The Intersections of Gender and Sexuality Among Queer Women in Armenia

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ABSTRACT

The thesis explores the narrative construction of the sense of Self of queer women in contemporary Armenia. It seeks to uncover how gender and sexuality interact and mutually shape the experiences of LBQ individuals. My aim is to understand the participating women's sense of self. I made eleven semi-structured interviews with queer women and non-binary/agender/queer individuals. By delving into the life stories (Stanley, 2020) of queer women, I identify pivotal life events in their life that have played a significant role in shaping their understanding of gender and sexuality. Drawing on an intersectional approach (A. Lord, 1979), the research acknowledges the influence of various power relations such as race, geography, and class shaping LBQ individuals' understanding of their Self and lived experiences. By exploring how patriarchal cultural norms, societal possibilities, geographic location, and socioeconomic status intersect with gender and sexuality, the study seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of LBQ individuals' experiences in Armenia. Additionally, the thesis explores queer women's familiarity with currently operating feminist and LGBTIQ+ organisations and collectives' activities in Armenia. It also examines how relevant they think these activities and the organizations' approaches are to their needs and expectations.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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Signed: Aida Marukyan

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Abbreviations

LBQ - lesbian, bisexual, queer

LGBTQI+ - lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex

NGO - non-governmental organisation

Bi - bisexual

Pan - pansexual

CEU - Central European University

Introduction: My Autobiographical Motivation and Methodology

The topic of my thesis has been shaped by my life trajectory and my numerous interactions with queer women. I was born and raised in Echmiatsin, a small town not far from the Armenian capital city of Yerevan, in a big and yet small family. My grandmother, my father's mother, often said that we were a family of men because she had five sons, and all her grandchildren before me were also boys, and she never had a daughter or a granddaughter. I was born and, besides being a person, or perhaps even before that, I was the first girl child in the family. In Armenian culture, it is common to name children after their grandparents. According to this tradition, I was also supposed to take my grandmother's name, which was given to her by her father, the chairman of the Sovkhoz, who had discovered the Italian opera Aida and decided that his daughter should bear the name of the character in the opera. My grandmother was a tall woman with very long hair, perceived throughout most of her life as the embodiment of beauty, who was also very intellectual and, as she used to say, an aristocratic woman. Through the name, I was supposed to inherit this entire package of my grandmother's identity and the expectations associated with being a girl child. My paternal grandmother also perceived me as “her continuation”. Knowing that my father had decided to name me after her, my grandmother said she would allow me to be named after her only when she saw me and made sure I was beautiful. Due to the doctor's carelessness during childbirth, some damage occurred on my face, which resolved a few hours later. During those few hours, my grandmother probably could not even breathe. But eventually, she saw me and “allowed” me to be named after her.

Various members of my family have told me that everyone had some ideas and plans for me before I was born. In this regard, I guess I am not unique. I suppose many parents and family members do the same. In any case, according to all these expectations, I was supposed to have long thick braids, be beautiful, intellectual, and have my grandmother's “aristocratic” demeanour. In my father's vision, I was supposed to have the opportunity to do anything. Neighbours told me that after I was born, my father came home drunk and in a very high mood, saying, “My daughter will drive, smoke, and drink.” I know almost nothing about my mother's expectations and desires. I only know that both the pregnancy and childbirth were quite difficult. My mother probably thought if both survive and are healthy, that would be enough.

One of the important people in my life, it would be more accurate to say one of the *most* important, is my maternal grandmother. I spent most of my childhood with her. From a very young age, she took me to all possible and impossible educational and entertainment places. Sunday colleges, preschools, choirs, poem recitation competitions, dance and art clubs. In short, everywhere she thought would positively impact my development. She was the third girl child in her family. She said her parents wanted to have a boy. Her mother was very angry about having a baby girl. She often told me that she had to fight hard with her family for her education. They did not want her to study at the university, thinking it would benefit the boys more, but she made it to the university. She told this story to me to make sure I should do everything to get a better education. Then find a good man and marry him. When I started dying my hair red, got a couple of tattoos on my hand, got involved in feminist activism, talked about queerness and my sexuality, in my grandmother's eyes, I seemed to become the exact opposite of what she imagined. For a few years, we rarely communicated, and when we did, we often argued. At some point, valuing our emotional connection, we started communicating more often again, but still, periodically she would make sure I know that she was not pleased with some parts of my life.

In the past couple of years, I was a bit relieved because I was meeting my grandmother's expectations about education. However, I very clearly understood that I would not be able to fulfil the condition for her "forgiveness." I already was and still am in a committed relationship and not with a man.

My grandmother is not the only person in my family who doesn't know about my sexuality. My parents do not know about my attractions and relationships either. My family is an average Armenian family with heteronormative and somewhat conservative views. They certainly do not expect that I will not marry a man. For them, queerness is not the most acceptable thing.

For about 8 years, I have been working with various groups of women, and for the past 4 years, I have been exclusively working with queer women. During this time, I have met many women whose experiences are very similar to mine. In my various interactions, I have been primarily interested in understanding how the process of self-perception happens for queer women. How do they navigate their life path? Where do they find the strength to cope with all the hostility in a homophobic and misogynistic society? And how do they make sense of themselves in general?

My aim is to explore the narrative construction of the sense of Self of queer women in contemporary Armenia. It seeks to uncover how gender and sexuality interact and mutually shape the experiences of LBQ individuals. By delving into the life stories (Stanley, 2020) of queer women, the research intends to identify pivotal life events in their life that have played a significant role in shaping their understanding of gender and sexuality. Drawing on an intersectional approach (A. Lord, 1979), the research acknowledges the influence of various power relations such as race, geography, and class shaping LBQ individuals' understanding of their Self and lived experiences.

By exploring how patriarchal cultural norms, societal possibilities, geographic location, and socioeconomic status intersect with gender and sexuality, the study seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of LBQ individuals' experiences in Armenia. Additionally, the thesis aims to explore their understanding of the relevance of the existing civil organisations representing their needs and values.

As my aim is to understand the participating women's sense of self, I did qualitative research, making use of semi-structured interviews for collecting life stories. I have conducted one-hour-long semi-structured interviews with 11 queer women and non-binary/agender/queer individuals during April 2024. I have interviewed 6 cis-gender women and 5 of the participants identified as non-binary, agender, or queer. Among them, there were self-identifying lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, queers, and one biromantic. In the thesis by saying Armenian, I refer to those who were born and/or raised in Armenia and currently live there. In order to acknowledge the influence of various power relations such as geography, class, and age, I have interviewed participants from the capital city Yerevan and from different cities and villages of Kotayk, Lori, Tavush, and Shirak regions to capture the diverse backgrounds of queer women. The age of my participants varied from 18-35.

To capture the diverse experiences and perspectives within the community, I have interviewed queer women both actively involved in activism through various feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations and those who are not engaged in such activities. This criterion is introduced to understand the factors that lead some women to be involved in NGO and/or community organising activities, while on the other hand, to explore the factors that cause other women not to participate in such activities. The selection of members of the two groups aimed to provide comparable and comprehensive insights into the topic.

To reach my participants I have used snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, Geddes 2019). Due to my engagement in local queer feminist activism, I have already established personal and professional connections with LGBTQI+/LBQ people living in Armenia. To initiate the interview process, I first contacted some of the people whom I already knew. Then I asked some of my respondents and friends from the queer communities to connect me with other individuals whose experiences were relevant to the research.

All the interviews were conducted in person in Armenia and in Armenian. I first contacted the participants mostly by social media, introduced my project, and asked them to participate and contribute by sharing their life experiences. The interview participation was voluntary, and I clearly explained that they can withdraw from the project at any point or skip any question they felt uncomfortable with. The participation in the research did not involve any financial or other remuneration. The location of the interview was mostly chosen by the participants. In the few cases where they were unsure where they wanted to meet, I suggested a cosy and safe venue.

All the participants were informed that the narratives collected during the interview will be used for my thesis research project, which will be published in CEU's library e-database. I offered the participants to choose pseudonyms for themselves when referring to them. However, only one of them did so; all other nick names are my creations. They were also notified that I wouldn't make them identifiable by using any actual geographical/institutional names that could identify them. I have also mentioned that they have the opportunity to withdraw their consent by June 7, the date of submission of the final thesis.

Considering that the research is about the participants' individual experiences of gender and sexuality, it could be emotionally triggering. To better cope with this, at the beginning of the interview, I always made it clear that they have the opportunity to take breaks during the interview, refuse to answer any emotionally triggering question, or end it if they feel the need. The introduction of the eleven women, their short bio data is provided in Appendix 1.

I have prepared an interview guide (Appendix 2) which helped me to identify key points for their sense of self. At the same time, I left enough space for the participants to shape the process and ensured there was time for follow-up questions, following the guidelines of Weiss (1994, p. 48-49). I approached interviewing as a "research partnership" between myself and the interviewees (ibid, p. 65-66). This allowed me to challenge the power imbalance as much as

possible and create a more comfortable environment for the participants. Considering that the topic could be emotionally challenging and that during the storytelling participants might feel that they are the only ones facing these issues, I would periodically reassure them during the interview that I understood and, in some cases, that I shared the participant's experience. Nevertheless, I made sure that this did not take up a large part of the conversation, leaving most of the space for the participant.

I recorded each interview on my smartphone. To ensure the safety and security of the information recorded during the interview, I uploaded it to my One drive account after conducting the interviews and deleted it from my smartphone. I have created the interview transcripts manually and saved them on my One drive account too. I also added coding of the transcripts (Löfgren, 2013) to identify the main themes and patterns emerging in each interview.

My position as an Armenian queer woman accompanied me throughout the entire research process. Above all, as I already mentioned, the basis for choosing the research topic was my personal experience in the family. The interview and the subsequent analysis phases were quite interesting and at the same time challenging. Since the topics discussed were also, in some way, about my own life, I often found myself in situations where I would sit and begin to reflect on my perceptions of the themes raised by the participants. Additionally, being a queer woman, myself sometimes made the interview phase of the research emotionally challenging. This was particularly the case when people shared quite problematic and emotionally heavy stories from their life experiences which were similar to mine.

Furthermore, my interest in the participants' involvement was further shaped by the fact that since 2016, I have been involved in various feminist and queer activities in Armenia. From 2020 until now, I have been a team member of the Queer Sista Platform, a collective working with LB women, queer and trans people in Armenia. During the interviews, my "insider" status naturally manifested itself. When discussing various topics, it was often the case that participants would provide very general descriptions, assuming I was familiar with the details. To bridge any potential gaps stemming from this assumption, I often encouraged my interviewees to provide further details, even if they assumed I already had a comprehensive understanding of the topic we were discussing (Weiss, 1994, p. 75).

The open-ended nature of the project presented a challenge, as I could not predict the specific findings that could emerge from the research. As Fran Tonkiss (1998) would argue, a

discourse study is inherently a ‘messy methodology.’ This uncertainty sometimes made it difficult to establish clear conclusions and required a more flexible approach when doing the analysis. To address the open-endedness of the project, I was continuously questioning my assumptions and interpretations, which in some cases entails integrating additional theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

My thesis aims to explore the narrative construction of the sense of Self of queer women in contemporary Armenia and their understanding of the ir/relevance of the existing civil organisations representing their needs and values. This Chapter will offer a comprehensive examination of relevant scholarly works concerning the construction of womanhood through the lenses of gender and sexuality and will draw the main theoretical framework in which it operates. Additionally, the literature review includes an investigation of existing studies about Armenian queer women for contextualising the research within that actual academic landscape.

1.1 Gender Theories and "Woman"

Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first theorists who, in 1946, tried to answer the "What is a woman?" question in her The Second Sex (1989). Regarding the social perceptions of women, she highlights that they are mostly perceived as non-autonomous beings and always in relation to men because, as she points out, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself" (ibid., p. 15). Beauvoir points out that men are the ones who decide how and what women should look like and as they have the power to do that men make the image of Woman satisfactory for themselves. She also points out that, historically, women have been viewed as only sexual beings for men, the "absolute sex, no less" (ibid., p. 16).

Thomas Laqueur (2003) discusses the history of European perceptions of women by presenting the one-sex and two-sex models. Laqueur argues that according to the so-called "one-sex" model in the pre-Enlightenment period, it was believed that women's bodies were simply imperfect or incomplete versions of men's bodies. However, in the 18th century, there was a transition to a "two-sex model," where men and women were viewed as different in terms of their own bodies, sexual behaviours, and desires. (2003, p 8-9). But here again, we see that women are being presented in some kind of relationship with men similar to what Beauvoir said.

Beauvoir goes deeper than simply presenting the social perception of women. Pointing out that women are perceived as the "inessential as opposed to the essential [men]" (ibid., p. 16), she explains that difference by introducing the concept of the "*Other*" (ibid). In this concept man is the "*Subject*, he is the *Absolute* – she is the *Other*" (ibid). One of the most important things to notice in Beauvoir's theory is that she rejects the notion that gender is natural. She

argues that the way we imagine a woman is not the coextensive representation of a woman's natural condition in which she was born. Rather social perceptions are defining what one (in this case woman) should be and become what society believes they should be: “One is not born a woman but becomes one” (ibid., p. 301) When discussing that "woman" is shaped according to the needs and interests of men, Beauvoir also tries to understand what this binary division of perceptions and social positions is due to. She notices that for centuries women have been "subordinated to men" (p. 18) and this is a fact of the social organisation of life that has always been there. Therefore, the reason for Woman being the absolute "Other" is "... in part [the fact] that it lacks the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts" (ibid., p. 18).

The most important point to me in Beauvoir’s thinking is that in so far as these social ideals of gender distinction are historical formations, they are mediated by signification. That is, they can be studied through the specificities of their narrative construction. This aspect of “being made a woman” is discussed through the concept of performativity in Judith Butler’s “Gender Trouble” (1990). Butler challenges essentialist perspectives on the sex/gender binary distinction. By questioning the assumption that gender should be inherently determined by biological sex, they disagrees with the idea that specific sexes automatically correspond to their ‘appropriate’ particular genders. In other words, they argues that, even if we should view sex as strictly binary, it doesn't mean that only individuals with “male” bodies can identify as men or that only those with “female” bodies can identify as women (ibid., p. 6). Butler goes on to point out what follows from this discrepancy and makes a more subversive claim and argues that “sex is as culturally constructed as gender” ibid., (p. 7). So, gender should not be conceptualised as the cultural interpretation of some biological sex because sex itself is gendered and made sense through the mediation of historically contingent signification.

What does it mean to say that sex is gendered? According to Butler, the fact that we think of sex as merely binary is not an inherently biological fact but rather a gendered cultural interpretation and one that is made to be the norm. So, within the essentialist paradigm, for instance, gender is the “apparatus” by which the “natural sex” is formed as “prediscursive”, “a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (ibid). In other words, sex is presented as only "female" and "male" because culturally gender *should* also be sex appropriate, that is, binary only. But, if we follow the idea that sex has always been gendered then the absolute distinction between gender and sex is meaningless (Butler, p. 7), and sex – in the sense of “biological foundation” of gender – becomes decentred, itself a matter of social articulations.

This constitutive relationship is what is explained by Butler through the concept of performativity: gender is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (1990, p. 33). Gender is created, maintained, and enforced through the repetitive actions embodying particular societal norms that regulate how genders should be presented and understood, among other things, in genres of Self-articulations, such as life stories. Individuals are made into social subjects, shaped by these norms, and end up perpetuating them through their actions, thus solidifying them in society. In essence, performativity involves actively *doing* gender, as opposed to it being determined by biology. Therefore, repetition or rather collective reiteration of the activities is the key aspect here as it “constitutes the temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilisation” (1993, p. 21). It is important to note that performativity entails a dialectic process of repetition and failure to do so: reiteration, besides creating “gender uniformity”, produces *and destabilises* the concept of the “subject”. It only “comes into intelligibility through the matrix of gender [relations of power]” (1993, p. 22), but in the course of its articulation of the norms, it is always already open to ‘failures’ of its performance. In other words, gender performativity doesn't involve simply choosing one's gender identity at will. It's about being compelled to repeatedly enact and so adhere to pre-existing societal norms, which can't be easily discarded or changed at will. (1990, p. 22-23)

In *Gender Trouble* Butler also discusses “women" as the subject of feminism. According to them, feminist theory asserts the existence of a collective identity represented by the category of “women", which serves as the subject of feminism. Feminist theory aims to ensure the representation of this identity in both society and politics. However, Butler challenges the idea of a stable and universal category of "women," as well as the notion of a fixed "subject" of ontological being. Defining a feminist subject is a complex and challenging task because femininity and patriarchy are different across cultures and historical moments and relations of gender intersect with other socially regulated relational activities like, for instance, race, class, and sexuality. So, universalizing these experiences is quite problematic as such logic would always exclude certain groups as if non-existent or irrelevant at best. To avoid this exclusionary act of universalizing, Butler’s suggestion is to conduct a "feminist genealogy" to explore how the relevant categories have been constructed throughout history (1993, p. 2-4). Chandra Mohanty’s (1984) argument is similar to Butler’s view. Mohanty argues that women's oppression should not be homogenised under the umbrella of a “universal” experience as that would be a colonising move from the perspective of the white feminist woman. Rather, feminist

theory should consider how diverse social, cultural, geographical, and other relations form women's experiences differently, and render the different groups of women caught in unequal relations of power with one another.

Discussing the category of "woma/en" I would like to reflect on the importance of the difference between the life or circulation of various concepts of Woman and the life of actual women. Monique Witting (1981) in *One is Not Born a Woman* draws an important distinction between "woman" and women by saying that "woman" is "only an imaginary formation," "the myth", while women are "the product of the social relationship" mediated by that concept: it is "the *class" and the "product of social relationship" "...* within which we fight" (1981, p. 180-181). Having said that, this does not mean that the concept 'woman' (or the ideal, the myth') is not a product of social activity, that signification would not be a collective, socially regulated practice, rather it draws attention to the discontinuity between representations and other social practices of organising life articulated in that ideal or "myth" that is meant to naturalise, or erase the effect of the very power dynamics in question, including the ones governing which meaning of 'woman' is meant to be taken as 'given' in a particular cultural-social context. This is why in my thesis I will analyse the life narratives I have elicited in my fieldwork as stories of gender/sexuality, as a matter of performativity, drawing on the above authors' critique of the dominance of stable biologically grounded "universal" category of woman.

1.2 Sexuality, Queerness, Women

Michel Foucault was one of the first theorists who discussed theoretical frameworks of sexuality. In his *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (1976) Foucault presents a critical examination of power dynamics in the formation of sexuality. Foucault challenges traditional notions of sexuality as a fixed, natural phenomenon, the expression of some innate sexual drive, and argues instead that it is a particular formation shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces. He explores how power operates in the regulation and control of sexuality, highlighting how discourses and institutions shape a given society's understanding and expression/performance of sexual desires.

Along that line, Rosemary Hennesy (1995) underscores the importance of the historical materialist formation of such norms of sexuality and notes that sexuality

> *is a material practice that shapes and is shaped by social totalities like capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism as they manifest differently across social formations and within specific historical conjunctures. As social practice, sexuality includes lesbian, gay, and queer resistance movements that have built social and political networks, often by way of capitalist commercial venues. (1995 p. 32-33)*

The key point about these intersecting power relations, or 'junctures' is that, out of the many forms of sexuality, heterosexuality is the one that is perceived as the natural or – to use Butler's word – the "original" form of sexuality. In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" Butler (2004) criticises the notion that heterosexuality is the "original" and lesbianism (and gay sexuality) is differentiated from *hetero*sexuality ('the relationship between the 'opposite' sexes) in terms of the latter. Consequently, homosexuality should be seen as its "imitation" or the "copy" – always already destined to "fail". Butler fully rejects the notion of originality, arguing that paradoxically, for heterosexuality to be considered as "the original", it needs homosexuality to "imitate" the former, to exist as its "copy". Without producing the idea of "the copy", "the original" has nothing to compare itself against. Butler argues that heterosexuality cannot be considered as "original" or better to say "natural" because of its performative nature. That is to say that heterosexuality needs to be constantly repeated and confirmed as the norm of origin in order to exist as such. So, it cannot be considered as naturally existing since it is discursively articulated according to this binary logic of categorization.

As Rosemary Hennessy says in her discussion of Butler's theory, heterosexuality is a "regime of power" (1995, p. 38) that oppresses women – and others who are not in the privileged position in a heteronormative(ly organised) society. She adds that, for some theorists, such as Adrienne Rich or Monique Wittig or Cheryl Clarke, lesbianism is the best way to resist heterosexual oppression. Adrienne Rich highlights that heterosexuality is compulsory and is assumed to be the "sexual preference" of "most women", or the expected norm of visibility in society. She argues that it is not a natural human instinct but an institutionalised category which reinforces and creates fertile ground for male dominance. According to Rich, under the heterosexual oppression women do not have the opportunity to understand or discuss their sexuality and its meaning in their lives. So, it is important to acknowledge the absence of choice - which is again a result and form of oppression - while discussing women's sexuality. (1980) Cheryl Clarke defines lesbianism as "a recognition, an awakening, a reawakening of our passion for each (woman) other (woman) and for same (woman)." (1981, p. 126) She sees lesbianism

as an act of resistance, “an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny” (1981, p. 127). She also sees heterosexuality as an oppressive institution which “is a die-hard custom through which male-supremacist institutions insure their own perpetuity and control over us” (1981, p. 128). What is worth mentioning of Clarke’s thinking for my research is the concept of “Political Lesbians” she brings to the discussion and defines it “as lesbians who are resisting the prevailing culture’s attempts to keep us invisible and powerless” (1981, p. 132). More importantly, she adds that the best way to resist oppression is for lesbian-feminism to have “anti-racist, anti-classist and anti-woman-hating vision of bonding as mutual” (ibid). In other words, the best resistance strategy for lesbian-feminism would be acknowledging the diversity of women from within an intersectional framework and instead of “hating” each other, start loving and accepting each other as that love “for all lesbians, as lovers, as comrades, as freedom fighters, in the final resistance”.

In the thesis, I draw on Judith Butler's theoretical framework to examine sexuality as a matter of performativity. Within this analytical framework, the discussion of sexuality will necessarily extend beyond mere sexual orientation, with particular attention given to heterosexuality as an institutionalised category of normativity in the centre of complex power dynamics in society, most often leading to the oppression of various groups of women. At the same time, I will explore whether Armenian queer women identify commonalities in their lived experiences as non-heterosexual women. This part of the research aims to examine if non-heterosexual Armenian women in my group of participants perceive themselves as a community and whether the concept of “bonding as mutual” (Clark, 1981, p. 132) holds significance as a form of resistance for them, and whether there exists a perceived necessity for their resistance in general.

In the discourse of social theories of sexuality, the term “queer” is frequently discussed. According to Michael Warner (1993), queerness extends beyond the binary categorization of sexuality of homosexuality and heterosexuality. According to him, queerness is “a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer”, aiming “to challenge the common understanding” of what is normal (p. xiii). Rosemary Hennessy (1995), reflecting on queer theory, says that it targets “heteronormativity rather than heterosexuality”, thus acknowledging that “heterosexuality is an institution that organises more than just the sexual: it is socially pervasive, underlying myriad taken-for-granted norms that shape what can be seen,

said, and valued" (1995, p. 35). It is important to highlight the differences between heterosexuality and heteronormativity. Heterosexuality by itself is neither desirable nor problematic. It becomes a matter of social concern when it "is a form of power that exerts its effects on both gay and straight individuals, often through unspoken practices and institutional structures" (Somerville, 2014, p. 204). On the other hand, "queer" is sometimes used as a synonym of gay and lesbian, or better to say it is understood as an umbrella term to refer to "non-heterosexual" sexual identities.

In my thesis, I will use the term "queer women" as well to encompass those who do not identify as heterosexual, acknowledging the diverse forms of non-heterosexuality, going beyond the binary distinction of lesbian or bisexual. Despite their diverse self-identifications, these women may share similarities due to their non-heterosexuality. Therefore, when discussing issues relevant to non-heterosexual women, I will use the term "queer women." At the same time, I will specify their sexual self-identification when discussing an issue that is relevant specifically to those participants.

1.3 The "I" and Identity

As articulated in the introduction of *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality,* edited by Anna Livia and Kira Hall (1997), queer theory, with its "concern for hegemonic social forces rather than individual speakers" (ibid., p. 6), can be seen as a response to the identity politics of feminism. Identity politics "revolves around the recognition" (1997 p. 6) of one's identity as part of a specific, often marginalised group, such as women, Black individuals, the working class, or people with disabilities. A key criticism of identity politics is its essentialist nature; it presumes that personal identity is an "unproblematic category" and that all social dynamics can be understood through it (ibid).

Queer theory challenges the conventional, normative constructions of identity by questioning and deconstructing the binary and essentialist views of gender and sexuality. When discussing approaches to the "I" in queer theory, Anna Livia and Kira Hall explore Butler's perspective on that (1997, p. 7). Butler considers the individual "I" who speaks as "a citation of the place of the "I" in speech" and adds that there is "no "I" who stands behind the discourse" (1993 p. 225). Butler argues that the "I" does not have a referent that exists before the act of speaking. So, their assertion that there is "no "I" that stands behind discourse" (1993 p. 225) challenges the traditional notion of a stable, "pre-discursive" self to be extended in language.

This view suggests that identity is not something one has from the outset as their "true self" but is continuously formed and reformed through speech and social engagement. Furthermore, every use of "I" is a reiteration of a social norm. The self, therefore, is an ongoing performance that draws on existing discourses, reflecting the idea that identity is constructed through repeated acts and citations of historically contingent acts of signification.

To understand that life stories are deeply embedded in such social interaction, I turn to Charlotte Linde (1993). According to her, life stories are shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which individuals live and are told and retold in social settings, influenced by the feedback and responses of others. This social process allows individuals to negotiate their identities, seeking validation and recognition from their audience (1993, p. 32-35).

Butler's theory on the "I" along with Linde's perspective on life stories and their connections with identities will serve as the main theoretical framework for me for the discussion of the "I" and the sense of Self among the participants.

1.4 Intersectionality

Although the need to consider women's diverse backgrounds have been argued for by several feminist theorists before her, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) is the scholar who has coined the term 'intersectionality' itself. Crenshaw acknowledges how various social relations of power intersect, shaping individuals' unique and multidimensional experiences and perceptions of who they are. Her notion of intersectionality encourages a more comprehensive way of analysis that considers the overlapping and intersecting dimensions of positionality when examining women's lives, thereby providing a more complex understanding of women's lived experiences and reflections on them. Another author whose perspective on intersectionality resonates with my views is Audre Lord (1979). Her main point in the essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" is that using the tools of an oppressive system cannot solve issues of oppression that is based on the dominance of binary distinctions. Instead, it's important to recognize and address the diverse experiences of women within the context of their differences and forge a position/logic beyond the dominant ones of familiarity. Lorde challenges the idea that we can have "equality" or "tolerance" without a genuine and deep appreciation of our relative differences. So, we need actual acknowledgement of our differences as potentially part of one another, instead of "mere tolerance of differences *between* women" (p. 95). For Lorde this change entails the necessity for the relatively privileged, i.e. white

women, especially white feminists, to educate themselves about Black women's issues. The idea or the reality that marginalised groups, in this case, Black and "third-world" women, are expected to do the work and educate privileged white women about their existence, differences, and roles in the joint survival of the feminist movement indexes a further hierarchical power dynamics. In the models of intersectionality many feminist theorists have addressed colonisation and its exclusionary consequences for groups of non-white women. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" criticises Eurocentrism and colonialism and interrogates the representation of marginalised groups, particularly women in contemporary postcolonial contexts. She critiques Western feminist discourse for its tendency to silence the voices of "subaltern" subjects when assuming that they should be silent and are in need of some representation: their experiences are often misrepresented or appropriated by dominant discourses of white (European) feminist assumptions about the alleged need to speak on the former group's behalf. Saba Mahmood's (2001) views are in some sense similar to Spivak's argument. Although Mahmood concentrates on challenging conventional Western feminist assumptions about *women's agency*, similarly to Spivak, she highlights the importance of considering the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals *within* their respective contexts and *through their own* interpretation. Mahmood's discussion is organised around the conceptions of self and moral agency, critiquing the (mostly Western) feminist perspective on women's emancipation or freedom. She argues against the understanding that agency is always synonymous with resistance or a complete breaking out of the system that subordinates women. Instead, she proposes that agency can manifest in forms that appear "docile" or passive/submissive from an outsider's perspective. She states that it's crucial to take into account the perspective of the involved on a particular action when analysing whether or not it was emancipatory.

Drawing on these approaches, my research acknowledges the influence of various power-shaping factors such as race, geography, and class on the LBQ individuals' understanding of their identities and lived experiences in my case study. In agreement with Spivak and Mahmood, I shall observe the argument that people should have space and opportunity to present their lived experiences by themselves when approaching Armenian women for their participation.

1.5 Queer Women in Armenia

The situation of LGBTQI individuals in Armenia shows a complex environment affected by multiple challenges, such as social discrimination, discriminatory cultural values, legislative gaps, and institutional neglect. Even though there is a Constitutional clause on the prohibition of discrimination providing a non-exhaustive list of protected grounds (RA Constitution, 2015) as well as the requirement of direct implementation of the Constitution, there are no effective legal measures to ensure protection from discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. The absence of effective legal mechanisms leaves LGBTQI individuals vulnerable to discrimination and violence. After the dissolution of the Soviet-Union (1992-1994) and in the context of wars with Azerbaijan (2016, 2020, 2023), the “preservation of the nation " became the main concept around which all political, social and cultural discussions have evolved. Armenia’s survival has often been presented as a result of the efforts of the Church, the family, and a “proper Armenian morality preserved through these institutions” (Shirinian, 2018). This anxiety of self-preservation has always been tied to heteronormativity. As non-heterosexuality has historically been seen as male, women have constantly been erased from non-heterosexual discourses. In the Armenian context, women are imagined to be heterosexual and, most importantly, as reproducing mothers (Sargsyan, 2018). Shirinian (2018) highlights that women’s sexuality is also connected with kinship. In the Armenian patriarchal kinship system, women’s sexuality is perceived as something that can be controlled by male kins (fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands). Shirinian states that women lack “sexual subjectivity” and if women’s sexuality is always in one way or another “marked by their kin-relation to men” and the public image of the woman is formed as “she who does not desire but is for the desire and control of men", then imagining a woman who desires women not men becomes impossible according to that logic. In other words, women’s sexuality is “never her own and never for other women” (Shirinian, 2018).

In this thesis, my ultimate aim is to examine lesbian, bisexual, and queer (non-binary), in short, LBQ individuals' sense of self in the Armenian cultural-social context from within an intersectional approach to point out/explore the intersections of gender and sexuality.

Chapter 2: Journey to Self-Understanding

2.1 Who am I?

To understand the intersections of gender and sexuality I have explored the narrative construction of the sense of Self of queer women in contemporary Armenia. Before delving deeper into the participants' life stories and understanding the role of gender and sexuality in their lives I wanted to establish what a descriptive paragraph about themselves could include.

The "Tell me about yourself" question may seem easy to answer, but most of my participants found it challenging. Some of them were unsure what to say, some of them asked for more time and a few of them asked to clarify what I wanted to know specifically. While asking this question I first wanted to see if people mention their gender and sexuality while generally describing themselves. Secondly, acknowledging the complex interplay of various social relations of power, such as gender, sexuality, class, and geography, I sought to understand which other key components participants mentioned to construct a personal portrait. I did not specify my question any further. When they asked me what I specifically wanted to know I just said: "Tell me whatever you think is important for you to describe you".

Notably, gender emerged as the most frequently mentioned aspect among the participants. It is consistently a central theme throughout the conversation. Participants appear to navigate their lives through the lens of gender and in some cases, their lives are essentially influenced by it. Gender plays a significant role in their discussions of sexuality, interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and various specific aspects of life. As the Armenian language does not have gendered pronouns, only a few of them mentioned what pronouns they prefer to use while communicating in another language and none of them were cis-gender. Those who nevertheless mentioned their pronouns identify as non-binary, queer, or agender.

When discussing gender, my participants frequently mention their sexuality as well. While this is less common than mentioning gender in their general self-descriptions, whenever sexuality is included, it is invariably mentioned alongside gender. Such as "I am a bisexual woman", "My gender is a woman and I identify as pansexual", or "I identify as a lesbian woman". In fact, in half of the cases, the individuals mention their sexuality in their general self-description, while in the other half, I had to inquire separately about their sexual identity.

Secondly, in this self-portrait the participants tend to mention their place of birth or nationality. Interestingly those who mentioned the city/village they come from were not born and raised in the capital Yerevan. Based on my personal experience, I can say that in Armenia, there is a pronounced centralization of resources and opportunities in the capital city, Yerevan. Consequently, residents of regions experience limited access to various services and opportunities, highlighting significant regional disparities. Being born and raised in the regions influenced participants' life paths specifically when it comes to awareness of sexuality, self-acceptance, and being involved in community activities which mostly happen in Yerevan. Participants mainly mentioned that living in the regions, they had comparatively fewer, in some cases no, opportunities to participate in events organised for LGBTQI+ people. Additionally, they noted that it is much harder to meet queer people in the regions because, as rural communities are smaller, people usually do not disclose their sexuality to anyone for fear of being outed. This also affects their ability to express their gender as they would like to. There is always the chance that someone who knows their family members could see them and discuss their appearance with their family. Participants mentioned that people in the provinces hold more conservative views, and as a result, their appearance could cause additional problems.

The third common factor mentioned as a signifier of who they are is their job or education. Interestingly they are not just mentioning what they do or what degree they have, but they tend to describe the role of that degree or job in their life paths. For those who had the opportunity to choose what to study and then started to work in the field, education is an aspect that shaped their life perspectives, or it is a way to bring their values and interests to life. Their engagements and activities are mainly formed around their profession and education. The participants also discussed their future career aspirations, recognizing the importance of this aspect in defining themselves. They emphasised that articulating their professional goals provides insight into their ambitions and the direction they aim to pursue. The participants engaged in less preferred occupations or facing challenges in securing employment aligned with their educational background tend to highlight specific obstacles when discussing their work experiences. Gender often emerges as a significant factor influencing these difficulties.

Age is another relatively common signifier of identity. However, I would like to highlight that everyone who mentioned their age when talking about themselves was 30 or 30+ years old. After stating their age, most participants provided additional comments on their age, or the life phase associated with it. Here are some examples from the interviews:

... I am trying to do everything, it is like I am starting to live my life now, after 30. (Anushik, 34 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

They say "the generation of independence," right?... I was born in 1990, and perhaps the so-called taste of independence [from the USSR]and freedom was the reason that created an opportunity for a person like me to understand things that were happening in my life such as sexuality, feminism, women's issues, etc… (Arev, 34 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)

Age also plays a significant role when all the 30+ years old participants describe their involvement in the NGOs or generally in the queer community.

Less frequently mentioned aspects include the participants' hobbies, personality traits, and descriptions of their emotional states at that moment.

2.2 Making Sense of Sexuality

To comprehend the experiences of queer women regarding sexuality and gender, it is crucial to first explore their journeys of self-discovery and acceptance. In this section, I will examine the narratives of my respondents as they navigated the discovery and acceptance of their sexuality and gender.

The participants in the study frequently emphasised that their sense of self was shaped significantly by the challenging realities they faced. They recounted experiences of pressure, discrimination, and oppression, particularly from within their own families. These familial dynamics often profoundly influenced their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Additionally, the participants highlighted the pervasive impact of binary and heterosexual expectations in society. These societal norms imposed rigid standards that constrained their sense of self-expression and limited the possibilities for authentic self-discovery. Each person's journey through life varies, and while some have found peace with their queerness, others are still on the path to acceptance:

I remember... I remembered this recently... We had a plot of land in the countryside, and our neighbour there had a girl with gorgeous, long-long hair, she had very beautiful blue eyes. [smiling while describing the girl] I always went to play with her; she was older than me, but she was so nice to me that I always wanted to be

around her … I did not realise and understand what was happening back then, I was a child. (Arev, 34 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)

For none of the participants did queerness emerge immediately or all of a sudden. It was a process for all of them. For some, it spanned years, stretching from childhood to adulthood, while for others, it was a relatively shorter journey. Most of them noted that signs of queerness were noticeable in early childhood or adolescence.

Ani, a 27-year-old queer person from Gyumri, explained that they started telling their mother about liking women when they were 8 or 9 years old. They did not really understand it at the time. Ani said they fell in love with a woman for the first time at age 12 and knew it was a strong crush. They also mentioned that they didn't resist those feelings and acted based on their emotions:

I think it was a process because for the first time, I fell head over heels in love with a woman and I was only 12 years old. I was thinking, 'What is happening to me, my God?' and I understood that I had fallen in love. I clearly recognized that feeling, but I did not question or fight against it. Moreover, I gave myself to that flow and frequently visited the places where that woman was. I just sat and watched her and my teenage soul was completely satisfied. I did not resist these feelings. However, at that age, I did not even think these feelings meant I would grow up and like women or be a lesbian." (Ani, 27 years old, from Gyumri, Armenia)

In stories of falling in love during childhood, early adolescence, or in the initial stages of discovering sexuality, participants often describe falling in love with their female friends. They don't always label this feeling as infatuation or attraction. Instead, they perceive it as friendship and remark that girls' friendships are inherently closer: "You always want to spend all your time with your best friend and do everything together, don't you?" says Anushik. And then she goes on to elaborate:

I had a friend who lived next door to us, and we did everything together: if one cut her hair, the other had to cut hers in the same way; if she put on a hairband, I had to do the same... We were experimenting, doing things without really understanding, and this went on for 4-5 years... If we were 5-6 years old, I would think we were just exploring each other or ourselves... but somehow it lasted too

long. When we [Anushik's family] moved, I experienced severe depressive episodes because we [Anushik and her friend] were no longer in the same area, and I had no opportunity to see her or communicate with her. (Anushik, 34 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

During their childhood, most participants didn't recognize their feelings towards other women as attractions. Even if it was emotionally evident to them that "something was burning inside," they did not define or name it in a certain way. Essentially, it is during the process of self-acceptance or self-discovery in adulthood when they begin to reflect on and recall the earlier signs of queerness.

In some participants, manifestations of queerness emerged in early youth or late adolescence. In such cases, it is relatively easy to discern whether their feelings are attractions or infatuations. However, despite this, none of them mention realising from the outset that they were attracted to that person. Initially, such feelings are often interpreted as "we were just good friends," "I was simply interested in spending time with someone different," or "I couldn't imagine that I liked them."

When discussing her first crush, Marine, a 26-year-old woman from Yerevan, says that only upon later analysis, did she realise that the first person she was attracted to was a girl. However, at the time, she was hesitant to label her feelings because accepting them was emotionally difficult:

the first person I had a crush on was a girl, I couldn't accept it anyway, because I thought... I didn't understand... I just felt something like... that I had to protect her, there were many dangers, I had to protect her... but anyway, I started not to accept that I could be in love with her, and that remained in my mind... Then [years later] we went to Georgia with our university department. I lost my ring in some dark room and started to panic. I asked people to help me find it... then she went, turned on the lights, found my ring, brought it to me, and said that she saw me all the time at the university, we both had blue hair, then she asked if she could invite me to a concert, and I said yes, you can invite me, I'll come with pleasure, and I went... then we spent all our time together... we went to the backyard of the university, and apart from classes, we spent the entire day together, smoking and so on. The whole university made it up that we were together, and that's why they didn't want to hang

out with us. I didn't care; if I'm honest, it meant nothing to me how others saw me. The only thing I cared about was how I perceived myself... and I denied that I had a crush on her... we were just friends. (Marine, 26 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

Growing up in a heteronormative society, some participants initially tried to build relationships with men. These attempts were mostly unsuccessful. In their stories about relationships with men, participants frequently mentioned that they found these interactions very unpleasant and sometimes even disgusting. Naira, a 28-year-old pansexual woman, shared that she began her first romantic relationships with men and, before that, she hadn't considered the possibility of being queer:

Whenever there was an attempt to go out with a man, I just could not do it. I rejected it completely; it was a definite no... At first, I thought that I just could not do it, and then I asked myself why I could not... I thought maybe I am asexual. (Naira, 28 years old, from Dilijan, Armenia)

Attempts to start a relationship with men often arise when participants have thoughts of being attracted to women. Marine, for example, says that when she had thoughts of liking women, she started going on dates with men to reject her thoughts of being attracted to women. When talking about her relationships with men, she said:

I started going out with men just to show myself or to prove something to myself, and it always ended with some kind of disgust, even if it was just light contact. (Marine, 26 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

Self-acceptance is a challenging process, especially within the context of Armenia's heteronormative and homophobic society. This difficulty is not surprising given the cultural environment. As you have already seen in Naira's and Marine's stories, the process of self-acceptance started with resistance and rejection—this is a relatively common practice among all the participants. Interestingly even for those who were at peace with their queerness in childhood or adolescence, accepting their sexuality became challenging at some point. In certain instances, challenges with self-acceptance emerged due to maintaining predominantly negative perceptions of queer individuals. In certain instances, challenges with self-acceptance emerged due to harbouring predominantly negative perceptions of queer individuals. For some

participants, these notions were shaped by prevailing societal attitudes, while for others, they stemmed from personal interactions. Karmen, identifying as bi-romantic, for example, shared that upon recognizing her attraction to women later in life, she felt distressed and initially denied this realisation:

> *At a certain age, I realised that I liked women, and it brought me to tears. I remember when I was little, it was the beginning of the 2000s, all the lesbian women who were in Armenia were butch, masculine, and very aggressive ... I've seen all that, I thought, so I'm going to become like that too, and I started to cry from that thought. (Karmen, 27 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

In discussions about queerness, one often encounters the myth that homosexuality is a disease or a mental disorder. This myth remains prevalent in Armenia. I vividly recall a conversation with my mother a few years ago, during which she asked me, "Aid, tell me honestly, is this actually a disease?" Even now, I still wonder about the answer my mother was seeking, particularly given her ongoing doubts about my queerness, both then and possibly even now. Perhaps my mother believed that if homosexuality were classified as a disease, there might be a cure available. On the other hand, if it were not considered a disease, coping with it might prove more challenging.

My participants also had thoughts about being or not being sick. Alex, a31-year- old, non-binary, lesbian, from Yerevan, shares that when they were first beginning to explore their sexuality, they did not have much information about it. They were not sure but had heard conversations suggesting that not being heterosexual was a sickness:

> *I wanted to read more and learn about it from movies or research I don't know… I didn't know what it was, whether it was a disease, a deviation, or none of that... For about 4-6 months, I closed myself off and constantly read, watched, and studied different things... When I was in a relationship for the first time, I thought, even if this is a disease, I'm okay with it, I am okay to be sick... I was happy for the first time. (Alex, 31 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

Several key factors have helped participants to come to be at peace with their sexuality. Among these, awareness rising can be highlighted as a means of self-acceptance. While this might sound broad, the sources from which the participants said they had obtained information

about sexuality were equally broad. When discussing sources of information, feminism is frequently mentioned. In this context, gender undeniably plays an important role. Most participants became acquainted with feminism while seeking information about discrimination against women and the unjust distribution of power. As a result of studying feminism, they found information about sexuality and began to embrace the idea of accepting oneself.

Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned having a negative opinion about feminism initially or thinking that all feminists were lesbians. Feminism or a feminist could mean a lot of things and as Sarah Ahmed says, “where” also means a lot (2000, p. 98). I find this interesting because perceptions of feminism in Armenia are quite blurred. In public and social media posts by various nationalist groups, it can often be observed that all feminists are labeled as “gays” or LGBTQI+. Nonetheless, my respondents either didn't encounter these ideas about feminism at the beginning of their research or did not pay them enough attention to mention in our conversations.

Meeting other queer people has also played a significant role in validating sexuality and fostering self-acceptance. Nearly all participants mentioned that this helped them not feel alone and realise that there are others who share their experiences. Beyond simply knowing other queer people, feeling "accepted" by them and not being judged has been crucial. As Karmen, the 27-year-old agender bisexual from Yerevan puts it:

> *When I was 18 a classmate of mine at the university was incredibly gay-friendly, and they were demisexual, if I am not mistaken. They said that they would give anything to have been born a lesbian, but they were not... I was constantly talking to them about being attracted to this guy and stuff... They did not believe me and would say, “Really, are you sure you liked the guy?” I kept denying it... Then one day, I came out to them and said, “I'm coming out to you now, and also to myself.” They were happy, said that they knew it and so on… it was a happy moment. (Karmen, 27 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

> *After struggling for so long, I began to accept myself, and it turned out that my friends had already sensed it. They were like, “Okay, we figured out that you had a crush on this professor before, and now you like this girl from our class. We are aware that you two have randomly started talking and have become close. We accept you as you are, it is completely okay. Do not lock yourself up, do not change*

yourself…" I am generally the kind of person who never cries, I mean, I cannot even cry from physical pain. But at that moment, I got emotional and said, "Oh, you exist, thank you, thank you, thank you for being in my life." And from that day on, I began to accept myself. (Marine, 26 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

In addition, pop culture is also said to have played a significant role in normalising the participants' sense of sexuality. Seeing queer characters in various movies or music videos, where the love and explicit sexual scenes between a couple is shown and queerness is normalised, has led some participants to developing a positive attitude towards their own sexuality. It is important to note that by pop culture, I exclusively mean foreign (particularly American and Russian) pop culture, as none of the participants spoke about the positive influences of Armenian pop culture. On the contrary, some of them mentioned that during their childhood, following Armenian media mainly normalised gender stereotypes and homophobia for them.

Luse (22 years old, lesbian woman, from Abovyan, Armenia) mentions that a particular episode from her childhood left a strong impression on her, which she believes was one of the first signs of her queerness:

I was watching a show about Greek gods, and I remember myself as a little child, sitting there with big eyes, looking at the goddesses and saying, "Mom, they are so beautiful." I was not paying much attention to the gods, even though their statues were there too; they did not attract me... When I got a bit older, I explained that moment to myself by saying that the female body is generally more aesthetic, which is why I liked it. I always interpreted it that way.

Let me tell you how I came back to this topic: I was watching a series where there was a couple who, in my perception, were just perfect. Their love was very beautiful to me; they both identified as men, and at that moment, I looked at them and immediately accepted it as something normal, something usual. (Luse, 22 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)

In post-Soviet Armenia, the influence of contemporary pop culture has been quite significant. When studying stories of accepting queerness, references to Russian singers or musical groups like Tatoo, Ruki Verkh, Reflex, and Zemfira often appear among people born

in the 1990s. Their songs and music videos frequently featured lesbian, gay, or trans characters or stories about them. Interestingly, participants mention that these videos never seemed strange or unusual to them. They saw them and thought, "Okay, there are people like this too." Participants also note that there was not a widespread negative opinion about these videos among their acquaintances or family members. Some believe this lack of negativity was due to the limited availability of information, as there was no internet or social media at the time to spread and discuss negative views on sexuality, as is often the case now.

2.3 Making Sense of Gender

You probably have already noticed that while discussing sexuality, I often talk about gender and its role as well. In reality, they are intricately intertwined, and it is hard to separate them. Genders and sexualities go hand in hand in most of the participant stories. So, in different segments of research, you will encounter their intersections. I will often mention one of them while discussing an issue regarding the other one.

Now, when I have clarified this aspect, I can start discussing the stories of self-discovery among queer women. First, I will discuss participants' paths in discovering their gender. During the research, I have conducted in-depth interviews with both cisgender individuals and those who identify as agender, non-binary, or queer. In this part of the chapter, I will separately discuss cis-women's and non-binary/queer/agender people's experiences.

I start with cis women's experiences. They are Anushik, Marine, Naira, Luse, Adalyn, Lera in my group of participants. As one might infer, cisgender women typically did not experience a period of gender discomfort or struggle with gender acceptance. However, it is important to note that many have needed to challenge and redefine what it means to be a woman as the existing traditional norms and expectations imposed upon women have not always been comfortable or desirable for them. Here, we can revisit feminism, as it has played a significant role in challenging gender roles and stereotypes.

Luse mentions that in her self-acceptance journey feeling comfortable with her body has been quite an important aspect. She specifically highlights the importance of having the opportunity to "construct" her body as she desires, without the constraints of obligations and societal norms:

> *I had decided not to undergo any type of hair removal and it was important or maybe a goal for me to be comfortable with that decision... I did not anticipate that the hair on my legs could pose any problem, but I was told to shave them off so it would not be an issue... However, it was important for me to start accepting myself, so I didn't engage in any hair removal for that reason. (Luse, 22 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)*

Another apparent finding from the intersection of gender and sexuality is that, following the recognition of sexuality, some of the respondents mention a desire to be a man so that they can have a relationship with women. However, since this desire mostly refers to sexuality and not to the perception of gender, after accepting their sexuality, the desire to be a man is said to have passed. Alex says for example:

> *I question the existence of gender a lot; it is about categorising people into a limited number of types, but people are very diverse, each person's gender is very unique... mine just happened to turn out this way. (Alex, 31 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

Being born into and living in a binary society—and allow me to say, world—non-binary, agender, queer people's relationships with gender and its social perceptions is reported to have not been smooth or straightforward. It is best demonstrated by the five non-cis people I interviewed in my research. They are Karmen, Alex, Arev, Ani and Renat. Their stories differ quite a lot from each other, but they all share some common threads, setting them apart from cis-gender participants. The first commonality is that they do not and, for the most part, have never fit into the binary gender division.

Alex, who mentions that being non-binary is now the most important part of their identity, shares that they have never had a “sense of gender” since childhood. During our conversation, they frequently mentioned that they do not understand the feeling that people can perceive themselves as women or men. This was a prominent and recurrent theme in our discussion:

> *... As a child, I never had a sense of gender... now I think I have always been uncomfortable with female/woman identifications... especially the feeling of gender is unfamiliar to me, I do not understand how people say "I feel like a woman or a man"... later, when I learned that there are other things besides women and men, I realised that non-binary is the closest to my inner feeling... I do not fit into those [binary] perceptions... those [woman and man] are also superficial, it is like categorising people, but still, most people deviate in some way from that box, hundred percent matches are very rare. (Alex, 31 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

Alex's experience and feelings about their gender are very similar to Karmen's experience. Karmen is a 27-year-old agender person. Unlike Alex, Karmen does not refer to their childhood when discussing their feelings about their gender, mainly talking about the present. However, it is interesting that when speaking about their journey of discovering their sexuality, Karmen's earliest memory is an incident from kindergarten when they asked their mother to cut their hair very short. After cutting Karmen's hair short, their mother dressed them in a dress to make them “look like a girl.” While recounting this episode, Karmen mentioned that despite everyone saying they looked very pretty, they did not like the dress or the “femininity” it created. Reflecting on their conscious feelings about gender, Karmen says:

> *...From a gender perspective, I consider myself agender, but I do not have a problem with pronouns; people can address me however they feel comfortable, I do not have an issue or trigger with it. I even participated in an event in Sweden... I told people to address me however they were comfortable; some used he, some used she, and at that time [5-6 years ago] 'they' was not very popular... I do not feel male or female inside... I have heard people say, “I'm a girl in a boy's body" or “a man in a woman's body,” I do not feel that way either, I feel genderless. (Karmen, 27 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

At the same time, participants note that going through "female socialisation"—being raised, growing up, and being perceived as a woman—plays a very important role in their lives. This is important because it has shaped their values, worldview, and ways of interacting with people. A significant part of this is that they were raised with "feminine" values, which, within a patriarchal system, implies being in a subordinate role and facing the same issues that women encounter:

...I consider myself queer... I would not say that I feel like a woman, but I also feel like a woman, but I also understand, and it is important for me to talk about the experience of female socialisation. As an activist, it is also important for me to address the issues I face in our country as a woman, as a queer woman, or as queer... (Arev, 34 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)

As evident from Arev's experience, despite their non-binary/agender/queer identity, these individuals continue to be perceived as women by society, and in this sense, we could say that their socialisation as women continues. According to Ani:

...I have undergone female socialisation, and I am still undergoing it. Even if I shout out loud that I am queer, in all areas of my life—except in those spaces where people can be sensitive, respectful, and ask questions to understand how to interact with me in regard to my identity—I am still a woman in all other aspects of my life… I am still a woman in Armenia, and I am still undergoing that socialisation. If I am given space somewhere [as queer], it does not mean 'wow,' because I have a life after work, after events, and even after drinking with my partner or alone… I would be lying first to myself if I said, "No, I have gone through female socialisation and now it's stopped, now my queer socialisation is happening." My queer socialisation is happening alongside my female socialisation. It is like two lines that started to become two lines at some point in life… Of course, my queerness does not die within my female socialisation, but people do not perceive that. The point is, I continuously face the same issues that cis women in our country face. (Ani, 27 years old, from Gyumri, Armenia)

When strangers perceive them as women or address them as women, sometimes they accept it and don't bother correcting them. Sometimes accepting and saying they are women is a very political decision. This is mainly intended to show that a woman can look like this—with short hair, a masculine appearance, without makeup, and so on:

...I had set myself the task of showing that a woman can be like this… it was validation for alternative gender expression… (Alex, 31 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

In some cases, they say they are women because they do not want to be identified as men. Here, their issues with patriarchy, which are mostly connected with men in privileged and oppressive roles, come to the forefront. They do not want to be perceived as men for this reason. Additionally, being perceived as a man can also lead to physical dangers. First, if they have some issue with another man, it is likely that if they are also perceived as men, the resolution of the problem will not end with a conversation. As participants mention, men in Armenia are used to resolving problems through physical fights. To avoid fights, they often have to say they are women.

Additionally, as participants note, it is dishonourable for men to get into a fight with a woman. It calls into question their "real man" status. Alex mentions that often, to highlight the "absurdity of the situation," they say they are a woman. Here, besides protecting themselves, by saying they are a woman, they also aim to play with men's perceptions of being a "real man." Alongside this, participants also mention that there are cases where they start "playing" the gender people address them with. In some instances, they do this just for fun, while in others, they want to see how long people's confusion can last.

Now, let's discuss how non-binary/agender/queer people perform their gender. If you expect to read a unified picture of the appearance, gestures, and lexicon of non-binary/queer/agender people, your expectations are unlikely to be met. All five participants described their gender expressions very differently.

For example, when Ani talks about her daily gender expressions, the first thing she notices and mentions is her periodically changing vocal tone and mannerisms. Additionally, she uses extra accessories to express her gender. It is important to note that Ani shares that she wears these accessories only when she is outside. As soon as she gets home, she immediately takes them off because they are a part of affirming her identity, which needs to be visible to others without her having to explain it. At home, she doesn't feel the need for that:

> *...It seems to me that the first things that happened to me... are my mannerisms and my voice, which I do not work on, but it still has some tonal variations that I can influence, change, make sound different because I want my voice or mannerisms to be a certain way at that moment... For example, someone might talk to me on the phone and think they are talking to a man, but then they come and see—pa-bam: me. But they might also imagine some cutie-pie woman and come and see me like*

this... At some point, I started matching my appearance to my gender perception as much as possible... I cut my hair, never wore makeup, and did not change in that regard. I added accessories to myself, which, by the way, I quickly take off when I get home. It is not that they are uncomfortable, but it is a part of affirming my identity, something I need to affirm, which I should not have to explain, people should see it, but at home, I do not need that, I know who I am... for example, the same rings, necklaces, I quickly take them off when I get home... (Ani, 27 years old, from Gyumri, Armenia)

For Arev, her appearance is a way to show and make her queerness more visible. For her, being queer is not only a gender indicator but also a reflection of her political views. Arev explains this as a constant act of questioning heteronormative norms, the limitations on women's appearance, and the clear gender roles in public:

[Queerness] becomes important when I try to create something or present myself to the public, even in terms of appearance... I understand that I like myself this way, I like, for example, that my hair is short, my hair is different, I am different, I used to feel a bit discomfort about being different, now I do not feel it at all... I do not know, maybe again it was public pressures, and I had internalised all of that, thinking, how can I do this, I did want that, but they pressure me with those [stereotypes]—I am not feminine, I am not this, I am not that, then I realised, but what is feminine anyway... Besides trying to be accepting, that [appearance] is also a form of political resistance, trying not to feel bad about who you are and making people understand that they should accept you as you are, not to feel bad, not to be shy about it... (Arev, 34 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)

Alex mentions that they have almost always felt discomfort with their body. Sometimes this was related to gender and public perceptions of gender, and sometimes it was not. Speaking about the connection between body discomfort and gender, Alex says they have always wanted a "flat chest" without breasts. Interestingly, although they have always wanted to be without breasts, it is not something that torments them daily; it is just that in their mind, they are “without breasts.” Additionally, they mentioned that their desired body structure has changed at different stages of life. Over the last two years, they has periodically wanted to have a penis. They shared that initially when they noticed this desire, they began discussing it with their psychologist but could not find the roots of this desire. At this stage, they are not trying to

analyse or understand this desire. When they feel the need, they simply wear a packer, which is the solution for them at the moment. Continuing to talk about their appearance, Alex mentions that they are often perceived as "more masculine" than they actually are:

> *I have always been perceived as more masculine than I actually am... people were always disappointed when they started interacting with me and realised that I am not that masculine... for a while, I would tell people about it right from the start... It was a very serious issue; people have broken up with me because of it... they told me to keep myself together, act like a guy... I never aimed for people to perceive me as masculine... (Alex, 31 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

Karmen, too, talks about being perceived as masculine and then "disappointing" people. They share that at the beginning of discovering their sexuality, they thought that "all lesbians must be butch." They also talk about the widespread heteronormative ideas about queer relationships. At the beginning of discovering their sexuality, they started behaving more “masculine” because they liked "feminine" women:

> *This is how they expect it to be right? the feminine should be with the masculine, the masculine with the feminine, masc-masc cannot be together, fem-fem cannot be either... I tried to artificially masculinize myself to appeal to femmes.” (Karmen, 27 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

2.4 Performing Sexuality: Are you an “ակտ/act” or a “պաս/pass”?

As I have already outlined in Chapter 1, I draw on Judith Butler's theoretical framework to examine sexuality as a matter of performativity. Within this analytical framework, I discuss sexuality beyond mere sexual orientation. In this chapter, I analyse how the participants perform their sexuality by discussing the components they mention as indexes of their sexuality.

As you have probably already noticed, masculinity and femininity play an important role in sexuality performances. While the participants discussed masculine and feminine divisions in their narratives, they did not specifically address the role of femininity in expressions of sexuality. The central focus was on hegemonic masculinity - to use Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) words - exploring its problematic and neutral manifestations. Connell and Messerschmidt revisit the concept of hegemonic masculinity by drawing on insights from

various academic fields. This concept emerged from the collective interests of scholars aiming to focus on the study of masculinity within the broader framework of gender dynamics. Influenced notably by Gramsci's idea of hegemony, they describe hegemonic masculinity as the prevailing and highly esteemed form of masculinity within a society during specific historical periods. This dominant form of masculinity sets the standard above other gender identities. Those identities of masculinity not aligning with the hegemonic ideal are either seen as complicit in its maintenance or marginalised and subordinated. Hegemonic masculinity represents power over both other forms of masculinity and women, establishing itself as the socially most esteemed masculine identity, even though it may not accurately reflect the lived experiences of men.

While talking about a general understanding of performances of sexuality, most of the participants mention that there are the forms of ակտ – which in English means 'act' – and պաս – in English 'pass'. When translated directly from Armenian, these words mean "active" and "passive". The most suitable replacements for these terms in English would probably be "top" and "bottom". According to my respondents' descriptions, acts are seen masculine figures while passes are viewed as more feminine. As at other part of the interview, participants primarily discuss acts rather than discussing femininity or feminine characters.

Here is a short descriptive paragraph about how exactly masculinity is being performed within acts. First, I would like to highlight that none of the participants currently identifies as an act. However, some of them at some stage of their life, mostly at the beginning of the discovery of their sexuality, tried to create a more masculine image for themselves. Consequently, my description of acts is composed not of how they perceive themselves, but rather of how they are perceived by others. The participants generally note that acts typically have a short haircut, and their movements and gestures are assertive and brisk. Their style of speech is also assertive and often includes coarse language. They tend to communicate aggressively and may resort to violence if when having issues with others. Participants often observe that acts are primarily focused on "protecting" their partners. One participant, who was in a relationship with an act, notes that the partner often exerted pressure under the guise of "protection," forbidding certain activities or social interactions. These actions are described as "attempts to assert power" and are interpreted as "expressions of unresolved personal traumas" by my respondent.

We can say that being an "act" essentially becomes part of one's sexual identity. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that it becomes a role that people take on as part of their sexual identity. This model also inherently resembles and perhaps perpetuates hegemonic masculinity and its components. Besides, the reproduction of binary and heteronormative forms of relationship is also very vividly visible here. In fact, most of my participants mentioned this as one of the issues they face within the queer community.

The expressions of sexuality are not limited to this distinction. Besides talking about specific roles that have strong ties with sexuality, participants highlight other indicators of their queerness as well. We have previously discussed how appearance serves as a significant way for individuals to express themselves. Participants often use elements of appearance to convey, emphasise, or clarify their sexuality. One of the most common forms of expression is changing their hairstyle from long to short. Even though short hair is often associated with more masculine behaviour and sexuality in society, and even within the queer community, at this stage, the change in hairstyle is less about expressing masculinity or femininity and more about expressing queerness.

Participants also mention receiving information about various "hinting" signs from TikTok or Instagram videos. Examples include bisexual people rolling up their shirt sleeves or pants cuffs. Perhaps the most common symbols used to give "hints" about queer identity are rings. According to my respondents if one wears more than 2-3 rings, then they are most probably queer. You maybe could not exactly say who they are in the queer spectrum - maybe a lesbian, genderqueer, bisexual, or someone else - but you know that they are queer. Another queer “hint” is the rainbow. However, there is an important nuance here: people tend to use this symbol in more discreet ways, such as wearing small rainbow bracelets or socks. According to several participants, the main purpose of this is that if someone is queer, they are more likely to notice and pay attention to these small rainbows. People generally avoid wearing larger symbols because this would attract the attention of the wider public, which is fraught with various dangers.

Chapter 3: Exploring Discrimination: The Lived Experiences of Queer Women concerning Sexuality and Gender

3.1 "*It is hard to be a woman*."

When addressing the everyday manifestations of gender, the majority of participants initiated their reflections with the statement: "It is hard to be a woman in Armenia". They said it and it felt as though we both grasped the numerous difficulties and potential obstacles implied by this statement. Overall, mutual understanding among women emerged as a significant theme discussed by the participants. Many expressed a preference for discussing gender discrimination, violence, or the challenges regarding their gender primarily, and sometimes exclusively, with other women. A notable illustration of this dynamic is observed in the reactions of both men and women to an incident of violence experienced by one of the participants:

> *For example, there was an incident where someone groped me. When the male security guards watched the video, they said, "He did not do it on purpose, he did not do anything, why are you accusing this guy for nothing?" Meanwhile, when female employees watched the video, they looked at each other and shouted, "This is on purpose." Either they [men] understand and want to cover up for each other, or they genuinely do not see it. (Anushik, 34 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

In conversations about the hardships of being a woman, most participants typically began by saying something along the lines of "maybe all women have been through this." These expressions appeared to emphasise the shared nature of their experiences, suggesting that their struggles were not unique. At the same time, it appeared to serve as a reassurance that they were not alone in confronting these challenges. Regarding the primary challenges associated with womanhood, participants frequently highlighted the pervasive feeling of insecurity in various aspects of their lives. This sense of insecurity manifested in different ways; some simply expressed discomfort around men or mentioned being extra cautious in their presence. These concerns extended across diverse settings, from social venues like clubs to everyday spaces like public transport, educational institutions, workplaces, and queer community centres. Interestingly, most of the participants acknowledged their responsibility for staying safe and emphasised the need to take proactive steps to avoid potential dangers. Naira highlights that

growing up she was taught how to behave around men; however, she never noticed her parents or other relatives say anything similar to men:

> *It is interesting, they give you a list of duties on how to behave properly around men: how to talk, how to walk, what to do, what not to do. You should know who the man is in front of you. You should dress properly—not too revealing or short. You should wear makeup, but it shouldn't be too bright or vulgar. You should be restrained and modest. But men... they may not give a damn. Nobody will say anything. (Naira, 28 years old, from Dilijan, Armenia)*

While preparing for the interviews I prepared myself to hear a lot of stories about diverse forms of women's sexualization and my expectations were "met." As I explored the various stages of the participants' lives, I encountered numerous instances of sexualization. As I was expecting, women's bodies are central to their sexualization and objectification. When discussing discrimination, incidents of violence, or gender-related inconveniences in public interactions, my respondents primarily focused on issues related to their appearance. The incidents they recounted ranged from casual comments by strangers to demands for hypersexualization in the workplace and instances of sexual harassment.

Women's sexualization is pervasive. As Rich says our bodies plunge us into divers lived experiences we have had (1986, p. 215). Anushik, one of the participants, is actively engaged in powerlifting, which, according to the men at the gym, is not considered a feminine sport. She frequently receives comments about how her body is not "feminine enough," and these men often suggest that she should do "more feminine exercises."

Dworkin says that women "must pretend to be weak to underline not only their femininity but also their upwardly mobile aesthetic…" so that men can express their physical strength as a power (1979, p. 15). This resonates with Naira's experience. She highlights that she often notices the demand for hypersexualization in her workplace. She is working as a diller in an online games platform where costumers are usually men. Where humans should have a "maximum of two genders" as she said. By saying this Naira meant that the perspective on diller's appearance is very binary and extremely stereotypical. Women should wear very vivid make-up, their nails should be done always and they should wear red lipstick, especially if they are working in the VIP:

We are being evaluated on several points, this [wearing make-up, doing nails], is one of the points and it is mandatory. If you do not comply, it will not result in immediate termination. If you protest too much, they will not fire you immediately, but you will be excluded and will not have enough games… In the team, there is a trans woman and others with diverse identities, and all must do the same. There is a person, I don't know what gender they prefer, that is why I will say a person… well, they were born female, but they don't like to wear a dress or make-up... but they must. (Naira, 28 years old, from Dilijan, Armenia)

3.2 "I can correct it.": Lesbian Experiences

In addition to experiencing gender discrimination, queer women face double discrimination. This means they are discriminated against for both their sexuality and their gender simultaneously. Although general manifestations of homophobia can be quite similar among queer women, there are fundamental differences in the discrimination stories of lesbians and bisexual/pansexual/queer-identifying individuals. Therefore, I suggest discussing them separately.

Lesbians often find it particularly difficult to talk about relationships with men, especially sexual relationships. This is one of the most emotionally challenging aspects of our conversations. The pace of the conversation naturally slows down, participants' speech becomes somewhat more fragmented, and some speak about it with great reluctance.

Perhaps we can start the discussion by noting that lesbians frequently receive sexual propositions from men. These propositions are especially common when men are told, or find out from other sources, that a woman is a lesbian. Most of my lesbian respondents mention that men become particularly excited by the idea of having sex with a woman who has never had sex with a man. The main attraction for men seems to be the idea of being the "first one." If I try to summarise my participants' views and experiences on this issue, I can say that this strong desire to be the first is partly related to men's need to boost their own ego and validate themselves as attractive in their own eyes. On the other hand, it is also connected to the fetishization of lesbians, as it is evident from the stories that men want to have sexual relations with a woman precisely because men usually do not attract her. Similar propositions can also be received by bisexual/pansexual/queer women, who might be attracted to men but have not yet had sexual intercourse with one.

Another motivation for making sexual propositions to lesbians is aimed at "correcting" them. Offers of corrective sex are actually more common and sometimes do not stop at just being propositions. Some participants also recount instances of sexual assault. It is both ironic and somewhat interesting that in all these stories, the men are very convinced that having sex with *them* will indeed change lesbians:

> *Once I was talking with an acquaintance—he was a cis guy—and I said that I seemed to like one of my girlfriends. He said, "If you sleep with me, I am sure you will realise that is not the case." It is actually quite unpleasant; I don't understand how that was supposed to help. (Luse 22 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)*

> *When men find out that a woman has a girlfriend, they get even more excited by the idea of being the good guy who will "rescue" the girl from the LGBT "dragon"... it's like a knight syndrome... it's disgusting. (Karmen, 27 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

In addition to this, my lesbian respondents mention that their sexuality is often not considered valid. Men are frequently inclined to devalue it and not take it seriously. Karmen says that she has often noticed a common attitude among men that if there is no man in the relationship, then the relationship is neither strong nor can it even be called a relationship at all:

> *...men are like that. If they know a woman has a boyfriend, they will say, "Okay, bro, we will not bother her." But if they find out she has a girlfriend, they will immediately go, "Ah, you just have not met the right guy yet" ... (Karmen, 27 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)*

Speaking of emotional challenges, some lesbian participants mention that it is quite difficult for them to deal with their family's constant questions about marriage. From my own experience, I know that in Armenian families, starting from the age of 19-20, close and distant relatives regularly ask about marriage and often suggest potential suitors. Luse shares that every time she responds to these conversations, it is yet another reminder that she can never have the type of relationship her family envisions. However, it is also a good opportunity for her to reanalyze her preferences and reaffirm for herself that she is only attracted to women.

...at home, they still ask, "Don't you have a boyfriend? Aren't you getting married?" I say, "No, why do I need one?" And every time I say this, I analyse it again within myself and come to the conclusion that no, I do not want one, I am not interested in guys… (Luse 22 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)

3.3 Bis/Pans/Queers

When referring to the sexuality of bisexual, pansexual, and queer women in this context, I mean those individuals who can be attracted to more than one gender or for whom a person's gender is not significant when feeing attracted to them.

The issues faced by bi/pan/queer people have several main directions. Let me start with the most common and frequently encountered one: "Will you please make up your mind?" Almost all bi/pan/queer respondents mention that at least once, they have been asked what prevents them from making up their minds and finally choosing a side. People sometimes genuinely lack understanding of what it means to be bi/pan/queer and have sincere questions. In other cases, these questions seem more like accusatory statements than genuine inquiries:

...when people find out you are bi, they say, "Oh, you are just indecisive…" or I don't know what… and then some stupid jokes could come up like, "Are you generally bad at making decisions, or is it just in this?" You know... that is the horrible part. (Marine, 26 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

Bi/pan/queer individuals often feel rejected or excluded by other members of the LGBTQ community. They are mostly labelled as "not enough queer" or are accused of being traitors to the community. So-called betrayal is generally defined by people as having a relationship with a man or being interested in them:

...most of the community cancels you as if you are not queer enough for them, and all of a sudden most of your queer friends disappear… accidentally. When I am with a man, that means, "You're not playing with us, go away." That is very unpleasant. It creates the impression, "either you are with us or you are against us". I do not blame them at all, it is just not a nice feeling when the sense of belonging is blurred… (Anushik, 34 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

…biphobia is very widespread in the community… it is important to understand that people could have diverse attractions… also, queerness is not only about sexuality… (Arev, 34 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)

…It is hard, I think… for example, if you are a lesbian, it is easier than being bi, because you face hate from the community… a lot of hate… (Marine, 26 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

In addition, bi/pan/queer people often face difficulties in romantic relationships. From the beginning, these relationships are often burdened with the stereotype that bi/pan/queer women will inevitably leave their relationships with women to build relationships with men. Participants also note that this not only manifests in their relationships but also hinders them from starting relationships in general. People simply do not want to start relationships with those who are "definitely going to leave them and go away." Besides being accused of "leaving" during the relationship, bi/pan/queer people are often blamed for starting relationships with men after a breakup. Marine, sharing her experience, says:

…When people find out you are bi, they usually say, if we break up, you might go and be with a guy, which is an insult to me… that person does not consider that yes, we broke up, and that is my own decision… it is a different thing if I start a relationship with someone else during our relationship, okay, then I would be the worst person, blame me then. But if you have had such a bad experience, it's not my fault. (Marine, 26 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

...Once I was dating a woman, and when she found out I was bi, it was like, "Oh, okay, well, you are going to end up with a guy anyway" … it makes you want to say, fuck you. (Anushik, 34 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

At the same time, when discussing the complexities of relationships, all my bi/pan/queer respondents mention that it is very difficult for them to build relationships with men, especially Armenian men. They often point out that men mostly have very heteronormative views about relationships. When referring to heteronormative views, the participants mainly mention the desire of men to dominate, and the emphasis on traditional gender roles within relationships. Manifestations of toxic masculinity are also frequently encountered in relationships with men, which is something the participants try to avoid:

Currently I'm interested and more inclined to date men who are also queer, which is very difficult in Armenia... Yes, this is also very challenging, being queer, and also politically queer, caring about... avoiding patriarchal pressures, homophobic behaviours… and you are trying to find the love of your life, someone you can share your love with, love, bond with, and grow with. It is very hard to do that in Armenia... there are almost no such men. (Arev, 34 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)

You know, when I say I don't like men, I mean the majority who fit into those disgusting masculine stereotypes—always wanting to be the alpha. I am aggressive with them because it feels like I'm constantly fighting for space with them, always having to defend my territory, and I don't know why... they act as if everything belongs to them like they own it all. (Anushik, 34 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

On the other hand, bi/pan/queer women sometimes struggle with their sense of queerness. Anushik mentions that it is sometimes very challenging for her to continue accepting and considering herself queer because she is in a relationship with a man. She notes that she started questioning her "sufficient queerness" when she realised that being in a relationship with a man is not widely accepted by the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, Anushik mentions that maintaining connections with the community and being in community centres helps her feel her queerness. Therefore, when she notices that she is not so accepted in those spaces, she goes there less often, which results in a diminished sense of queerness.

Some of them think heterosexual relationships, or better to say relationships with men, often feel more at ease in certain ways. This primarily refers to societal reactions and the ability to publicly express love. Speaking about her experience in a relationship with a man, Anushik mentions:

...In heterosexual relationships, the easiest thing is that you do not have to fight with the majority of society, which is very difficult in same-sex relationships, especially in small countries where privacy is an issue. It is okay for me, but for my [female] partners, it is often not okay—they do not want their family or people to know... and I am someone who needs to express her love. I am a bit of a different person, a person who loves gestures, showing love... for example, I like to hold hands and kiss. If I did something like that with a woman, I would probably get into

a fight every other day, and that is exhausting, constantly fighting, fighting for a little piece of love. Sorry, but that should be given… (Anushik, 34 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

Bi/pan/queer women are also not spared from being sexualized. They more frequently encounter proposals for threesomes. They note that people often have the impression that bi/pan/queer people always *want* to have threesomes. Interestingly, they mostly receive these proposals from heterosexual couples or men who intend to include another woman in the act. One participant aptly described this as a way to fulfil men's heterosexual desires. It is important to mention that participants do not generally speak negatively about threesomes. The issue arises in two main cases. First, when people propose threesomes, they mostly assume that they must be willing and ready for it, which is not always the case. Second, when threesomes are exclusively aimed at fulfilling men's fantasies.

3.4 Family Relationships

...Intimacy is very important to me… I know that I cannot have it with my family one day, so I try to build intimacy within the [queer] community, among the people who accept me…" said Luse when we were talking about the importance of having a sense of community belonging. I asked her about the "one day", when it is and why she is so sure what would happen that day. As you might have guessed, she is talking about the "day" when her parents will know about her sexuality.

Luse is not the only one who is afraid to not be connected with her family due to her sexuality. Most of the participants have the same fear. Some of them mentioned the fear of losing contact with their families while talking about the challenges of being queer. Others talked about it as an obvious fact, as if they had already accepted the fact. Most of the participants never came out to their families. They choose not to do that as they are aware of family members' homophobic attitudes. Most often they have to choose to be in touch with their families or to say that they are queer. Participants choose not to tell their family members as long as it is possible to keep it hidden from them. In fact, some participants mention that their parents are not very homophobic, but when it comes to their own children, they are not ready to accept their queerness. This raises the question of how we define homophobia and what we understand when we say someone is not homophobic. One participant aptly points out that the bar is set so low that if people are not calling for queer individuals to be beaten or killed,

we consider them not homophobic. Other participants similarly described their parents in this way when discussing whether or not they are homophobic.

Relationships with siblings are relatively easier. Some participants mention that they felt safer coming out to their siblings. However, even in these cases, it is relatively rare for individuals to feel fully accepted. Generally, as a positive response, participants say that their siblings do not blame or criticise them, but that is all.

There are also cases where family members are aware of their queerness but don't take it seriously, dismissing it as a "phase that will pass." Among the participants, there were also individuals whose family members, or some of them, are aware of their sexuality and make them feel accepted. However, this is relatively rare.

3.5 Navigating Queer Joy

When participants were asked whether there have been situations where being queer has been perceived or experienced as positive or pleasant, the most frequent response highlighted the joy of meeting an attractive woman and the possibility to initiate a relationship with her. This emphasises how queer people are trying to stay away from heteronormative expectations and declare their sexualities and desires in spaces where they are not only accepted but celebrated. These traits are reflected in research by Sara Ahmed, who notes how queer orientations can lead individuals to different and often more satisfying relational experiences. Ahmed argues that queerness "creates new impressions on the surface of bodies" (Ahmed 2005, p. 17) and these impressions can be very positive and affirming.

Some of the respondents felt relief at not having to engage in relationships with Armenian men as one of the best things about being queer. In their arguments, the participants often described men as oppressive, violent, and restrictive. This shows their desire to resist hegemonic masculinity, and how their avoidance of relationships with such men enables queer individuals to evade oppressive dynamics associated with traditional gender roles and expectations. This point aligns with critiques in gender studies about hegemonic masculinity which I have discussed above.

During the interviews, most of the participants often identified cis men as potential sources of danger and fear, leading to heightened concerns of their personal safety around them.

The presence of cis men was typically perceived as a threat, reflecting broader societal norms where gender dynamics often place queer people, particularly those who do not fit in traditional gender expectations, in vulnerable positions. This constant reconsideration of safety further emphasise the precariousness of queer existence in environments dominated by rigid gender norms.

Positive experiences mentioned by the participants also included situations where queer friends come out to each other. The mutual recognition of queerness usually creates an environment of trust and peer-support and eases the coming-out process. This relational act strengthens tiers of friends and provides a sense of belonging that promotes the process of sharing personal challenges related to sexuality and makes it less isolating. This concept can be understood through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea outlined in the "Epistemology of the Closet," where coming out is not only a personal act but a relational one that affects both parties involved (Sedgwick, 1990).

All of the participants emphasised the importance of having queer friends and acquaintances, as well as the broader presence of queer people in their social circles. Most of them shared the need of having people who share the same or at least similar experiences, as they are more willing to open up to those. The fact of having queer friends often is associated with feelings of safety, belonging, and being understood, that creates the atmosphere of trust, and sometimes might be a life-saver for queer people. Adrienne Rich has discussed the concept of a "lesbian continuum," which goes beyond sexual preference to include a large range of woman-identified experiences that create a sense of belonging and support among women (Rich, 1980).

My participants noted that they are more likely to share personal issues, particularly related to sexuality, identity, self-acceptance, and queer romantic relationships, with members of the queer community. The main motivation for this openness is the need to be understood and the confidence that someone with similar experiences will empathise and won't question their experience or judge. These shared experiences foster a safe space for discussing sensitive and delicate issues, which they avoid in relationships with heterosexual friends. And the main reason for this avoidance is the same: the fear of being criticised, or the need to justify or explain their struggles, as people who don't have the embodied experience of being queer, have a hard time to understand this:

> *I know I can't have that closeness with my family. I'm trying to find that closeness in the community, among people who accept me, who are more likely to accept me than my family. (Luse, 22 years old, from Abovyan, Armenia)*

The feeling of belonging to the queer community also helps resist the marginalisation faced from a generally hostile society in the same way as Michel Foucault (1988) discusses the instances of marginalised groups forming circles of solidarity to resist dominant power structures.

Chapter 4. Expectations and Relevance: Queer Women's Perspectives on NGOs, Feminist, and LGBT Organizations

4.1 Where Would They Go?

The second part of the research aims to study queer women's familiarity with currently operating feminist and LGBTIQ+ organisations' activities in Armenia as well as how relevant queer women think that these activities and the organisations' approaches are to their needs and expectations. I started this part of the conversation by asking participants about the kinds of activities or spaces they need in order to both feel safe and comfortable being there. The most frequently mentioned factors were a sense of safety as well as physical security. While the respondents may each have a distinct understanding of these terms, all of them identified these aspects as essential and indispensable. Many of them even revealed that they conduct personal security assessments of each event or activity before deciding whether to attend. This might include checking the confidentiality of an event, checking or guessing the potential attendees, and considering the measures ensuring the physical security of the place (cameras, entrance codes, etc.). Some participants also mentioned the role of the organisers or facilitators of the space or event in this process. They mentioned that they are more likely to attend the spaces and activities, when they know and/or trust the organisers.

While most participants stated that their most pressing need is the existence and maintenance of safe spaces for the community, they emphasised that simple announcement or positionality of the organisations themselves as safe spaces for queer women is insufficient. Most participants emphasised the need for a profound and genuine understanding of queer women's specific issues. They highlighted that queer women's daily realities and needs differ significantly from those of cisgender heterosexual women or gay* men. So first considering these facts and incorporating them into the organisations' approaches is crucial for spaces to be considered genuinely safe. Another significant criterion for safety highlighted was the limited presence or absence of cis men. In the previous chapters of the study, I have discussed on several occasions why and how could cis-men's presence become an obstacle for queer women. While discussing what can prevent them from feeling safe in the presence of men, participants mostly mention that men tend to take up the spaces, even if the discussion is on women's issues. So, they often find themselves not feeling safe to share their opinion:

...they always make us feel that the space is theirs… I do not feel comfortable, and I often want to fight to have my space… straight men do this the most, but next are gay men... I think it has to do with how they were raised… It is very difficult to share the space with men… with women, it is easier, we are always ready to share our space and honestly everything that we have. (Anushik, 34 years old, from Yerevan, Armenia)

Participants also named a few community centres where they feel safe and comfortable to be. Fem Library[1] and Queer Home (run by Queer Sista Platform[2]) are the ones participants mention the most. They specifically highlight that they love the fact that these places are not offices, and the general atmosphere is "quite homie". Besides the two, they have mentioned Pink[3] and Women's Resource Center[4] where they usually went to participate in several discussions and events. A participant from Vanadzor said that they usually spend time at TANIK [5] which is a queer community centre operating in Vanadzor.

The safety measurements were true not only for the spaces of organisations and initiatives but also for other social spaces, like bars and clubs. In recent years, there has been a significant rise in the tendency to conceptualise clubs and parties as queer-friendly spaces. The participants of the study noted that they feel considerably more at ease attending events where cisgender men are either absent or do not form the majority of the attendees. Furthermore, most of the participants expressed a preference for making use of spaces that are particularly managed by women and specifically avoid those run by cis men. Participants mostly refer to the Portal[6] while talking about the safe clubs. However, the bar has been closed recently. Another comparably safe club where some of the participants used to hang out was Poligraf [7], which also has recently been closed. In both clubs, sudden police raids occurred under suspicion of drug possession. These raids, particularly aggressive in the Poligraf [8], led some participants to avoid these venues to evade such situations.

Another factor that affects these preferences mentioned by the participants was the common belief that the "women only" spaces are typically much safer, as all the users of the

[1] Queer feminist collective in Armenia
[2] Queer feminist collective working with LB women, queer and trans people in Armenia
[3] Community-based LGBT organisation
[4] Feminist human rights organisation
[5] Queer community centre, Pink's Vanadzor branch
[6] Portal's Instagram page - https://www.instagram.com/portal__evn/
[7] Poligraf's Instagram page - https://www.instagram.com/poligrafevn/
[8] Poligraf's statement on the police raid - https://www.instagram.com/p/CrZAR10sYBP/?img_index=1

space have a natural silent understanding and experience of “threat” and “danger”. Such a mutual understanding fosters an environment where individuals are less likely to repeat or reproduce behaviours that are triggering or harmful in nature.

The second most mentioned need that the participants expect of the NGOs to address was mental health. According to the participants, the continuous and periodically escalating crises in the country over the past four years have had profoundly negative impacts on their mental health. Many noted that following the war, they frequently experience anxiety attacks, acute increases in tension, panic episodes, and persistent fears and worries. Besides, some of them mentioned that being queer is *“already mentally challenging, considering the homophobic Armenian society.” (Renate, 23 years old, from Vanadzor Armenia).*

Most of them mentioned the necessity of extensive, long-term individual psychotherapies as one of their most essential and urgent needs. Furthermore, all participants acknowledged the effectiveness of alternative forms of psychological consultation, such as group therapies or even informal discussions.

Another frequently mentioned type of support that participants would like to receive from the NGOs is legal support. All participants have experienced incidents of abuse, often involving physical and sexual violence. Additionally, most participants have a friend, relative, or acquaintance who has recently been subjected to violence or experienced human right violations. Given these circumstances, providing legal support to the participants is crucial.

4.2 Do They Cooperate?

Addressing feminist and LGBTIQ+ organisations and their existing gaps more specifically, participants highlight the following main issues. Valuing the ideological diversity of initiative groups, collectives, and organisations, participants note that feminist groups are quite fragmented and collaborate little. According to participants, there are several main reasons affecting the lack of collaboration. The most frequently mentioned reason is the scarcity of resources (mainly financial). Each collective or organisation wants to take a share of the limited resources available in order to continue its activities.

The second relatively frequently mentioned reason is gatekeeping or monopolisation. Participants note that in both the feminist and LGBTIQ+ fields, activities have been carried out

exclusively by 1-2 organisations for many years. As a result, a power imbalance has formed, which, according to participants, can be an obstacle to cooperation.

At the same time, despite the differences in approaches, priorities and positionalities of the organisations, the participants find the whole environment beneficial for the community. This diversity was mostly interpreted as a variety and ability to choose the one, whose values and approaches match with yours the most.

I consider it important to mention that the main discussions about the lack of cooperation in the feminist and LGBTIQ+ communities and the power imbalance in these fields are mostly voiced by participants of the study who are or have been somehow involved in a feminist or LGBTIQ+ organisation or collective (staff members, team members, volunteers, board members). From this, it can be inferred that by working in or being involved with a collective, they have had the opportunity to become more closely acquainted with and form opinions on the topic from an insider's perspective

Hence, some of the participants also mentioned that despite this, some collectives and spaces are not very welcoming for newcomers. Referring to these spaces, participants often highlight their positionality as very elitist, often having high demands and "requirements" for anybody to "qualify" as feminist. The most mentioned way of interpretation or expression of this positionality was the use of academic and often not very understandable language, that leaves out the ones not familiar with academic vocabulary.

Another frequently mentioned need that has been identified by several participants was the need for more visible, radical and public civic activist actions in the country. It is important to note that this need was mentioned both by the participants already involved in different organisations and initiatives, and by the ones who are not. Some respondents expressed their impression that NGOs have begun to collaborate closely with the state, attributing this as a reason for the lack of more radical actions.

An interesting insight is that while discussing the need for civic activism, participants employed a specific language that indicated a reluctance to see themselves initiating and, in some cases, even participating in such activities.

However, not all participants shared this opinion. Some are firmly convinced that the community is not yet ready for radical, visible, or public actions due to the potential dangers such actions could pose. These participants expressed a hope that the community might be more prepared to engage directly in such actions in a few years.

Conclusion

I will summarise the key factors in queer women's narrative construction of self. I asked them to begin by describing themselves. An important insight for me here was that self-description is hard for most of them. Often, it seems that people momentarily lose track of information about themselves. When they start talking about themselves, they mostly search for meaningful descriptions. When describing themselves, they most often mention their gender and sometimes their sexuality as well. By mentioning these, it seems as though they are trying to convey important information about their experiences because this is often followed by comments on what it means to be a woman or a lesbian. Interestingly, cisgender women sometimes speak about their gender "inertia," creating the impression that although it is an important part of their identity, they do not see a need to analyse it much. In contrast, non-cisgender people, when mentioning their gender, also talk about their journey of acceptance and its significance. Generally, when describing themselves, they mostly mention the points that are either the most challenging in their lives or those related to their plans and actions concerning the future (for example, their profession).

Regarding their sense of sexuality, the main conclusion is that its acceptance and revelation are always the result of an ongoing process. It never suddenly appears fully fledged at a certain moment. Another interesting observation is that when participants notice non-hetero manifestations of their sexuality at a young age, they do not particularly question it; they simply accept it as another fact about themselves. In stories where revelations about sexuality begin in adolescence or young adulthood, participants tend to suppress its signs. This, I believe, speaks to the impact of societal norms on personal decisions and their suppressive nature.

It also becomes clear from the stories that people generally do not tend to think about and analyse the signs of their attractions and usually go along with the prevalent heteronormative flow. Many discover they are queer when relationships with men mostly fail. A sign of this failure is that they mainly feel discomfort, disgust, or awkwardness in romantic relationships with men, especially in sexual contact.

On the path to self-acceptance, feminism often plays a significant role. It has a dual impact. First, by studying feminism, participants also find information about sexuality, thereby normalising non-heterosexual manifestations of sexuality. Information also becomes a means for continuous self-discovery. The more they learn, the more attention they start paying to

various signs about their sexuality. On the other hand, by getting closer to feminism, people come closer to the self-acceptance process because feminist theories often question and reject patriarchal norms that oppress women.

Gender and sexuality almost always intersect in the stories of queer women. This might be the most significant results of the thesis. This is expressed in various areas, from everyday interactions to noticing positional differences in both community and non-community places, from gender-based violence to expressions of heteronormative pressures in relationships. You can read more about this in different chapters of the thesis.

Regarding gender, I want to highlight the experiences of non-binary/agender/queer people. In these stories, two key points emerge. First, the gender socialisation they have undergone plays a crucial and significant role in their formation, self-acceptance, needs, and problems. Being raised and growing up as "women," and still being perceived as such by society, not only shapes their value system but also forms the main problems and needs arising from them that non-binary/agender/queer people have.

Last, but not least, I would like to mention sexualization as one of the most common experiences queer women have. Although its expressions may vary between lesbian and bisexual/pansexual/queer women, it is nonetheless present in all their stories. Here, too, the manifestations of male power and the objectification of women are very pronounced.

Although the research could provide an opportunity to uncover many significant points about the experiences of the queer women I interviewed, it also opened up new questions for me that I am planning to address in my future research projects. Firstly, due to the limited time allocated for fieldwork, I was unable to include a larger number of queer women in the interviews. This would have allowed for a more comprehensive examination of queer women's experiences and a more multifaceted discussion of them, which could have shown some more prominent tendencies. On the other hand, during the interviews, participants brought up several issues that I could addressed only very superficially. For instance, issues related to place of residence, or birthplace need more detailed consideration and analysis.

Furthermore, the participants' engagement in queer community spaces often plays an important role in their experiences. These spaces are very diverse, ranging from NGO offices to queer-friendly clubs. To study these spaces and the involvement of queer women in them,

the use of participant observation could also be an effective future plan. This way, I would have the opportunity to combine the data collected from interviews with that gathered through participant observation, providing a more critical analysis of the interview materials.

Appendix 1

Participant's Short Bio Data

1. Arev is a 34-year-old queer feminist activist from Kotayk province, Armenia. They identify as queer which is an indicator of their gender, sexuality, and political views.
2. Karmen is a 27-year-old agender biromantic from Yerevan, Armenia. They use any pronouns.
3. Anushik is a 34-year-old bisexual cisgender woman from Yerevan, Armenia.
4. Marine is a 26-year-old bisexual cisgender woman from Yerevan, Armenia.
5. Naira is a 28-year-old pansexual cisgender woman from Tavush province, Armenia.
6. Ani is a 27-year-old queer feminist activist from Shirak province, Armenia. They identify queer both in terms of gender and sexuality using she/they.
7. Luse is a 22-year-old lesbian cisgender woman from Kotayk province, Armenia.
8. Adalyn is a 26-year-old bisexual cisgender woman from Kotayk province, Armenia.
9. Alex is a 31-year-old non-binary lesbian, queer feminist activist from Yerevan, Armenia using they/them pronouns.
10. Renat is a 23-year-old agender lesbian, activist from Lori province, Armenia.
11. Lera is a 19-year-old lesbian cisgender woman from Lori province, Armenia.

Appendix 2

Thesis interview guide

1. Introduction: Remind the interviewee of the main topic of the interview. Notifying that the questions could be personal and if they don't feel comfortable to answering some of them, they may not answer them.
2. Asking for consent and permission to record the interview and use collected information for research purposes in my MA thesis.
3. Asking if they need to clarify anything before starting the interview.
4. Questions:
    - Please tell me about yourself.
    - How do you identify (sexuality and gender)?
    - How do you live this identity on a daily basis, in which situations or in what activities your identity becomes important, how do you navigate your life as X, what does it mean for you to live your life as X?
    - Do you recall any story, any event where this was a really pleasant thing, or any event where it was really challenging/unfavourable encounters with others where it caused you some problems?
    - Do you remember and can you share with me how this understanding of who you are came, when and how it happened? Can you pinpoint it at all, is there any particular moment? Was this a process, how did it happen?
    - Do you have some friends who share an identity similar to yours? Are you involved in some community with people like you? (Is it important to have friends like them, if so why, how do they do it, why is it good to make sure that they have/need people like themselves, and what does it do for them)
    - What kind of activities or space do you need so that you can feel both safe to go and excited to be there?
    - Do you know NGOs working with women of LGBTQI+ people? Are you involved in any of them? If yes, why? Why the specific organisation? What do you like about that?
    - Do you see any gaps in the activities or services of the organisations that you would like to be filled? What is missing? Would you like something else to be happening?

- For people who know about the NGOs and don't go there or are not involved - explore why?
- For those who don't know the NGOs - tell them a bit about some organization then ask: would you want to go there?
- Do you think it would be good to come together or organise together to see some changes?

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