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THE LIFE OF QUEER INDIVIDUALS IN BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

Aydin Aghayev

Doctoral Candidate, Krakow Pedagogical University

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1026-0888

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ABSTRACT

The following article aims to give brief information about the queer community and individuals in Baku city, Azerbaijan. The paper includes historical views and interviews with LGBTQI+ individuals in mentioned geography. The changes within years have analyzed briefly. The interviews with community individuals brought insights and reflections about the investigated topic. All in all, the paper represents a piece of brief but fruitful information to understand the queer life and societal mental values within the frames of the Azerbaijan Republic. The Caucasus region's queer community is complex and most oppressed.

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Introduction.

Baku is the most occupied city in the Caucasus area. According to the official reports, there are 2 million residents in Baku city, meanwhile, Baku has more than 3,5 million occupants who are not enlisted (Baku, 2020). In Azerbaijan, there are barely any queer networks and associations. The lives of individuals get more unequivocal than it was many years back. Biased view toward LGBTQ+ community fellows is the legacy of the Soviet Union, religion, and the reflection of government policy on human rights.

All these referenced segments are legitimately and in a roundabout way influencing the lives of queer networks in Azerbaijan. As indicated by the exploration of the independent magazine in the European States, Azerbaijan is positioned as the worst country to be an LGTBQ+ individual (This is the worst country to be gay in Europe, 2020).

The administrative policy on the provision of equal rights for queer individuals is not properly set. This is the burden for the queer network to develop and achieve their rights in society (van der Veur, 2007). The liberal institutions try to avoid empirical research regarding the mentioned network in the country. The provided data is usually either outdated or biased. Besides the historical glimpse, the investigation will probe the following questions:

1. "Why is Azerbaijan mentioned as the worst country to be an LGBTQ+ individual?"
2. "What are the opportunities for LGBTQ+ individuals in-country, if there are?"
3. "How can queer individuals build networks Intra and inter-communities?"
4. "Do these networks assist in progressing the human rights concern?"

The personal observations and reflections will be mentioned by the author in the discussion part. Although the feminism flow in the country is being progressed, the unorganized protests and sensitively chosen slogans usually create aversion within different segments of society. Unfortunately, the ratio of hate crimes increases in Azerbaijan every year ("Azerbaijan | HCRW", 2022). There is no official

statistical analysis of hate crimes, however, not every criminal act is being unfolded and shared with society. The fieldwork was organized during the lockdown period in Azerbaijan. Four individuals were interviewed, and one focus group discussion was organized by the researcher to conduct the paper.

Historical review.

The first practiced and known religion in the geography of Azerbaijan was Zoroastrianism (Hartz, 2009). The sacred book of the religion is Avesta. Although Avesta does not refer to boycotting homosexuality, conformist Zoroastrians fight that the Vendidad - one of the series of the Avesta, is a trademark bit of Zoroastrian oral custom whether it accumulates far later than various bits of the Avesta. According to the researchers in Zoroastrianism, making love among the same sexes is accepted as demon worship (Lesley-Ann, 2011). This entry has deciphered to imply that homosexuality is a type of evil spirit tenderness. Antiquated critique on this section recommends that sexual acts among same-sexes could slaughter without consent from the Dastur, the consecrated cleric. As a result, the historical dilemma occurs: the official book of the religion does not ban homosexual acts, but the oral novels – newer edition emphasizes homosexuality as worshipping evil.

The verifiable view proceeds with medieval times. Except for a few tribes that tolerated homosexual behavior, same-sex demonstrations were considered taboo in the medieval ages. Historian Mousey Kalantatli gives short data in his book about sodomy in medieval times. The book is called *The historical backdrop of Albania*. The ancient name of Azerbaijani territories was Caucasian Albania. The historian refers that three families were known for this activity. Yet, furtherly mentioned families were pulverized by society and administration (Dowsett, 1961). The influence of Christianity was also another reason that homosexual act was forbidden. The official religion of Caucasian Albania was Christianity.

Even though the gay demonstration stayed unlawful during Arab Caliphate, the historian Iskandar mentions the existing nature of homosexual behavior. In his book named - "*The mirror for rulers*", he advises his son: "*Invest energy with young men in winter, and with young ladies in summer. It doesn't make a difference if your accomplice is a young lady or a young boy*" (Oksaçan, 2012). This is the verification of the existence of the same-sex act during Arab Caliphate. Still, I will have to mention that, modern theocratic states use the power of sharia to rule the administration.

With the start of the Safavid dynasty, "oğlanbazlıq" which implies homosexuality became a term. Ruler Shah I Ismael Khatai, carried 8 little youngsters to the royal residence and interacted with them. As the leader of the Safavid Empire (Rahbari, 2018), ruler Shah I Abbas was likewise known for his harem which was comprised of little fellows. During the Safavid dynasty, geography's main religion was Islam. Nevertheless, the perspectives on religion are very questionable. "Rich and powerful people can have the power of practicing everything liberal, but the poor and lower socio-economic class cannot?" the question is debatable and open for discussion. In Islam, there are two fundamental branches: Sunnis and Shias. While shias acknowledge homosexuality as wrongdoing, Sunnis acknowledge the idea of queer life as an examination. Safavid Empire was known for spreading the "Shia" branch of Islam. Yet, the higher political governors and richer socio-economic classes had the right to homosexual activity while others were sentenced to death. Unfortunately, there is no relevant data about homosexuality in the 16-18th centuries.

Further on, Azerbaijan was occupied by the Tsar regime - of Russia. The imperial system boycotted homosexuality. The tsar empire acted against homosexual acts. Nevertheless, some individuals had given the freedom in homosexual deeds (Mole, 2018). In this way, the boycott had only conventional attributes. During the Soviet Union, and when Stalin was administering the Union, gay demonstration was taboo, and gay individuals were acknowledged as a threat to the administration. The Soviet administration was built on the ideology of atheism. Still, the same-sex act was unaccepted. Five years of detainment was the common punishment for homosexual people. The homosexual act was a societal taboo rather than religious. Homosexuality was acknowledged as a promulgation of the West and America (Resource Information Center: Russia, 2020).

The law on viewing homosexual acts as criminal behavior was abolished in 1998 by Heydar Aliyev (2021). Abolishment of the law seeing same-sex acts as crimes can be so-called the only positive administrative change for the life of LGBTQI+ individuals. Neither government nor the civil societies try to enhance the human policy regarding the rights of homosexuals in Azerbaijan since then. Consequently, the individuals are oppressed, and their lives are in danger. No special programs are running for the protection of the life of LGBTQ+ individuals. The trans woman has been a victim of

hate crime ("Burning of a transgender woman in Azerbaijan sparks protests, hate speech", 2021). The homosexual activist and journalist Avaz Hafizly ("Justicia de Azerbaiyán ignora crimen de odio contra activista LGBTQ+", 2022) was another victim of hate crime. The government still evades the question regarding the refinement of life quality for individuals. Unfortunately, even the deputies of Milli Majlis - the Azerbaijani Parliament, recall the elements of hate speech in official statements.

Why is Azerbaijan the worst place in Europe to be an LGBTQ+ individual?

On the off chance that we look at the improvement of queer culture in Azerbaijan with the age phases of people, we could consider it the "adolescent crisis" period. As referenced previously, the historical backdrop of queer networks began to have dilemmas after the 2000s. After the abolishment of the law indicating homosexual acts as crime, police officers and the government still gazed at LGBTQI+ individuals. The privacy concerns of individuals are an existing phenomenon. Hate speech and unequal behavior towards individuals remain, unfortunately. Although the government bodies tolerate the rights of the LGBTQI+ community as they indicate, society does not accept individuals. Came out individuals have hardships getting a job in legislative bodies. Society does not accept LGBTQI+ individuals, and the community members are oppressed and deprived of social life. As a result, individuals hide their sexual preferences and gender identity to get jobs and build their lives.

1. First spark.

The first official LGBTQI+ association in Baku was framed in 2012. The won Eurovision Song Contest in 2011 resulted in the desire to hold gay pride in Baku. The Baku administration did not officially respond to the celebration of gay pride. There was a strong belief that Azerbaijan would host gay pride. Yet, government appallingly didn't act until the neighboring nation Iran dissented (Antidze, 2012) and threatened the administration. The administration declared that it is inappropriate to host pride in Azerbaijan. Another reason to cancel the pride parade was the societal norms. The Caucasian region overall consists of mountainous people with a conservative background.

Mass media and society were against pride just as it did not follow the heteronormative construction. While referencing standardizing society, I should likewise incorporate the acts of western countries. Western polities began to show and give more voices to the queer network in the everyday lives of organizations as in the broad communications (Brown, Browne, and Lim 2012). These segments are exceptionally fundamental for the acceptance rate of LGBTQI+ individuals.

Afterward, in 2014 the gay activist, the originator of the first LGTBQI+ institution named *Nafas* - Isa Shahmarli, submitted suicide (www.kaosgl.org). Isa wanted to ensure gay rights in Azerbaijan and organize an honor walk. He declared his sexuality openly and faced oppression and aggression in everyday life. Minor incidents were recorded at his funeral as well.

Isa's initiations were a spark for LGBTQI+ individuals to find the courage to express their sexual preferences. The passing day of the activist is currently celebrated as the national day against homophobia. The *Nafas LGBTQI+* association organized an informal pride parade in the verifiable area of Azerbaijan ("Minority Azerbaijan - Nafas LGBTI : Queer-Feminist podcast series", 2021). Isa was the pioneer to take the initiative and courage to defend equality in Azerbaijan for every LGBTQI+ individual. He was the first spark.

2. Good declaration, lack of demonstration.

The development of the feminism torrent in Azerbaijan had a positive impact on the development of the LGBTQI+ network. Feminism targets and denounces the oppression of capitalism and patriarchy (Valentine 2007). Feminism flow was born as a result of protests against women's incompetency. Women oppressed in the medieval ages, and their role in society mentioned as the erudition of children. The torrent aims to end inequality and promote gender equality which is the stimulus for the life of individuals. The patterns of feminism are controversial in Azerbaijan.

The protest organized on the 8th of March in 2020 organized by the feminist community caused controversy ("В Баку полиция попыталась остановить марш феминисток и задержала несколько человек", 2021). A group of feminists and LGBTQI+ individuals demonstrated to achieve equality at implying Istanbul Convention ("Minority Azerbaijan - 8 Марç - Haqlarımız Uğrunda", 2021). The group of protesters also demanded to stop aggression and oppression toward women.

Unfortunately, the opened slogans (for instance - my vagina, my rules -which are not appropriate for the society of Azerbaijani people) caused misunderstandings, and society perceived their protest as the want of a sex revolution.

Consequently, they could not protect the rights of women and LGBTQ+ individuals. The attempt as an idea is considered as successful. Yet, the lack of unity among community members and uneducated trainees failed the ideology of this demonstration. Many individuals agreed that the declaration could be more successful. Surprisingly, the police officers did not oppress the protestors. The protest was disapproved by the executive power of Baku city. The protestors demonstrated aggression towards police officers. As a result, some of the protestors were brought arrested by military forces.

3. Mentality, mindset, and understanding.

The Republic of Azerbaijan is a fast progressing state that is considered a part of the Global South. The people constructed a heteronormative mindset. There is an impact of religion and mass media on forming misunderstanding and bias towards LGBTQI+ individuals. The administration of Baku does not set clear outlines and juridical legislation for the protection of LGBTQI+ individuals' lives.

Educational institutions are essential for the erudition of gender-related issues. There is no sexual or gender-related training in Azerbaijani educational institutions (kindergartens and schools, some university specializations are an exception). Researchers, and professors, often evade inquiries regarding the mentioned topic. Governmental structures, members of society, and non-governmental institutions decline to discuss LGBTQI+-related topics. From the perspective of Azerbaijan, the individuals are identified as *deviant* or *pathologized* (Heasley 2005). The education gap is interlinked with the low quality of the educational system of the country. Some researchers argue that there is a set of norms for straight males. For instance, "Why do men should always follow sports, have a deeper voice, or support feminism? It is gay!" (Heasley 2005).

The term "queer" is an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ individuals (Brown, Browne, and Lim 2012). In developed states, LGBTQI+ individuals are being tolerated and not deprived of society. Regrettably, the situation in Azerbaijan opposes. Liberal organizations and unions try to erudite people about gender issues. Simultaneously, on the off chance that we go further to the hetero standards, these issues are deconstructed during the time spent in recreation (Brown, Browne, and Lim 2012). Society needs to be trained and informed about the new terms in gender studies (Oswin 2008) for the progress of LGBTQI+ individuals' rights. The training and possibly launched programs can decrease the number of hate crimes.

4. Administrative management and LGBTQI+ rights.

The other contention that we thoroughly concur with references to the law and the acts of the acknowledged "orders" regarding the human rights and the privileges of LGBTQI+ individuals. (Brown, Browne, and Lim 2012). Governments ratify new local frameworks by modernizing the justice system. The acknowledged jurisdictions remain unimplemented in most cases. Azerbaijan has one of the highest literacy rates - 99.79 percent ("Azerbaijan - Literacy rate | Statista", 2021) in the world. But as the level of misinformation and propaganda remains high, people are biased toward LGBTQI+ individuals. Despite the high ratio the level of literacy, people do not practice national legislation and do not get information about human rights. Even though Azerbaijan makes a decent attempt to coordinate with European culture (Valiyev, 2016) and acknowledge Westernization, the state policy is not unambiguous.

The mentality is the most crucial part and favorite word of Azerbaijani people. The word itself should be defined from the cultural perspectives of the Azerbaijani people. Azerbaijanis usually emphasize that people should preserve their mentality. What is understood as the preservation of a mental value? Mental values influence policy-making strategies (Anindya, Leolita & Abraham, 2014). According to the UN convention resolutions, all kinds of violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals cannot be welcomed (OHCHR | LGBT UN Resolutions, 2020).

Corrupt governmental organizations and unprofessional NGO management lower the quality of work that is done in Azerbaijan. The mentioned practices also burden the development of LGBTQI+ rights in the country. Universal Human Rights Declaration is often dismissed in the management of administrative bodies.

5. Safe Space problem.

Leaving rural provinces and populating in crowded cities is a common execution among LGBTQI+ individuals (Binnie and Valentine, 1999). The idea demonstrates the accessibility of safe spaces for individuals. In Azerbaijan, LGBTQI+ individuals attempt to move to the capital. They believe Baku would provide them with a better future. Finding a job, learning languages, attending community meetings, and socializing with other individuals is a usual practices in the capital.

Finding shelter in Baku, LGBTQI+ individuals believe that the idea of being away from parents and relatives is the same as obtaining freedom. Still, finding an apartment and renting a room with a partner can be perilous for individuals. Research demonstrates that individuals who recognize themselves as queer encounter threat both from their social vicinity and the government (Brown, Browne, and Lim 2012).

Methodology.

While referencing the everyday lives of the individuals in Azerbaijan, I have chosen to ask for help from our companions and interview them personally. I needed to concentrate on the day-by-day schedules of the queer network. The Republic of Azerbaijan is mentioned as the worst place for being an LGBTQI+ individual by European Independent Institutions. Not to reveal the research participants' identities, I have explained to them the confidentiality principle of the research data. I have asked for their consent for participation in the data collection process. I was also able to attend the meeting of the queer community and hear their concerns on everyday life issues.

I have utilized individual interviews and focus group discussion for the empirical data collection part of the mini-study. Some interviews were conducted online due to the COVID19 pandemic. I interviewed four volunteer research participants. The research informants were asked for both: oral and written consent by the researcher for participation.

Analyses: Daily lives of queer individuals in Baku.

This section represents four main concerns that progressed during the data collection process. The analyses part of the paper gathers the collected data from focus group discussions and individual interviews. The utmost responses are emphasized below. I have to mention that, the outcomes of the data do not cover the whole practices of the LGBTQI+ community in Azerbaijan. As geography is known for the most oppressed towards human rights, finding interviewees and volunteers was hard. The chosen country needs to be investigated in larger-scale research.

Community meeting: Focus Group Discussion.

I could participate in focus group discussions. The discussion covered life during the lockdown and post-lockdown period. Moreover, the LGBTQI+ individuals spoke about their daily concerns. A common problem among individuals is the loss of the workplace. Individuals also mention that one of their concerns connected to family-related issues. Queer individuals encounter oppression and deprivation daily.

Considering the economic challenges, individuals had the most burdensome period of their lives during the lockdown. Unfortunately, domestic violence toward individuals was intense during the lockdown. Some of them had to abandon their house. Regarding domestic violence, the LGBTQI+ community individuals mention that their relations with their families differ. Some families tolerate their sexual orientation, while others force individuals to attend therapy sessions. Unfortunately, therapists and psychologists admit same-sex relation is an illness. LGBTQI+ individuals are forced to change their opinions in psychological therapy sessions.

Some of them mentioned the problem of their gender identifications. They emphasize that it is challenging to admit their sexuality to the people around them. In the Azerbaijan Republic, psychologists do not require licenses to work. As a result, there is no monitoring strategy of the government for psychologists.

Being part of a queer community.

Informants have enlightened me that being an LGBTQ+ individual can be tiring, good, and bad at the same time. One of the participants has told me that they would not like to interact with the network:

“I do not want to interact with the queer community a lot as I work with the government organization. I don't think that that would be a problem for the workplace but for people and society.....

Our society is inappropriate, people judge only but do not respect. The societal system is constructed for the promotion of hate and anger. Maybe people are poor and this is the reason why they are so aggressive. But also, community "stars" (this is what we call activists or sex workers) only promote oppression even within the community network. How can I trust them? How can I ensure my confidentiality? ”

According to their words, it became clear that the participants just wanted to continue their implicit life about their sexuality. While others were resisting the public hate and prejudice. They did not want to show up outside with his friends from the community as well. One of the participants mentioned:

“I do not know how to identify or explain what it means to be an individual of the LGBTQ+ community. I am living apart from home. Recently have been attacked for wearing shorts. The community assisted me in pledge a lawyer and morally supported me. Yet, not everyone feels the same way as I do. Most LGBTQ+ individuals try to hide, surprisingly sometimes use hate speech against the community to hide their sexuality.”

Daily routine and threat.

Most of the research participants are students. They also represent different socio-economic backgrounds. Research participants mentioned that their major activity was based on attending lectures in pre-pandemic times. Socialization for the individuals means going out for a drink, and activities outside the home. They mentioned that most of them try to avoid family activities as they do not feel comfortable with them. Most of the research participants added that their daily activities engage learning new languages. They say that learning new languages, especially English can assist them to abandon the country and seek a better life. One of the informants added:

“I do online courses. I try to develop myself and learn new skills. Developing myself can help me to get rid of poverty. I learn English, I go to English courses. I used to work part-time to collect money for leaving the country. It is hard to live in Azerbaijan. Not only social vicinity but also family members would be a threat to my life if they had information about my sexual orientation.”

Further, they have also mentioned that some of them are and have faced danger in their lives. According to the participant, she was beaten and had to defend herself because of her sexual orientation. She describes:

“I fell in love once. Friends knew about my girlfriend. Some of my university mates spread gossip about me at university. They started to blackmail me. I was beaten and had to defend myself as a result.”

The other participant added:

“There were always threats for LGBTQI+ individuals. We still face hate crimes, our lives are still in danger, and we have no trust in society. I have also faced traumatic stories. Recent actions - crimes against LGBTQI+ individuals prove that Azerbaijan is the worst place to be homosexual. I think the main reason for observing hate in people is a lack of education. People in Azerbaijan are sexists here, they beat and kill the transsexuals.”

Social Relations.

While investigating the lives of individuals, I wanted to have broader information about their social relations. Firstly, mentioning inter-generational relations would be better. Unfortunately, youth must take on more responsibilities in Azerbaijan. With the financial dependence on their parents, individuals are forced to conceal their sexual identities to survive.

“If my family knows about my sexuality (breaths deeply)....

Once they almost discovered that but I had to lie to them, they would kick me out of the home. I am the best student at university, and I must pay for my university with the financial

aid of my parents. I do not work, and my family financially supports me, so, I have to keep lying to them.”

Participant 1.

“I live with my family, and it is hard. I sleep a lot because that takes me apart from all the current problems. I do not communicate with my father, but sometimes with my mother and brother. I don’t have anything to discuss with them. If I had had a chance, I would change the country and the family.”

Participant 3.

“I take an active part in the social life of the NGOs. Except for LGBTQI+ topics, we are doing well with my family. You can guess - they do not know about my sexual preferences.”

Participant 2.

Changes in the community in the past years.

Network individuals have proclaimed that plenty of positive changes occurred within two years, and they don't hesitate to communicate and share their emotions, reflections, and dreams among their straight companions. However, there is also a negative tendency. Social media activists promote hate speech and seduce society to torture LGBTQI+ individuals. The government does not take serious actions to stop the danger concerning the increasing number of hate crimes.

As I have mentioned above, the consequence of such calls resulted in the death of a trans woman in Baku. Unfortunately, the head of the White Party, Tural Abbasli, demonstrates homophobic behavior in his interviews with TV channels. Besides him, the famous blogger Sevinj Huseynova occasionally alerts her followers and threatens LGBTQI+ individuals with "human hunting". The official reaction towards these people is left neglected.

The opinion of individuals regarding the safe space also oppose. One group assumes that there is a positive tendency, while the others collide with their arguments. Exploring Baku, I have witnessed LGBTQI+ friendly spaces. The younger generation tolerates people's lifestyles. This positive tendency goes against societal norms and is misunderstood by the suburban population of the country. Lack of information and training in the republic on gender issues causes the problem of hate crimes. Some organizations still fight for the freedom of LGBTQI+ individuals. Nevertheless, their efforts are not fruitful as the administration does not support them. These organizations and civil unions often assist individuals to depart the country and seek asylum.

Discussion.

The discussion chapter represents my reflection from small-scale research on the daily lives of LGBTQI+ individuals in Baku, Azerbaijan. I would emphasize the main responsibility of government administration. The management of the education system should be built on sustainability. Training conservative people on gender-related topics would decrease the number of hate crimes. As I mentioned, educational institutions do not erudite students about gender studies. Yet, if schools, universities, and scientists talk openly about the diversity of differences people can progress their outlook. While talking about educational institutions, I must mention that pupils with non-traditional orientations are oppressed at school. Sexual orientation deprives individuals of their right to education. LGBTQI+ individuals also are bullied by their classmates at academic establishments.

Mentioning the organizations and liberal institutions, I must say that from my observations, and also from participant responses I discovered some liberal institutions deprive the community members within the network. The management of liberal institutions is being ruled by unprofessional staff members. Nevertheless, these establishments are called "safe" spaces for LGBTQI+ individuals. There is also institutional amateurism.

The societal mindset is also a burden for governors in the protection of LGBTQI+ rights. The government try to raise the approval rating. It is also the responsibility of administrative and executive bodies to create a safe space for individuals. The family institution in Azerbaijan is not supportive of LGBTQI+ related issues. This can be reasoned as oppression from society. The individuals also face challenges in job seeking. They do not want to reveal their sexual orientation at their workplaces or educational establishments.

Conclusion.

I have directed small-scale research about queer life in Baku, Azerbaijan. Overall, I tried to glimpse the historical reflections of the development of LGBTQI+ interactions in mentioned geography. LGBTQI+ community progresses in Azerbaijan, and the problematic views towards the researched topic vary. The small-scale research can furtherly be enhanced from the perspectives of family, educational, governmental, and organizational institutions.

Exploring geographies produces an effective assignment in understanding the encounters of individuals in human geography (Gavin Brown, Kath Browne, and Jason Lim 2012). The observation of cultural practices, societal norms, and lack of administrative initiatives explain Azerbaijan's last position in gay-friendly place geography graphs.

The processed data enlarged the view of the overall image of LGBTQI+ life in Azerbaijan, Baku. Personal observations assisted me to probe queer-friendly spaces in the largest and most populated city of Caucasus. Despite the negative feedback of LGBTQI+ individuals, personal reflections prove that society's approach toward the LGBTQ+ community has progressively improved. People, especially young individuals are more aware of gender-related topics. As a final notice, I need to mention that the paper is open for further development.

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