sexually minoritarian practices, behaviours and identities needs to be taken into consideration when determining the context within which the interviews' utterances will be situated.

The greatest threat that behavioural studies pose is the reification and privatization of stigmatizing experiences and the complex of negative and painful emotions correlated with stigma and insulting experiences without going into in-depth analyses of the socio-psychological complexities involved in stigmatizing experiences, thus fetishizing emotions as the burden of the individual and consequently reinforcing the political strategy of social division between individual heroes and weak personalities, disguising the histories of inequality as the source of the unequal distribution of emotions (Protevi 2011) and affects across the social field.

Goffman begins his classic study on the Stigma and spoiled identities produced through stigmatizing social relations by strongly emphasising that he uses the term stigma "to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor or confirms the usualness of another, and therefore is neither credible nor discredible as a thing in itself" (Goffman 1963: 12). In the same recourse, many sociologists have strongly emphasized that 'private' emotions and the complexities of the interactional world (J. Turner 2007), individual psychology and the networks of social relationships and distribution of goods and recognition in society are deeply interwoven and that, as such, "the individual is unavoidably social." (Barbalet 2001: 104)

Following the work started by Goffman and preceded by Durkheim, Randal Collins also defines the individual as a transient and transforming flux in time and the dynamics of social situations, whose partial and temporary sedimentations of recognizable self are the effect of the iteration of certain interactional rituals congealed into interactional ritual chains. Individual differences are thus not considered as being virtues in themselves or discreditable

personalities, but rather the result of different pathways of the interactional chains in which one has participated. Hence the individual self is not the determinant but rather the "precipitate of past interactional situations and the ingredient of each new situation" (Collins 2004: 5). The decline in the importance of social ties and relations was significantly introduced with the rise of Modernity and capitalism, although it has not diminished its constitutive role for the individual and his/her particular emotion as the sacred object of every interactional ritual of Modernity. Thomas J. Scheff (1990), one of the most prominent sociologists of shame and emotions, also claims that the social tie and bond with others, its maintenance and threat upon it, constitute the fundamental source of human motivation, interaction, self-presentation, monitoring of one's actions and the emotions emerging in it. According to Scheff, pride and shame are the most prominent human emotions that testify to the importance and meaning of the social bond, being the "intense and automatic bodily signs of the state of one's bonds with others." (Scheff 1990: 14) Reflected appraisals—i.e. the views of others which an individual takes upon him/herself, or the individual's perception of how others perceive their appearance and the imagined judgment they have of them (the 'looking-glass self' of Charles Cooley)—form the core that triggers the emotions of shame and pride and are the driving motor of society and social interactions.

Although Elias claims that shame is, by its very nature as a social emotion affirming the social interdependency of people, the most powerful emotion of the civilizing process, Modernity has repressed shame, its expression and avowal, while simultaneously inculcating it automatically in children. Hence in the modern era the adult not only maintains his/her relations with others with the permanent hang of shame on his face, but even more feels ashamed of being ashamed and embarrassed as not coinciding either with the masculine ideal of independency and autonomy and bodily impenetrability, or with the contemporary imperatives of individualism. The suppression of the social and political reflection, as well as individual self-reflection of the importance of self-feelings and their crucial indication of the social interdependence of the individual, is best illustrated by Cooley when claiming that self-feelings remain for all people as the "mainspring of endeavour and a chief interest of the imagination throughout life" and continues.

Before proceeding with our analysis after making this clarifications on the social and relational nature of feelings of shame and fear and stigma, we should just point to some of the analyses already made in the previous chapter on the privatization of sexual identity and the misperception of the heteronormativity of public spaces and the discomfort it triggers for those not complying with the norm that has shaped the contours of hegemonic publicity, and the consequent and unrecognized comfort of those in accordance with whose bodies these spaces have been shaped in disguised histories of equality. The 'not fitting in' and feelings of discomfort that non-normative sexual subjectivities and bodies experience in the variety of normative social situations and interactional frames means precisely to be affected "by that which persists in the shaping of bodies and lives", and the shame they feel expresses the "affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence" (Ahmed 2004: 155, 107). Consequently, the virtue made of necessity, or the pride felt by those subjects who approximate to the normative ideal, testifies to the tautological reflection of the ideal that they have embodied and that has already taken their shape.

III.2. Audience Segregation, Self-Presentation and Passing

Without exception, all of the interviews clearly showed that there is a cutting differentiation of one's self-presentation depending on social environment and the sexual and gender identity of the participants in the various social interactions in which our interviewees enter. Hence, salient role segregation and audience segregation (Goffman 1964) is determining their socialization processes, wherein negotiation and shifts in discourses have certain implications for the process of identity formation, identity salience and identity ambivalence. In this perspective, the

process of individuation and self-identification processes, including gender and sexual identifications, and the disclosure and presentation of one's non-heterosexual identity or sexual behavior have to be taken in their processual dimension, even sometimes following separate dynamics and logic. Identity thus needs to be conceived as a process of accommodation to the social world and not as a simple expression or disclosure of a pre-existing and disposing psychic or bodily force.

Audience and role segregation is much more strongly emphasized among those men who have sex with men and who disidentify with the homosexual identity position, or more strongly identify with the gender role based (hetero)sexual identity position. In this situation, what determines and leads the processes of segregation is the management of information related to one's sexual behaviour and same-sex practices. One Albanian informant with social said:

Of course I behave so as to not to be discovered for what I am doing and who I am. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

A clear division is made by participants between people who know about their sexual preferences and practices and people who do not know, in front of whom they present and comport themselves as masculine heterosexuals. Some of the Albanian interviewees emphasized that they make a clear-cut division even on the level of ethnicity, even avoiding sexual contacts with people of Albanian ethnicity because of the threat it involves to one's sexual reputation and social status and competence. One Albanian gay informant said:

It is the fear that makes me do something I am not. The fear keeps me under pressure that my family might find out, that no one would understand.

The social division established through the process of audience segregation is confirmed by a Macedonian informant with below average social status:

I hang out with people from both worlds, one might say. A world of normal guys. I also accept those who the need, they have to... er...[he corrects himself]... wants to have sex with a man... and normally with women. What I mean is, I have all kinds of friends. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

In the same context, one side of the dividing line involves exclusively sexual contacts with gay men in which social interaction and intimacy development are kept at the lowest level, while the other side involves homosocial interaction rituals marked by highly masculinised manners of organising socialization practices, homophobic gender performance and gender scrutinisation and policing, maintenance of solidarity, loyalty and brotherhood ideals where intimacy is excluded with the very same turn of its inclusion, which is to say intimacy sanitized from the possible sexualized and emotional excesses that might indicate a rupture of the masculine imagery and the entrance of signals of homosexuality. Another Albanian informant, bisexual with below average social status, testified:

I haven't changed my behaviour, since I am not effeminate, although when I was smaller I was more effeminate, but now I am careful. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The majority of the Albanian and Roma interviewees pointed to the masculinity determinants of the homosocial interaction in which they participate, the stigmatizing speech addressing 'faggots' and 'feminized' boys, and the hypersexualized identity talks marked by dominative and phallic masculine discourses. A younger gay Albanian informant said:

When I am with straight men, I have to look at girls in cafés, clubs, anywhere, I have to go and dance with girls, I have to drink from the bottle. When I am with gay friends I can dance the way I want to. (Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Some of the interviewees explicitly highlighted the shame feelings induced by the possibility of being seen with 'faggots' by their friends or close social environment and significant others, hence overemphasizing 'discreetness' as one of the major appreciation and valuation tools when approaching or establishing same-sex encounters. Thus:

Well of course it has an influence. When I want to bring someone new home for sex I am usually careful not to be seen by a neighbour on the street who might suspect something. I mean it depends on how the person looks, if he is effeminate there is no way because this would be as if I shouted though a load speaker who I am, I don't know... If somebody saw me in town with someone so transparent I wouldn't mind. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Same-sex encounters with no deeper social involvement in many cases serve the participants as a means of founding their own masculinity and self-differentiation from insertees or "feminine faggots". In extreme cases, as many of the Roma interviewees explained, this means treating them as objects for further confirmation of masculine sexual dominance and control, thus amplifying the domination gratifications he derives from penetrating females.

III.3. Gay Friendships and Affiliation Cycles

Other interviewees from these two groups have more nuanced and developed close relationships of friendship and love with other MSM and gays, and they assert these relationships to be a valuable source of emotional exchange, free space for conversation on topics different from those exercised in homosocial surroundings. Some of them claim a feeling of greater freedom in the MSM and homosexual friendship circles and the exercise of a more authentic version of themselves.

The socialization processes with other MSM and gay men should also be taken into consideration as a crucial part of the identity work involved in subcultural communities as well, especially considering the identity talks and subcultural codes of communication and recognition being generated and communicated in these forms of interactions. Correlation has been noted between one's self-identification and stronger/weaker identity commitments, and higher and more intensive involvement in interactions with other homo/bisexually identified friends.

The Macedonian participants also expressed a significant degree of role segregation and audience segregation as part of their daily routines in managing information. In the Macedonian groups of interviewees, however, stronger ties can be noticed being developed and nurtured with other MSM and gay people, the majority of whom are self-identified gay or bisexual men, unlike those participants whose sexual identification has been made across the gender normative lines or as normalized masculine and sexual position. A few Albanian self-identified gay and bisexual men also claimed to have established socialization with other gay and MSM, though mostly privatized, and they emphasized the importance of gay friendship:

They are very important for me, they are always here when I need them, they help me more than my family does. I can express myself freely in front of them, and we are very close. If we have 100 denars for a coffee we all have one; if not, nobody has one. (gay Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The social spaces involving MSM and other gays are mostly privatized spaces with no stronger public visibility or developed culture, yet they represent spaces of freedom and comfortable expression wherein information does not need to be managed and tensions do not need to be negotiated and resolved. Most of them experience these friendships as sources of intimacy, sharing, and emotional disclosure, non-prejudiced discussion of topics related to

sexuality and sexual pleasures and some of the most valuable things in their lives. Some of the interviews identify their gay friends as being their family, which has also been confirmed in many different researches on gay friendships before (Nardi). Several quotes from the interviews illustrate this conclusion:

Well of course I don't have the same relationship as with my gay friends. We can talk about many mutual topics, about a straight friend from our childhood, or where we go out, and share the news, but with my gay friends I can talk more freely about my intimate life. Whenever my straight friends ask me what's new I change the topic immediately and that's it. (gay Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Going out together, going everywhere together, eating together, watching TV together. We talk about everything: sex, music, politics, social issues, art, everything... We are interested in the same things in many aspects, we share the same problems, and this entails a close emotional attachment. Giving advice, emotions, everything, I cannot imagine a single day without my gay friends. (gay Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Yes, I can say, I feel 100% free, I am entirely fulfilled person in everything I do (with my gay friends). (gay Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Another important feature in socialization processes and friendships segregations is that most of the interviewees claimed strong similarities in their friendships with other MSM and gays and their friendships with girls, all of which create a context for more enjoyable and authentic socializing and a safe terrain for sharing emotional and sexual lives. Reasons for this can be found, on the one hand, in the sharing of similar sexual interests and experiences, but one should also point out the more egalitarian gender relations which mostly the self-identified gay/bisexual men practice and their distancing position towards hegemonic masculinity, as well as the shame protection strategy it represents, thus generating an environment for the healthy development of one's wellbeing.

However, one can also find identity ambivalence and 'affiliation cycles' involved in relations with MSM and homosexuals that might be highly dependent on the stigma markers and symbols attached to the stigmatized group used for their discrediting. For example, one of the interviewees with below average social status on several occasions throughout the interview emphasised the intriguing, distrustful and malicious nature of the homosexual community, although the person self-identifies as gay and shows 'effemalized' bodily comportment. The possible conclusion we draw is that these oscillations can be ascribed either on the grounds of their (the stigmatized) being reminder of the stigma symbols (promiscuity, conspiracy, self-hatred, pathology, gender inversion and effeminacy, etc.), hence failing to realize the demands for normalization or their inadequacy in fulfilling the over idealizing and in-group favouritism expectations they have been invested with in his personal projections and disappointment in failed expectations. This tendency and dramaturgy among stigmatized populations has already been persuasively elaborated and argued by Goffman. Namely, Goffman argued that stigmatized persons adopt and incorporate the viewpoint of the 'normal', enforcing the dominant identity belief of the wider society. Other stigmatized people 'flaunting' their stigma symbols represents a threat to the stigmatized person who tries his best to manage discreditable information because it "stirs up the guilt of having scorned his own group membership as well as the possibility of his own exposure. He may prefer surreptitiously to realize the other's person secret and to maintain a gentlemen's agreement that both should play their 'as if' roles to having the other person challenge his pretence by confiding his own." (Goffman 1963:110)

Another constant that has been noted among the interviewees is disavowal of the existing inequality in acceptance between the heterosexual and homosexual social/friendship environments, thus negating the perpetual management of tensions, followed by constant awareness and aliveness to various aspects of the social situation, in particular when calculating the quantity, content and dose of information shared about one's sexual life in order not to breach the

established and contracted situation of tolerance, acceptance and equality. Most of the interviewees who declared themselves to have disclosed their homo/bisexual identity to their heterosexual friends confirmed that they evade confessional moments or indulge only in controlled sharing of information related to their emotional, intimate and sexual life. In these situations they seem to negotiate the promise of equality which may sometimes look like the promise of keeping the difference that might expose them as being different, and thus not break the contract of abstract and universal equality between participants in the interaction rituals, and thus not be subjected to interactional misinvolvement.

The "phantom acceptance" which is evident in these situations may easily lead to the development of dependency relationships for the sake of maintaining the limits of acceptance and maintaining one's social competence and tolerance. That the effectuations of stigma and shame lead to expectancy-consistent changes (Fazio et al. 1981) in individuals' self-perception and behaviour is best exemplified in the utterances of a few of the interviewees showing different and discriminating attitudes towards heterosexuals' and homosexuals' sex talk and sexual bodily expression, applying the normalizing judgement exclusively to homosexual 'provocation' when disguising his sexuality in front of heterosexuals considered 'open' and tolerant. Being affirmative towards the urge for violence one of his colleagues expresses towards an openly homosexual colleague, our interviewee claims that this violent expression was justified because the other colleague was 'provoking' this reaction. When we asked them whether his colleague (the heterosexual one) would react in the same manner when a heterosexual colleague or friends was 'flaunting' his sexuality, they answered negatively, thus confirming the stigmatizing and normalizing attitude they show towards the obtrusive and open expression of stigma symbols by someone else from the stigmatized group, hence the phantom character of the acceptance they claimed before to characterize their heterosexual colleagues and friends.

It seems that there is an underlying contradiction in the claim that 'sex talk' in the company of 'normals' is something they voluntarily refrain from doing, or claiming "I have no need to talk about my personal and intimate life" while all the others in the company are doing so, or even more when they cast stigma on those from 'their own class', hence displaying incommensurable criteria in making appraisals. Again, Goffman has noted this strategy of 'in-group purification', describing the work done by stigmatized persons to normify 'their fellow beings' as well as the conduct of others in the group and to cleanse it of all unwanted elements that might be found to be disturbing for the comfort of heteronormative environments and threaten their efforts of passing. One of our Macedonian participants thus expresses his disgust towards the effeminate expressions with which gay men often address each other:

*But people from the gay population, a large group of them like to address themselves in feminine gender, and this creates repulsion, the humour quickly disappears and what remains is a strange atmosphere, **which is not funny, especially when there are men who aren't effeminate at all in this company.** (MKD AA O30)*

III.4. Shame, Conformity and Subversion

This last quotation refers us back to our previous remarks on the possible sources of hypermasculine accentuation in one's bodily comportment among gay men, which is to say how shaming experiences create the need for a respectable self-presentation within the terms provided by the normalizing majority. Klaus Theweleit (1987) has argued that after their humiliating defeat in World War I what the Germans needed as compensation for the experienced shame was the image of a male who could not be shamed, threatened, penetrated—who was not going to be exposable and vulnerable, a male capable of anything, a man of steel and metal. He further argued that this self-image of man was accompanied by its 'againstness' directed towards the feminine, as hate and denigration, or against

other threatening social groups portrayed as extensions of the hated feminine. Considering these other historical and collective experiences we can get closer to tracing the roots of the phenomenon under investigation, and it becomes even more elaborate when one considers the fact that denigration of effeminate man is even more successful because of their being the bearers of the shaming sign.

Martha Nussbaum has also argued that the insistence on calling oneself normal is based on the "need for a surrogate kind of safety or completeness. And those who call themselves "normals" find this safety in the idea of a group that is both widespread, surrounding them on all sides, and good, lacking in nothing. By defining a certain sort of person as complete and good, and by surrounding themselves with such people, normals gain comfort and the illusion of safety. The idea of normalcy is like a surrogate womb, blotting out intrusive stimuli from the world of difference." (Nussbaum 2004:218-9)

The expression of the discredited/discreditable difference, the sign of shame attached to the non-heterosexual bodies in popular imagery can sometimes become an extreme source of anger directed outwards towards the different, and become an indication of a selective and favourable interpretation of the situation so that one can bypass the feeling of shame causing a painful self-feeling, mostly hard to bear. Significant in this regards is the statement made by one informant, with a salient tone of rage, a Macedonian of above average status and over 30 years old whose interview was flooded with accent set on normality and the normal life he conducts:

Gay community? What is that? Does it really exist? ...Where is that gay community?...What kind of rights are they fighting for? We have exactly the same rights. I mean exactly the same rights. What is it that makes us different? Does something make us different? No! Only that we sleep a man with another man or a woman with another woman? Only this can make us different from the others, nothing else! So which rights? This is what we should discuss more, the danger for the so-called people in danger, because in my opinion no man is in danger, he himself makes it possible to be in danger... By distinguishing himself from the crowd. Because people, society is the crowd, one whole, but he is yelling, "I am gay, I will separate, I am different from the rest". How is he different? If he can explain what makes a man who sleeps with another man different from the rest, than maybe I can believe in some kind of gay community in the world. I see no difference, none. Just a biological need. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

The non-conformity or difference from the norm, in this statement, becomes the reason and effect in itself for social exclusion. What is implied is that the nation and its people are imagined as a unified and totalized whole allegedly representing normality itself and no difference is made possible—or, vice versa, any form of differentiation is imagined to naturally lead to threatening one's life. Violence becomes justified and the burden of guilt is transferred on difference itself. The problem is not in negating essentialized properties of sexual difference itself, but rather in negating the unequal social conditions through which different identities are constituted, some as the effect of ignorance of privilege and others as the negative effect of power mechanisms. His strong attachment to the ideal of normalcy is indicative in this case, in particular considering the anger and rage with which this stance is being expressed. Scheff has argued consistently that bypassing shame triggers in the majority of occasions anger/rage which further reinforces feelings of shame and so on in a vicious circle. In this vein, the example cited above seems to indicate the evasion of the possibility of shame which is possible to be raised if one faces the real and material divisions in society, divisions which break the imagined national whole into bad and good sexual subjects, the first of which hold the associative relation to his sexual desires and behaviour.

On the other hand, this example further confirms the claims made by numerous sociologists and cultural scholars that shame represents the main emotion contributing towards social compliance and conformity (Scheff 1990; Barbalet 2001; Ahmed 2004; Nussbaum 2004; Kemper 1978; Tomkins 1963; Asch 1956; Goffman 1963; Eribon 2004; Smith 1982). In the same interview we referred to in the previous section, the refusal to acknowledge the possibility of sexual citizenship by conferring political and social significance on sexual identity has been tightly linked to making it impossible for others to prove in situations of 'malicious gossiping'. The absence of experience of shame or insult or even discrimination is secured by confining one's sexual self in the shadow of privacy and unsayability and invisibility. Yet, as Didier Eribon has argued, "even if they have no concrete experience of it, they are nonetheless fully conscious of the fact that such a verbal attack is possible at any moment, that it is a threat forever present in their social life, that there is a risk it will plunge that life into unimaginable and even unbearable future." (Eribon 2004: 47) The 'flaunt' of the sign of difference as the stigma symbol thus bears the information of this future and the pain of shame, something that great efforts are being invested in to be eluded. However, stigmatization still persists in its effect although one has not been yet discredited actually. It is the fact of being discreditable that "acts on individuals both consciously and unconsciously as a subjectivizing force, a force of interiorized domination, all the more effective given the fear of being discovered and the self-censoring necessary in order to avoid being so" (ibid: 66).

Referring to already existing research and literature in the sociology of shame and stigma, we can claim that knowledge of cultural stereotypes affects behaviour through ideomotor processes or associative linkages in memory, assimilating behaviour in accordance with expectations and interaction rules, hence preventing the expression and inhibiting manifestation of behaviour that can lead to status incompetence or a break in the social bond (Lewis 1995, Tomkins 2008, Scheff 1990, 2000; Barbalet 2001; Kemper 1978). The shame triggered further redoubles itself at a meta level, inducing further shame, this time because of the same already felt, or because of the shame one feels because of having scorned one's group membership and the possibility of its exposure (Goffman) leading to bypassing shame and not acknowledging it (Scheff).

We should accentuate that these examples are the extreme cases of the whole spectrum of varieties of experiences of shame, fear and stigma. This variety includes multiple sources of shame as well as the multiple forms in which shame is expressed, channelled or bypassed. Throughout our interviews a great number of themes arose connected to experiences of shame, in the context of stigma, (insult, discrimination or violence because of one's sexuality, gender or identity) or experiences of fear. In trying to identify whether our participants had had these kinds of unpleasant experience we partly used the methodology developed by Scheff, Lewis and Gottschalk-Gleser method (1995), involving a list of key words correlated with specific emotions, in our case with the emotion of shame. Hence, we came out with approximately 50 themes that occurred and that could be related to experiences of shame and fear.

Relying on Scheff and Tomkins and many other sociologists, we decided to analyse shame as the bodily expression of experienced threat to the social bond, while the fear of such a threat is vaguely subsumed under the experiences of shame or the prevention of such experiences. Herein, the identified themes include: 1) exclusion of public appearance with 'transparent' gays; 2) feeling of fear and threat in certain interactions; 3) fear of gossiping; 4) fear and shame of possible divorce; 5) awareness of possible unpleasant feelings if others find out about one's sexuality; 6) fear of losing friends; 7) fear of disclosure and thinking of escape on such occasions; 8) fear of judgment by significant others; 9) fear of non-acceptance and abandonment by closest friends and family; 10) fear of being thrown out of home; 11) permanent self-monitoring and feeling of inappropriateness; 12) absolute negation of any experience of shame; 13) feeling bad and sad if others find out; 14) withdrawal in insulting situations; 15) explicit shame of one's own sexuality; 16) feeling 'down' because of not being able to respond to homophobic jokes; 17) fear of criticism and social judgment; 18)

evading conversations related to sexuality as a strategy of evading unpleasant situations; 19) feelings of humiliation and anger; 20) fear of disappointing others, etc.

Some of the themes point directly to experiences of shame, while many of them point to the anticipation of shame in situations considered unfavourable and anticipation of shame if the stigma symbols come to be 'revealed', whereby this anticipation heavily determines one's conduct in everyday interaction, self-feelings and self-presentation. All of the themes listed above were registered among all groups of participants, with no discrimination regarding their personal self-identification. Enacting various strategies of 'passing', most of the participants manage to protect themselves from actual insult or immediate shaming experience. However, a significant number of them have had severely traumatic shaming experiences caused by insult, or in extreme cases by violence and bullying. We provide a few quotes to illustrate this:

Yes, there used to be many such moments while I still lived in 'X' this happened and I felt powerless to say anything or to speak my mind. It was this inability that hurt me and destroyed me, the lack of knowledge and fear, yes. But now my surroundings are liberal so I can speak freely, I can do whatever I want freely. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

My childhood and the time at elementary school was like hell for me, beating, discrimination, public insults, humiliation in front of the teachers, or 200 people. 40 guys wanted to beat me and they beat up my brother in front of me. They held me so I couldn't stop them. One of my classmates tried to rape me, and I reported him and no one wanted to help me, no one, they didn't believe me... this is a bit embarrassing, I am sorry. So, elementary was hell for me. In high school I was introvert, in elementary school I was very introvert. Because of the assaults I had a severe phobia, till I was in first year at high school I couldn't go anywhere far away from home. I was psychologically paralyzed because of this. I didn't go to a psychiatrist, I didn't go to a psychologist, I didn't talk to anyone, till the first year in high school when I faced it and I went out, I went through the mall. I had never been able to do that before. So at lunch break I walked from one end to the other end of the mall and my heart was beating, I was choking, but I managed to survive this and ever since then I have no fear. There were suspicions in high school as well, not so many, mostly from kids whose parents had higher status in the government and they discriminated against me and called me a "faggot", and once they tried to rape me. I didn't report this, but it escalated with the fact that I couldn't walk freely... I went running to the classroom and running out of the classroom, you understand? One day the guy who created the greatest problems for me wouldn't stop, and I had had enough. I was in the third year, so I went to the head teacher of the class and the principal and reported him. He kept doing even worse things, so my mother complained and he couldn't come near me after that. Just once he said to me "you shouldn't have done that", but I told him "next time we'll make sure you can never leave your house", so ever since then he didn't make problems. I was quiet for a long time, I suffered so many things in life. When I was 17 I couldn't stand it anymore— I said to myself "that's it, I am what I am". I even had suicidal thoughts and tried to kill myself because of that for two years." (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Not to the degree that I wanted to withdraw. I felt like someone was pointing a finger at me when talking about me. I felt like everyone was looking at me, but I kept being cool and changed the subject. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Not long ago I went with a friend to a café and the topic was the location, and she didn't attack me directly, but people that go to places like that, and I felt bad. She is a close friend, and from all the things she said she didn't direct anything towards me, but since she was talking about people like me, she hurt me and I felt as though she stabbed a knife in me. This was the end of our friendship, because all of us are faced with this discrimination and shouldn't be surrounded with people who indirectly support this. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The effects of shame on how one perceives oneself in terms of belonging or not to a gay community, and in particular how it effects one's involvement in political struggle and political revision of one's identity, has been extensively elaborated in the previous chapter in the discussion on privatization of sexual identity. Shame presents a strong threat in the sense of enclosing a person in the confines of their interiority, or what some scholars have called the 'interior ghetto', and sustenance of what Michael Warner has called stigmophobia and stigmatizing and fearful disidentification with others who bear the sign of stigma and social exclusion and discrimination. Thus the depoliticizing effects of shame have already been explored.

However, a few participants provided stories that testify to the transformative potential and play one can derive and creatively produce from shaming histories. Some participants made statements confirming their personal overcoming of these experiences and use of them as a tool for revising the wider social and political norms inflicting pain and shame, as well as for political identification with others subjected to shaming politics, engaging in socializing practices based on stigmophilia and creating alternative cultures and social interaction patterns, or even, in a few cases, for engaging in more active and visible forms of civil activism.

IV. Risk Assessment, Protection and Sexual health

IV.1. Risk Assessment and Protection

Most of the Albanian participants, regardless of age and social status, practise sexual intercourse with women. Of the participants above 30 years of age and of below average social status are married, some of the younger group have girlfriends or are engaged. In addition, the majority of them state they have sexual intercourse with more than one female partner at the same time. The frequency of these intercourses is regular, i.e. everyday or every other day. However, some of the participants when asked to make a comparison between intercourse with men and women, stated that sex with men was more appealing:

The difference is huge. It's a very difficult question. If I found the ideal man that I am looking for, I would tell my wife, DEAR, WAIT, BECAUSE I AM FUCKING. I think that the pleasure and the emotions during sex with men are more intense. There is no other difference, sex is sex, no matter with whom. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

I get more excited during sex with men, there are stronger emotions, as opposed to sex with women. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

I like better sex with men, because it is more emotional for me. My heart wants a man. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

There's no doubt I feel better during sex with a man, since I feel a need to have sex with a man. For me sex with men is more normal than sex with my girlfriend. I feel better emotionally, spiritually as well. I feel safer. (Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Another informant, who clearly indicated his bisexuality, had a different opinion:

Honestly, for me it's good with both sexes, being a bisexual, I have no problem. The difference is that I fuck the women in the vagina, and the men in the anus, but men have something women don't have, like their voice, the beard, the hairs, this is what excites me. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

According to their statements, the use of condoms during sexual intercourse with female partners is frequent. Apart from two participants, all other stated they use condoms. However, there is a pattern of inconsistent use of condoms, i.e. not using a condom with the steady partner or wife, in most cases. The reasons are reduced to the opinion that condoms are to be used only during sex with strangers or partners who, on the grounds of social characteristics, are potential carriers of a virus. To a certain degree this situation was identified in some of the studies on SRH. For example, Mladenovik in her study "The effect of psycho-social determinants on sexual behaviour among adolescents" (2011) indicates that 44% of respondents (adolescents in the general population) were not using condoms because they believed in the faithfulness of their partner. Furthermore the "Technical report from the HIV/AIDS related risks behavioural survey among young people aged 15-24 years in Macedonia, 2011" conducted by the Institute for Public Health provided the following finding: "Of those who did not use condoms consistently in the past 12 months (n=510), half of them did not use it because they "trust their partners [...]" (Mikic et al., 2011:14).

In general, all participants are informed about the dual function of the condom, to protect from sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy, although some, when it comes to sex with female partners, place emphasis on the contraceptive function in terms of unplanned pregnancy.

I have sex only with my wife and no other women. I don't use a condom with my wife because I don't see the need, I know who I am. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

Regularly, except with my wife. I want to make sure not to get an infectious disease, AIDS, the crabs (pubic lice), so you won't carry the infection in your home. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

When I have sex with another woman, I always use condoms, so she won't get pregnant and I won't catch a disease. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

I always use a condom, because the other person wants me to, as protection against pregnancy. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

The frequency of sexual encounters with male partners varies from frequent and daily encounters to a few times per month or three months. According to the statements, the Albanian participants can be divided into those who have an active role during intercourse (perform anal and receive oral sex) and those who take on both roles.

It depends, I haven't gone out lately (in the last three months), I used to go out more regularly before, almost every night I went out to look a partner for sex. After we met, we would talk or have coffee, then continue with the sex, first he gives me a blowjob, then I fuck him. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

General fear from STIs and abstinence related truisms were noticeable among participants from the Albanian group when they were talking about the possible strategies for overcoming the risk.

I should protect myself, not to change partners very often, that's how I am safe. (Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Still, there are evident misunderstandings about the manner of transmission or the broadly spread prejudices about groups that "spread" the infections.

There is a risk, for instance, if I swallow his sperm, or his sperm drops in my eye, we are all at risk. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The risk from getting infected with HIV or other STDs is great, since this is a virus that spreads a lot among gay circles. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

89 – 90 % I can get infected with HIV, since it has happened that the condom has broken during sex, or I haven't used a condom, and everyone knows, anal sex is not very hygienic. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

These notions are directly linked with the practice of using condoms. Although, almost all participants from this group claimed to have used a condom for protection from STD and HIV, condoms were used only with unknown partners. The estimation whether to use a condom is free and provisory and based on the impression the partner leaves, or knowing, believing or expressing fidelity towards the partner. Therefore, everyone who is marked, usually for reasons based on general moral evaluations, represents a threat. Furthermore, all participants stated they had had sex with foreigners in and outside of Macedonia and had used a condom during these encounters. Condoms are used only during anal sex, while rarely during oral.

We have to stress the inconsistency of these statements and the danger of using such a strategy. Namely, those participants who stated they used a condom with everyone except their female partners (wives, fiancées and girlfriends), in their sexual practice with men who are also selected, well-known and regular male partners, don't use a condom. Therefore, by way of successive questions, it can be established that such risk evaluation results in accidental and rare use of condoms and cannot be a safe prevention strategy.

I don't use condoms with regular partners, only with the occasional ones. With my regular partners I don't use a condom because I trust them, I know them. I know what they do and I am convinced that they aren't infected. I use condoms with strangers because they are not safe. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

I always use a condom, except when I am in a relationship, and we do check ups and we are faithful to each other, and then I don't have to use one. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Sometimes I don't use a condom with those I know, because they are clean. They tell me themselves they are clean, very hygienic, and I can have sex without a condom with them without any problems. I ask them if they have been with someone else, they say no, and I tell them if you've been with someone else, go and clean yourself and then we'll have sex. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

When it comes to use of condoms with male partners there is a pattern defined by age and social status. Some participants state that they use no protection whatsoever:

Most often I don't use a condom, because I might not have a condom, or I have partners which I don't consider to be risky. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

No, I don't use condoms. The pleasure is greater. I don't like condoms. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

On the other hand, there were participants during our research who claimed to use condoms on every occasion when they have sexual intercourse with men:

I always use condoms during oral sex, when I give a blowjob, and when I fuck them. With the ones I know or don't know, I always use condoms. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

I always use condoms, whether we have known each other for a longer period or not. There is no compromise. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Some participants participated in using or offering sex work for money, during which they didn't use a condom:

I have never paid for sex, I've been bought to have sex. I don't always use a condom, since when somebody pays me they don't want sex with a condom. Sometimes I don't want to use a condom myself. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

I have never paid for sex, because I was a DIVA ON THE BALKANS, they used to pay, a lot. I didn't always use condoms with them. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

All Roma participants stated that they have regular and clean intercourse with their female partners, from three to four times a week. A large portion of them were married, the rest were in a relationship. Only one of them stated that he made no difference between sex with female and male sexual partners.

I can't find a big difference. I simply enjoy both. I am fascinated by sex with men, while in women by their femininity and sensuality. There isn't a big difference. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

All others undoubtedly stressed that they prefer sexual intercourse with female partners in their statements.

Well, the woman has a cunt, it's nicer. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Well, it's normal that sex with women is better. I simply feel that way. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The woman's body is different, with gay is also good, except that he has one hole, while she has two. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Well, it's not the same. With a woman you can have foreplay, and everything else, but I wouldn't do that with a man. (Roma, Below Average Status, Over 30)

There is a huge difference. The pleasure is greater, I can say that 90% I prefer sex with men, and 10% with women. (Roma, Below Average Status, Over 30)

The Roma participants stated that the use of condoms is quite rare and to say the least irregular. Similar to the Albanian group, there is also the pattern of using a condom only with stigmatized people or those towards whom there are generally accepted prejudices that they are carriers of sexually transmitted diseases. In other words, in the cases when a condom is used it is usually only during sex with gay men, sex workers, or girls marked as "easy", and not with steady female partners. In cases when a condom is used with the regular female partner it is to prevent unwanted pregnancy.

Not very often, I have used it only 6-7 times. It depends on the partner, you can see whether he is clean. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Rarely, very rarely. For example, I won't use it with a girl I know very well, sometimes I use it, it depends on the girl. Sometimes I might want to use a condom non stop. (Roma, Below Average Status, Over 30)

Lately, very rarely because I know my partners and I don't use it a lot. (Roma, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Why should I use it? She doesn't want me to. Not that I want to, so there is simply no reason to use it. Only for protection against pregnancy. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

I only use condoms when I don't know the girl or the gay man, and so. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

I use condoms only if she is a prostitute and I know she sleeps around. It's better to use a condom than to catch AIDS. If I know the girl then I don't use a condom. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Certain statements show that some participants lack sufficient knowledge on how STD and HIV are transmitted, hence they undertake ineffective strategies for avoiding the risk based on maintaining general hygiene:

Sex is sex, it's all the same. There is no difference, I don't need a condom, there's no reason to use a condom, if there is simply hygiene you can't get infections or any risky things. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

According to the statements recorded among the Roma group, sexual encounters with men are also frequent. Similar to encounters with women, encounters with men also vary from a few times a week, to a few times a month. One informant stated that he has intercourse with men more often than with women. It is evident that, as among the Albanian group, most of the participants take on an active role during anal sex or receive oral sex from the partners. The risk assessment is based on the already mentioned criterion, whether the partner is known, the period they have known each other, what the partner himself states about his STD status, etc.

Well, of course if I know the partner I won't use a condom. I ask him, if he is HIV, I should know... Well, I trust them, the man stands by his own word... (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Well, the danger is big. You can't find out if there is something in him. The passion makes the fear go away. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Asked whether he would think about sexual intercourse with a person who sincerely told him that he was living with HIV, one informant stated:

Yes, they should (isolate them). Well, he won't just infect me, but everyone else. He should be hanged. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

In addition, there is the fact that all participants who stated they had had intercourse with foreign citizens (men or women) claim to have used condoms and that this was not a matter of hesitation.

The use of condoms is fairly limited when it comes to the Roma participants, bearing in mind the manner in which they evaluate the risk. In support of the abovementioned findings, according to them if the partner, although gay, is someone familiar, he is safe, hence there is no need for protection. The other reason for avoiding condoms is that their use reduces pleasure. Similar to the case in the other groups, condoms are never used during oral sex, only during anal intercourse.

I haven't used a condom till now. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

It depends. If he is clean, there's no need to use a condom. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Less, the feeling is not the same. I don't feel good with a condom. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

When do I use a condom with a gay? –Always for sex from behind. Not for the mouth? -NO. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Well, I don't use it, as I already said, if I don't know the partner, if I've known him for years, I know that he is... although he is gay I know he hasn't caught anything, so I know, even now I avoid them. I go only with those few friends I know. I can accept them, although as I said I did only a few days ago, and it was only once. (Roma, Average Status, Over 30)

Only one of the participants, over 30 years of age, with above average social status, stated they had used a condom when working as a sex worker. All the others claim neither to have asked nor to have offered sexual intercourse for money.

No, some offered, it was little... I mean it wasn't little. Yes, they offered money, but I refused them, first I would never have sex for money, plus never with older people. Never! I mean I don't want to. (Roma, Below Average Status, Over 30)

Sexual intercourse with women is not typical for the Macedonian participants. Only two participants under the age of 30 with below average social status stated they had frequent sex with women (three to four times a day) and that they enjoy sexual encounters with female partners better. These two participants don't identify themselves as gay. We should mention a few statements from bisexuals who claim to have sexual intercourse with men and women equally. The others state to have had intercourses in the past, but for a longer period haven't practised sex with women, or simply answered with a short *NO*.

Not anymore, I did until I was 30. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

I did once. I was 17.. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Well, it depends, sometimes 3-4 times a day, sometimes once, sometimes twice. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Well, more rarely now because I am in a monogamous relationship with men more than with women. When women in Macedonia hear you are bi, they don't want to have sex with you.. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The use of condoms during intercourse with female partners, for the few who answered positively, can be questioned. Once again, the findings from similar profiles from the previous groups (Albanian and Roma) are confirmed that with female partners condoms are used only with unknown partners or sex workers.

For example if I go to fuck a prostitute of course I use. But when I have sex with someone I know, or if I am her first, then.... (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Well not often. It's better without a condom. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Even one of the participants who hasn't had an emotional or sexual relationship with a woman for a longer time states:

Very rarely, almost never. I don't know, because I wasn't informed about AIDS and transmitted diseases and I was embarrassed to buy one. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

The statements from the Macedonian group of participants regarding intercourse with male partners present a logical addition to the ones related to sexual pleasure. Namely, the frequency of intercourse with men can be regular for those who don't identify themselves as gay or bisexual. For the rest, when the sexual orientation influences the identification, not only the frequency but also the quality of the sexual intercourse depends on whether the partner is ideal, whether they are in a relationship or not.

Well, when with a casual partner it all comes down to fucking, pure satisfaction of the sexual urge. Then with the regular partners it is more intimate, it is love making in a way. The feeling is different because you are close. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

When I am in a relationship always, when I am not it isn't very often. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

On the other hand, as was already mentioned in the analysis of the statements on sexual pleasure for the Macedonian group with a social status above average, there is the conclusion that it is not the frequency of intercourse that is important but the partner:

I am not someone who has sex with whoever: no sex with different partners. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Also worth mentioning is the opinion of one informant who finds that during intercourse with men there is greater sexual freedom than with women:

Well, look now, sex with women is more classical, since our girls are more conservative and nice and don't do everything. As opposed to men, when you can relax more. For instance I have had partners who were men, but they were relaxed and wanted to experiment literally with sex, which is what I want. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Some of the participants have solid knowledge, but although employing the standard and typical strategies for avoiding risk of STD and HIV transmission recorded among the other groups, which is safety assessment based on knowing the partner closely, are aware that condom should be used all the time. Regarding the possible risks they state:

A particularly higher risk is when you don't know the man you are with... which doesn't mean you are safe with your steady partner. You might not know that you can transfer a disease. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

I have had it with the lottery, you never know... everything is high level. I cannot say that I can be relaxed here, because I am a boy from the 80s and I am familiar with everything, I don't have a fear, but I am very cautious. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

You never know when danger can come, you never know who might be contagious. If you have sex without a condom, the danger is big. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

However, some participants exhibit opinions based on incorrect information and confusing assessments of the healthy appearance of the partner, such as the following:

Well I have information about HIV/AIDS as a disease. I am well informed and I know about this, you can judge according to the person's skin, its appearance if he has something, but not always because it is a secretive disease and sometimes you can't see anything. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

In addition, we should mention the statement of an informant, identified as a bisexual, who lives in an open relationship with two partners. He stressed that with the second partner he has oral intercourse and masturbation. Although he describes in details the measures he has undertaken to prevent STD and HIV, most of them are overstated and not useful. On the other hand, the regular visits to the doctor, the testing, and taking care of sexual and reproductive health, as well as the dialogue with partners on this subject proves to be a rational strategy.

Bearing in mind that I have two partners and I know the sexual histories of both of them, one is monogamous and has sex strictly with me, he has never had other partners, has never had an HIV test. Honestly I did and I am negative, which confirms that he doesn't have anything because the first time we had sex was 7 months ago. So in the course of these 6 months something would appear. Regarding the second partner, I know I am the only man he has intercourse with—he has intercourse only with me and women. Until now we have had only oral sex and joint masturbation, nothing other than that, but I can make a visual assessment, for instance whether he has swollen crutch, a strange smell, I ask him in details what he had been doing before intercourse and he is absolutely honest with me. I believe him 100 %, just as I believe my other partner. Before sex, if I satisfy him orally, I don't wash my teeth 6 hours before that, I just rinse my mouth in order to avoid micro abrasion on the palate, no bleeding and decrease the risk and of course in 3 to 4 months I go to the doctor and have my blood tested to see how things are and so far it has been great. I have never had a sexually transmittable disease, I've been to a dermatologist,

gynaecologist for counselling. Yesterday I went to do a test at the help centre. I take a great deal about that.

(Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

When it comes to use of a condom with male partners, both participants who stated that they have regular intercourse with both sexes and enjoy sex with women more say that they use condoms rarely, i.e. almost never during sexual intercourse with men:

To be honest, I don't use a condom very often. It depends on the looks and the attitude. When I have to use a condom, I do. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

I don't use it. Like I said, it's better for me that way. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Most of the participants share the already established division of using a condom with a new or unknown partner but not using one with a known or constant partner. However, what separates this group from others is that the decision not to use a condom and the evaluation of fidelity are mutual. The partners in a relationship make joint decisions and take preventive measures through dialogue and agreement.

I haven't used a condom with my partner for a long time because we both had a check up when we first started seeing each other. I had had one three months before that, but I had another one just to make sure. I think it was the right way, because there's no other way to discover diseases. Different diseases might have the same symptoms. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

We used a condom (with the steady partner) at the beginning. It was very stressful, because they were tight, so we stopped and we made an agreement not to use them. I've been in this relationship for 7 months, and these past 5 months I haven't had sex with others, I am sorry, until two months ago I didn't have sex with others so we agreed not to use condoms. He doesn't mind. I don't mind either because I know I am his first partner and he hasn't had partners before me. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The condom is used mostly for anal sex, and very rarely for oral sex. Some of the participants—even those who say they always use condoms—mostly stress the influence of condoms on sexual intercourse and the pleasure:

Well condoms... this is a bit unpleasant, these things are too intimate. The condom kills my erection sometimes, it does. So, sex with condoms is not good for me at all, I mean it's bad... but it's worse than without a condom. This is why I don't want to use a condom. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Contrary to the abovementioned participants who connect the use of a condom with the type of relationship, as many as one third of the participants in this group have a strict attitude towards the use of condoms. Regardless of the partner, whether he is a regular, temporary or a new partner, the use of condoms is mandatory.

No, I always use condoms during sex, so.. I have never had sex without a condom, to be more precise.

(Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Yes, always. Yes, but the bodies won't be in touch, you know? Not that it will protect me, it can break, but it won't be in touch with the sex organ of the other man. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

First, I don't have confidence in myself, and then in someone else, because, God forbid that something happens, like the problem that I have now, and I can transfer something to the other guy, and you never know what he might have done in the meantime when we aren't together. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The statement of one of the younger representatives with above average social status is also worth mentioning:

I think that gay people are much more disciplined about this. All my straight friends have sex without condoms immediately. I haven't heard that any of my gay friends have had unprotected sex. (Macedonian Focus Group, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Almost half of the participants stated they had had sexual intercourse with a foreign citizen in Macedonia or abroad. There were different opinions about whether intercourse with foreign men inevitably entailed higher risks. However, some claimed that this is a generalized prejudice:

I don't know, I don't suffer from the stereotype that there is more AIDS here than there, or there more AIDS than here. Maybe it is a matter of perception, because a large part of the gay life and the social life of homosexuals in other states is slightly different. Maybe there is such a perception among the gay population when they face the life people lead there, regardless of whether it is a community, and community communication, so, the answer should be 'yes', maybe the risk is greater, but that's why there are condoms. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

A small number of participants had experience with commercial sex work. Only two participants asked for sex services for money from a woman (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30) who at the beginning stated they had had regular sex with both sexes. One of them stated they had used a condom. From the other interviewed people, only said they had offered and paid for sex with men and had regularly used a condom.

Well, regardless whether I buy or sell, protection is important. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

IV.2. Sexual health

More than half of the interviewees from the Albanian group indicated they had no need and hence no use of health or other services related to sexual and reproductive health. They simply stated: *I haven't had the need*. The rest had used these services. However, it is striking that they sought these services abroad:

Yes, I had a check up of my sexual health, a penis examination and an HIV test. It was in a NGO in Pristina. (Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Yes, I went to the doctor. My testicles were swollen. I thought it was from the sex, but I went to the doctor and it turned out it was from a cold. I went in France. (Albanian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

The reasons given by participants from the Albanian community for seeking help regarding their sexual and reproductive health vary: infections, skin changes, pubic lice or HIV testing. In Macedonia they receive these services within the primary health protection network, as well as the Youth Centre "I Want to Know" – Vodno and the EGAL centres. In addition, some participants said they had used the existing system of referrals and re-directing of clients among the NGO services. Also, within the focus groups the Albanian participants stressed that the NGOs were more accessible on account of their not asking for a mandatory health insurance card or proof of health insurance.

I had the crabs, but after a while I talked to a doctor, where they gave me something and I got rid of them. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

No, I talked to a friend who works in EGAL, and from there they directed me to the Centre called "I Want to Know". I had a penis infection. I think it was the clap. I went for a check up in the homosexuals' surgery, opposite the state hospital. (Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

I had spots around my penis. The doctor told me it was from the heat and the depilation cream I used. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

I went to the doctor because I felt burning on my penis, especially when urinating, and I talked to my registered doctor at the Bit Pazar polyclinic and in the state hospital. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

I went to counselling three or four years ago in EGAL. Their offices were in a different location then, they advised me about HIV. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

It should be mentioned that within this group there is an awareness that there is insufficient counselling on SRH, and its members clearly articulate this need. Within the focus group they stressed the need for services from a sexologist which are not available in Macedonia at the moment.

I have had the need, but I couldn't find help anywhere. (Albanian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

Well, until recently I didn't think of these kinds of things, but lately I really want to receive the information I need. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

I have had the need, but I didn't visit an expert. I solved the problem with my friends. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

As in the case with the other groups, it can be noticed that people who were having sexual intercourse with other men during counselling on their mental health also received advice related to their sexual orientation:

I was depressed. It caused erection problems so I visited a psychiatrist who helped me. It is interesting to mention that the psychiatrist told me that every child is a bisexual, but in time the sexual drive is oriented, or it remains bisexual. (Albanian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

More than half of the Roma participants indicated that they had used certain services related to sexual and reproductive health. The others said that they hadn't had the need to visit a doctor, although they are well informed about the NGOs and the services they offer or refer patients to in their municipality.

God forbid, not once! (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

No, no, nothing like that. Well, I think "I Want to Know", your organization (EGAL) in the city, in HOPS, HERA, also. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The most frequently used services are HIV-testing, check-ups and dermatovenerology counselling.

To check if I am HIV positive. In EGAL.

Well, in general, for example, I took an HIV test and tests for STD in EGAL. (Roma, Above Average Status, Over 30)

In the Youth Centre "I Want to Know". Mostly about haemorrhoids. I've had this problem for years. No matter the problem there are the centres, and I go there freely, without any problems, and they help. I go to the Youth Centre, in Shutka or Vodnjanska. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

The services we have are sufficient, what else do we need? It's good that we even have this. (Roma Focus Group)

Bearing in mind the latter statements, it should be stressed that the Roma participants listed only the sexual and reproductive health services about which they are informed, namely the ones offered within the municipality of Shuto

Orizari. These are voluntary and confidential services, available since they are offered free-of-charge in the vicinity of their residence. None of the participants had sought help in a state or private health institution, nor did any mention a service offered within an NGO. Hence, disregarding the positive finding that Roma are informed and use the current services offered by HERA, EGAL and HOPS in the municipality of Shuto Orizari, there are limitations to the existing services and the efficiency of the system for re-directing to other sexual and reproductive health services, as well as the possible barriers, should be improved. In addition, it was noted within the focus groups that the participants lacked sufficient information and considered regular (very frequent) HIV tests with negative results to be sufficient and satisfactory for their entire sexual and reproductive health.

You should go to the doctor every week, every week and do a test. It is smart to do it every day, but some people who have sex with men and women don't do it. It's better to go every week, no matter if you have sex or not. (FG ROM)

This was confirmed by the statements from participants who had no certain information about the services they had received during the doctor's visit. It was noted that the reason for this could be the use of terminology related to common problems related to male health:

Have you ever been to counselling about your relationship, about problems with potency or anything similar? -Potency? (Roma, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Well once I was asked if I had had sex with a woman or a man. I had something, but I didn't get it from sex, it was because I shaved. They gave me something and it passed. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

In Kumanovo there was a Roma organization. Young people would gather and they would tell us what to do and how. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

As was the case with the other groups of interviewees, there is no understanding about the importance of services for sexual and reproductive health. In addition, bearing in mind the above mentioned finding, all the interviewees mentioned a service related to SRH that was not available in their surrounding.

I went to EGAL with a close friend of mine and I was counselled about my relationship by a girl. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

At the end of this section, we would like to include the statement of an informant who indicated that he takes care of his sexual and reproductive health via his wife's visits to the gynaecologist:

I don't have such problems. We go to the gynaecologist with my wife.

She goes to examinations, right?

Yes, yes. (Roma, Below Average Status, Under 30)

Most of the participants from the Macedonian group had used services for sexual and reproductive health. They use the network of health services provided by the state, the private sector and, to a greater extent, civil organizations which are well known to them. The only exception was the Macedonian group under 30 years of age with below average social status, in which half of the participants stated that they had never used this type of services. One of them gave the following statement:

I didn't trust anyone, I was afraid, I grew up in a surrounding where these things were unimaginable. It was embarrassing to go to the doctor and ask about those things, but I suppose I had no need to overcome this. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

These men visit different services for sexual and reproductive health according to their needs. Depending on the problem, they mention urologists, gynaecologists and dermatovenerologists. Their reasons for going to the doctor differ:

When I notice even the smallest change I don't have a problem to go to the doctor, nor to take off my clothes or do whatever they say. I have no prejudices. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

For HPV infection. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

Actually, I am not really sure I had condyloma, because they weren't around the anus, but the tights, and I've seen them in others and told them to go to the doctor, but I didn't have the same, although the doctors determined they were condyloma, but I think they were something completely different. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

I had a problem with one of the testicles, it was swollen. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

I did a year or two ago, I was bleeding a few times, I had blood in the sperm and I didn't know what it was, I went to the doctor, took some samples in Microbiology, they didn't find a bacteria, and at the end it turned out to be a bicycle injury. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

They most often obtain services at the following centres: the Youth Centre "I Want to Know" – Vodno, EGAL, the mobile clinics for HIV testing managed by HERA and EGAL, the Urology Clinic, and the Jane Sandanski Polyclinic.

The majority of the interviewees do not make use of counselling on sexual and reproductive health. Asked whether they had ever sought counselling services on SRH, they gave a short answer, NO. In other words, there is an apparent lack of awareness about these services, and thus an impression that these services are not offered at all. Consultations only take place after the appearance of a certain visible bodily symptom, and even then not all the necessary information is received. The following statements testify that certain needs related to SRH remain unaddressed:

For example some strange occurrences, is something that is happening to you normal, like when the sex organ hurts, there is simply no way to stay informed. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Under 30)

On the relationship yes, on potency, no. I have been to counselling for problems in the relationship, for instance what next, what to do after. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

Bearing in mind that I've been living in Skopje the past few years, and some things are very familiar to me. But not before, when I didn't use to live in Skopje, I had problems which I couldn't solve because I didn't know where to ask for advice, or maybe I knew but I was embarrassed to look for help. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Over 30)

Relevant in this context is a statement from a focus-group of participants over 30 years of age, with above average social status, in which is apparent the lack of information about and unavailability of HIV Post-Exposure Prophylaxis.

The pill, something like 'the day after'? Then I can stuff myself with 30 to last me for the entire month. I don't know anyone who has looked for it. Do we have it in Macedonia? (Focus Group: Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

We also identified a number of statements conveying the danger for people who have sex with men when they ask for a service related to their sexuality, i.e. they receive advice or services directed towards normalizing and changing their sexual orientation.

With sexuality in general, that is with my psychological state, my psychological wellbeing, that is to say not-wellbeing. (Macedonian, Above Average Status, Over 30)

Yes, although I started the conversation, she didn't ask me anything specific, because the test contained a question whether you sleep with man, and some lied, but I wanted to be honest. I thought about my family, whether I should tell them, my mother I mean, my father wouldn't understand, but I don't know how to start and I am afraid mostly that I will disappoint her since, you know, every mother wants her son to get married and give her grandchildren etc. We talked about these things with the doctor and she didn't know what to say to me. (Macedonian, Below Average Status, Under 30)

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The first and most important limitation of this study was the absence of baseline data on the identification and social aspects affecting the life of MSM in Macedonia. For these reasons, any comparison and correlation with the solid amount of data on sexual behavior and proceeding with more focused study was not possible.

During the second stage of the implementation of collecting data through in-depth interviews, the researchers' team was faced with challenges recruiting respondents. Specifically, it had been planned to involve 50 MSM by the pre-defined criteria. In the end, however, it was not possible to interview more than 39 MSM.

Related to this problem, another limitation of this study is that the number of respondents from the Albanian and Roma community of above average social status was significantly smaller than the number within the Macedonian group. The main reason for not being able to recruit respondents with this profile was the hidden life of MSM among Albanians (as detected with this research), and the unfavourable social conditions of Roma in the country. In the case of the Albanian group, although contacts with these MSM were established, and the interviewer was a native speaker and the confidentiality procedures were transparently presented, many were not comfortable about taking part in the study. The method of using cliques proved to be highly effective in the Macedonian focus groups but was not achievable in the Albanian group because MSM from this ethnic group were not willing to expose themselves in front of other Albanians. In the case of the Roma there were some participants who in the framework of the community social standard could be described as having above average social status, but still only one matched the study criteria. This a good point at which to emphasize the need for a similar study focusing on Albanian and Roma MSM and that will employ a different method for recruitment. This is even more important because it is not evidenced that representatives from both communities with higher social status were involved in any previous MSM studies.

Another serious limitation that needs to be noted is that the recruitment method used the outreach teams and service delivery points of NGO EGAL. Some of the participants were already clients of the services and thus had the possibility of being affected by the messages from informational materials. This fact indicates that some of them were providing desirable answers to the researchers or that their answers were formatted by the structure of disseminated information. For example, among the Roma respondents it was evident that their need for services for sexual health was limited to the services that are already supplied by NGO EGAL and NGO HERA in the municipality of Suto Orizari.

The absence of basic information about gender shown by the participants, their understanding of a strict dichotomous division of sex roles and failure to make any linkage between sexual preferences and identities were indicative. Even though this was taken into consideration after the focus group discussion and the interview questionnaire was simplified and adopted, still some respondents were reporting difficulties and asking for additional explanations when answering the questions related to the concept of gender.

In conclusion, because of all these reasons, the findings of this study that suggest a relationship between gender and sexual identity, and sexual health should be taken only tentatively and the findings are not representative for MSM in Macedonia.

We would like to recommend conducting more focused research in the future that will provide more detailed data on the questions raised with this study.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PUBLIC HEALTH

1.1 HEALTH SERVICES

MSM in Macedonia mainly use the sexual health services provided by NGOs, especially voluntary and confidential counselling and testing for HIV. The unquestioned perception of the masculine gender position, and its being the unifying identity category, unlike sexual identity which is still marked with stigma, shame and fear even within this population, when taken together with the fact that only a small number of MSM are taking continuous care of their general sexual and reproductive health, can be an indication of the need to develop and improve services for men's sexual and reproductive health in the country.

Responsible state institutions should:

- ◆ Ensure the financial sustainability and recognition of MSM-friendly sexual health services provided by NGOs within the National HIV prevention programme
- ◆ Form a task-force that will provide strategies for improving the existing public network and providing greater accessibility to men's sexual and reproductive health services
- ◆ Initiate public health campaign for creating demand for medical and counselling services for men's sexual and reproductive health.

NGOs already working with MSM and the LGBTQ population should:

- ◆ Proceed with current service provision and open new service delivery points in different cities in the country tailored for all communities living in Macedonia
- ◆ Develop strategies for utilizing existing horizontal social modes of knowledge-sharing within MSM and gay environments as a means of preventing HIV/STI.

1.2 BEHAVIOUR CHANGE COMMUNICATION

Similar to the pattern identified in the general population, among MSM the criteria for condom use is very often based on generalized, random and provisional moral appraisals of unknown partners as 'others', socially and morally condemned. Based on this belief, condoms are used only with partners who are unknown or evaluated as threat, while they are rarely used with known partners or those who are seen as known. In this context, the romantic notions of intimacy and love, wherein trust, fidelity and monogamy determine the understanding and fantasies of a love relationship, influence the decision for not using condom or protection during sex. Though, among gay and bisexual men with permanent partners, this decision is very often made by rational risk assessment based on mutual consent and open dialogue.

Future public health campaigns focused on HIV prevention should apply the following insights:

- ◆ Using condom in every single sexual intercourse (both for anal and vaginal sex) is the most efficient HIV and STI's protection strategy
- ◆ There are no specific groups who are transmitting HIV and STIs, but specific sexual behaviors that are more risky in the context of HIV and STIs
- ◆ Everyone is responsible for the protection of his/hers own health and wellbeing
- ◆ Risk-assessment strategies based on moral and emotional evaluations of partners are not effective
- ◆ Myths and stigma about HIV positive people need to be dispelled by informing the public about the ways of transmission and about the fact that PLHIV are just patients with chronic disease
- ◆ Nurture and use the already available peer and support networks among MSM and gay men as a valuable medium for implementing and developing prevention programmes

2. IDENTITY

Identification across the hegemonic masculine gender spectrum is highly prevalent among MSM, whereby this identification is accompanied by common-sensual acceptance of gender roles ascribed by society, with moderate and low levels of awareness about gender identity, norms, performativity and gendered embodiment and, in some cases, with stigmatizing attitudes towards gender-nonconforming behavior. The unquestioned acceptance of the 'gender fate' is enforced through everyday masculine interactional rituals wherein homophobia is the constituent feature, as much as by social structures and cultural norms (embedded in family life and social macro-structures). The social status of being discredited or discreditable as a result of sexual stigma generates hegemonic masculine performance as a protective and security-providing status and identity.

Because of this, the relevant state institutions and state officials should:

- ◆ Improve the current curricula content and programmes with regards to education on gender, gender identity, gender equality and sexuality, as well on sexual and reproductive health at all levels of education, in a way accessible for all communities, including Roma and Albanian
- ◆ Initiate public campaigns targeting gender stereotypes, traditional gender roles and sexual stigma.

Citizens' associations which target MSM and gay and bisexual men in their work, as well as associations working in the field of gender equality, should:

- ◆ Foster Coalition building with women's rights organizations in order to strengthen alliances for human rights and gender equality
- ◆ Foster actions for community strengthening by developing and implementing educational programmes on gender among MSM and the LGBTQ community.

3. STIGMA

The politically, publicly or insidiously enforced secrecy of emotional, intimate and sexual life and sexual identity, as well as the corresponding shame and socially enforced identification with hegemonic and homophobic masculinity, affects the everyday lives of MSM (both psychologically and socially) and indirectly affects the sexual health of men having sex with men in Macedonia. This can be seen as a direct result of constraining settings for MSM and gay and bisexual men in the country and an environment that enforces constant vigilance and monitoring of one's behavior and bodily comportment and the consequent distance this enforces from sexual health services that can be perceived as being associated with gay lifestyles or sexual stigma.

Those individuals who, because of different social conditions, succeed in creating micro environments in which sexual orientation is accepted and recognized as part of their identity and in which gender identity is not strongly enforced as a coercive norm, are: a) engaged in relationships in which both partners are equal, especially in the achievement of sexual pleasure and negotiating different aspects of the relationship; b) have more rational risk strategies that again involve the partner, no matter if he is steady or occasional; c) take care of their sexual health in a comprehensive manner; and d) create social and friendship networks that become a valuable source for information related to sexual health, risk assessment and protection.

For overcoming the current stigma state institutions and state officials should:

- ◆ Initiate a campaign involving state representatives, academia, and different health and social care professionals in order to delegitimize the unscientific statements and claims that stigmatize non-heterosexuals (such as the unscientific statement that homosexuality is not natural and not healthy) from the public discourse and state education curricula
- ◆ Include information on sexual diversity within the curricula and build the capacities of teachers at all educational levels in order to enable the young generation of LGBTQ to live in an environment free of stigma, bullying and coercion
- ◆ Provide a supportive atmosphere by recognizing sexual and gender identity in the national law against discrimination and by adopting relevant legislation on hate crimes against the LGBT community
- ◆ Develop policy measures, strategies and campaigns to combat hate speech directed against sexual and gender minorities
- ◆ Ombudsman and Commission for Protection from Discrimination should act in accordance to their legitimacy and initiate reactions and preventive measures for discriminatory, stigmatizing and homophobic hate speech.

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