

# LGBTI+ Survey Gozo

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LGBTI+ Gozo was formed in May 2015, for the purpose of promoting and raising awareness regarding the LGBTI+ community and issues affecting it, together with organizing events aimed that include all LGBTI+ peers and supporters. The idea for starting this NGO was motivated by after various LGBTI+ youths' idea of holding regular socials event for LGBTI+ youth in Gozo. So far various events have been and are being planned, in collaboration with different stakeholders. These include regular social events, awareness campaigns and informational meetings. LGBTI+ Gozo wishes not only to give understanding to LGBTI+ peers but also to build a community and a safe space where one can express their ideas without the fear of being judged.

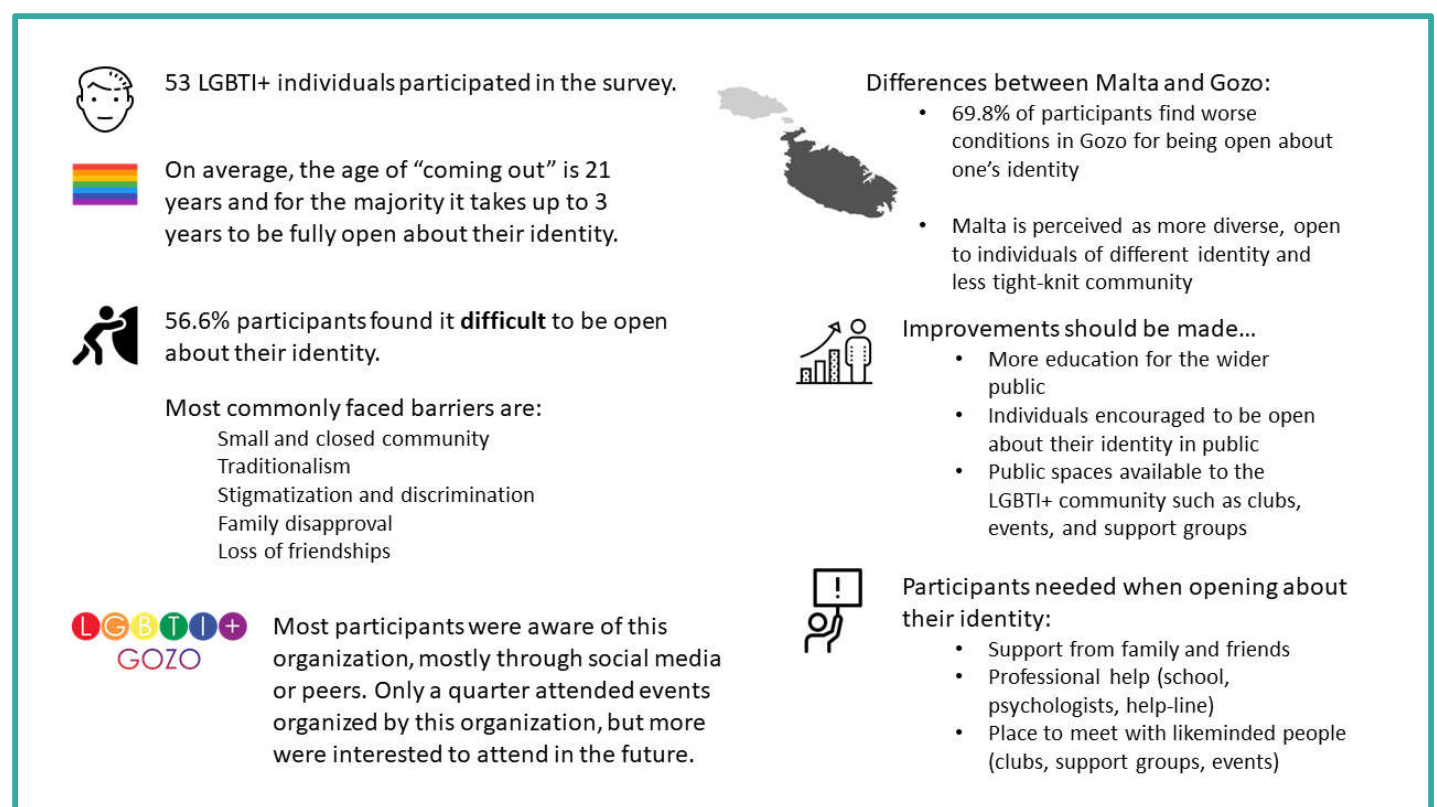
## Gozo 2019 LGBTI+ Survey

A brief survey was designed to explore the state of situation in Gozo related to the thoughts, opinions and demographics of LGBTI+ individuals. The main goal of this survey is to collect, analyze and report data along with the implications of these findings in order to understand the needs of this population and propose the appropriate steps to be taken for improvement of subjective well-being of those who are faced with barriers.

The survey consisted of 18 questions covering key areas of demographics, issues faced with openly stating one's sexuality, needs of this population and availability of information related to LGBTI+ needs.

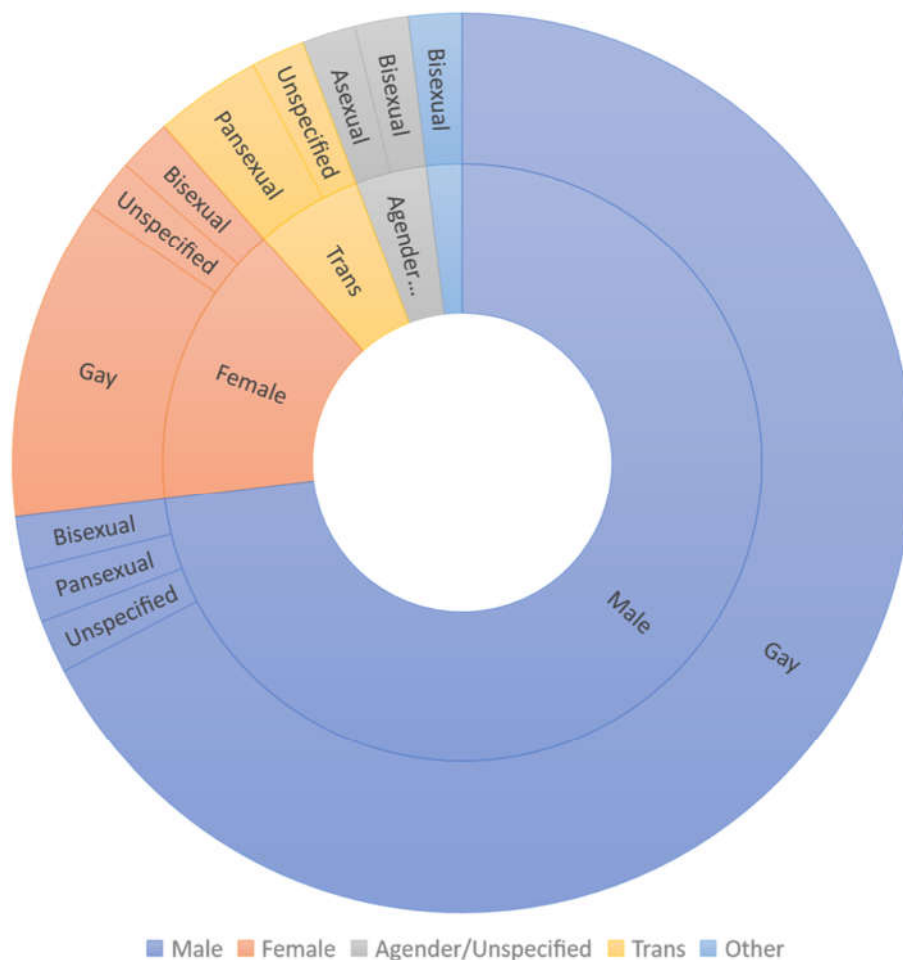
The survey was available online during August 2019. Data collected were analyzed in a quantitative and qualitative way in order to provide a detailed overview of the topics in question.

The main findings are outlined below.



## ANALYSIS OF LGBTI+ POPULATION OPINIONS, NEEDS AND HABITS

In total, **53 individuals** belonging to the LGBTI+ population have filled out an online survey. The sample demographics are as follows: mean age of the sample is 31 years old (youngest respondent being 17 and eldest 59 years old). Most respondents identified as male gender (71.7%) followed by female (15.1%). Some identified as transgender or agender/nonbinary (13.2%). The sexual orientation distribution is displayed below:



Further analysis has shown that the average age of respondents coming out as LGBTI+ was 21 years (lowest indicated age being 14 and highest 50). On average, respondents took 3 years between coming out and being fully open about their sexuality in Gozo, with over 60% being open in the first 2 years. Some indicated that even though they are “out of the closet”, they still do not feel comfortable being open about their sexuality in Gozo.

## DIFFICULTIES AND BARRIERS IN GOZO RELATED TO OPENNESS ABOUT OWN SEXUAL ORIENTATION

In general, over half of the individuals surveyed consider being open about one's sexuality to be **difficult** (56.6% difficult, 25% neutral, 19.4% not difficult). Barriers which have been often mentioned regarding being open are living in a *closed and small community*, upbringing which is *traditionalistic* in nature and often marked by *religious beliefs* or rules. Such conditions are believed to support *stigmatization* of LGBTI+ individuals and promote discrimination. Our results have shown that there is still a tendency in Gozo to provoke individuals of the LGBTI+ population with questions that are aimed to humiliate them or to use derogatory terms, especially towards effeminate men.

Furthermore, some individuals find barriers within their own *family*, mainly related to not being comfortable with discussing their sexuality with their family members. This is partially due to trying not to hurt their family members by being labeled as "different" and the overall notion that family is defined as the traditionalistic nuclear type. The latter relates to relatives of respondents being embarrassed to answer questions by others about their marital status or having children.

***"It was more difficult 10 years ago. I think the mentality and the looks. My mother asked me not to be open so that not everyone would find out. I was also afraid I would be shunned by my family and friends."***

One of the hardest issues related to "coming out" has been *loss of friendships* as the respondents were ostracized, stigmatized and abandoned due to homophobic views which came to surface once they became open about their sexuality. These sentiments are supported by EU surveys that found large incidences of trans-, bi-, and homophobia in peer-to-peer relations in schools<sup>1</sup>.

Respondents share a common view that the situation has improved in the past years and is nowadays easier to be open about one's sexuality (although still difficult) than it was before (see quote by a 40-year-old participant below). One of the factors that can make being open easier is higher social status. The general conditions have significantly improved over the last decade in Malta with educational campaigns, efforts to stop bullying against individuals who identify as LGBTI+ and with legislative that supports equality on more levels<sup>1</sup>.

***"Yes, back in my day it was difficult to be who you want to be - nowadays things have changed for the better, people are more open minded now"***

Some of the respondents have indicated that their own disinterest in the opinions of others or the society as a whole has made them more confident in being themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2017 Malta National School Climate Survey Report

## THE TALE OF TWO ISLANDS: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MALTA AND GOZO

Up until the writing of this report, we have not found literature addressing the issues individuals who identify as LGBTI+ face at the island of Gozo. Even national surveys include a very small percentage of participants from Gozo. For example, the Malta National School Climate Survey (2016–2017) has only 2.9% of survey participants from Gozo. Having this information in mind, we find it important to explore the perceived differences such individuals feel are present between the two islands.

When we exclude the perceived differences in mentality between Malta and Gozo, an overwhelming majority of individuals surveyed have expressed that Gozo has worse conditions for LGBTI+ individuals compared to the island of Malta (69.8% see it as worse, 11.3% perceive it as same and 18.9% see the situation being better in Gozo).

When we analyzed the responses, the majority reflected that there is a larger number of LGBTI+ individuals who are open about their identity in Malta compared to Gozo who can subsequently provide more support for those who are about to or have just started to be open. One specific advantage the inhabitants of Malta had is the existence of LGBTI+ clubs and community thus making the outgroup individuals more exposed to the idea of LGBTI+ people within the population.

***“Size is definitely a factor that differentiates Malta from Gozo, and which has an effect on how members of the LGBTIQ+ community can interact. The lack of safe spaces and the overfamiliarity of people makes it more difficult to come out, discover oneself and lead a private life until one is comfortable coming out.”***

Furthermore, the influence of religion and religious beliefs has been pointed out to be stronger in Gozo than in Malta. Overall, this is in line with findings of firm heteronormative mindset in Malta in general<sup>2</sup>, which the participants in this survey find to be further exacerbated by the closedness of the community in Gozo. Such an environment can limit one’s ability to find support among peers and friends when being open about non-heteronormative identity as such expressions and support for individuals can have negative consequences for both the individual and the person which offers support.

***“I think the mentality in Gozo might be more open than we think. I think it’s our own fears that keep us from coming out or thinking that Gozo is more judgmental.”***

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<sup>2</sup> Borg, J. (2017). The narratives of gay male teachers in contemporary Catholic Malta. In *Informing Educational Change: Research Voices from Malta*.

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## ENCOURAGING CHANGE IN GOZO

Of the 52 respondent answers analyzed, most (49.1%) mentioned a need for more education and/or raising awareness of the LGBTI+ community in the general population in order to shift the mentality to be more welcoming to individuals who identify as LGBTI+. The answers mentioned a wide variety of educational needs intended for elementary school children up to the elderly. The educational activities proposed ranged from lectures about homophobia, sharing information about the LGBTI+ online and in media, leaflets, billboards, and general sexual education. Since 2014, there have been significant efforts in Malta taken up by the Ministry of Education to educate students against identity-dependent bullying, followed by a nation-wide policy fostering inclusivity and establishing schools as a safe environment<sup>1</sup>.

Other common mentioned changes that could improve the state in Gozo were having more LGBTI+ individuals be open about their identity in public to encourage exposure of the general population to diversity (17%). Having more public spaces where members of this group can meet and mingle would help people feel they have a support system and safe space to be open about their identity (11.3%).

***“Education for sure. And I believe that more activities and having maybe a gay bar in Gozo might help. Although we say that its OK and its better in Gozo, I don't believe that we're at a point where if there's an LGBT activity going on, people would join voluntarily or even gay people would join with a big smile on their face. WHY? Because of the social life, because of work, because of family. So the fear of being part of that group is still there.”***

Surprisingly, about 15% of individuals who participated in this survey felt that being patient and letting time change the general sentiment of the general population will suffice.



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## OPENING ABOUT OWN IDENTITY: EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS

Thoughts, experiences, fears, and obstacles are key areas to explore when grasping the bigger picture of the process individuals who are starting to become open about their identity face. In the survey, we have asked the participants to share what services, events or support they needed during their period of opening up about their identity in Gozo.

A theme analysis of answers shows that most commonly shared needs were:

- Support from friends, family or support groups (35.8%)
- Need for professional help in school, from a psychologist or a confidential help-line (30.2%)
- Places where they could meet likeminded people: bars, clubs, events, or meeting places

***“I had plenty of support from family, however if that support was not present perhaps a meeting group, or one individual to talk to to seek guidance would have been great.”***

A couple of respondents have expressed the need for safe space along with some financial support for those individuals whose families are not supportive and decide to take drastic measures against the individual, such as limiting financial sources or housing.

As the Malta National School Climate Survey (2016–2017) has reported, many students who identify as LGBTI+ have faced derogatory homophobic remarks aimed at them at school which has made them feel unsafe and at times skip school. Such behavior has been found to be made frequently by some of the students, and rarely by some school staff. Furthermore, around a quarter of students were found to be physically harassed by other students because of their orientation or expression of identity. This highlights the need for more education of the school staff and students themselves about the destructive nature of such behavior. In order to make school a safe space for one’s expression of identity, change is needed. On the bright side, around two thirds of respondents in the Malta National School Climate Survey reported they felt comfortable speaking to a counselor or social worker about issues they face with their identity expression. Our findings point that these professions are indeed perceived to be the key players in ensuring LGBTI+ individuals have the support they need. To further foster the feeling of safety, educational opportunities should be provided to these specialists to ensure they are equipped with high skill levels and best practices to help the students in need.

When it comes to events organized by and for LGBTI+ individuals, 64% of respondents would like to attend those. In particular individuals were interested in *social events* such as informal gatherings, parties, meet-ups, group discussions, excursions with activities in nature (e.g., hikes). Furthermore, some have shared ideas of having *conferences* (which could be themed along the lines of sharing the struggles and solutions for the LGBTI+ population) and *training events* (which could show individuals some techniques of dealing with stigma or discrimination), and *educational events* for the underaged.

Those who were opposed to events organised for the LGBTI+ individuals in Gozo expressed their thoughts along the lines of either not being in Gozo often or not wishing to distinguish themselves from the rest of the island’s inhabitants (e.g., *“I feel that I am like everyone and I don’t need any events”*).

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## LGBTI+ GOZO – GROWING ORGANISATION

Since 2015, LGBTI+ Gozo has been actively promoting and raising awareness regarding the LGBTI+ community and organizing events. It has provided the much-needed support for the members of the community and worked on educating the wider public in order to diminish stigma and discrimination.

Of the 53 surveyed LGBTI+ individuals, an overwhelming majority have heard of the organization (92.5%). They were introduced to the organization through social media (49.1%, mainly on Facebook), followed by peers or friends (39.6%) and the general media (18.9%). This shows that the efforts to share information on social media sites—a medium nowadays frequented by most youth—is an affordable yet effective way to educate and gather the community. However, within the sample we have surveyed, only 24.5% have attended LGBTI+ Gozo events. Asked for reasons why they have not attended any events so far, participants have mentioned not living in Gozo full time, not being interested, being frightened to participate, or not being fully open about their identity in the public.