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Structural Aspects of LGBT Topics in Armenia: Social and Cultural Contexts

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This paper explores the social, legal, and institutional landscape surrounding LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) topics in Armenia, employing the framework of structural discrimination theory. Public and scholarly attention to LGBT-related issues in Armenia has grown in recent years, particularly in light of ongoing discussions about inclusion, social cohesion, and the country's alignment with international norms.

While Armenia is a signatory to international agreements such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the everyday experiences of LGBT individuals often reflect a disconnect between formal commitments and practical realities. In many cases, these individuals face social stigma, limited institutional support, and negative portrayals in public discourse, which collectively contribute to patterns of exclusion.

This paper aims to analyze the cultural, legal, and structural dynamics shaping LGBT experiences in Armenia. Drawing on the theory of structural discrimination, it examines how laws, policies, and prevailing social norms intersect to influence the visibility, safety, and opportunities available to LGBT individuals.

1. Theoretical Framework: Structural Discrimination

This paper employs the concept of structural discrimination as the central analytical lens through which to assess the situation of LGBT rights in Armenia. Structural discrimination refers to the systematic and persistent disadvantages experienced by certain social groups due to institutional arrangements, policy frameworks, and prevailing social norms. Unlike direct or individual acts of prejudice, this form of discrimination is embedded in the routine functioning of legal, political, and cultural systems, often operating without overt intent to harm.

This framework is especially relevant to the Armenian context, where challenges faced by LGBT individuals stem not only from personal bias but also from the ways institutions are organized and how societal norms are reproduced. Political theorist Iris Marion Young outlined five dimensions of structural oppression: marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, violence, and exploitation.ⁱ Of these, several are clearly reflected in the Armenian landscape:

- **Marginalization** manifests through the limited inclusion of LGBT voices in public policy discussions, civic education, and media representation, resulting in their social and political invisibility.

- **Powerlessness** is evident in the absence of legal safeguards, such as anti-discrimination laws explicitly covering sexual orientation and gender identity, and in the limited access to justice when rights are violated.

- **Cultural imperialism** takes shape in dominant discourses that define non-heteronormative identities as un-Armenian or

foreign to national traditions—an idea often repeated in media, political, and religious rhetoric.

- **Violence** encompasses both physical aggression and symbolic harm, including harassment in public, rejection by family members, and a broader environment in which hate crimes are underreported and rarely prosecuted under bias-related provisions.

According to this theoretical approach, inequality persists not solely due to explicit legal restrictions but also because of institutional inertia and the absence of proactive measures to address exclusion. In Armenia, for example, while same-sex relations are not criminalized, the lack of specific legal protections, recognition within public policy frameworks, or institutional support contributes to conditions of social and legal vulnerability for individuals identifying as LGBT. What may appear as institutional neutrality can, in effect, perpetuate harm by allowing structural gaps to remain unaddressed.

Structural discrimination also emphasizes the interdependence between legal norms and prevailing social attitudes. Legislative reforms, when adopted, may have limited impact if they are not accompanied by shifts in public perceptions or institutional practice. In such contexts, societal resistance to change may impede the implementation of policy measures, while the absence of clearly articulated legal standards can reinforce existing stigmas—creating a feedback loop that preserves existing dynamics.

Through this lens, the paper moves beyond documenting individual cases or overt acts of discrimination. Instead, it examines how the intersection of law, policy, and societal norms collectively influences the

everyday experiences of LGBT individuals in Armenia. Structural discrimination theory thus serves as a framework for analyzing these complex patterns and identifying areas where coordinated legal and cultural engagement may be needed.

2. Legal Framework and International Commitments

Armenia is a signatory to multiple international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), both of which obligate states to guarantee equal protection before the law and to prohibit discrimination on any grounds. These instruments, alongside Armenia's voluntary participation in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism of the United Nations Human Rights Council, reflect a formal commitment to uphold the principles of dignity, equality, and non-discrimination. However, the domestic implementation of these obligations remains inadequate with respect to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI).

Armenia does not have a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that prohibits discrimination based on SOGI in areas such as employment, education, healthcare, housing, or public services. Armenia's criminal legislation does not include sexual orientation or gender identity among the aggravating factors in cases of assault, murder, or harassment.ⁱⁱ This omission contributes to a notable gap in legal classification and response, as incidents involving LGBT individuals are generally addressed under standard criminal provisions, without explicit recognition of potential bias-related motives.

The first recorded instance of a homophobic motive being officially recognized by a criminal court occurred in March 2022, when an Armenian

court acknowledged the bias-driven nature of an assault on an LGBT individual.ⁱⁱⁱ Prior to this ruling, no Armenian court had ever applied aggravating circumstances related to sexual orientation, despite evidence of homophobic violence documented by civil society groups.

Law enforcement agencies in Armenia have at times been criticized for limited or inconsistent responses to reports of violence or discrimination targeting LGBT individuals. In certain cases, complaints of abuse or harassment have not led to thorough investigations, and victims have reported feeling unsupported when engaging with police authorities.^{iv} These perceptions may be linked to the lack of formal protocols or specialized training for handling incidents involving bias-motivated violence, which can contribute to underreporting and a sense of mistrust among affected communities.

Public institutions have also been navigating a broader social context in which discussions of LGBT rights remain sensitive. Policymakers have noted the importance of societal readiness and cultural dialogue in shaping the pace and nature of legal reform.^v In this environment, developing training programs, public education campaigns, or inclusive policies can be challenging without broad public consensus or institutional capacity dedicated to these efforts.

In conclusion, while the full integration of LGBT protections into Armenia's legal and institutional frameworks remains a work in progress, continued engagement—both domestically and internationally—has the potential to strengthen inclusivity and access to justice. Ongoing dialogue, policy development, and public awareness efforts may help address the

structural limitations that currently affect institutional responses to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.

3. Societal Homophobia and Cultural Hostility

Social attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity in Armenia are significantly shaped by historical, cultural, and religious factors, contributing to a widespread climate of homophobia and limited public acceptance of LGBT individuals.

Public opinion surveys conducted in recent years suggest that negative perceptions of LGBT people remain widespread, with large portions of the population expressing discomfort with or disapproval of homosexuality.^{vi} This prevailing attitude is reinforced by limited public education on diversity and human rights, as well as the influence of media, religious authorities, and political discourse. Consequently, LGBT individuals often face social exclusion, not only from strangers in public settings but also from within their own families, schools, and workplaces.

Harassment in public spaces—including verbal abuse, physical intimidation, and even violence—is a common experience reported by LGBT Armenians. Incidents have occurred on streets, in public transportation, and in service establishments, particularly when individuals are perceived as gender non-conforming.^{vii} These encounters contribute to a general sense of insecurity and invisibility, prompting many LGBT people to conceal their identities to avoid conflict or discrimination. The fear of exposure is further compounded by the risk of losing employment or housing, especially in small communities where privacy is limited and reputational concerns can heavily influence access to jobs and basic services.

Cultural representations of LGBT people are often negative, portraying them as alien to Armenian traditions or as products of foreign ideologies. This perception is frequently voiced in media outlets and online platforms, where discussions about LGBT rights are met with derision, moral condemnation, or conspiracy theories that frame LGBT advocacy as a Western attempt to undermine national values.^{viii} The notion that LGBT identities are incompatible with “Armenianness” continues to shape social behavior and justify exclusion.

One particularly tragic example of societal hostility occurred in October 2022, when two young men—Arsen, aged 16, and Tigran, aged 21—died by suicide after posting photographs online that implied a romantic relationship.^{ix} The online reaction was swift and overwhelmingly hostile, with thousands of public comments expressing hatred, ridiculing the victims, or encouraging similar actions among other LGBT youth.

Such incidents illustrate the psychological burden placed on LGBT individuals in Armenia. Constant exposure to societal stigma, rejection by family members, and the absence of affirming support networks contribute to elevated rates of mental health challenges, including chronic stress, depression, and suicidal ideation. For many, the cumulative effects of exclusion and fear result in long-term emotional trauma and social isolation.

Moreover, coming out is often considered dangerous in Armenia. Young LGBT individuals may face rejection by parents, eviction from the home, physical punishment, or coerced “treatment” if their sexual orientation or gender identity is discovered. This leads many to delay or

entirely avoid disclosing their identity, resulting in significant internal conflict and invisibility in public life.

While there are isolated examples of increasing visibility and some instances of allyship within Armenian civil society, these remain exceptional rather than representative. In many cases, visible LGBT individuals or activists become targets of public vilification.

In sum, societal homophobia in Armenia is not merely a reflection of individual prejudice but part of a larger cultural and structural environment in which traditional values, nationalist rhetoric, and institutional silence reinforce exclusionary norms.

4. Armenian Cultural Context: Family, Tradition, and Social Cohesion

Armenia's social and cultural identity is deeply influenced by longstanding traditions that prioritize family bonds, historical continuity, and a strong sense of national belonging. These values are foundational to everyday life and influence the structure of communities, social relationships, and institutional norms. In Armenian society, the family is widely regarded as the core unit of social organization—responsible not only for emotional and material support, but also for preserving cultural practices and intergenerational values.

The country's social fabric has evolved through centuries of historical experience, shaped by a combination of indigenous customs, Christian beliefs, and collective responses to hardship, including war, displacement, and foreign domination. Within this cultural backdrop, roles within the family—particularly those related to gender and expectations around marriage and childbearing—are seen as important to the preservation of national identity and social resilience.

This emphasis on familial unity and collective identity can sometimes create complexities when it comes to navigating topics that challenge conventional norms. Conversations around sexual orientation and gender identity, for instance, may be difficult for some families—not due to animosity, but rather because of unfamiliarity, generational perspectives, or concerns about social reputation. In such situations, hesitation may reflect a protective instinct or a desire to uphold family standing within a close-knit community, rather than deliberate rejection.

Views on non-traditional identities are also influenced by broader cultural narratives in which majority norms tend to guide public attitudes. As such, discussions related to LGBT issues may be approached with caution, particularly when they are seen as emblematic of rapid cultural shifts or external influences. These patterns are not unique to Armenia and are often observed in societies where historical continuity and cultural heritage are strongly emphasized.

In this light, public attitudes toward LGBT individuals may be viewed as part of a larger historical and cultural legacy shaped by social conservatism, long-standing traditions, and post-Soviet transitions. These attitudes are informed by a combination of internal cultural factors and broader regional influences that have shaped national identity and public discourse over time.

Understanding this context can contribute to more effective and empathetic engagement. Dialogue on inclusion and rights may be more successful when approached with cultural awareness and a recognition of the values that many Armenian families hold dear. By fostering mutual respect and cultural sensitivity, it may be possible to promote social

understanding while honoring the traditions that form a vital part of Armenia’s national character.

Table1: Factors Influencing LGBT Discrimination in Armenia

Area of Concern	Observed Challenges	Possible Contributing Factors
Legal Protections	No comprehensive anti-discrimination law explicitly covering sexual orientation or gender identity.	Limited legislative development; evolving public discourse; lack of consensus.
Hate Crime Provisions	Sexual orientation and gender identity not consistently recognized as aggravating factors in hate crimes.	Omission in criminal statutes; underreporting; limited training for law enforcement.
Law Enforcement Response	Mixed experiences reported by victims; some cases lack follow-up or legal accountability.	Resource constraints; lack of specialized protocols; limited training on SOGI issues.
Societal Attitudes	Public opinion remains largely conservative, with limited acceptance of LGBT individuals.	Historical values; role of family and religion; low public exposure to diversity topics.
Media and Representation	LGBT individuals are rarely represented in mainstream media or public education.	Dominant cultural narratives; limited institutional efforts to foster inclusive visibility.
Mental Health and Social Support	Reports of psychological stress, isolation, and lack of accessible LGBT-affirming services.	Social stigma; family pressures; lack of mental health resources tailored to LGBT needs.
Public Dialogue and Inclusion	LGBT issues are not widely discussed in national policy forums or education systems.	Sensitivity of topic; emphasis on societal readiness and cultural tradition.

5. Conclusion

The situation of LGBT rights in Armenia is shaped by a complex set of interrelated factors, including legal frameworks, institutional responses, societal attitudes, and cultural traditions. Although Armenia has formally committed to international human rights principles, practical implementation of protections for LGBT individuals remains limited. The absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, lack of legal recognition for same-sex partnerships, and underdeveloped hate crime enforcement contribute to a legal environment in which LGBT people often lack adequate safeguards.

In parallel, public perceptions of LGBT identities are influenced by longstanding cultural and familial values that emphasize cohesion, tradition, and national identity. These values, while deeply meaningful to many, can create barriers to open dialogue and inclusive policymaking. Issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are frequently considered sensitive, and discussions may be shaped by generational perspectives, concerns about social reputation, and perceptions of foreign influence.

Through the lens of structural discrimination, it becomes clear that exclusion does not always result from overt hostility, but may emerge through institutional inaction, legal omission, and prevailing social norms.

Efforts to strengthen inclusion and equality in Armenia will benefit from approaches that combine legal reform with culturally sensitive dialogue.

Recognizing and respecting Armenia’s cultural context while engaging in human rights-based discussions offers a constructive path forward—one that promotes both social harmony and individual dignity.

ⁱ Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990.

ⁱⁱ Human Rights Watch. World Report 2023: Armenia, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/armenia?utm_source.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Amnesty International: Public Statement, August 7, 2018, [https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EUR5489172018ENGLISH.pdf?utm](https://www.amnesty.org/ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EUR5489172018ENGLISH.pdf?utm;); Human Rights Watch. World Report 2024: Armenia, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/armenia?utm>.

^v *National Report on Violations of the Rights of LGBT People and MSM in Armenia 2023*, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/national-report-on-violations-of-the-rights-of-lgbt-people-and-msm-in-armenia-2023/>.

^{vi} Abuladze S., Life of sexual minorities in the realm of Armenia, February 20, 2025, <https://www.gchumanrights.org/preparedness/life-of-sexual-minorities-in-the-realm-of-armenia/>; Report on International Religious Freedom: Armenia, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/armenia/>.

^{vii} Human Rights Watch. World Report 2023: Armenia, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/armenia?utm_source.

^{viii} Armenian Far-Right and Church Opposition to Anti-Female Violence Convention, September 3, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/09/03/armenian-far-right-and-church-opposition-to-anti-female-violence-convention/?utm>.

^{ix} Armenia: a Young Gay Couple’s Tragic Fate, November 16, 2022, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/armenia-young-gay-couples-tragic-fate>.