# “WE NEED TO FIGHT AND HAVE A BATTLE EVERY DAY!”: QUEER PERCEPTIONS OF PEACEBUILDING AND ACTIVISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

By

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**Abstract**

This research uses critical qualitative methods to discuss the untold stories of LGBTQIA+ Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) after the Bosnian war in 1995. The qualitative research aims to examine the impacts of the violent conflict on queer individuals, as well as explore their experiences of peace activism and coping with homophobia in a country where queer communities face a heightened risk of homophobia. The data were analyzed using a set of procedures including description, coding, and interpretation of transcripts and field notes.

Direct and indirect violence, along with discriminatory policies and practices, have led to a resurgence of conflict and violence against queer people in BiH. This study investigated queer people's perceptions and experiences of peacebuilding in BiH and the political queer presence there after the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). It also explored the activism strategies of queer Bosniaks/Serbs/Croats residing in BiH, which they employ as part of a collective movement to improve the conditions of community members' conditions to help them cope with violence directed at queer people.

The research findings showed that there are interrelated everyday violent acts that disrupts queer people's way of living. The current structural issues that impact them range from the constitution, Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), and Two Schools Under One Roof policy to intergenerational trauma that prevent people from reconciling and coexisting in an already dysfunctional system that was created by the DPA in post-accord BiH. The research findings also suggest that the political institutions supported by the international community have institutionalized ethnosectarian politics and divisions in BiH, which puts everyone, specifically queer people, in danger of everyday homophobia violence.

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to those who spent years searching for a home…

This thesis is dedicated to queer people currently seeking a safe space for themselves and their loved ones…

In loving memory and profound admiration, this thesis is dedicated to my late, brave mom, a beacon of strength who imparted invaluable lessons about equity to me during times of injustice. When she moved to a different culture without any prior knowledge, she learned the language, integrated into the culture, created a space for herself and made many friends who adored her despite the numerous challenges, discrimination, and injustices she had faced. Without a formal education, she challenged every component of colonization, sexism, and any form of discrimination in her social circle.

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## List of Acronyms

BiH - Bosnia and Herzegovina

DPA - Dayton Peace Agreement

EU - European Union

LGBTQIA+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual.

RS - Republika Srpska

SOC- Sarajevo Open Centre

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## Chapter One: Introduction, Resistance in Post-Peace Bosnia and Herzegovina

### Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a country with a long history of conflict, which dominated much of its national narrative. The country underwent significant political, economic, and social changes under socialist Yugoslavia between 1918 and 1990. The already existed conflict during the Yugoslavia intensified and BiH's violent three-year war took place until the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA).

The existence of Yugoslavia began after World War I when a delegation from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (known as SHS) went to Paris to secure recognition of the new state at the international peace conference in January 1919 (Drapač, 2005). SHS was recognized by the United States in February 1919, followed by Britain and France in June 1919 (Calic, 2018). Although SHS wanted to remain as a single state representing South Slavic people, the Serbs refused to remove their name from the state's title which created tensions (Calic, 2018; Drapač, 2005). However, the state's attempt to foster further unity among its diverse ethnic groups failed. This led to tensions that increased over time and escalated in 1929 with the assassination of Croat politican Stjepan Radić, prompting King Alexander to declare a dictatorship as he dissolved the parliament and abolished the constitution to create "Yugoslav unity" in 1929 (Drapač, 2005).

During his time, all ethnic and religious parties and organizations were banned and many politicians from the opposition were arrested (Drapač, 2005). On October 3, 1929, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes underwent a name changed as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The king's regime was supported by various apparatuses like older elites in the bureaucracy, church, and military, and the monarch's charisma also included standardizing school curriculum to

establish an integral Yugoslavism in the educational system (Calic, 2018). In addition, the monarchy also used different means to disseminate its propaganda and reinforce the idea of a Yugoslav nation through the press, film, science, and culture, etc. The government-making process faced various problems in establishing its legitimacy due to a lack of proper representation and authority, as well as no clear plan for a future political structure (Calic, 2018).

During King Alexander's dictatorship, the unity of the country became his major priority as he used different means to overcome several internal uprising and divisions (Drapač, 2005). Despite these strategies, the country's divisions surrounding various issues did not disappear as the country's multifaceted problems became more apparent:

> On September 3, 1931, the monarch imposed a new pseudodemocratic constitution on the country, in which he gave himself the right to appoint as many as half of the representatives to one of the two chambers of parliament. That same year the Yugoslav Radical Peasants' Democracy was founded [….] The king's attempt to win support for the Yugoslav Radical Peasants' Democracy from members of the banned political parties failed. Instead, republican forces lashed out with a counterattack. In November 1932, the Democratic Peasant Coalition, an oppositional coalition of Serbs and Croats, demanded the reintroduction of parliamentarism and a federal restructuring of the state (Calic, 2018, p. 106).

These political demands led to massive uprisings and political arrests that included prominent leaders like Svetozar Pribićević, a Serb from Croatia, the Croat Vladko Maček, the Muslim Mehmet Spaho, and the Slovene Anton Korošec. These political leaders led to a "unified opposition" against the government when the Serb, Slovene, Croat, and Muslim parties nominated a joint list during the May 1935 and December 1938 elections (Calic, 2018).

In 1934, Yugoslavia was further destabilized by the assassination of King Alexander in France with the cooperation of the ultranationalist fascist Croatian Movement, the Ustaša (Drapač, 2005). The King's underage son was unable to rule so the country was governed by his cousin Prince Regent Paul. As a result of various tensions, the Great Depression hit the country

and exacerbated the poverty, specifically among peasants who relied heavily on selling their goods in the markets. The country also experienced migration which became a major issue particularly for those living in Belgrade.

During World War II, Yugoslavia was occupied and divided by the Axis powers of Italy and Germany. Josip Broz Tito's partisans emerged as a dominant resistance force against the Axis alliance and the Croatian Ustaša. They eventually established the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945. Under Tito's leadership, the country underwent significant political, cultural, economic, and social transformations. However, ethnic tensions and economic challenges persisted, culminating in Yugoslavia's dissolution in the early 1990s, leading to the formation of several independent states, including Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Macedonia (Calic, 2018).

Croatia and Slovenia, the richest Republics, did not want to be part of Milesovic's "greater Serbia" while the JNA controlled most of Yugoslavia's vast military hardware (Bennett, 2016). With the end of the Cold war, Yugoslavia also lost its strategic position to the West as international economic aid flowed from Yugoslavia to the East to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary (Bennett, 1997). The international community was also focused on events unfolding in the Middle East at this time especially during the 1991 First Gulf War and were not aware of the underlying political simmering's and escalation of political conflict taking place in Yugoslavia as ethnonationalist sentiments began to spillover and drive people apart (Bennett, 1997).

As Yugoslavia began to collapse in the early 1990s, it experienced increasing ethnic tensions, economic hardship, and political changes (Bose, 2007). This collapse was marked by Slovenia and Croatia as they declared their independence which was followed by BiH in April 1992 (Grodach, 2002). Leading up to BiH's declaration of independence, it began to experience

sporadic shooting in 1991 and it intensified as Bosnian secession campaign increased by Bosnian Serbs and the JNA (Yugoslav People's Army) which was largely controlled by Slobodan Milošević who used violence to ethnically cleanse Bosniaks, Croats, and Albanians in the region (Grodach, 2002). When the power and ideology of Milošević intensified, it increased tensions, polarization, and ethno-religious nationalism under the Greater Serbia Project (Mujanović, 2018; Ramet, 2006; Walasek, 2020).

The Yugoslav war impacted queer lives as queer people were uncertain how to cope with the violence before, during, and after the war. However, it is important to highlight the critical resistance and the space of queer people during the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia or as some activists would call it, "Queeroslavia" (Dioli, 2009). Despite the experiences of exclusion and discrimination in the former Yugoslavia, LGBTQIA+ individuals witnessed some changes overtime. Similar to Britain's colonial British laws, Yugoslavia's "unnatural fornication between persons of male sex" was considered to be a criminal act until its replacement by the new federal constitution of 1974 (Lešnik, 2006, p. 83).

Although "sexual morality" appeared to be on the Federation's agenda, there was consistent progress followed by many units of the republics that constituted Yugoslavia at the time. The new Slovenian penal code repealed the offence, with the age of consent being 14 years of age, while other republics set it at 18 (Lešnik, 2006). For example, Macedonia decriminalized the law in 1996, and Croatia, Montenegro, and the autonomous province of Vodvodina and then Serbia decriminalized homosexuality in 1997, followed by BiH in 1998 and the Republika Srpska in 1998 (Durković, 2007).

The 1970s was specifically a golden age for republics like the Slovenian republic in Yugoslavia. Despite political challenges during Marshall Tito's era, Slovenia maintained a

progressive agenda compared to other republics. The debate over the decriminalization of homosexuality revolved around the argument that "the intimate life of adults… is a personal matter and there is no need that the state should assume it has a right to interfere." (Lešnik, 2006, p. 83). Significant progress was made thereafter in Yugoslavia, specifically in Slovenia.

Thus, the queer movement flourished during the 1980s. The Student Cultural Centre in Ljubljana (ŠKUC) organized various sections in fine arts, music, film, and video, etc. It also established a *homosexual* section under *social sections*, followed by peace and feminist sections (Lešnik, 2006). ŠKUC collaborated with another student-led associations, like the *Forum* in *Theory and Practice of Clubbing.* These collaborations created opportunities to engage in meaningful events and discussions in theater and musical production, among many others. Their actions became a political practice over time and their events consisted of queer themes. Lešnik further expands on the importance of that movement:

> Later that year (13 December 1984), about 30 men founded a "gay section" of ŠKUC, naming it "Magnus: Section for the Culture of Homosexuality." They defined its position as that of a cultural organization with a political program. Its manifesto was published in 1986; it called for the abolition of anti-homosexual laws in all of Yugoslavia, for the constitutional prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, and for treating homosexuality as a "lifestyle" in public education. Lastly, it demanded from the federal government to protest against anti-homosexual oppression abroad, mentioning Romania and Iran (p.87).

As I discuss throughout this thesis and in contrast to the conservative claim that "queerness is not Balkan, and that it is a product of Western countries," the literature illustrates that queerness existed and it was highly visible in Yugoslavia for a long time (Ranković, 2023). During her visit to Ljubljana in 1985 for example, Viennese feminist lesbian activist Gudrun Hauer observed how feminism and sexuality were highly visible and integral to political issues in Yugoslav socialism "even without state repression" (Hauer, 1985, p.25 cited in Ranković, 2023, p.59). Although such an observation may not align with the legal control of homosexual activities in the former

Yugoslavia, Hauer's notes that the existence of queer lives are critical as it debunks the myth that queerness is a Western product that does not belong to the Balkans. The aforementioned literature elaborated on the critical existence of queer activism in the former Yugoslavia.

After the three–year war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH); Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia finally signed the Dayton Peace Accords (DPA) in 1995, thereby ending one of Europe's most violent conflicts (Yavuz, 2023). Although the DPA provided a significant opportunity for communities to construct a new state based on the rule of law, freedom, democracy, and human rights, it failed to create a united civic identity and a well-functioning, democratic state that can protect human rights (Swimelar, 2016). On the one hand, the new generation, aged between 20 and 30, in post-peace accord BiH faces unemployment, social and systemic exclusion, lack of educational opportunities, and poor economic and political conditions. On the other hand, the new generation are asked to build peace and coexist together as Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. Within this unpredictable and strenuous context, queer people specifically feel more so disenfranchised from society, as they face discrimination, violent attacks, and exclusion on top of the aforementioned hardships (Kajevska, 2016; Selmić, 2016; Swimelar, 2017, 2018, 2019; Sarajevo Open Centre, 2019).

Queer people are discriminated against because of their non-heterosexual sexual identities; specifically they feel disenfranchised from society and face discrimination, violent attacks, and exclusion (Kajevska, 2016; Sarajevo Open Centre, 2019; Selmić, 2016; Swimelar, 2017; Swimelar, 2018; Swimelar, 2019). As my data will suggest, direct and indirect violence, as well as discriminatory policies and practices, have led to a resurgence of conflict and violence against BiH's queer people. Such an unjust environment is exacerbated by both direct and structural violence, along with discriminatory practices, policies, and ideologies.

## Purpose

This thesis research investigates queer people's perceptions and experiences of peacebuilding in BiH and the political queer presence after the 1995 DPA. It also explores queer Bosniaks/Serbs/Croat activism strategies that they use as part of a collective movement in BiH that improves community members' conditions and helps them to cope with violence levelled against queer people. Since this research focuses on queer Bosniaks/Serbs/Croats perceptions and experiences, I use an intersectional lens (ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and class) to understand what the local people relate to in their own stories. To do so, I use a variety of sources and social science literature including Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS), gender and queer studies, ethnic conflict, and intersectionality scholarship. In this study, I use "queer" as an open and inclusive term to refer to a group that is marginalized because of their sexual identities.

## Guiding Questions and Objectives

The main objective of this research is to explore how LGBTQIA+ Bosniaks/Serbs/Croats live in post-peace accord BiH while they work on peace activism to be more visible in public and political contexts. It aims to bring an interdisciplinary perspective together through understanding the BiH conflict with a queer lens. Specifically, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

(1) What is it like to coexist as an LGBTQ+ and a Bosniak/Serb/Croat in BiH?

(2) What impact do ethnic conflict narratives have on the experience of the queer community in BiH?

(3) Are there any possibilities for queer and ethnic identities to coexist together?

(4) What is it like to do peace activism and cope with homophobia in a country where queer communities face a heightened risk of homophobia?

(5) What conditions (political, cultural, social, economic, etc.) are required to strengthen peace in BiH?

**Significance of the Study**

Although some recent PACS studies as well as scholars who are from other disciplines (Rahman, 2016; Weber, 2016; 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2017) address the need for queer issues and people on the margins of society to be included in the mainstream PACS discourse, queer people and their sexuality within post-peace-accord societies are still significantly under-researched. By stating "under-researched" I do not mean to undermine the critical scholarship that comes from the Balkans and globally. I am thankful for many scholars who are actively working to create the necessary space in academia including Adelita Selmić, Bojan Bilić, Jelena Vidić, Safia Swimelar, Sanja Kajinić, Aleksa Milanović, Ivor Sokolić, and many others. Hence, this research aims to bring PACS scholarship into conflict transformation by using a queer lens. There are a very limited number of research projects on "marginalized" communities in post-accord societies, specifically in BiH.

This research is significant because it extends the historic and existing queer narratives in BiH by amplifying the voices of local queer community members and queer non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Its significance lies in filling a critical gap in the scholarly literature, as there is limited exploration of the experiences and voices of LGBTQIA+ individuals in post-peace-accord Bosnia. By amplifying queer voices through this research project, it is hopeful that other queer people, and those in allyship with LGBTQIA+ people, can feel inspired and informed by the study participants both in BiH and elsewhere.

The research focus on post-accord societies tends to be on the same types of mainstream actors, groups, and organizations connected to the ethnonationalist and peacebuilding discourse. The analysis or understanding of post/frozen conflict, peace processes, and their transformation must be seen through the eyes of the marginalized such as youth, women, queer and disabled people, refugees, and ex-combatants as part of a positive peace or social justice narrative (Ashe, 2019; Aughey, 2005; see Özkaleli & Yilmaz). The perspectives of those on the social periphery bring a clearer understanding of the root causes of conflict. This research specifically uses a humanizing lens in understanding the Bosnian conflict by centering marginalized perspectives that humanizes the conflict and includes queer individuals' diverse experiences.

**Caveats**

This research is not an attempt to find the solution to the issues BiH people face who have been going through for almost 30 years nor does it aim to give a voice to the participants. My research, rather, provides space for the LGBTQIA+ Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats to share the stories that I borrow from them in a meaningful way. These are not my stories or narratives and I do not claim a position in which I act as an expert of their lived experience. I share their stories with the readers to make sense of the ongoing struggles, specifically for the queer community in the country.

This research does not idealize the ongoing conflict, nor does it deny that there is ongoing conflict in BiH whether it is direct or structural, whether it is frozen or not. Through the stories and narratives of BiH people, this research seeks to critically understand the conflict and how ordinary LGBTQIA+ Queer Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs cope with violence leveled against them

and how the people work through various violent forces to make meaning of their relationships and paths to reconciliation.

BiH has been used as a peacebuilding laboratory for many researchers, scholars, and practitioners who visit the country, generate data, and never go back. Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2012; 2017) discusses how research does little in achieving social emancipation. This has been one of the key critiques made by my research participants during my fieldwork. I was told to be careful during my field trip by people in my Winnipeg surroundings who never had any experience of living in BiH. Every time I received such reminders, I could not help but remember Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*. Although Said's work primarily addresses the Middle East and Asia, his concept of orientalism was used to apply to other regions such as BiH. Scholars and practitioners have examined how Orientalist approaches and stereotypes influenced Western perceptions during the BiH war (Todorova, 2009). In addition, and based on my interactions with the locals, it becomes apparent that Western researchers often engage in a romanticized portrayal of BiH. This tendency has faced substantial critique from the locals who express dissatisfaction with the limited sustainability of collaborations. There is less sustainable collaboration if any at all between internal and external researchers. Instead of fostering enduring relationships, Western researchers are frequently perceived as transient, collecting data, and departing, leaving a sense of disappointment among the locals, which also impacts future external researchers as the previous researchers leave behind a poor legacy.

**Thesis Outline**

The thesis consists of nine chapters. Most themes and sub-themes discussed in these chapters offer a coherent picture of the research participants experiences and perceptions and they intersect with each other. On the one hand, it provides integrity to understanding BiH's

post-peace accord Bosnia from the perspective of queer people, and on the other hand, through the probing questions posed to the research collaborators. I attempted to ground the narratives, my data, into theory which is discussed in Chapter nine. To this end, this thesis has the following structure.

Chapter one includes the introduction which provides the significance of the study, guiding questions, and the objectives of the study. In the second chapter, I provide the historical, political, and cultural context of the war and queer history as well as the current queer presence in BiH. While this chapter offers a brief historical overview of the war, it focuses on the events and policies that have changed the progress of queer visibility and activism in BiH. That said, it also introduces the origins of queer civil society movements within the country.

Chapter three offers a theoretical literature review that serves as a foundational framework for the study, particularly, for the empirical chapters five through eight. The literature review section consists of six main groups of literature. The first investigates liberal peacebuilding in the context of peacebuilding and how funding from international donors and actors shape Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) agenda, which brings about conflict and prevents locals from creating a unique local agenda. Everyday peace literature focuses on the importance of the disruption of peace. While the PACS literature focuses on other actors such as politicians, external interveners, and government bodies, everyday peace investigates different forms of interactions between so-called ordinary people in peacemaking. While the violence and basic human needs literature covers a broad spectrum of topics and issues and examines how violence can reinforce inequality and undermine the human rights of individuals in the context of LGBTQIA+ individuals, structural violence pays close attention to the struggles of the LGBTQIA+ community with various forms of indirect violence. Finally, political homophobia

and societal security dilemmas examine how the persecution of LGBTQIA+ individuals intersect with broader security concerns in society.

Chapter four discusses the qualitative methodology used in this study, but it also provides an extensive exploration of grounded theory. This also includes the sampling technique and the description of the research participants. Further, it discusses the caveats, the research instrument, the researcher's positionality, research validity, and project dissemination. Due to the dynamics of the research site and the issue this study explores, I paid close attention to anonymity and confidentiality measures to ensure that the participants' identities and information are rigorously protected.

Chapter five presents' challenges to everyday coexistence practices, and it specifically analyzes the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), the apartheid school system, and intergenerational trauma and how these prevent communities from moving forward toward reconciliation. Through the participants narratives, experiences, and stories, this chapter further elaborates on the impacts of the political apparatuses on queer people's everyday coexistence. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of distrust, and prejudice within the queer and main ethnic groups living in BiH and how such discrimination impacts queer socialization.

In Chapter six, the psychological effects of the war and post-peace accord atmosphere on queer individuals are investigated. By examining everyday discrimination, poverty, exclusion, and constant war memories which create traumas, this chapter also examines how structural violence exacerbates the current frozen conflict in the country that is not talked about. This chapter further elaborates on the perceptions of queer people regarding trauma and how it has lasting impacts on their mental, emotional, and physical well-being but also how these traumas

lead to depression, substance abuse, and suicide among many others within the queer community.

Chapter seven explores the experiences and challenges of queer people in the context of activism in BiH. By examining the significance of space, institutions, and its agents, this chapter further highlights the complex nature of activism while examining the experiences of queer activism, the Pride Parade, and violence against queer people. Chapter seven also focuses on the lack of police support and the failure of state institutions in protecting queer activists.

In Chapter eight, the current and possible reconciliation and coexistence debates, practices, and policies as well as the challenges to reconciliation are discussed. It further elaborates on the importance of a robust effort to address the underlying issues of the brain-drain that pushes hundreds of youths and adults to leave their hometowns permanently every year.

Chapter nine highlights the summary of the key research findings about this study's goals and its research questions. It further discusses the key grounded theoretical concept of Good Tune Theory and the limitations of the study and directions for future research and concludes with the implications for future research and practice and the limitations and directions for future research.

**Conclusion**

The introduction chapter presents a brief overview of the study, outlines its preliminary background, and details both the research objectives and the study's focus. The significance of this research and the thesis structure are also outlined. In the following chapter, I discuss the contextual background of BiH in the contexts of war and post-war situations for ordinary people, specifically LGBTQIA+ individuals living in/from BiH.

## Chapter Two: Contextual Background of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the History of Queer/LGBTQIA+ Activism

### Introduction

Continuing from my earlier historical overview, to understand the queer perspective of BiH today, it is critical to turn our attention to Yugoslavia and the horrific war that took place in today's BiH between 1992 and 1995.

For several reasons, Mostar was hailed as the jewel of Yugoslavia. The city of Mostar is situated on both sides of the Neretva River, whose emerald-green waters flow through Herzegovina, a region in southern Bosnia. This gives Mostar a breathtakingly magnificent natural setting. The Dinaric mountains and hundreds of miles of beautiful Adriatic coastline are both visible as one travels from Sarajevo to Mostar, making the route especially picturesque. (Bose, 2007).

The second reason is that Mostar has long been known for its old Turkish houses and the Old Bridge (*Stari Most*), also known as the Mostar bridge, and the remarkable technological achievement of bridge building under the Ottoman Empire (UNESCO, 2005). The restored Old Bridge and the old city of Mostar, as well as the city's many cultural influences, serve as emblems of reconciliation, tolerance, and the coexistence of many cultural, racial, and religious groups. (UNESCO, 2005). The influence of these many cultures shaped the region of the Western Balkans and unified into a country called Yugoslavia (Bose, 2007). From around 1463 to 1878, Bosnia was an Ottoman Turkish "possession." Mostar's *stari most*, or, the Old Bridge, has been a defining feature of the city since 1566 (Bose, 2007). However, modern Mostar was largely built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Austro-Hungarian rulers who ruled Bosnia from 1878 until 1918, when the first Yugoslav state was established out of the ruins of

the Ottoman and Habsburg empires based on the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination (Bose, 2007).

**Bosnian War**

Following the passing of President Josip Broz Tito, the former president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the power dynamics had shifted and underwent significant change, from transitioning to a collective presidency where leadership positions were appointed by the assemblies of Yugoslavia's six republics and two autonomous regions (Kalyvas & Sambanis, 2005). Toward the end of Yugoslavia's existing as a nation, desires for independence grew out of multiple reasons, particularly gaining prominence following the rise of Slobodan Milošević to power in Serbia that increased ethnic tensions and divisiveness, and ethno-religious nationalism under the so-called Greater Serbia Project (Mujanović, 2018; Ramet, 2006; Walasek, 2020).

When the war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, Slovenia and Croatia had already declared their independence. As a result of Croatia being home to a large Serb minority, the newly independent country became the target of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian paramilitary units for over a year (Walasek, 2020). The war intensified and the historic structures were the target as Walasek (2020) sees it as part of "the destruction of identity":

> Scores of historic structures were attached during the Croatian conflict, but the most notorious episode of intentional cultural heritage destruction was the JNA bombardment of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Dubrovnik […] The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was to prove even more devastating. It was a conflict that galvanised intense public polemic and had a far-reaching and long-lasting impact that continues to influence policymakers today. One of the defining (and most reported) features of the war was the extensive intentional destruction of cultural and religious property (particularly its Ottoman and Islamic heritage), both as symbols of ethno-religious affiliation and of a historically diverse Bosnian identity. It was the greatest destruction of cultural heritage in Europe since the Second World War[...] (p. 225).

Serbian repressive policies and anger escalated when Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence from Yugoslavia in March 1992 which qualified Bosnia to become a member state of the U.N. (Walasek, 2020).

To get elected, nationalists like Milosevic mobilized the Serb constituency under a strong political message "Save the Serb Nation." Milosevic's rhetoric mobilized thousands of Serbs by and fueled additional ethnonational conflicts among the different ethnicities. For example, in 1998, Milosevic's emphasis in his political agenda was "retaking of Kosovo" where the Albanians threatened thousands of Serbs, and they "demanded the resignation of moderate incumbents and their replacement with Serb nationalists" (Oberschall, 2007, p. 102). These kinds of plans are always on an oppressors' agenda, especially in time of war and conflict.

During that time, the media's agenda-setting role was used extensively in Yugoslavia. For example, the Serb media served up frequent news of sexual assault and rape by Albanians against Serbs in Kosovo, and the media created many manipulative stories about the supposed Muslim domination over its ethnic rivals; however, Serb social scientists declared it otherwise. According to Serbian social scientists, rape incidences/cases in Kosovo were less frequent in Serbia (Popovic at al., 1990, cited in Oberschall, 2007, p. 102). However, due to the fear of group extinction as well as the fear of assimilation like what is experienced in many other ethnopolitical conflicts, people believed in what they received from the state-controlled media.

After Milosevic won the 1990 Serbian election, his regime gained the power of many institutions, including the control of the Serb mass media. The journalists who did not make enough propaganda for the Milosevic election campaign and who lacked "support" and "patriotism" were either put on "compulsory leave" or marginalized (Thompson, 1994, pp. 56-95). It is also important to remember that many scholars and practitioners have studied the effect

of media in different regime types and how the media can be used as an ideological tool in various regime types (Althaus, 2003; Tınç, 2015; Whitten-Woodring, 2009; Yavuz, 2022). Nationalists like Milosevic knew the importance of controlling the mass media and when he came to power, his regime-controlled ninety percent of the Serbian mass media. During this time, the public received ninety percent of their information and news about public affairs through the Milosevic regime's controlled media (Kurspahić, 2003, pp. 41-43).

**Srebrenica Massacre**

The Srebrenica massacre was the Bosnian war's largest massacre that took place in Srebrenica in July 1995 (Hoare, 2014). The Serbs systematically committed the mass killing of over eight thousand Bosniaks- predominantly targeting men and boys. However, as reported by many sources, significant numbers of Bosniak women were also the victims of the atrocities committed in Srebrenica (Honig and both, 1997; Nuhanović, 2007; Rohde, 1997 as cited in Hoare, 2014).

Multiple mass killings targeting civilians surpassed Srebrenica's death toll during the war. The first instance of Milesovic's intent was the initial Serb genocidal assault across Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, causing the death of more Bosniak lives in Podrinje that year than in 1995 and the second was during the prolonged siege of Sarajevo (Hoare, 2008, 2014). After significant defeats on the battlefield and NATO air-strikes in the summer and fall of 1995, the conflict was formally ended by the DPA that was signed by the Bosniak, Croatian, and Serbian leaders in Paris in 1995 (Chandler, 2001; Hoare, 2014). As part of the accord, the Republika Srpska was recognized almost as a fully autonomous entity within the Bosnia and Herzegovina state (Hoare, 2014).

After the violent Yugoslav war, peace negotiations between the rival parties were facilitated by the United States (U.S.) and concluded on November 21$^{st}$ and December 14$^{th}$,

1995, with the DPA. The Bosnian war was officially ended with the signing of one of the most critical peace agreements of the century. The signatories of the agreement were Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tudjman instead of leaders representing Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats along with Alija Izetbegovic of BiH (Bose, 2007). The agreement was signed in France; however, it is formally known as the DPA. While the agreement was initially considered one of the most ambitiously written agreements of its time, it is now regarded by the local people as the most unfavourable agreement merely marking the ending of the war. The perspectives of the locals on the DPA are elaborated on with details in Chapter five.

Today, the post—peace accord political structure of the former Yugoslavia is intricate, characterized by a complex combination of international supervision, special bilateral agreements, and peace accords. While the international community's peace architecture in the region has put their efforts into emphasizing the region's construction as well as its political and economic modernization, in the last 20 years, the country had many challenges politically and financially, which are further explained in the next few chapters (Mujanović, 2018). The elites of the Western Balkans are primarily motivated to support the region's stabilization and democracy by the possibility of being included into the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the major political and economic organisations on the continent, as most of the former Eastern Bloc republics have done (Mujanović, 2018). That was the guiding principle of how the international community approached the area. In the literature on political science and policymaking, it is referred to as *conditionality*: Political and economic support from the EU and the U.S. is dependent on the local authorities achieving a set of specified goals (e.g., free, and fair elections, the privatization of formerly socially owned enterprises, and peace). Elites gain more economic success and political credibility in exchange for maintaining and

reinforcing existing power structures and so do their constituents by voting for them (Mujanović, 2018).

This approach has played out rather differently in reality. The EU and U.S. have been provided hush money to a group of war profiteers and warlords for the past twenty years that are mostly unreformed and unrepentant (Mujanović, 2018). Local leaders regularly choose to create political crises to compel repeated pledges from the international actors when pressured to implement reform ideas rather than just embrace them. So, while simultaneously portraying their regimes as necessary for peace, local elites have kept both the local populace and the international world in a constant fear of escalating violence (Mujanović, 2018). Mujanović (2018) argues that the connection between Western powers and local elites is based on a "protection racket" rather than conditionality by adding that,

> The exchange of nominal stability for condition-free financial and political benefits, in a situation where the local elite rather than the international community, is the dominant party. As a result, while Slovenia and Croatia have successfully joined both the EU and NATO, and Albania and Montenegro have entered the fold of the latter, the dominant factors in the politics of each of these countries remain decidedly local, namely, the legacies of generations of authoritarian, patrimonial, and clientelistic regimes, and the wars of plunder that have traditionally accompanied moments of regime collapse and reconfiguration in the Balkans. That Zagreb's political establishment, for instance, appears primarily concerned with events in Belgrade and Mostar (i.e., Serbia and BiH) is no aberration but a historical pattern (p. 48).

BiH's political history is complex, and it continues to evolve over time. Political tensions, ethnic divisions, and economic issues appear to persist, eventually impacting ordinary people in BiH, which are discussed over the following chapters.

**History of the LBTQIA+ Community in Bosnia**

Religion serves to reinforce national and cultural identities in the Balkans, especially in the Western Balkans, drawing on masculinity and gender/ethnic purity rather than tolerance and diversity (Igrutinovic et al., 2015). Queer rights are perceived as a threat to the national and cultural identities in the region and right-wing nationalists argue that the recognition of sexual diversity is not aligned with the identity of their nation (Igrutinovic et al., 2015). Civil rights activists have been trying to change this perception and they have been trying to organize gay Pride parades since 2001. When the first parade was held in Serbia in 2001, many marchers clashed with the ultranationalist groups and football hooligans, who violently attacked the peaceful Pride parade and many marchers were injured as a result (Igrutinovic et al., 2015). In 2012, a gay grassroots activist was assaulted in Tetovo, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia) as he was walking home around 9:00 p.m. In 2013, three Montenegrins who worked to promote tolerance and equality were attacked and beaten up by a group of football fans (Hopkins, 2013). These are some examples of how violence against the queer community progressively escalated in the Balkans.

However, there seems to be a contradiction here because the Western Balkans countries including Albania, BiH, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia are considered to be some of the most homophobic societies in Europe (ILGA, 2020). These countries have recently passed legislation to raise the punishment allotted to individuals for bias-motivated crime (Godzisz, 2019). Why do Western Balkan countries like the Bosnian government pass laws protecting queer people despite their wretched record of homophobia and discrimination levelled against queer people? The simple answer is the region's preparations to join the EU entails that all the new progressive legislation in these Balkan countries is part of the

region's democratization policies that are needed in to join the EU I explore more of this nexus in the thesis since it is critical for understanding the contradiction between passing legislation and simply not enforcing it.

The Federation of BiH consists of two entities, namely the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska (RS). There is also a self-governing administrative unit called the Brčko District in north-eastern BiH. Homosexuality was decriminalized in BiH in October 1991 (Equality Rights Association, 2016). Same-sex sexual activity was legalized in the Federation of BiH in 1996, and in the RS in 1998, and finally in the Brčko District in 2003. The law specifically includes one's sexual orientation and gender identity, and proper legal terminology is used in the local language (*sekseualna orijentacija, rodni identitet*) (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2016). BiH was the first country in Southeastern Europe to provide intersex people protection against discrimination. The country's Anti-discrimination Law also offers complete protection for all queer people from discrimination. There are also significant improvements introduced by the newly adopted amendments to the Anti-discrimination Law such as:

- Inclusion of age and disability on which grounds discrimination is also, from now on, explicitly prohibited (Article 2),
- Prohibition of discrimination based on the relation with a protected group/ground (Article 2),
- Improved definition of harassment and sexual harassment (Article 4),
- Clear definition of aggravated forms of discrimination (Article 4),
- Improved procedural aspects, related to urgent procedures (Article 11), specific actions for protection of discrimination (Article 12), judiciary jurisdictions and procedure deadlines (Article 13), judicial security measures (Article 14), burden of proof (Article 15), third party participation (Article 16), and collective lawsuits (Article 17)

(Sarajevo Open Centre, 2016)

Although same-sex marriage or common partners are not legalized, advocate groups are constantly bringing the issue before the BiH government with the assistance of international organizations.

Despite all these improvements, queer individuals continue to experience discrimination, repression, bullying, hate crimes, and physical attacks daily in BiH (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2019; Selmić, 2016; Swimelar, 2017; Swimelar, 2019). These experiences lead to anxiety, depression, lack of belonging and self-esteem, posttraumatic stress, exclusion, substance abuse, and suicide among others that put queer people at risk in conflict environments (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Pachankis et al., 2015). Historically, oppression also refers to prominent actors, institutions, and popular culture that systematically discriminate against queer people and disenfranchise them through social media, TV, the internet, folklore, movies, advertising, and commercials while reinforcing stereotypes (Byrne & Senehi, 2012). The attackers often perceive the target person, group, or community as a threat to their existence, identity, and so-called values and customs (Staub, 1992 cited in Byrne & Senehi, 2012, p. 101). Hate crimes go against the dignity and human rights of people, communities, and groups. Therefore, it is vital to explore how certain groups, institutions, actors, and heteronormative values reinforce violence against BiH's queer community.

The queer movement's progress in BiH has been slow but consistent. The 2000s are especially important for queer history, because significant changes, including the passing of important legislation were made during this time. However, the community continues to face a heightened risk of discrimination. For example, Ayoub et al. (2021) untangled the stories of queer individuals during the 2019 Pride parade, the first parade in BiH, as queer activists shared their challenges in conservative BiH. "…This march gives us strength and faith that it will start

the process of breaking prejudice against us… We are here, we exist, and we are not a threat to anyone. We are a part of society, and we have the right to be equal citizens" (Ayoub et al., 2021, p. 474). The study indicates that the Pride parade had a significant impact on people's perceptions before and after the event. In fact, there was a 10 percent decline in strong opposition after the event, while those strongly supporting it grew by about 9 percent (Ayoub et al., 2021). Support has been growing slowly and consistently as the queer movement assists the LGBTQIA+ community in raising awareness of its existence and its visibility in the society.

Challenging traditional homophobic views through activism, like the Pride parade, was significant because traditional views in post-peace accord societies tend to exclude new voices. Marginalized voices assist in restructuring the system in which the community is forced to live as a result of oppressive policies that silence the visibility of the queer community as the system reinforces exclusion and acts of direct and structural violence against marginalized groups (Mizzi & Byrne, 2015). For this reason, it is essential to understand that an identity is dynamic and fluid, constantly changing, especially during times of war and conflict.

People who experience a war/conflict face extreme circumstances where survival becomes their primary focus. Their situations may push them to resort to drastic measures and adjust their sense of self to navigate through a conflict. Marginalized groups like queer people may find alternative ways to redefine themselves to stay alive, so they may adopt roles and mask behaviours that may be different than what was their prior lives before violent conflict. How spaces, capacities, and processes encourage people to create dialogues with other community members and groups rather than oppose them, especially when people are filled with fears and uncertainties (Lederach, 2003). This is an important critique of peacebuilding processes because neither the actors nor their peace agenda reflect the real situations faced by the communities due

to the fact that the peacebuilding agenda rarely addresses issues of gender and sexual inequalities (Ashe, 2019).

Queer events like the 2008 attack on the Queer Sarajevo Festival (QSF), the 2016 attack on queer-friendly cafes, and many others are constantly targeted by other ethnic, religious, and cultural groups in BiH, and the perpetrators are typically released right after interrogation by the police (Amnesty International, 2008). As a result of these violent attacks and the ongoing political turmoil and governmental changes, social actions and activism strategies in BiH have changed, moving from "large-scale visible events, to smaller events, while at the same time frame, little [has changed] in the climate of Sarajevo toward queer activism" (Zarenkiewicz, 2016, p.4). Despite the daily challenges faced by BiH's queer people, their strategies challenge the political system wherein oppression against queer people is a common practice.

Since the DPA, queer activism in BiH emerged and became more visible within its post-peace accord context (Swimelar, 2017; Selmić, 2016). While the DPA could have helped BiH's society transform and reconcile, it instead froze the conflict, and the international actors played a role in this. Consequently, local actors had almost no opportunity to speak about BiH's future. To understand the current situation for BiH's LGBT+ community, I now turn to two examples of queer activism in post-peace accord BiH as the queer community visibilizes and contests spaces to tackle direct and structural violence.

**The Queer Sarajevo Festival (QSF)**

When Association Q organized the Queer Sarajevo Festival (QSF) in 2008, the purpose of the festival was to have a four-day arts festival dedicated to the BiH LGBTQIA+ community at a gallery in the center of Sarajevo. The goal was to gather people to share stories of queer people, their experiences with love, discrimination, freedom, democratic and social justice

challenges. The Queer Sarajevo Festival (QSF) is an important example to help us understand how ethnonationalism and homophobia can be constraints to progress on queer rights. In many ways, the QSF was the turning point for the development of queer activism in BiH. Although the festival received support from the liberal press and CSOs, there were provocative campaigns and a backlash against the event's organizers run by other media outlets, politicians, and religious communities and leaders (Zarenkiewicz, 2016). As a result of an organized campaign, the QSF was placed at the center of the right-wing and religious groups' agenda.

Around 300 people gathered for this first major queer event; however, activists and participants were violently attacked and injured by nationalists, Wahhabi Muslims, and even football fanatics (Swimelar, 2019). Instead of issuing an apology and condemning the attack, political leaders and government officials blamed the queer community for organizing an event to "provoke" Bosnian society. Even the leader of the main Bosniak political party, Bakir Izetbegovic, and the Bosniak representative of the Presidency blamed the queer community, saying that "[t]his is not something to popularize or show as harmless. This is something that can spread if you allow it to. This should be kept private ('within four walls')… we have to protect our traditional values" (as cited in Swimelar, 2017, p. 922). The discussion around the QSF and queer identity specifically reminds us how an ethno-national identity and political homophobia feed off each other and trigger ethno-nationalist sentiment and behaviour for politicians and the alt right to gain political legitimacy and support. For example, Svetlana Durkociv, the founder of Organization Q, was targeted by the conservative media, and anti-gay opponents told Durkociv and another organizer from BiH to "go back to Serbia" (Swimelar, 2016, p. 12).

Svetlana Durkociv explains how political homophobia is embedded in the scapegoating of an "other": "[a]nything that is LGBT is not something that is theirs—it belongs to their

neighbour nation. In Croatia, they [nationalists] say it [homosexuality] came from Serbia, in Bosnia, they point the finger to another group. 'This thing can't possibly be part of us' [they would say]" (as cited in Swimelar, 2016, p. 12). Similarly, other countries, such as Russia an ally of Serbia, launched its political homophobia and even passed anti-gay legislation in 2013 in which the government described homosexuality as corrupting the youth. Not only were queer people portrayed negatively, but even NGOs that received funding from foreign sources were labelled as "foreign agents" (Sleptcov, 2017).

**Premier LGBTQ+ Pride Parade in Sarajevo**

After the violent attack at the QSF in 2008, the first Pride parade in BiH was held in 2019, with an estimated 2,000–3,000 marchers in the capital city of Sarajevo (CBC, 2019). While there was backlash by conservative groups claiming that the Pride parade went against "traditional family values," the pride route that passed through the heart of the city was protected by 1,000 police officers (Ayoub et al., 2021; Independent, 2019). The organizers used the motto "*Ima izać!/има изаћ*!" translated as "We want to come out!" This slogan played on the words used when "you yell to the driver to get off [the bus]" (Ayoub et al., 2021, p. 474). The BiH organizers and marchers, through the Pride parade, created a unique, local, and sustainable Pride movement. They worked to fight BiH people's perceptions of "foreignness by ensuring that the performance" focused on Bosnians and requested that international allies not be in the front row (Ayoub et al., 2021, p. 474). This was a critical action taken by the local queer community, as the activism, obstacles, and challenges queer people face in divided societies are different from those experienced in non-divided societies based on the community's needs.

Allyship can be critical for local queer communities, requesting that international actors not be on the front line also challenges the international actors'/organizations' involvement in

local movements (Ayoub et al., 2021) because their engagement could have prevented the queer community in BiH from creating a local, unique, and sustained queerness through the voices and initiatives of BiH citizens.

**Current Struggles for LGBTQIA+ People**

While the queer community in BiH continues to struggle, they resist to gain the visibility that they deserve. The current situation is somewhat inconsistent, yet progressive steps are being taken by the community and the current BiH government is being pushed to acknowledge the pain, persistence, and rights of the queer community.

In 2015, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted research on LGBTI issues in six countries with 6,426 people in the Western Balkans taking part (National Democratic Institute, 2015). The research result's critical to understanding the challenges faced by LGBT+ people living in BiH. According to the study, LGBT+ people see themselves as the most discriminated minority group (National Democratic Institute, 2015). The study also suggests that 51 percent of BiH participants were expecting to be discriminated against due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2015). The BiH participants report that 42 percent of the respondents experienced psychological abuse and verbal harassment by people on the streets. This number is much higher in BiH compared to other Western Balkan countries. For example, the number is 15 percent in Albania, 12 percent in Kosovo, and 26 percent in Serbia. LGBT+ people also report that they mostly experienced physical violence from people on the streets (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2015). The study also shows that the attitude of the general population toward the LGBT+ people in Western Balkans is acutely negative, including the opinion of 58 percent that LGBT+ people are sick. Forty-eight percent of participants report that they did not feel safe in their communities, thus, 36 percent planned to leave the country.

In 2015, for the first time in Bosnian history, members of parliaments gathered to discuss LGBT issues as part of a three-day seminar. The seminar was supported by the Norwegian Embassy to inform the representatives about the problems and needs of BiH's LGBT people and it was a great step for Bosnia (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2015). While more needs to be done, the participation of members of parliament sends an important message that a more intensive approach to LGBTQIA+ rights necessary. However, it is critical that the government pays attention throughout the country, including within its political, legal, security, and educational apparatuses like the police, criminal justice system, and education sector. Otherwise, one might perceive queer participation as "pinkwashing," especially since the EU progress reports for 2013 and 2014 requested to see the stronger involvement of BiH institutions in its own political apparatuses to make sure that its policies serve for all citizens living in BiH. (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2015).

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, BiH's queer people experienced different challenges in terms of visibility. When I interviewed my research participants, they pointed out their challenges regarding their concerns around the Pride parade, their daily interaction with one another, and the homophobia directed against them during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2019 first gay Pride parade in BiH was a critical step for the community that has experienced all sorts of discrimination and their visibility, despite challenges, was ensured by their determination to succeed. However, the pandemic impacted the consistency of the Pride parade that the queer community meant to continue with every year. The 2020 Sarajevo Pride parade that had *Nije život četiri zida* (No life within four walls) was postponed due to COVID-19. The second parade with the motto of resistance from the margin (*Otpor sa margine*) took place mostly virtually and with a march organized in cars.

In 2021, the Sarajevo Open Centre (SOC) conducted research on the history of queer life in BiH. This was a crucial moment for the country as there was a lack of historical awareness about the LGBTQIA+ community and a great way of challenging the narrative that "LGBT+ is not Bosnian," which makes a so-called argument that it is a foreign plan (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2021). The third Pride parade held in Sarajevo was well-planned, involving various community organizations that was held on June 25, 2022. My observation of the parade will be discussed further in chapter four.

In 2023, the SOC conducted a research study titled *Acceptance from a Distance* to understand the attitudes and opinions of the general population toward LGBT people in BiH. Through a selected representative sample of 1,023 respondents aged 18 to 65, the study found increased support for LGBT people and their human rights (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2023). Although the positive trend is promising, there still needs to be more work done in the country.

The study suggests that 45.6 percent of respondents personally knew someone from the LGBT community. While 41.8 percent believed that LGBT people were not sick and did not need treatment, 35.3 percent thought that LGBTQ people were sick. The acceptance rate decreased within families as 43 percent believed that it was unacceptable for their child to be an LGBT person and 34 percent considered it unacceptable to have an LGBT family member (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2023). Most people (65.1 percent of the sample) who participated in the study would not support the organization of a Pride march in Bosnia (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2023).

Considering that BiH as a heteropatriarchal society, there are challenges for queer people to enjoy the same rights and privileges of all citizens. As the literature suggests, heteronormative nationalism has been perceived as the "dominant heteronormative projections of national values"

(Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Gopinath 2006; Mizzi 2008 cited in Mizzi, 2010, p. 144). That said, to be regarded as a "legitimate citizen who enjoys full rights and privileges," queer people are expected to conform to the heteronormative notion of "family" (Mizzi, 2010, p.144).

Consequently, it is worth mentioning that queer people's existence was very much alive during Yugoslavia. However, the current scholarship portrays queer people in the context of today's society as "Europe's unruly homophobic Other" (Bilić et al., 2022, p. 6) without analyzing the queer life that existed in Yugoslavia. As Ranković succinctly puts it, the issue of *retraditionalization* or *repatriarchialization* is a key challenge in today's Balkan countries, like BiH. Both of these concepts also relate to the process by which religious institutions have "implemented a number of conservative spirit actions" in environments once considered secularized (Galić, 2019, p. 214cited in Ranković, 2023, p. 71). Today's BiH rather employs conservative practices from the past to limit the visibility of queer people despite their increasing resistance in the society that is discussed throughout the thesis.

**Conclusion**

The progress that the queer community makes is consistent despite many existing obstacles. Considering that BiH is trying to recover from the war, many priorities are given to ethnic tensions or ethnic divisions. Yet there is little opportunity for the queer community to be part of the decision-making process. Since there is not much hope that the BiH government will include queer issues as part of its agenda, the LGBTQIA+ community takes the issue into its own hands.

Many NGOs and CSOs are working collaboratively to make the visibility of LGBTQIA+ individuals more apparent. Since the first BiH Pride parade in 2019, the community has been more visible, and their issues are pushing the government's agenda to be more inclusive. Consequently, there has been a positive trend in people's attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+

community. As a result of the community's pressure, the members of parliament came together in 2015 to discuss queer issues during a three-day seminar, which is significant for BiH (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2015). In 2022, SOC organized training sessions to educate politicians, experts, and professionals across various fields. Overall, 17 prosecutors, judges, and lawyers, six politicians, 32 experts from public institutions (such as mental health centers and social welfare centers), and 19 officials underwent critical training on LGBTQIA+ and women related issues which is noteworthy for BiH's politicians to have completed the training (Sarajevo Open Centre, 2022).

The CSOs are actively advocating for the government's recognition of same-sex partnerships. Although this goal currently might seem to be so far away, there is a potential pathway, especially considering the willingness of the government to meet the requirement for EU membership accreditation. While the EU membership doesn't necessarily mandate same-sex partnerships as a requirement for accession, it desires for a candidate country to respect human rights and create an atmosphere with discrimination free for all genders with different sexualities (European Commission, 1993). Thus, it is more likely to be a factor for the BiH government to consider since there is a promising yet slow and challenging consistency there. One should also acknowledge the fact that while the candidates for the EU membership have to meet many criteria including implementing laws supportive of LGBTQIA+ community, there is less influence by the EU to enforce laws within these countries once they are accepted into the EU which also creates further questions about the role of the EU when it comes to protection of minority groups and human rights overall (Pelz, 2016). Countries like Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland are members of the EU; however, their long record of human rights

violations raise a much-needed discussion about queer inclusion within the EU that needs to happen. Lives are at stake.

The next chapter presents the literature review and a theoretical foundation for the study of LGBTQIA+ activism, everyday peace and violence, and queer visibility as well as the empirical chapters namely Chapters 5-8.

## Chapter Three: Exploring The Pieces: A Literature Review of Civil Society and Queer Visibility

### Introduction

Chapter three identifies theoretical foundations for investigating the role of queer activism in peacebuilding in BiH, the impact of the DPA on local people, and everyday queer people's perspectives of peacebuilding and social justice. To build a theoretical framework, a multidisciplinary approach that is advocated by PACS and other interdisciplinary researchers (Bilić, 2016; Byrne & Senehi, 2010; Mac Ginty, 2021; Matyók, 2011; Richmond, 2010) is applied. While traditionally, PACS research has lacked the integration of queer voices in research, there is promising scholarship emerging to strengthen the literature. The PACS literature has contributed to understanding the causes of social conflicts and practical ways to move groups forward toward reconciliation to build sustainable, peaceful societies. Contrary to International Relations, PACS also has a critical and emancipatory lens to examine how liberal peacebuilding controls the political and peacebuilding agenda, allowing limited space for unique, local, and sustainable peacebuilding.

### Liberal Peacebuilding within the Bosnian Conflict

In the early 1990s, the liberal peace approach was widely accepted by the international community to be used to build peace in conflict environments. The liberal peace focused on the rule of law, democracy, human rights, a vibrant civil society, a capitalist economy, and security reform (Richmond, 2014). In liberal peacebuilding, certain actors that are typically aligned with the Global North's interests are involved in peace intervention, which is "the dominant form of internationally supported peacemaking" (Mac Ginty, 2011, p. 20). This top-down approach offers a limited picture for creating sustainable peace because the liberal peace values are

contrary to peacebuilding itself. The liberal peace paradigm or democratic peace theory often reflects the ideological and practical interests (mostly economic) of leading states, international organizations, and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank in the Global North (Mac Ginty, 2011).

These countries and organizations dictate their own version of peace (liberal peacebuilding). However, it is clear now that this type of peacebuilding model does not work, and it fails communities. Some countries return to armed conflict within a year, and their situation is worse than before, and other countries are either ruled by more authoritarian and repressive governments (Özerdem & Lee, 2016) or they live in divided communities.

The core issue in liberal peacebuilding is that it is a top-down process. Peacebuilding was initially theorized as a bottom-up process that provides a safe space to emancipate all of the communities in a conflict environment, and it is "a local consensus within society led to a positive peace" (Richmond, 2014, p.97). When the concept of peacebuilding evolved, it was linked with important concepts such as development, democratization, human safety, and security, and "in practice, it also had to bring conflicting interests of major states in the United Nations (U.N.) Security Council" (p. 98). One key issue in the structure of this organized "peacebuilding" is that other options or proposals from marginalized communities are not taken seriously. These communities typically find it difficult to gain acceptance since the liberal peace model is supported by powerful international actors, ideas, organizations, and structures (Mac Ginty, 2006). Because the liberal peace process is considered superior and "the only alternative" method, the dominance of this model of peacebuilding encourages us to apply the same template for every conflict environment and context regardless of their unique circumstances, structural factors, or conditions (Rowen, 2016; Mac Ginty, 2006; Richmond, 2014).

Many peace processes have failed because dictated standardized formulas did not work. Understanding the types and dynamics of conflict under consideration and working of the actual peacebuilding and conflict transformation elements such as materials, resources in hand, structural violence, discrimination against marginalized communities, and skills that are needed for true reconciliation and sustainable peacebuilding are vital. The prescribed peacebuilding model, or in other words, liberal peace, has been dictated to many communities by external global actors (Lederach, 2008).

Hence, while one liberal peacebuilding prescription may work in Cyprus or Northern Ireland, it may not work in Turkey, Yemen, or Colombia. Mac Ginty (2006) underlines the core issue of this prescribed liberal peace:

> […] Liberal democratic peace has a sustained record of producing bad peace. Bad peace is better than no peace […] The negative peace of ending organized violence often provides the foundation stone for many other developments that support a broader peace. But the constancy of peace accords that fail to deliver social justice and positive peace is a serious issue that demands an examination of the philosophical and conceptual bases of contemporary peacemaking (pp. 34-35).

Many peace processes have failed because universal standardized formulas did not work. Understanding the types and dynamics of conflict under consideration and working on the actual peacebuilding and conflict transformation elements are vital.

The liberal peacebuilding model/practice has become the dominant form of peacebuilding, yet various concerns are being raised in terms of the implications of its model for local people (Brown, 2016). Within the liberal peacebuilding process, the role of civil society has been considered by many as a critical force for stability in post-accord transitions and "a relatively unproblematic relationship has often been assumed to exist between the emergence of a robust civil society and political democratization, and this has fed into the policies adopted by international agencies and donors in post-conflict countries" (p. 110). While the existence of

civil society has always been perceived in different ways, it has been a focal point in post-accord societies. In the liberal paradigm, civil society is seen as part of a "transition" that can help to transform societies from oppression and authoritarianism to democracy and freedom (Brown, 2016), and it is associated with "the good society" (Edward, 2009).

One of the more recent liberal peacebuilding examples is BiH because it has served as an empirical test case or laboratory for liberal peacebuilding intervention. Since the end of the Cold War, no other conflict milieu has been paid so much attention as BiH, and peacebuilding efforts there have been more intense and sustained (Donais, 2012) and it was once described as the "world capital of interventionism" (as cited in Chandler, 2001, p. 116). After BiH's three-year war, the conflict parties, namely the Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats, formally signed the 1995 DPA in France; however, the final agreement was reached at Wright-Patterson Air Force base near Dayton, Ohio, U.S. to end one of the most violent conflicts in Europe. The accord called for one year of an internationally supervised transition, and this supervision would include elections to be held in BiH and two types of joint institutions to be established among many other expectations (Chandler, 2001).

BiH's political authorities would be elected and be directly accountable to the people and the economic, judicial, and human rights institutions, which would be supervised and monitored for five or six years by the appointment of members of international institutions. Although the DPA was reached between the leaders of Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Croats, and Bosnian Serbs, it was dominated by the Office of the High Representative (OHR) alongside the international community to make sure that the DPA's requirements were followed (Mac Ginty, 2011).

Although the DPA provided a significant opportunity for the communities to construct a new state based on the rule of law, freedom, democracy, and human rights, it has not been able to

create a state that is well-functioning or has a strong human rights commitment (Mac Ginty, 2011). Due to the lack of reconciliation, BiH's communities were not able to engage with each other, and the domination of international actors and organizations excluded the voices of BiH's people. Because the international community has been free to redefine its mandates in BiH because the Dayton accord only bound the Balkan parties to it, "the international organizations… have given themselves the responsibility for implementing it" (Chandler, 2011, p.115). Ad hoc international forums including the International Contact Group Balkans were first created in response to the violent war in Bosnia in the early 1990s with six countries: the U.S., the United Kingdom (U.K.), France, Germany, Italy, and Russia, that had an "interest" in policy developments in the Balkans (U.S. Department of State, n.d.; Chandler, 2001). These countries meet to decide policies and then call on international institutions such as the U.N., NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the EU, and the IMF to draw up their plans. Still, this liberal domination brought many obstacles to BiH's communities because it was demonstrated that the Bosnian constitution could not be changed by their own people but rather by the international community. Also, internationally appointed judges dominated the Constitutional Court where citizens of BiH or neighboring states could not be appointed, nor could they run the central bank (Chandler, 2001).

In the name of liberal peace, all of the important government structures were taken by the international community, and some scholars state that the goal of the DPA was not to sustain peace, but rather just to end the war (Tuathail et al., 2006, p. 61). All the international interventions and the presence of the actors and organizations left the state with a weak structure and perhaps more fragile than ever. Roberto Belloni (2009) explains what the DPA has left for the people of BiH:

> [Dayton] created a complex institutional structure, composed of one state, two entities, three peoples [Presidents], an estimated 3.9 million citizens, and five layers of governance led by 14 prime ministers and governments, making Bosnia the state with the highest number of presidents, prime ministers, and ministers per capita in the entire world (p. 359).

Not only are BiH's people left alone with structural obstacles but they were introduced to a system where BiH's elected officials would be far more accountable to the international actors and community than to their own citizens while the OHR continues speaking on behalf of the people of BiH (Donais, 2012). Many scholars critiqued the DPA because it included every aspect and value that a liberal peace intervention would have like "top-down, technocratic, neo-liberal, and unsustainable" (p. 143). People who live in a conflict have direct experience with violent trauma, and this violent historical conflict often is characterized by discrimination, hate, intense animosity, fear of extinction, severe stereotyping, racism, sexism, and homophobia, etc. Hence, "peacebuilding must be rooted in and responsive to the experiential and subjective realities shaping people's perspectives and needs" (Lederach, 2008, p.24). It is crucial to acknowledge the type of conflicts that people live in and experience along with the trauma that impacts the next generation and the wellbeing of communities.

While the efforts of international organizations were significant, the role of the High Representative undermined the political realm. The High Representative aimed to give the authority to those who came up with twelve-month "action plans" for the new state which would be approved by the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) but not by the Bosnian government. The PIC is comprised of fifty-five countries and international agencies to support BiH's peace process and its implementation. They supported the process financially, logistically, and militarily.

On the Office of the High Representative's (n.d.) website the DPA was described as "the successful negotiation" and as part of the implementation of the "action plans" the PIC said it could offer recommendations to the government and those recommendations would be public in case of a dispute. The PIC also gave the High Representative the power to "impose restrictions on travel abroad for obstructive Bosnian representatives, and to impose economic sanctions at local and regional levels in the case of noncompliance" (Chandler, 2001, p. 116). This domination and political and institutional apparatus were almost dysfunctional, and liberal peacebuilding in BiH did not have a balance between international and domestic actors. The country's unresolved violent ethnonationalist conflict remained unchanged, and it has exacerbated the already formidable struggles in the country (Donais, 2012). David Chandler comments on the reality that ordinary people of Bosnia have become disengaged and excluded from the decision-making processes:

> Rather than statebuilding, it would appear that ten years of international regulation under the framework established by the Dayton agreement have done little either to build the capacity of the BiH state or to legitimate it in the eyes of its population. The powers and the authority of the state have been subsumed by external actors, sucking out the life from the elected bodies which were initially to have taken over government responsibilities following a year's transitional period (2005, p. 346).

In December 1997, the High Representative's powers were expanded to control the government and its mechanisms more. Some of these powers included "deciding the time, location, and chairmanship of government meetings, enacting measures that had not been accepted by Bosnian authorities; and dismissing noncompliant elected officials at every level of government" (Chandler, 2001, p. 116). This approach brought more autocracy to the already broken system and Chandler (2001) argues that this "transformation of the Dayton mandates led to the creation of a United States-run international protectorate in Bosnia" (p.116). People who live in

protracted ethnic conflict have a direct experience with violent trauma. Violent historical conflict is often characterized by discrimination, hate, intense animosity, various fears (e.g., fear of extinction), severe stereotyping, racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. Rather than creating a bottom-up approach, the peace process was established within the framework of international actors including the U.N., OSCE, the EU, the World Bank, the IMF, and others.

While the DPA faced many challenges and criticisms from local and international communities, it ended the costly violent conflict and helped one million displaced persons to return to their homes (Mac Ginty, 2011). Such efforts, however, failed to offer sustainable peacebuilding solutions for the communities living in BiH because the DPA did not necessarily proscribe where to start, and the insufficient reconciliation efforts between different ethnic groups set them further apart. People involved in the BiH conflict grapple with the challenges of holding multiple oppressed identities, such as being part of an ethnic queer minority. These individuals have long been overlooked and excluded from meaningful participation in the political and public spheres.

The DPA did not use gender or sexuality in the agreement, but instead, all communities other than ethnic communities, were described as minority groups. Under the non-discrimination principle, the DPA provides more details about who should be treated equally and how certain rights are provided; however, it still lacks gender or sexuality inclusion.

> Non-discrimination: The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms provided for in this Article or in the international agreements listed in Annex I to this Constitution shall be secured to all persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, color, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status (United Nations, 1995, p. 60).

Although the DPA is a recent peace accord focused on constructing a new state based on liberal peacebuilding models (the rule of law, freedom, democracy, capitalism, elections, human rights,

security reform, etc.), it does not include other BiH communities that also suffered from harm, such as the queer community.

**External Actors**

Funding from international donors comes with conditions and strings attached that indirectly set the agenda of queer organizations as the donors have the power to dictate what the NGOs can and cannot do. This power prevents communities from investing in or contributing to peacebuilding and reconciliation processes (Karari et al., 2013; Mac Ginty, 2011). Another concern about international funds is their prescribed queerness that is not Bosnian, and this is one challenge in queer activism in BiH since it is not a grassroots approach but rather a top-down strategy by outsiders. Some queer activists see international actors' funding support as "devastating" and the influence of the international community going in a direction where BiH is seen and treated as a "colony" of the Global North (Zarenkiewicz, 2016). The role of international aid can be vital in transforming a society that often loses everything in violent conflicts so that financial support can contribute tremendously to peacebuilding processes (Hyde & Byrne, 2015). However, the practice that international actors often take is top-down, and there is little opportunity for local people to support peacebuilding processes and engage with communities that suffer as a result of a huge loss in violent conflicts (Creary & Byrne, 2014; Hyde & Byrne, 2015).

Similarly, the dependence on EU Peace and Reconciliation funds in Northern Ireland has been an issue for LGBTQ+ and disability communities like what has occurred in BiH in that providing very limited and unsustainable money as well as various programs to "marginalized" groups do not challenge the status quo or normative assumptions underlying the peace process (Mizzi et al., 2023). Hence, it undermines the peacebuilding effort so that the conflict is ongoing

and it even leads to the resurgence of violence (Byrne et al., 2018, p. 25). The danger of Northern Ireland being solely dependent on the International Fund for Ireland and EU Peace and Reconciliation funding creates a perception of needing "rescue" through legal protection or legislation. However, it does little to build a strong community among queer people in BiH because there is little effort to address root issues that cause violence, discrimination, bullying, disengagement, and social exclusion (Byrne et al., 2018; Karari et al., 2013; Zarenkiewicz, 2016).

For example, the international community funds advocacy projects that have tangible results in passing laws or supporting legal protection that fail to include community empowerment and community peacebuilding and the strong link with the community is being left off of the agenda because it tends not to have such visible results (Zarenkiewicz, 2016). Indeed, pinkwashing plays a crucial role in NGOs' international support since liberal peacebuilding has several principles including an emphasis on human rights and the promotion of democracy (Özerdem & Lee, 2016). However, the queer community's issues are not tackled constructively; instead, the liberal peacebuilding model sees queer people as numbers to report, and this is why the liberal peacebuilding model has limitations in bringing sustainable peace to the communities where "marginalized" people suffer the most (Mac Ginty, 2011; Puar, 2007).

**Everyday Peace**

While writing this thesis, I came across this ground-breaking book by Roger Mac Ginty (2021) titled *Everyday Peace: How so-called ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict*. While there is a growing literature on everyday peace, Mac Ginty's book unpacks the core aspects of everyday peace with contemporary and comparative examples. In this book, Mac Ginty (2021) begins asking and spending time on three critical questions to understand everyday peace: 1) Is it

really peace? 2) How can everyday peace deal with and confront power? and 3) Can everyday peace be scaled up? For Mac Ginty (2021), everyday peace encompasses a series of behaviors, actions, and thought patterns individuals employ to navigate life in divided societies such as BiH. Mac Ginty (2021) further argues that everyday peace holds "power to" and has the great potential to disrupt forceful and purely material assumptions of power. Such disruption can be done through different ways including interactions between strangers, neighbors, families, or people who are not known as "good figures," they are often perceived as the "other" groups like the ethnic and other marginalized minority groups in society. A simple act of greeting, or speech between members of two groups, for instance, can be disruptive to a conflict.

The book offers an example from BiH where a Serb living in the same apartment as a Bosniak hears something pejorative toward Bosniaks on the radio and he may continue discussing it with his family since they are in their private space but when this Serb neighbor goes out and see's the Bosniak neighbor on the shared stairwell, he greets him well with a smile. He goes to work where many people from different ethnic groups work, he keeps his discussion around neutral topics and after work he stops by his brother's apartment for a drink. His brother might hold extreme sectarian views and make so-called jokes, and he laughs at his brother's jokes (Mac Ginty, 2021). This transcultural story (Senehi, 2008) might continue further, as a Serb might see another Bosniak neighbor on his way to play soccer and he greets him convivially and they can have a quick fruitful discussion, then he might go home and hear about his wife's sister using derogatory terms toward Bosniaks and sit, listen, and nod his head. This person is far from being an activist who aims to address intergroup reconciliation; however, he does display a commendable level of emotional intelligence, which can be a significant step toward everyday peace (Mac Ginty, 2021). Mac Ginty explains this succinctly as follows.

> They recognize the tensions of a deeply divided society and the potential of injudicious actions and words to contribute to a worsening of relations between communities. The man's behavior is not an expansive type of peace, yet it shows social maturity and contributes to the functioning of society. His act of living-peacefully- in the same apartment block as Bosnian Muslims might encourage other Serbs to move in. Intergroup social mixing will involve multiple micro everyday actions and stances. It may not constitute a peace revolution, but for a society emerging from violent conflict, it may be significant. In an optimum scenario, there may be a scaling out of everyday pro-social activities that may, over time, become more significant (p. 11).

While the act of awareness (shifting between modes of behavior) seems like a small action to some, everyday peace focuses on these small micro acts of peace, exploring their potential to interrupt conflicts and possibly evolve into something more substantial (Mac Ginty, 2021).

Post-accord societies have mostly concentrated on the same types of actors, groups, and organizations (Aughey, 2005). These tend to be male-dominated and prioritize ethnonationalist identities/concerns rather than including marginalized communities, such as queer people (Ashe, 2019). Even when identities, such as gender and sexuality, are mentioned in peacebuilding, analysts often frame the ethnonationalist identity as the core identity and adopt the view that "any singular construction of the ethno-nationalist subject, as feminists are only too aware, will invariably become coded as male, which frames as the primary actors during conflict and conflict transformation" (Ashe, 2019, p. 4). This hierarchy creates a system wherein power paradigms are strongly embedded, making it almost impossible to get to the root of problems in such a way that every community can be heard. Hence, it is vital to redefine peacebuilding and reframe the concept of "ethno-nationalist identity" so that it can create space for queer people as part of the society's conflict transformation. This process not only helps queer individuals be free, but it also contributes to the fields where identities are situated and allows them to become active participants in the peacebuilding or conflict transformation processes (Ashe, 2019). Peace and conflict become common occurrences and they are constructed by people. Hence, it is

critical to focus on the localization of peace in which "so-called ordinary people can display a resilience, persistence, entrepreneurialism, and sheer humanity and goodwill that can change conflict outcomes" (Mac Ginty, 2021, p.24). Such a focus can disrupt dominant narratives, or the violence people experience every day.

**Conflict, Violence, and Basic Human Needs**

Lederach (1995) emphasizes the importance of pursuing adequate language in the PACS discipline by recognizing that concept of resolution remains prevalent because it may conceptually convey the idea that conflict should be minimized or eradicated. However, it does not address the underlying conditions that cause the conflict to arise in the first place, and it does not promote sustainable peace. The resolution does not always lead to sustainable peace. If violence or destruction continuously repeats itself, then it becomes a protracted conflict, and then one important question remains: how can it be known whether the change is genuine? (Lederach, 2005). Resolution has been understood to stop the conflict; in other words, it has been used to control or suppress it (Lederach, 2008). However, this has not been helpful for many communities since structural violence is very much alive in conflicts even after peace accords are signed and are not fully implemented. Hence, it is important to bring different definitions and scholarly work into this discussion to further understand conflict and violence.

Many scholars have provided various definitions of violence and its structures and dynamics (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Cordell & Wolff, 2009; Galtung, 1996). The term violence according to Brunk (2012) includes four elements including identitable actors, groups, physical action, or behavour; physical, emotional, or psycholigcal harm and victims who suffer from the harm. This definition does not include cultural and structural elements of violence, nor has Brunk included social, cultural, or political institutions' intervention in violence that also includes the

psychological effect of physical violence. Poverty and social class impact millions of people worldwide, and social conflicts occur as results of such situations, and as a part of *structural violence,* poverty may exacerbate more violence and conflict (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Langer & Brown, 2016).

**Political Homophobia and the Societal Security Dilemma in BiH**

*Political homophobia* and nationalism have been at the root of politics, and they are often utilized as parts of *ideological state apparatuses.* This oppressive modular strategy has been used to gain legitimacy and authority whenever a state faces crises, challenges, or threats to its power (Weiss & Bosia, 2013). Thus, state actors use political homophobia and nationalism as tools "to build an authoritative notion of national collective identity" (Weiss & Bosia, 2013, p. 3). As a part of the states' political strategies, queer people's demands are not prioritized, merely treated as "special interests", and are often seen as a threat to the nation or national security, thus leading to violent abuse. Hence, political homophobia and nationalism have been embedded in the processes of the state. Related to this, governments often use the fear of group extinction to deny queer existence.

Like the fear of group extinction, "threats to societal security exist when a society believes that its *we* identity is being put in danger, whether this is objectively the case or not" (Roe, 2015, p. 48). In other words, the societal security dilemma is denying queer existence, along with their rights and legitimacy, while also presenting them as a "threat to the nation" through the ideological state apparatuses, such as criminal justice, healthcare, education, places of worship, and political speeches, among others (Roe, 2015; Swimelar, 2019). Through these apparatuses, the state forbids the use of certain languages, traditions, and clothing; enforces the closure of schools and places of worship; and authorizes the killing of members of other

communities (Buzan, 1991). This "policy" impacts the visibility of marginalized groups in society.

When societies are "threatened," one way to respond is to strengthen the prevailing societal identity by using "cultural means to reinforce societal cohesion and distinctiveness and to ensure that the society reproduces itself" (Waever et al., 1993, p. 191). For example, homosexuality is always blamed by nationalists, who create a denial discourse wherein queer people are forced to choose either their ethnic or sexual identity. This discourse pushes queer people to drop their multiple identity statuses and does not give them space where their queer and ethnic identities can coexist. Further, minorities are typically blamed for past crimes, tragedies, and current events, such as epidemics and different community conflicts. Although Roe's (2015) book lacked a discussion on the role of queer identity in the societal security dilemma, the queer community suffers the most, especially in post-peace accord societies, as most accords recognize and ensure certain ethnic rights, while queer people, people with disabilities, the elderly, and the youth remain marginalized (Byrne et al., 2018; Mizzi et al., 2023).

The societal security dilemma occurs more often when one group increases its security and attempts to protect its identity against other groups' threats, actions, and fears (Roe, 2015). When this fear of extinction becomes more visible, it can motivate another group to develop countermeasure acts, so the second group does the same; in turn, this reaction makes the first group feel insecure and threatened (Roe, 2015; Swimelar, 2013). These fears are more visible and apparent in BiH, as the governmental system represents one platform in which nationalism and ethnic division are thriving.

According to the 2014 International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) BiH progress report, queer people face heightened homophobia and transphobia in the country. Homophobic and transphobic acts remain very common, and authorities largely ignore instances of discrimination, harassment, attack, or violence. Likewise, government officials contribute to perpetuating homophobia and transphobia, as exemplified by the Deputy Minister of Human Rights and Refugees, who made a derogatory comment in one of the main newspapers (ILGA Report, 2014, p. 1).

In the politicized school system in BiH, students learn different ethnic narratives that are entirely different from one another. This triggers the societal security dilemma and increases one group's perception of other groups (Roe, 2015; Swimelar, 2013). It also increases fear of security, as another group also feels threatened and develops defensive motives about another party or group because of different narratives (Jervis, 1978 cited in Swimelar, 2013, p. 165). As a result of the societal security dilemma, the queer community and its allies make their identities more visible and consistently attempt to make queer voices heard, to protect their identities. These heightened advocacy and resistance acts make their queer identities more visible. In turn, this action is interpreted as a threat by nationalists to their identities and security, asserting that "a potential weakening of the strength of ethno-national identities are more broad" (Swimelar, 2019, p. 6). As both queer community activists and nationalists want to play a bigger role while protecting their identities and security, this creates a societal security dilemma that causes homosexuality to be constructed as a "threat to the nation" (Swimelar, 2019). As a result, the state creates and implements oppressive policies.

BiH is a recent example of post-peace accord societies trapped in a state of liminal peace. The state is neither at war nor at peace but trapped somewhere in between so that the

sustainability of community peacebuilding is still uncertain. The people of BiH remain in limbo, captured between various agendas, including the nationalist political agendas of local political parties and the uncertain supervision of the international community's representatives who are not local or unique, ensuring that peace is unsustainable (Selmić, 2016, p. 207).

Marginalized communities, including queer people, people with disabilities, elderly people, and the youth, specifically face great challenges, such as the lack of employment, discrimination, bullying, and social exclusion, in post-peace accord societies (Byrne et al., 2018; Mizzi et al., 2023). Although there is a growing body of literature on queer rights in the Balkans (see Selmić, 2016; Celebicic, 2017; Swimelar, 2017; Swimelar, 2019), there is minimal scholarly work in BiH despite its more recent prominent role in PACS scholarship in general (Selmić, 2016; Swimelar, 2017). The war in BiH is very recent, and researchers, along with community members/organizers, could have benefited tremendously from ongoing studies that sought to understand the complexity of marginalized people's situations there.

**Queering Structural Violence**

The queer perspectives in the PACS discipline are still emerging, especially in post-peace and frozen conflict societies. The question, "whose peace is what really matters for peacebuilding actors" (Özerdem & Lee, 2016, p. 1) has been asked by multiple PACS scholars, which is a critical question. However, the language and the implementation of peace in post-peace-accord societies is still problematic because youth, women and queer individuals have always been excluded and their great potential for peacebuilding efforts are silenced as they are not given the space to work for peace. Structural violence has been used by researchers and scholars to explain different conflicts, yet the language of these actors and their priority have remained heteronormative. When ethnonationalism concerns are addressed, they are prioritized

by the actors who tend to be male-dominated, and queer and women's issues are ignored as they are not taken seriously (Ashe, 2019; Aughey, 2005).

PACS is a critical disclipine that challenges international relations (IR), political science, and genocide studies because it offers a different picture in which the focus of conflict is to move people forward to work for peace, reconciliation, and coexistence (Byrne & Senehi, 2012). However, in order for PACS to fully function, it must create more inclusive practices and curricula where gender diversity and/or queer issues are fully included. Otherwise, reconciliation would always be incomplete. As Pharr in Mizzi (2010) wrote, "Hierarchy of oppressions […] is terrible and destructive" (Pharr p. 154). That said, one should include all socially diverse identities and backgrounds of in a reconciliation plan, otherwise some individuals/groups will always feel excluded. Further, queer perspectives help dismantle gender normativities that underpin a society, demonstrate where allyship can be most useful, and actualize what it means to be respectful and equitable in our peace programs and practices.

While Galtung (1996) includes institutionalized racism, sexism, and nationalism as part of structural violence, the existing literature fails to address queer issues (Mizzi & Byrne, 2015). Literature involving structural violence relies on basic human needs including identity and identification within systems and structures where the violence took hold. Yet Jagose (1996) argues that non-identifications and anti-identity are queer. In other words, anti-identity means resisting to traditional forms of identity construction that disrupt the "normal" dictated by societal norms. For example, Jagose (1996) views such non-identifications as queer because they challenge normative ideas about one's identity and create spaces for greater freedom of expression. This perspective counters much of the structural hegemony around identity-categorizations ("race", "ethnicity," "sexual orientation," "gender identity," and so forth) that is a

current dominant institutional practice. Hence, structural violence may even be more pervasive as it affects those not mentioned/rendered invisible due to dominant heteronormative and identity-heavy structures.

Sedgwick's (1990) notion of "the closet" is also important to read structural violence through self-regulation to survive and fit in society. In their work, Sedgwick (1990) highlights the concept of the closet explaining how it represents a concealed space where people hide important aspects of their identity due to fear, discrimination, and societal pressure of "being norm/al." Queer people, even those who are openly queer, calculate their daily interaction with people they meet. They "[…] deal daily with interlocutors about whom [they] don't know whether they know or not; it is equally difficult to guess for any given interlocutor whether, if they did know, the knowledge would seem very important" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68). The concept of *the closet* fits well within this thesis as I highlight how queer people in BiH use that concealment or suppression of their identities due to societal expectations, daily discrimination, and prejudices. While the closet may play different roles in different locations, as Sedgwick (1990) succinctly puts, "there are risks in making salient the continuity and centrality of the closet" (p. 69). I further expand the critical aspect of structural violence in the context of queer people throughout this dissertation.

"Traditional" families are viewed as those with a mother/father and this understanding excludes queer families in society as their agency is silenced. There can also be some unexpected outcomes to structural violence for those who are queer (e.g., those who have female same-sex sexualities, for example, may escape homophobic laws in certain countries as the laws only focus on gay men, yet they are subsumed into violent regimes due to gender role expectations). Those who fled their country due to homophobic laws can also experience systemic structural violence

as is demonstrated in asylum-seeking processes. For example, queer refugees are expected to prove their "sexual orientation" in order to be granted asylum (Borgqvist, 2016). The U.K. migration court demanded male asylum seekers to show proof that they engage in sexual intercourse. In Turkey, queer refugees were asked to name gay clubs and venues in order to be assessed by the state (Lewis, 2014). Another example is in Sweden where a gay asylum seeker was denied entry because he did not seek out Sweden's queer community (Gröndal, 2012 cited in Borgqvist, 2016, p. 14). These are just some examples of queer structural violence that can occur in different countries and settings. Drawing out the uncertainties/anxieties/politics around structural violence may demonstrate that a queer reading of structural violence may look very different as it isn't quite detected through a heteronormative lens. Hence, in this study, I explore this issue of heteronormative structural violence more in-depth.

As many scholars clearly explain, societal or structural issues (economic, social, or cultural) bring violence upon human rights, people's dignity, and core basic human needs (BHN) including race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, freedom of speech, etc., that are either ignored, attacked, or eliminated (Avruch & Mitchell, 2013; Barash 1991). Global economic oppression of citizens in the Global South, violations of Indigenous rights, violence against queer people, globalization and its effects, such as immigration, civil wars, rape-warfare, lack of health care access, poor nutrition, and the exploitation of women, children, and queer people are some examples of structural violence (Barash & Webel, 2002; Byrne & Senehi, 2012).

BHN theory notes that the consequences of suffering and abnormal and deviant behaviors occur when individuals' BHNs are suppressed (Azar, 1985; Burton, 1997; Sandole, 2013). When their needs are threatened, they then try to satisfy their needs even at a cost of personal and social disruption. Maslow (1943) classifies the hierarchy of human needs as a five-stage

model, which he called a five-tier model of human needs that includes psychological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow's (1943) basic needs are psychological, which include food, water, warmth, and rest, and he states that the needs at the bottom must be satisfied before considering the needs higher up as individuals will pay attention to the very basic needs that must be met in order to move on. Psychological needs are the most dominant needs when compared to other needs.

While Maslow emphasized five basic psychological needs, Johan Galtung (1990) and John Burton (1990) identified "security" and "identity" as BHNs. In the etiology of violent conflict, Burton's thought on the position of BHNs began as a consideration of values, particularly what Burton calls "social-psychological values" (Sandole, 2013). Instead of using Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Burton decided to use sociologist Paul Sites' list of seven needs which are 1) consistency in response, 2) stimulation, 3) security, 4) recognition, 5) distributive justice, 6) rationality and the appearance of rationality, and 7) meaning and control (Sites, 1973 cited in Sandole, 2013, p. 23). In addition to Site's list of eight needs, Burton introduced a ninth need, "role defense", "the protection of needs once they have been acquired" (Burton, 1979, p. 72 cited in Sandole, 2013, p. 23).

Role defense is concerned not only with the security of a specific position, such as Prime Minister, but also with the protection of steps required to satisfy other needs commensurate with that role. This is an obligation that extends to all opposing groups, including those in privileged elite positions of authority. This part of Burton's thinking is controversial or contentious for some, particularly human rights activists, since Burton argues that successful conflict resolution depends in part on understanding that "bad guys" also have basic needs and not just those whom they oppress (Burton, 1979 cited in Sandole, 2013, p. 23). Although Burton's BHNs were

extensively used by other scholars and practitioners, Sandole (2013) reminds us of the continual question about what Burton has not addressed in his theory. Kevin Avruch and Peter Black (2013) argued, for example, that Burton did not discuss the effect of culture in mediating the impact of universal needs surrounding conflict. In other words, they argued that Burton did not say enough, if anything, about the role of culture in mediating the impact of frustrated "universal" needs in conflict (Sandole, 2013). Hence, if the parties to a conflict come from different cultural backgrounds, one should not conclude that all essential understandings are shared between them when the conflict is "intercultural."

Galtung (1990) also introduced four classes of human needs, which are security, welfare, identity, and freedom that are important components of BHNs. He defines welfare needs as sufficiency needs; protection against climate change, the environment, and diseases; and self-expression, dialogue, and education. Galtung describes identity needs as the need for closeness, to avoid alienation while freedom needs are the freedom to choose options and avoid repression. Galtung (1969) identifies various concepts that are core elements of the PACS discipline because when people are impacted by negative experiences, violence is present and their actual realizations are under their potential realization. This definition provides a basic understanding of direct violence, and it also explains clearly how human beings' actual potentials can be invisible due to their lack of BHNs and opportunities that so many communities are excluded from, so this lack of opportunities is *structural violence*. Violence is an insult to human life and needs, which disrupts the potential satisfaction of people having their human needs met (Galtung, 1990).

Structural violence emerges from political institutions and power, the unequal distribution of cultural, and socioeconomic resources (Galtung, 1996). Similary, Barash (2010)

emphasizes that structural violence includes inequality and social injustice, and it emerges when people are denied their rights, such as economic opportunity, social and political equality, and dignity. Galtung (1990) expands the conditions in which structural violence occurs and these includes starvation, suffering from preventable diseases, denial of a decent education, housing, employment, freedom of expression, and freedom of protest, etc. Consequently, violence occurs when there is systemic inequality in the distribution of justice, social, political and cultural resources, and freedom.

**Sexuality in Conflict**

While there are thousands of books, reports, and articles dedicated to understanding meta-conflict and its prevention and intervention processes, there are less than a dozen academic studies that work to understand and analyze gender diversity and sexuality in protracted ethnopolitical conflicts (Ashe, 2019). There are various important publications written by PACS scholars but the word queer, 2SLGBTQ+, or sexuality are rarely mentioned, if at all (Baker & Chandler, 2005; Carter et al., 2009; Hauss, 2010; Sandole et al., 2009; Young & Egeland, 2015). While these publications contribute tremendously to the PACS discipline, its lack of queer perspective/angle does not give the entire picture about post-accord societies, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, or reconciliation. This is a critical area that is missing in the PACS academic literature (Mizzi & Byrne, 2015).

More generally, most studies within PACS tend to focus on the gender perspective but this angle excludes a queer presence. Sally Engle Merry (2009) wrote a book titled *Gender violence: A cultural perspective*. While it is an important contribution to the PACS and women's studies literature, there is not a single sentence on queer people in that book. Laura Reimer et al. (2015) wrote a book on transformative change, which is a collaborative effort by the

contributions of several PACS scholars. The book has chapters on empowering people through praxis, engaging with communities for change, facilitating group processes for transformative change, storytelling for peace, etc. However, there is not even one sentence on how and why including "marginalized" communities, such as queer people contribute to peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and reconciliation processes. While Reimer et al.'s, (2015) book is an important contribution and emphasizes the importance of BHN, the authors have used broad language as communities were vaguely defined. Including queer voices is important as it is critical for deconstructing heteronormativity and for normalizing the queer perspective. Otherwise, as Berlant and Warner (2000, p. 312) underscored, heteronormativity is framed as coherent and privileged.

The inclusion of a plethora of queer perspectives is still a work-in-progress in the PACS discipline, yet there are a number of recent studies that place queer people as the main key actors in understanding protracted ethnic conflicts and peacebuilding rather than prioritizing a single identity (Ashe, 2019; Byrne et al., 2018; Byrne et al., 2020; Mizzi & Byrne, 2015; Mizzi et al., 2023; Selmić, 2016; Swimelar, 2016; Swimelar, 2017). This recent scholarship focuses on protracted ethnic conflicts, peacebuilding, or conflict transformation through a queer lens, and it challenges the mainstream ways of dealing, analyzing, or understanding protracted ethnic conflicts.

**Queering Peacebuilding and Activism and Community Challenges**

Sexual minorities, including lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, and other queer people, experience discrimination, repression, bullying, hate crimes, and physical attacks daily. These experiences lead to anxiety, depression, lack of belonging and self-esteem, post-traumatic

stress, exclusion, substance abuse, suicide, and many others, which put queer people at risk (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Pachankis et al., 2015).

An accord can be an opportunity for people living in violent conflict; however, it does not necessarily mean that post-peace accord countries will evolve and converge into nirvana. Considering Northern Ireland, South Africa, BiH, and other post-accord countries, communities still face more challenges, and some volatile circumstances can bring uncertainties for people even after accords are signed. BiH is one of the recent examples of this:

> For citizens of BiH, who are captured between nationalist political agendas of the local parties and the ambiguous supervision of the 'international community's' representatives, which sometimes has clearly neocolonial overtones, perspectives for a better future, including the EU accession, are enveloped in skepticism (Selmić, 2016, p. 207).

Marginalized communities, including queer people, people with disabilities, elderly people, youth, and the young generation, specifically have more challenges in post-accord societies (Byrne et al. 2018, 2020; Mizzi et al., 2023; Pearce & Cooper, 2014). Although there is a growing body of literature on queer rights in the Balkans, there is minimal scholarly work in Bosnia despite its prominent role in peace and conflict scholarship in general, and postwar peacebuilding and nationalism scholarship specifically (Pearce & Cooper, 2014; Selmić, 2016; Swimelar, 2017).

Chandler (2005) offers an important analysis of the role of external actors noting that the history of the OHR provided "little guidance for understanding the extension of international mandates or the mechanisms of international administration over the new state" (p. 340). International actors, institutions, and politicians have "done little either to build the capacity of the BiH or to legitimate it in the eyes of the population" (Chandler, 2005, p. 346), hence, this political transitioning and its structures (or lack thereof) led people to be more active and

challenge the political structure that was mandated by the international actors. Although BiHs queer people are more visible, they still face bullying at school, discrimination, physical attacks, homophobia, and transphobia.

International actors in the context of queer rights are perceived to be the "true saviours." However, not all international actors are queer-friendly nor do their agenda or intentions include queer policies (Mizzi, 2009). Funding from the international community, actors, and donors are particularly complex in divided societies and it comes with conditions that indirectly set the agenda of queer organizations as donors have the power to dictate what the NGOs can and cannot do. This power prevents the communities from investing in or contributing to peacebuilding and reconciliation processes (Zarenkiewicz, 2016). Another concern about the international funds is its prescribed queerness that is not Bosnian, and this is one challenge for queer activism in BiH, since it is not a grassroots approach but rather a top-down strategy:

> One donor tried to directly influence SOC [One of the largest queer organizations in BiH] but SOC no longer receives funding from them. Further, for a nascent queer activist movement, Western funding of activities runs the risk of constructing a monolithic queerness in BiH that is not distinctly Bosnian, but is actually a replica of Western queerness (Zarenkiewicz, 2016, p. 26).

Some queer activists see international actors' funding support as "devastating" and the influence of the international community going into a direction where BiH is seen as a "colony" (Zarenkiewicz, 2016). The role of international aid can be vital in transforming the society that often loses everything in violent conflicts, thus, financial support can contribute tremendously to peacebuilding processes. However, the approach that international actors often take is top-down, and there is little opportunity for local people to support peacebuilding processes and engage with communities that suffer because of huge loss in violent conflicts.

Local NGOs play a crucial role in humanitarian relief and development work in conflict and in a post-accord era. While NGOs are given a vital responsibility for specific programs or activities in communities, their actions are controlled by the international organizations/actors, and international organizations deal with mainly the official government institutions; there is a lack of communication with civil society (Jeong, 2005). Although there is a belief that international funding has helped the community in BiH, some queer activists argue that "there has not been little substantive change" (Zarenkiewicz, 2016, p. 26).

Similarly, the dependence of CSOs on EU funds in Northern Ireland has been an issue for LGBTQ+ and disability communities because, as in BiH, "having 'pockets' of money and distinct programs available to minoritized groups does not challenge the normative assumptions underlying the peace process, nor does it lead to a widespread effort to embrace and value social difference so that the conflict is not ongoing or leads to a resurgence of violence" (Byrne et al., 2018, p. 25). The danger of being solely dependent on EU peace funding creates a perception of needing "rescue" through legal protection or legislation. However, it does little to build a strong community among queer people in BiH because there is little effort to address root issues that cause violence, discrimination, bullying, disengagement, and social exclusion (Karari et al., 2013; Byrne et al., 2018; Zarenkiewicz, 2016). For example, the international community funds advocacy projects have tangible results in passing laws or supporting legal protection; however, "community building and empowerment is being left out of the agenda because it tends not to have such visible results" (Zarenkiewicz, 2016, p. 26).

Indeed, pinkwashing plays a crucial role in NGOs international support since liberal peacebuilding has several principles including an emphasis on human rights and the promotion of democracy (Özerdem & Lee, 2016). However, the queer community's issues are not tackled

constructively; instead the liberal peacebuilding model sees queer people as numbers to report, and this is why the liberal peacebuilding model has limitations in bringing sustainable peace (Mac Ginty, 2011; Puar, 2007).

**Conclusion**

There are various critical points that PACS scholars address to understand, analyze, and prevent conflicts. These points focus on peacebuilding, conflict transformation, reconciliation, and social justice among many others. Since it is vital to understand how peace is achieved and leads to sustainable community peacebuilding, Chapter three addressed some important factors in peacebuilding, as well as the lack of queer inclusion in PACS. While it is critical to study and teach about the importance of gender in PACS, gender is only discussed in the context of women's scholarship, which is vital; however, sexual diversity and/or queer existence finds little space within PACS scholarship.

Most scholars suggest that conflict transformation "must be rooted in the soil where the conflict rages and must be built and contextualized participation of people from that setting if reconciliation is to be sustained" (Lederach, 2008, p. 107). In other words, they suggest that conflict transformation must occur where conflict exists and needs to be specialized to work for the people within the conflict if reconciliation is going to be achieved. However, PACS scholars and practitioners, as well as international actors, need to think about those settings and their actions need to lead them toward a sustainable conflict transformation. For this to happen, peace needs to be conceptualized and peacebuilding between bureaucrats, politicians, states, and community members needs balance, a balance that clearly shows the ways true reconciliation can help societies move toward prosperity and everyday peace.

As resolution is a dominant concept in the PACS field, it is significant to ask whether a change is genuine since violence or destruction repeats repeatedly and this violence leads to protracted conflicts. This Chapter also focused on the concept of resolution and how communities cope with the violence that is not necessarily direct but structural that impacts communities through invisibilized violence and reinforce governments' discriminatory policies.

Finally, the definition of peace needs to be outlined clearly, so it can show what peacebuilding would look like and what are the roles of locals and community members. Also, where are the victims, perpetrators, and witnesses in this definition? Where are the locals that can provide beyond-vital perspectives and build peace that is sustainable, and inclusive for all including NGOs, human rights commissions, queer people, people living with disabilities, youth, elderly people, undocumented people, and racialized people? Real peace implemented through a true reconciliation and peacebuilding process can only be achieved, as Galtung says, "by peaceful means" that includes everyone. If one group is out, it is clear that peace is not in.

# Chapter Four: Research Methodology

## Introduction

The following sections of Chapter four describe the procedures that were used to collect and analyse the data for this study. It also highlights the researcher's background, research approach, research design and tools, research location and participants, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, ethical issues, and study limitations. As Mills (2014) puts it succinctly, the methodology that researchers engage with guide them to make sense of their entire research processes as researchers also position themselves in their research. The purpose of this discussion is to provide context for how the data for the study were generated and analyzed.

## Study Scope and Significance

Chapter four provides further discussion on the critical qualitative methodologies used for this study. The study used a constructivist grounded theory method to further collaborate with participatory, reflexive, and user-engaged research approaches in a multi-method approach to examine transformative informal learning in social justice and community peacebuilding across a historically marginalized and divided society like BiH. Although mainly grounded theory was used, ethnographic principles like participatory action research methodologies also enrich the discussion and assist in developing a grounded theory titled Good Tune Theory (GTT) that is discussed in Chapter nine. During my ethnography, I mainly used queer and storytelling methodologies to emphasize the critical role of reflexivity, which rejects the idea of a researcher being objective and it further notes the values and biases of researchers being brought into a

research project (Senehi, 2022). Therefore, researchers can influence their perception of the research participants, process, and outcome (Custer, 2014).

Qualitative research is used to better frame people's experiences and perceptions about the issues, barriers, and conflicts that surround them. Social science research on queer people has a short history and it first focused on examining the mental health issues of gay men. Since then, queer research has attempted to describe issues including coming out, relationship with parents, and sexual behavior, etc. (D'Augelli, 2003). Hence, this research fills a void by focusing on queer narratives in post-peace-accord societies to address the gap in the PACS literature.

Although some recent PACS studies address the need for queer issues and people on the margins of society to be included in the mainstream PACS discourse, queer people and their sexuality within post-peace-accord societies are still very much under researched. Hence, this research aims to bring PACS scholarship into conflict transformation by using a queer lens. There are a very limited number of research projects on "marginalized" communities in post-accord-societies, specifically in BiH. This research is unique to unpack queer narratives through the voices of local queer community members and queer NGOs.

The research focus in post-accord societies tends to be on the same types of mainstream actors, groups, and organizations connected to the ethnonationalist and peacebuilding discourse. The analysis or understanding of peace processes and their transformation must be seen through the eyes of marginalized rather than male-dominated ethnic communities such as youth, women, queer and disabled people, refugees, and ex-combatants as part of a positive peace or social justice narrative (Ashe, 2019; Aughey, 2005).

**Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT)**

As an inductive methodology, grounded theory aims to attempt to bridge between research and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 cited in Sebastian, 2019, p.1). The primary method for data collection for grounded theorists is interviewing, and ethnographic methods as well as the analysis of documents that also serve as two critical steps for data gathering (Charmaz, 2014; Morse et al., 2021). Grounded theory methods allow flexibility when gathering data as the researcher engages in an ongoing analysis and a shifting of the focus when need be (Charmaz, 2014; Levitt, 2021). It also enables an instant follow up on what is happening.

Grounded theory methods allow the researcher to code and categorize the data as it is collected, it also enables a constant comparative analysis of the literature review after the analysis of the data as it offers an opportunity to develop theoretical analyses from interviews, personal stories, and field work (Charmaz, 2020; Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). A grounded theory methodology also enables "theory to be conceptualized within the study and by the data rather than verifying previous theoretical assumptions" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014; Farragher & Coogan, 2018 cited in Sebastian, 2019, p.1). Such an approach empowers researchers to utilize grounded theory in offering a practical theoretical explanation to a complex problem. Instead of relying on previous analyses or assumptions to identify the right answers to the wrong questions, grounded theory fosters a supportive environment where researchers are encouraged, inspired, and committed to discovering the correct answers to the right questions (Sebastian, 2019; Urquhart, 2022).

As Charmaz (2014) describes, the process is like a camera with multiple lenses, you begin viewing a wide expanse of the landscape and then switch between lenses to find the closer and clearer view into which a researcher is placed. This method was critical in this study as it

helped me gain a clear focus of what was happening in my data without moving forward with other processes or interviews. In addition, grounded theory incorporates various methods within a specific context and location (Charmaz, 2014; Thiessen & Byrne, 2017). As such, the methods allowed me to include the knowledge of queer people, activists, and organizations in BiH society. It was also critical to report local people's definitions of activism, social justice, and peacebuilding instead of providing proscribed definitions that may not be culturally acceptable or common.

Charmaz (2014) sees all knowledge as constructed, thus the reality depends on a participant's interpretation and lived experience of it. That said, Charmaz (2014) argues that Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) is based on an "outdated assumptions of an objective external reality a passive, neutral observer, or a detached narrow empiricism" (p.13). In other words, while CGT follows a more positivist ontological perspective, which aims to explore objective truths and universal patterns that elucidate social phenomena, CGT adopts a constructivist ontological standpoint (O'Connor et al., 2018). This practice recognizes that reality is socially constructed and subjective, which underlines the importance of recognizing multiple realities and diverse perspectives in the research process. Charmaz sees research as a co-constructive process so that the researcher is a co-constructor. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that provides an explanation of the nature of knowledge contending that humans generate knowledge and derive meaning through the interaction between their experiences and ideas (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Duffy, 2006 cited in Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022, p. 8). In other words, "We can add new pieces to the researcher puzzle or conjure entire new puzzles while we gather data, and that can even occur late in the analysis. The flexibility of qualitative research permits you to follow leads that emerge" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 25).

Intensive interviewing aligns seamlessly with grounded theory as grounded "theory methods and intensive interviewing are open ended yet directed, shaped, yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). Intensive interviewing also enables researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of an issue or a subject in which the researcher has significant expertise to understand and conduct interviews (Charmaz et al., 2018). Researchers who choose grounded theory can also incorporate other methods such as focus group interviews or research participants' written accounts into the field research (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, my field research complemented observations of space and events such as the 2022 Sarajevo Pride Parade.

Every researcher who works in conflict environments finds different results based on the region or the population and the methods and questions used (Mac Ginty et al., 2020; Millar, 2015). I sought to understand the experiences of sexual and ethnic populations in BiH's post-peace-accord society. Queer people face many challenges in a country where queer communities face heightened risks for homophobia, so the participants' narratives were unique in exploring the process of building peace for all (Browne & Nash, 2010). Therefore, their experiences must be grounded so that their particular stories can help this researcher develop different frameworks or theories to understand the conflict from a different angle and perspective (Senehi, 2019).

Guided by the interviewees grounded experiences, I adopted grounded theory to analyze the data that emerged during my research. At the same time, however, a theory of culture must be grounded in particular human experiences, so I am interested in how ideas are grounded in individual experiences (Malinowski, 1960 cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 6). To do so, participants' experiences and images were the core component of this research. Their stories and experiences of the reality they encountered as part of their daily routine were the key to

understanding the entire picture of the unfolding peace process (Senehi, 2019) and where gay people fit within it.

Researchers collect data and do analyses while they are using a particular method in grounded theory. Grounded theory is also used for theory-building, constructed inductively using qualitative data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). The researcher's analysis of the data when addressing the questions that have been developed during the research can be valuable and it generates grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 27). This analytical process is crucial, and researchers should include any questions or concerns that are relevant to their research within memos and observation notes during their data collection process, so that their findings can be linked with theoretical issues (Bogdan & Biklin, 2016). Since I am using grounded theory, I maintained the authenticity of the data by analyzing the participants' responses/narratives so that I could search for themes. Finally, grounded theory is not a system that is linear. It is an iterative, comparative, and collaborative technique that allows the researcher to engage closely with the data and it goes beyond the casual reading of the data material (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 115-116).

**Research Questions and Research Instrument**

The main research questions aimed to examine queer people's experiences and perceptions of peacebuilding, social justice, and activism in post-peace-accord BiH. To understand the main objective of this study, the following questions were explored: 1) What is it like to coexist as LGBTQ+ and Bosniak/Serb/Croat in BiH? 2) What impact do ethnic conflict narratives have on the experience of the queer community in Bosnia and Herzegovina? 3) Are there any possibilities for queer and ethnic identities to coexist together? 4) What is it like to do peace activism and cope with homophobia in a country where queer communities face a

heightened risk of homophobia? 5) What conditions (political, cultural, social, economic, etc.) are required to strengthen peace in BiH?

To explore the research question, semi-structured interviews with participants were used throughout this study. The researcher guided the discussion with the following open-ended questions:

**Questions for Queer Participants:**

1. What was it like growing up in your hometown?
2. There was a peace agreement after the war. Do you feel a sense of peace in BiH?
3. Do you feel a sense of peace in the queer community in Bosnia?
4. What are your fears and worries about your future?
5. What are your best hopes and wishes about your future?
    a. Do/did you experience any uncomfortable feelings because of your gender, sexuality, and/ or ethnicity?
6. What is your understanding of peace? How do you build peace?
7. Who do think has the most responsibility to build peace among ethnic and queer groups in BiH?
8. If you could recommend to policymakers or organizational leaders who are charged with building peace, what would you say?
9. Would you have anything else to say about this project?

**Questions for NGO Workers at Queer Organizations**

10. Can you tell me about your work? What is your motivation for your work? How did you become involved in this work?
11. What are your goals with your activism or work? Could you provide an example of a goal and steps being taken to meet that goal?
12. How is your activism or work going? Tell me about an experience that speaks to your point.
13. What are some of the challenges and joys of doing this work? How have you responded to the challenges?
14. Where has there been a good example of activism in the work of your organization?
15. What is your definition of peace? How does your peacebuilding activism connect to peace activism in BiH? Could you provide an example of that?
16. Has your peacebuilding activism changed since the conflict began, and how has it changed? Could you provide an example of that?
17. Based on your experiences, what are some of the strengths and challenges that everyday people encounter in their everyday lives? Could you provide an example of that? (J. Senehi, personal communication. March 18, 2021).
18. Would you have anything else to say about this project?

**Sampling and Recruitment Strategy**

There are always pros and cons of being an insider or an outsider in a research study. Insider research simply means a researcher who conducts research with participants who are also members of those groups (Kanuha, 2000). This means that the researcher shares many common identities and culture, language, tradition, and customs with the research participants (Asselin,

2003). There might be language and cultural barriers that limit the type of research in which I engaged. Other important challenges were my lack of experience to understand the participants, and it might arguably be my biggest challenge in the research analysis.

As a sexual and ethnic minority, myself, I experienced what it is like to lose loved ones or family members because of ethnic violence. Being an insider, however, can also be challenging in approaching participants or in analyzing the data because the membership of a society/population provides a certain degree of credibility and/or stigma to researchers (Adler & Adler, 1987 cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p.55). Adler and Adler (1987) also discuss the importance of "ultimate existential dual role" in research (cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, pp. 55-58), which ultimately can result in role confusion (Asselin, 2003 cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p.55 ) especially when the researcher approaches the issue from a different point of view rather than as a researcher. Asselin (2003, p. 58) suggests that role confusion can occur in any research study; however, when the researcher is familiar with the research environment or participants via a role other than that of the researcher, there may be greater risks such as biases and assumptions (cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58).

I lived in Bosnia during the summer of 2015 and made strong connections with local people. What I noticed was the openness of the people to me as an outsider who would not judge community members since I was not a part of their community. During that time, I started thinking about the BiH conflict from my own Kurdish conflict lens. Although there were some challenges when I started my recruitment process, I hoped that the collaboration with local NGOs such as the SOC would be crucial in recruiting research participants. As I gained their confidence through the interviews, I recruited more participants using a snowball sampling method.

This study uses two sampling methodologies to recruit participants: a purposive sampling method (PSM), and a snowball sampling method (SSM). An SSM is known as a chain referral sampling method in which interviewees provide leads to the researcher of other participants to interview since it is a respondent-driven sample that gives an opportunity to researchers who depend on referrals from participants and gatekeepers to engage with other participants (Babbie, 2020). In qualitive studies, purposeful sampling techniques are mainly used and can be defined as selecting units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, and institutions) based on particular purposes associated with addressing the questions of a research study (Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

A society experiencing conflict faces many challenges. People in a conflict environment often consider their needs, objectives, desires, or interests to be contradicted by the goals or interests of the other ethnic group (Kriesberg, 1998, 2015). Conflict creates distrust, division, fear, and tension between groups, and such an environment aggravates situations for locals and researchers (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). The lack of political freedom and distrust, societal suspicion, and fear creates more challenges for researchers who want to engage people and hear their stories so that it directly impacts recruiting interviewees in conflict environments (Senehi, 2019). In addition to these challenges, the lack of system information, cultural differences, mobility limitations, and distrust are some other reasons researchers use snowball sampling to be able to contact locals to be able to hear their actual stories (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, Senehi, 2002, 2019). When researchers experience some challenges in producing a representative sample of the research population, SSM is widely used to identify, access, and include individuals from particular populations (Babbie, 2020). Therefore, SSM would be a great way to reach participants, particularly given the fact that hidden communities actively shield themselves from

public knowledge and have little social exposure for various reasons such as religious, cultural, social, and ethnic affiliation (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

My recruitment strategy ensured that the participant sample includes a range of ethnicities, genders, and communities. I recruited 40 percent of my participants from one or two particular ethnic groups by the end of August (2022) so that I stopped recruiting more participants from that particular ethnic group, so that my sample reflects a diverse ethnic representation in the study. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom/Microsoft Teams/Skype, telephone, and the internet due to the COVID-19 pandemic and included ten semi-structured open-ended questions designed to reveal the participants' experiences and perceptions of peacebuilding in BiH as well as their coping strategies, queer activism, reflections on ethnically divided communities, and the challenges they experience. Since I interviewed 25 participants online, the dynamics of the interviews changed overtime. Due to the 7–8-hour time difference, I received last-minute cancellations as participants had different priorities or some emergencies came up, so we had to reschedule them. For example, I had a few participants who rescheduled their interviews more than five times which was a challenge for me. Some days I remember waking up at 5:00 A.M to conduct the scheduled interview, and I received a cancellation instead.

I also realized how my sleeping habits had changed overtime as I conducted interviews at different times like 3:00 or 4:00 AM in the morning, or 11:00 PM at night. These online research practices were critical for me as a researcher because those who conduct interviews miss one of the most important issues in that for participants the research projects are not the biggest priority for them. Their basic needs, family emergencies, friend gatherings can be more important than a researcher's project. For some participants, having a safe space was critical to conduct the

interval, that said, it was the researcher's responsibility to be patient until ech participant found the right time and space to engage with me.

In addition to my interviews, I also compiled a library search of government, NGO, and EU policies, influential documents, and secondary sources that were also analyzed to provide context for the participant interviews, and to elucidate insights into what structural changes are necessary to improve queer people's conditions by hearing from various community members.

Research participants were first reached out to via email to introduce each person to the research project and to invite their involvement through collaboration with local NGOs such as the SOC and others identified by colleagues. Possible contacts included PACS faculty members, local activists, and local people living in BiH.

Data may be used in future publications, discussed in public policy forums, and conferences after the thesis has been formally completed. These intentions for the future use of data were stipulated in the consent form. All data (recordings, transcripts, web survey soft/hard copies, and completed interview schedules) will be destroyed within five years of the completion of this research study. While the semi-structured interviews covered themes that some interviewees found to be uncomfortable to discuss or that triggered illicit unpleasant memories or emotions, the risks were minimal for the respondents as they were in control of their contributions, and they could withdraw from the study or skip a question they did not wish to respond to at any time. All the research participant names are anonymized.

As a researcher who is unaffiliated with any of the BiH institutions or educators other than receiving support in recruiting research subjects, my role was simply to support research participants to tell their own stories of their experiences and perceptions. As a facilitator, I had a

bottom-up approach rather than coaching or directing them. I only asked several open-ended questions to hear more about their stories and experiences.

After the University of Manitoba Human Subjects approval, data gathering for this study commenced in the summer of 2021 by telephone/Skype/Microsoft Teams/Zoom, and the internet, and it continued for eight months. While collecting my data, the foundational chapters of the doctoral thesis were drafted including the theoretical and contextual chapters.

The data was analyzed inductively (using either Nvivo coding software tool) and it was stored in Microsoft Teams software. I have used these software tools in two previous research projects and have received training about how to best use these software tools for qualitative data analysis. Data was analyzed using a dialectical approach- relating parts to the whole in ways that captured inner tensions and explored themes.

**Participant Profiles and Research Sites**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I started interviewing my participants online via Zoom from October 2021 – May 2022. Prior to this project, I was involved in two major research projects during the pandemic, and I gained vital experience in conducting online research, which was critical for me in applying that knowledge in my research as well as being cautious about some possible challenges that I had already encountered in other projects.

In June 2022, I travelled to Bosnia to conduct the rest of the interviews (18 interviews) and met my participants that I had already interviewed. While online interviews can be perceived as a challenging component of research, I greatly benefited from them. The participants I interviewed indicated how convenient the online process was and some were either working full time, had school commitments or feared meeting me in person or they were outside of the country for certain reasons. In person interviews, on the other hand, enhanced my relationships

with each participant as I met many of them for coffee or lunch that also allowed me to ask them any follow-up questions that I had. It was critical for me to apply a community-based method as it enabled me to be in touch with my participants whether it was via email or social media tools. I was able to observe their challenges and their everyday activism via social media as they posted issues about Bosnia. This was also helpful for me as a researcher to request any information/sources related to their social media posts as it enhanced my data generation.

The research was conducted in major cities, Sarajevo, and Mostar, in BiH; however, I also interviewed a significant number of participants from cities in RS such as Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Doboj, Foća, and Prejedor, and also from other cities in the BiH Federation such as Tuzla, Bihać, Cazin, Stolac, Zenica, and the Brćko District of Bosnia. Since this research was carried out online due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, I opened the interviews to anyone who identified as a sexual and ethnic minority in BiH. The research field sites for this study were Mostar, Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Doboj, and Cazin. The reason these sites were chosen for the study is due to their populations. Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Mostar are some of the most populated ethnically mixed cities in BiH, and Doboj and Cazin are less populated cities.

That said, some organizations assisted me. The SOC is an independent CSO that is actively working with community members including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI) people and women through community empowerment and activist movement building in BiH. The SOC assisted me in identifying participants who participated in this study. The SOC is a well-established human rights organization in BiH, and its support was vital in the recruitment process. The SOC emailed my invitation to potential research respondents and members of the organization who could then choose to contact me if they were interested in participating in the study. Doboj and Cazin are underresearched locations, and there are fewer

opportunities for queer people who live in Doboj and Cazin to have their voices heard. My research included queer stories from both cities as well.

This study conducted semi-structured individual interviews with 43 queer community members, NGOs workers, and directors/managers working with the queer community in BiH. Queer Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats who were 18 or older were invited to participate in this research. Throughout this research, I took the role of a learner-researcher relying on participants' experiences and knowledge, and they were the focus of this research.

**Table 1 – Study Participants**

| Participant Name (Pseudonym) | Sex | Sexual Orientation | Ethnicity | Religion | Age | Location |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ana** | **Female** | **Pansexual** | **Croatian** | **Catholic** | **30** | **Sarajevo/Lives in Serbia** |
| **Luka 1** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serbian** | **Orthodox** | **26** | **RS/Lives Abroad** |
| **Mak** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **24** | **BiH** |
| **Aleksa** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serbian** | **Orthodox** | **29** | **RS/BiH** |
| **Adnan** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **35** | **Tuzla/BiH** |
| **Armin** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **23** | **BiH** |
| **Amila** | **Female** | **Bisexual** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **25** | **Mostar/BiH** |
| **Mladen 1** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Croatian** | **Catholic** | **30** | **Mostar/BiH** |
| **Emir 1** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **24** | **Sarajevo/Lives abroad** |
| **Džan** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Croatian** | **Catholic** | **23** | **BiH** |
| **Lamija** | **Female** | **Asexual** | **Bosniak** | **Non-religious (background Muslim)** | **26** | **Zenica/BiH** |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Dunya** | **Nonbinary** | **Queer** | **Bosnian** | **Non-religious (background Muslim)** | **23** | **BiH/lives abroad** |
| **Luka 2** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serb** | **Orthodox** | **27** | **RS** |
| **Strahinja** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serb** | **Orthodox** | **39** | **RS** |
| **A.K.** | **Male** | **Queer** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **30** | **BiH lives abroad** |
| **J.D.** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosnian** | **Catholic** | **39** | **Sarajevo/lives abroad** |
| **Abraksas** | **Male** | **Bisexual** | **Bosnian (Bosniak/Serb)** | **Atheist** | **31** | **Banja Luka/BiH** |
| **Namo** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosnian Serbian/ Croatian** | **Catholic/ Orthodox/a person who respect all religions.** | **32** | **Banja Luka/ BiH** |
| **Emir 2** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **36** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |
| **Mak** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **35** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |
| **Jovan** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serbian** | **Non-religious** | **22** | **Banka Luka/ Lives abroad** |
| **Keyser** | **Male** | **Bisexual** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **30** | **BiH** |
| **Amina** | **Gender Questioning** | **Queer** | **Bosnian & Herzegovinian** | **Agnostic** | **23** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |
| **Adnan 2.** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Atheist** | **42** | **BiH/Lives abroad** |
| **Marko** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serbian** | **Orthodox** | **43** | **Banja Luka/lives abroad** |
| **Ivana** | **Female** | **Lesbian** | **Serbian** | **Orthodox** | **26** | **Lives in Sarajevo but from Banja Luka** |
| **Milana** | **Female** | **Lesbian** | **Serbian** | **Orthodox** | **26** | **Lives in Sarajevo but from Banja Luka** |
| **Dino** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **18** | **Ilidža, BiH** |
| **Osman Kurtulus** | **Male** | **Bisexual** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **45** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Elena** | **Female** | **Transexual** | **Serb/Croat** | **Orthodox/ Catholic** | **71** | **RS/BiH** |
| **Jovan 2** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serb** | **Atheist/Orthodox background** | **23** | **RS/BiH** |
| **Mladen 2** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serb** | **Agnostic** | **24** | **RS/BiH** |
| **Edin** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosnian & Herzegovinian** | **Muslim** | **40** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |
| **E.** | **Female** | **Queer/Lesbian** | **Ostali Or Bosanska** | **Believe in Art (family orthodox)** | **24** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |
| **Ilma** | **Female** | **Heterosexual** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **18** | **Zenica/BiH** |
| **Damir** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Muslim** | **26** | **Tuzla/BiH** |
| **Bojan** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Serbian** | **Agnostic (orthodox Christian)** | **33** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |
| **Almas** | **Female** | **Lesbian** | **Bosniak** | **Culturally Muslim** | **27** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |
| **Aida** | **Female** | **Lesbian** | **Bosniak & Bosnian & Herzegovinian** | **A believer** | **53** | **Sarajevo/BiH** |
| **Arman** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosniak** | **Atheist** | **25** | **Tuzla** |
| **Daniela** | **Female** | **Lesbian** | **Bosnian Serbian/Croatian** | **Agnostic (Orthodox)** | **25** | **Sarajevo** |
| **Tarik** | **Nonbinary** | **Sexually fluid** | **Bosnian** | **Muslim (non-believer)** | **29** | **Sarajaevo** |
| **Zoran** | **Male** | **Gay** | **Bosnian Background Bosniak** | **Culturally Muslim** | **20** | **Mostar** |

**Data Generation**

The forty-three interviews carried out for this study were audio recorded with a digital MP3 voice recorder. After the interviews were completed, each audio/video file was uploaded

onto licensed MS Teams and were immediately erased from the voice recorder. Each interview was transcribed word for word by the primary researcher, and then the participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms that the participants chose for themselves. These names reflected their ethnic and religious background. During the transcription process, any personal identifiers, except for the respondent's ethnicity were removed.

Using a storytelling method empowered the research participants to share their authentic stories with me (Senehi, 2019). Including queer voices is important as it is critical to deconstruct heteronormativity and to normalize the queer perspective. Otherwise, heteronormativity is framed as coherent and privileged (Berlant & Warner, 2000). Through qualitative theme analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Mihas, 2019) key themes for the entirety of the interview responses were identified. Each of these themes represent a collective response by BiH's queer individuals and NGO workers who were research participants in this study regarding the critical issues, challenges, and successes regarding the queer existence in post-peace-accord BiH.

The interviewees stories consist of many lived experiences and intergenerational trauma, which resulted in hundreds of pages of transcripts. The participants' generous perspectives resulted in a wealth of data, which is immense. Chapters 5-9 highlight the critical themes that emerged from this study's data.

**Observations of the 2022 Sarajevo Pride Parade**

The third annual Pride parade took place on June 25, 2022, on Maršala Tita Street in Sarajevo, and I witnessed all the excitement when I attended it during my fieldwork. Prior to the Pride parade, I talked to a local queer person, who was also one of my participants. He said that we would meet at the train station in Mostar and travel together to Sarajevo, which was a relief for me. Although I was overexcited to join the crowd, I was nervous about being there alone.

One had to navigate the streets to get there, as there was a police presence that blocked many of the streets. Fortunately, the people of BiH were very hospitable, kind, and genuine, and I felt that in every step I took in so many places I visited. For example, on the morning of the Pride parade, as I was getting ready, I noticed that I was running late, and I panicked. The friend with whom we were supposed to go together to Sarajevo picked me up, and we both went to the train station. Even today, I am still so thankful for the help that was extended to me.

I rented an apartment for two nights in Sarajevo, which was in a central area that was nearby many places, like the Bosanski-Kulturni Centar (BKC), many bars, coffee shops, and restaurants. Before I headed to the apartment that I rented, my friend took me to his friend's house, as he had to console his friend who had just lost his parent. Before we headed there, he stopped by a supermarket to buy coffee and sugar, which were traditionally given to someone who had lost their loved ones. I was amazed to learn about this, as it was also part of my culture. However, what really surprised me the most was that as soon as we entered his friend's apartment, he said "*Bašun sagosum*" to greet him solemnly, which meant, "May your wound be healed." This is exactly the same greeting in Turkish. Thus, I, a Kurdish person, was able to experience the influence of the Ottoman Empire in Bosnia through its language, customs, and traditions. It is important to remember that some of these customs vary in Serb or Croat culture, as religion also plays a different role in maintaining distinct traditions.

His friend was so welcoming that I felt I was visiting my own friend. After chatting for a few minutes, he offered us Mexican coffee. I jokingly said, "Mexican coffee in a Bosnian household?! Unacceptable! I only drink Turkish coffee." We all laughed. He said, "Next time, Turkish coffee it is." As it turned out, he brought the coffee from Mexico the last time he visited the country. After visiting his house, my friend and I went to my Airbnb place with the friend

who took me to the train station in Mostar. He then invited his friend over. After we introduced each other, we chatted a bit and then we left the apartment to go to the Pride parade.

The parade was well organized, but the police presence was everywhere. The locals I spoke with said that it was one of the most progressive parades in BiH. Some locals reported that they couldn't march without the police presence, while others said the police presence was expected in a country like Bosnia, where homophobia was still very much alive. Indeed, the police blocked every street, and there was only one entrance to go into the street where the march was supposed to begin. Marchers first had to go through a police checkpoint before joining the Pride Committee volunteers, who welcomed us so warmly. I was a bit nervous going through the police, as I was not sure what to expect. The process, however, seemed to go smoothly. They only checked our bags and then asked us to go straight to the line where the Pride Committee was waiting for us.

As we approached the line, I noticed that the people who were there seemed to be so happy. Everyone was smiling, hugging, and helping each other as they said, "Happy Pride!" Most volunteers greeted people in English and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, which was helpful as there were also hundreds of visitors from outside of the country, although the majority of the participants were locals. We were one of the early marchers that arrived there, and so we got our bracelets on which were written "*Porodićno Okupljanje* - Family gathering." Initially, there were only 200–300 people present, but as time passed by, more and more people arrived. It was reported later that around 1,000 people joined the Pride parade on that day.

The motto of the 2023 Sarajevo Pride parade was "family gathering" (*porodićno okupljanje*) with 1,000 estimated attendees (N1 BiH, 2022). Through this slogan, the organizers aimed to emphasize the importance of family support for queer individual family members.

While some people were initially concerned about attending Pride due to some potential attacks by homophobes, it went off successfully without any incident, except for a few anti-Pride individuals who were staring at the participants outside of the park where they held the Pride party after the march.

Some participants referred to their first Pride experience as a “cathartic one,” and as the parades progressed over time, they said the community felt much safer. However, the country has a long way to go in terms of tolerance and acceptance for queer people.

This photo is taken by Mehmet Yavuz during the 2022 Sarajevo Pride Parade.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data in this research were analyze inductively. During the field research, I also committed to take field notes, which further helped me to analyze my data. After 10 interviews, I transcribed and analyzed them to establish my next goals for the research. While I realized it was an early call to make such a decision, the initial data analysis was critical for me to establish whether the data quality and breadth corresponded to the research goals and questions. Further data gathering was significantly important, and I realized that after getting different perspectives from my first 15 interviews, and when I completed my 38$^{th}$ interview, that the subsequent interviews did not provide any further information that was useful as I had reached data saturation.

An interconnected analysis of the interviews assisted me in identifying the differences and similarities between the transcripts. As grounded theory inquiries point out, the new data makes more sense when it is compared with the existing data to facilitate coding and further understanding the goals of the study based on the available data (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, enabled me to code, analyze, and compare my data, which was a critical part of the analysis process (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Its secured system can be accessed anytime with a password. As the interviews were uploaded to Nvivo it also had an option to transcribe the audio files. Most of the interviews for this study were completed in English; however, each participant had a different accent, which was difficult for Nvivo to identify. Therefore, each interview was listened to multiple times to make sure that it was accurate and consistent. I also added my field notes as memos to Nvivo, which helped me to correspond interview transcripts together that offered a different point of view alongside my field observation notes.

As I transcribed the interviews, I interacted with the research participants, especially having constant communication with those who were very much interested in the research project. We went over some of the themes, key points, and some ongoing social or political movements/actions in BiH. All the themes that emerged were directly derived from the interviews, some key themes also had sub-themes, what some researchers call "baby themes" (Bogdan & Biklin, 2016). I then moved onto the intermediate coding, which enabled me to establish categories and the overall relationship between them (Mills, 2014). I spent a significant number of hours revisiting the coded themes that emerged inductively from the data. I also described each code in a few sentences, which prevented any overlapping between other codes. A few codes were renamed, and the transcripts were revisited because of continued overlapping. This process, however, was significantly helpful for me to have a deeper perspective of participants and their narratives that were shared during each interview.

**Ethical Considerations**

I began the research after I received the University of Manitoba's ethics approval. Each research project requires ethical practices to ensure that any harms and risks are minimized, and respect, anonymity, and privacy are maximized by the researcher. The role of the researcher is not only to go and generate the information but to also respect and appreciate the enormous information, teaching, and collaboration that local community members offer to the researchers (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Hande & Yavuz, forthcoming). As a community-based researcher, it is important for me to consider local expertise, social and cultural responsibility, as well as integrity. These critical values and steps create a meaningful environment both for the researcher and the participants to actively collaborate but also receive feedback as the writing progresses so that the locals can be part of the process (Paris & Twain, 2014). In other words, as Senehi (2020)

so succinctly put it, “writing with people rather than about them” (p. 49). Therefore, trust, mutual respect, and fairness are vital in the ethical research study that I strictly followed.

Ethics also make sure that researchers are held accountable and this assurance (by providing ethics approval to interviewees) helps participants to decide whether to be involved in the research study (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Since hearing people’s stories can be emotional and difficult for participants to express themselves, I made sure that each participant received a list of emotional/health/support organizations before the interview process began. This support included providing them with a list of queer organizations, and counselling and mental health resources. While this was an important step for institutional ethics, the participants did not seem to be too excited about these resources as they were already aware of them. Based on my experiences as a researcher, the participants really wanted to build that trust-relationship with me and to continue the dialogue even after our interviews were completed. As a community-based researcher, it was crucial for me to build that relationship with them for future interaction but also to appreciate the further insights they continually offered without expecting anything in return. During each interview, I was also aware of the need to ensure pauses, breaks, and emotional check-ins so that participants would have enough time to process their emotional needs.

**Confidentiality**

Due to COVID-19 (and the University of Manitoba JFREB ethics policies), a field component at first was not an option. Consequently, I utilized telephone, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Survey Monkey/Qualtrics, email, and the internet to conduct the research. The benefits of using internet-based research methods include discretion and confidentiality through using encrypted software tools (Babbie, 2020). It was also important to reach out to community members who

lived far away from where I would be able to do the research in person. Therefore, online options provided an opportunity for participants to access the questions and share their stories easily. I used some software tools while conducting the research online to make sure that all the information was kept confidential. In case of any concerns, I suggested that my research participants downloaded the Signal software so that their conversations could be encrypted. However, none preferred that option with some instead, reaching out to me via Whatsapp's encrypted option.

The digital recruitment poster was accompanied by a project description with more detailed information about the research project. The interviews were in English for those who spoke English and in the BiH languages (Serbian/Bosnian/Croatian) for those who felt more comfortable speaking in their native languages. Interpreters were provided for participants who were told that the interpreter and I would be present during interviews. Before the interviews commenced, each participant was notified about their option to choose either Canadian-based or BiH-based interpreters to avoid any uncomfortable situations for them. The participants were also told that the interpreter would be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement form to ensure that the participant's data is kept discreet and confidential. Any transcriptionists or translators who would access interview recordings or transcripts before they have been stripped of identifying information would be required to sign the Confidentiality Agreement as well. After the interviews were recorded and completed, the data were digitized and uploaded to Microsoft Teams. The recordings were securely deleted from all recording devices/software applications and my notes were shredded and uploaded to Microsoft Teams.

If a participant chose to contact me or the interpreter for more information about participating in the study, they had the opportunity to discuss the project in more detail with

either the interpreter or myself. The research participants were asked to provide informed consent before they participated in each interview. The consent form explicitly communicated the rights of the research participants who could discontinue their participation or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty (and their data would be shredded/deleted). It was written in the consent form that their participation was completely voluntary. Participants were also sent an electronic copy of the consent form via email before the interview commenced.

Before the interview started, the participants were reassured that they could withdraw from the study during the interview and/or within 6 months after the interview without penalty. Participants were reminded of the possibility of withdrawing immediately after the interview was complete and again before the six months window had passed, especially if the participants' benefits or risks of involvement changed in any way. The participants were also reassured before and during each interview that they could choose not to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable about answering without penalty. The participants were also provided with their own copy of the consent form, which included contact information for individuals that they could get in touch with should they have concerns, questions, or a desire to withdraw from the study. The University of Manitoba's JFREB contact information was included as well.

**Challenges and Limitations of the Study**

I found myself both as an insider and outsider during the research process. Although I am well aware of some of the dynamics of this ethnic conflict drawn from my lived experiences, I recognized the necessity for having a more comprehensive insight during my field work. Feeling insider and outsider makes the researcher revisit their positionality. As Mills (2014) explains, it can be challenging for one to separate oneself "from a participant in the generation of data" (ch. 7, para. 20). As a researcher I have lived and experienced ethnic conflict in a similar context, so I

found myself to be in a position where I was not able to separate myself from the study findings. Rather than seeing this as a challenge, this position was important for me to fully draw a picture based on the participants reflections.

At the beginning of my interviews, I found that one of the key issues was the language barrier, not a barrier to communicating with participants but mostly in transcribing the interviews. Every time a participant mentioned a region or neighborhood, I had to ask them to spell it out, so the recorder would recognize it. Even during the transcription process, it was a challenge as I had to google some of the names that some participants did not spell out during their interviews.

Ninety percent of the participants had no issue with speaking and conversing in English, and indeed some even sounded like native speakers as they would say that they started learning the language at a very young age. Due to the post-war environment in BiH, most participants that I had interacted with wanted to connect with the world and learning English was one of the tools to break the isolation. However, homophobia is very much alive in BiH, so that a few participants who could have used the interpretation services that I offered refused even though I had to clarify that the interpreters would be Canadian living in Canada. Marginalized communities living in violent conflict zones are traumatized and are very suspicious of outsiders as they are always on a hair trigger of anxiety (Smyth & Robinson, 2001). Although those interviews went well, as a researcher, I felt that the informants could have been more vocal if they had access to an interpreter.

I realized that purposive and snowball sampling complemented each other during the recruitment process. While purposive sampling relies on specific characteristics of selected interviewees, the incorporation of snowball sampling was helpful for recruiting a diverse group

of people (Babbie, 2020). When I started the recruitment, I thought that I would only recruit participants through the NGOs/CSOs, however, I found that most of the participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which was an efficient sampling process.

**Project Dissemination**

Disseminating project results is a moral responsibility to the participants who trust researchers to share their stories, narratives, joys, challenges, and trauma. It is also essential for the grounded theory methodology to make an impact in the community and such an impact cannot be done only through the academic journals, but it rather goes beyond the institutional platforms to make sure key stakeholders as well as community members are informed about the findings and future research plans (Mills, 2014).

Theory without practice and vice versa cannot happen, especially in the PACS field as both must inform each other for a better practical, theoretical, and scientific inquiry (Höglund & Öberg, 2011; Sandole, 2009). The findings of this research will be disseminated in the form of a report to participants as a blind copy as well as CSOs/NGOs who are particularly working on these issues. It is also imperative to share the findings with policymakers, ensuring that they can integrate them into their work. The report was also sent to BiH's political parties for their consideration. The summary did not contain any identifying or sensitive information that might put the participants at risk. Following these distributions, engaging in further discussions with recipients led to future plans and strategies.

**Conclusion**

This research offered a perspective in understanding the everyday challenges for the LGBTQIA+ community, CSOs/NGOs, as well as activists living in BiH. I also critically explored what social

justice, peacebuilding, and activism looked like for the queer community and how they enhance their existing conditions. To further investigate their stories about post-peace-accord BiH, a grounded theory methodology was employed, which offered a comprehensive examination of everyday experiences. The following four chapters discuss (1) challenges to everyday coexistence practices, (2) structural violence and post-war memories, (3) activism and resistance despite internal and external homophobia, (4) reconciliation, and in the last chapter, (5), I offer implications for theory and practice. These sections represent four primary themes derived from the data generated through interviews with the study's participants.

## Chapter Five: Challenges to Everyday Coexistence Practices

### Introduction

Chapter five examines the theme of the contested notions of coexistence that emerged strongly from the participants' stories, experiences, and everyday challenges in their communities. Specifically, it explores their images of the Dayton Agreement, apartheid in BiH, and intergenerational trauma. Their narratives emphasize systemic division issues, such as the two schools under one roof system, the elite instrumentalization of ethnoqueer identities through the DPA, divided neighborhoods, and a lack of urgency to protect queer rights. For the most part, participants expressed their concerns over divisive policies, neighborhoods, and a school system that leaves no opportunity for communities to coexist.

First, a parallel is drawn between a discussion of queer people's perceptions of coexistence challenges in general. This parallel comes in the form of examining queer people's connections to the political apparatus and how this apparatus has influenced their everyday socializations in queer spaces. Thus, a specific conversation is built between the role of the two schools under one roof system and the impacts of intergenerational trauma on the impact of queer people and their family members. The Chapter concludes with a discussion of distrust, prejudice, and bias within BiH's queer community and the three ethnic groups and its impact on queer socialization. Finally, six key findings are generated from the data to reflect the perspectives of BiH's queer community.

While Bosnia today has a system of segregation, it holds different historical contexts compared to apartheid places like South Africa or Occupied Palestine. Apartheid refers to a system of institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination based on policies, procedures, and mistreatment of individuals. This system was characterized by policies that sought to

maintain a White minority rule and suppress the rights of the Black majority population. In contrast, BiH has a complex history of ethnic and religious diversity, which has been a source of both conflict and coexistence. BiH is a multiethnic state, with three main ethnic groups, namely Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Croats, and Serbs.

In the 1990s, these groups were involved in a violent conflict that lasted for several years and resulted in the deaths of thousands of people. BiH's conflict was not based on racial segregation but rather on ethnic and religious differences. While there were instances of discrimination and violence between the ethnic groups, there were also examples of coexistence and cooperation. For example, the city of Sarajevo, which was one of the epicentres of the conflict, had a long history of diversity and tolerance before the war, which is discussed later.

**Dayton Peace Agreement as a Trap that Would Fail**

After the three-year-war in BiH, the parties finally signed the DPA to end one of Europe's most violent wars. Although the DPA provided a significant opportunity for the communities to construct a new state based on the rule of law, freedom, democracy, and human rights, "it has not been able to create a civic identity, a well-functioning state or democracy, or the strong implementation of human rights" (Swimelar, 2016, p. 175). The DPA established a federal state consisting of two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which is mainly populated by Bosniaks and Croats, and the Republika Srpska (RS), which is mainly populated by Serbs. The agreement also established a central government with a rotating presidency that includes one representative from each of the three main ethnic groups. Although it is a crucial document that marked the end of the war, communities believe that the DPA created more divisiveness, and it failed to address the underlying issues that continue today, such as political corruption and inequality.

Bosniaks and Croats largely attend ethnically segregated schools, and places of worship, and live in sectarian neighborhoods. There are almost no opportunities for Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats to socialize and spend some time understanding and embracing each other. Post-peace accord societies face *institutionalized unpredictability* (see Celebicic, 2017) with poor economic conditions while they are asked to accord and coexist together as Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. The new generation also faces unemployment, exclusion, a lack of education opportunities, and poor economic and political conditions. Among the youth, queer people specifically feel disenfranchised from society and face discrimination, violent attacks, and exclusion (Kajevska, 2016; Selmić, 2016; Swimelar, 2016, 2017, 2019; Sarajevo Open Centre, 2019) and this leads to a resurgence of conflict and violence.

Although most participants from each ethnic group agree that the DPA was a failed experiment, Bosniaks grew up with a different story about the departure of the agreement. This is what Lamia had to say on the issue:

> I grew up with the story that the peace treaty came forth at a very bad time for us, Bosniaks, because it came when we were the strongest, and it came when we were just marching in Banja Luka. Serbs weren't as strong as they were…. Even though we thought of Aliya Izzet Begovich, the president back then, as [a] hero, we were not really happy because we could have won and not stop everything because of the treaty.

Dunya also considers Bosnia to be completely locked in a negative peace. Although Bosniaks acknowledged that the DPA stopped the conflict, it did not do any further good for them. Dunya does not see the nation moving toward positive peace but rather remaining in a deep crisis:

> But the problem is that 30 years later, we're still in a deep crisis. We're in a complete blockade, and there is no way to go forward with this sort of constitutional frame. There is no [way], because for me, the first and the most important thing is that this Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) solidifies these ethnic differences [and] solidifies differences alongside ethnic lines, which is just as a stick [or] as an idea. It's just false. It should not be solidified. It should be eradicated from people's minds [and] from people's mentality. It's just so destructive; you cannot live in one country like this. So, now, we need to rethink this.

Similarly, J.D. also considers the DPA to be destructive to the future of the country and supports its abolishment, as it has created more corruption and an unpredictable future for BiH people.

BiH has a very complex political system that includes multiple levels of government and several branches, and this creates an illusional peace that prevents officials from easily making decisions. While one might argue that democracy requires a thrilling decision-making process, the DPA system requires a country of four million to be governed by three presidents and so many prime ministers. J.D. expresses his frustration with the governmental system, and he wants the DPA to be completely abolished, calling it "crap."

> We should choose our political leaders based on their competence, and we should have one President […] We have over 500 ministries. The DPA is a rubbish. It's nonsense. It's stupidity. Why do you need three Presidents or so many ministries for a country of four million?
>
> I mean, New York is managed with one mayor. Like so many millions of people, all are living in New York. And here in Bosnia, you need to have 10 cantons, a federal government, the government of the Republic Srpska, governments of Bosnia-Herzegovina, then presidency, and a federation. Come on!
>
> I mean, the only positive thing [about the DPA] is that the war and the bloodshed was stopped.

Some participants see the DPA as a trap that entrenches ethnic divisions and perpetuates instability in BiH. One of the main criticisms of the DPA is that it institutionalized ethnic divisions by creating a federal state consisting of two entities: the Federation of BiH and the RS, each with its own government and president. J.D. emphasizes the lack of reconciliation in the system that the DPA created:

> If we want to kill each other, let's kill each other and finish the job, and then let's do something good for the next generation. Bosnia is completely trapped, and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Even some friends and family members who have nice jobs want to move and come to Germany. They are fed up. Thousands of people are leaving the country every year.
>
> So, that's the signal that the DPA is rubbish. It should cease to exist. It's very dangerous to make so-called ad hoc decisions, right decisions in the moment, and I think that the DPA was a product of a lot of ad hoc decisions [and] that they had to be reviewed. Every single [instance of] reviewing those ad hoc decisions

> cost a lot of money, a lot of effort, and a lot of political tension, and that brought nothing to our people.

There have been various critiques of the U.N.'s involvement in BiH during and after the war, including the failure to prevent the war, a slow response to the conflict, complicity in war crimes, and failure to promote reconciliation.

Almost all the participants agree that the DPA did nothing good but end the war in BiH—except Emir 2, a U.N. worker who challenged this narrative:

> The peace agreement was designed as a stopgap measure, with an actual expectation on both the designers and signatories that it would last only a few years [and] that a country would dissolve after that. However, the peace agreement has been functioning for the past 25 years, and a lot of progress has been made to mend ties or make this country function, despite the odds, [with] the way that it is designed. It is literally a global example of how not to set up postwar reconstruction.
>
> You know how Kosovo is? Obviously, they're using every available ounce of energy not to repeat the mistakes of the peace agreement in Kosovo by instituting executive authorities and lower data central [sic] levels of the breadth and extent that the Republika Srpska has. So, in most regards, [the] peace agreement has been able to secure peace, [but] it has to be reformed and transformed, and we have to outgrow it. It's just [that] we're still at a halt. We still don't know how.

I was impatiently curious about the perspectives of a U.N. worker and asked Emir 2 on a scale of one to 10, how would they rate the success of the DPA in terms of bringing peace to Bosnia. Emir 2 said the rate would be 10.

> It's been an epic success. So, what is the alternative [for those who don't see the DPA working]? If it's not working, then we will be having mass graves […] We stopped having mass graves by decree, not because we had enough [but] it was just because someone said, "Fine, let's stop!"[…] It's stifling growth, but it's still maintaining peace, and if it weren't for that, then we would have ethnic cleansing all over again at this very moment. [This is] because the DPA was adopted literally just after the Srebrenica genocide happened. So it's not like there was some, you know, epiphany moment there was let me go. Right?

In contrast, Armin believes that a peace agreement is signed to institutionalize reconciliation, prosperity, and sustainable peacebuilding to strengthen democracy. However, none of these

critical elements were built into Bosnia. Armin has doubts about it as he believes that everyone goes in "a wrong direction today."

> People start to fight, people start to hate each other, and everything comes from that paper. You know, it's just a piece of paper […] You know, it's some sort of kind of black magic, I should say. Yeah, black magic is the correct answer I can possibly give to you. Like, you see, people are hating each other. People are judging each other too much. People can't stand other ethnic groups, and I started to doubt, like, what the hell is actually happening?

Abraksas noted that people have become used to the DPA, reminding the participant of the boiling frog syndrome.

> They disagreed that the DPA brought peace:
>
> I wouldn't say it because I was born into this. This is like Stockholm syndrome. Like, I was never out of the basement, so I don't know how it is. Yeah, but I would say that there are always some tensions.

The DPA continues to lead to uncertainties for communities, which has also created an apartheid school system. Instead of bringing people together in a peaceful society, it has divided the people more than ever, as participants hardly see any light at the end of the tunnel if at all.

**Apartheid School: Two Schools Under One Roof**

While BiH has experienced conflict based on ethnic and religious differences, it is different than the apartheid in South Africa, as it was based on race and involved various forms of segregation and discrimination. However, BiH maintains the most visible example of discrimination in education through the creation of a school system called "two schools under one roof." Such a school system was established as a temporary measure to address the postwar ethnocentric education system (Kosic & Byrne, 2008; Kosic & Senehi, 2009). This temporary solution has become permanent, and it has exacerbated the conflict, which has become systemic (OSCE, 2018).

The concept of "two schools under one roof" refers to a system of education where students from different ethnic or religious backgrounds attend the same school yet are separated into different classes and taught different curricula (Marijan, 2017). These schools were specifically established/enforced in places where the ethnic tensions were heightened, such as in Mostar (Cardzic & Byrne, 2007). While this education system has impacted the entire community, it has created different layers in an already tension-filled environment where heteronormativity is blessed through a divisive ethnocentric curriculum, class discussion, and socialization.

The queer community has expressed its concerns about the two schools under one roof system, as it reinforces segregation and prevents coexistence in communities. Dunya expresses their concerns as follows:

> Oh, I think I knew from primary school because the moment you enter primary school, I was one of the subjects. One of the classes was [the] Croatian language, you know, and the guy next door was studying Bosnian, you know.
>
> So, of course, from the first moment, and I don't know when this is kind of crystallized in my head, but pretty early, I think maybe 6th grade of primary school, I was like, "This is bullshit. Don't we all speak the same language?" I asked myself.

Communities decide their schools based on their future plans. Catholic schools play a critical role, as they typically offer a curriculum aligned with the Croatian state curriculum. Students who consider studying in Croatia, an EU member state, go to schools that align with the Croatian education curriculum, making their transition smoother. These types of schools especially attract people who have family roots in Croatia or those who come from mixed marriages. Like other Croatian participants, Dunya also had the same reason for attending the Croatian (Croatia) curriculum-integrated school. Her family had the idea that if she goes to that type of school, then

afterward, if she wants to pursue education in Croatia, she would not have any problems. She would also enrol in a university in Croatia free of charge.

J.D. also shares his experience of being educated in such a school system where the students' declaration of their choice of language is a big deal because it provides more opportunities for the students to enter better middle and high schools:

> I think I was in elementary school or so. After I finished elementary school, my teacher asked me what I would want her to write as my language, and then I spoke with my parents, and they agreed. Okay, maybe it would be better to write the Croatian language because I wanted to finish a Catholic school in Sarajevo, and we thought it would be better. But all three languages are the same, with minor grammatical differences.

When the war started in 1992, the schools were divided according to the military positions and frontlines, and the army in charge of the area managed the curriculum (Torsti, 2009). Bosnian Serb–controlled areas began utilizing the Serbian curriculum, while Bosnian Croat–controlled areas used the Croatian curriculum (Torsti, 2009). A new Bosnian curriculum was developed in the areas under the control of the Bosnian state army (Torsti, 2009). Several schools during the war shut down or experienced difficult conditions; however, education was used as a political weapon, as it was considered a powerful agent of Yugoslav state communism.

The DPA, which is discussed later in the Chapter, institutionalized the wartime educational division, which continued for many years. According to Annex 6 (Agreement on Human Rights), "The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (the 'Parties')" regulated "the right to education" under Article I: Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (OSCE, n.d). However, each party's position on education divided the communities more than ever. Terminologies such as "us vs. them" were used in textbooks, creating societal security dilemmas, discrimination, and otherness between the three main ethnic groups (Torsti, 2009).

Mehmedalija compares the apartheid school system with racial separation in American history. He criticized the Western world for supporting the emergence of this perceived apartheid system in BiH:

> Imagine separating kids because of their ethnicity, so they cannot be in touch with each other. It reminds me of one part of American history: when you were Black, you were not allowed to go to the cinema. As long as you are on the corner of the cinema, you cannot mix with White people.
> It is happening now in Bosnia, and I hope that Western people will understand such racism, nationalism, and fascism. That was happening in their parts, in their systems, 50–100 years ago. It is happening in Bosnia now, and the Western world is supporting it and telling us, "Your children should not be friends with Croat children." They are telling this to us.

These divisive educational policies also impact the entire community and children's socialization.

During my visit to BiH, I met many young people who never had a chance to go to the east side of Mostar. The west side is populated with Croatian Bosnians, and the east side with Bosniaks. Some parents forbid their children to go to the east/west side of Mostar. Some families make extra efforts to make sure that their children are unaware of such divisiveness, yet they make up a small minority of the population. One participant calls this divisiveness a "well-known invisible border." Schools are used as the most effective tool for institutional segregation, and once communities are taught these divisive ideologies at schools, it creates more conflicts within a protracted conflict that enforces otherness. Dunya never had friends from other communities because of institutionalized segregation. She highlights the importance of schools and how devastating the current system is for the country:

> If you do not meet friends at school, well, you probably won't meet them anywhere else. Maybe at the park… Even the city is kind of divided along ethnic lines. There's a Muslim side, and there is a Catholic side. So growing up, it wasn't really possible. I know for my older sister, the sibling, [she] went to a music school, which was the only music school in the region. And so it had to be

> mixed, right? So it was the only one. So she had a completely different experience because she had the chance to interact with many different people.

Dunya also believes that the current school system was deliberatively created to divide communities, so they would not reconcile. Through the two schools under one roof system, students are learning the same history with different narratives, depending on their ethnic background, and Dunya questions such a system: "It is ludicrous. How can we go into the same building, where on one floor, we are teaching Croatian, and on the second floor, we are teaching Bosnian?" Like other participants, she also believes that the school system is all part of the deeper agenda of keeping different groups apart.

> First of all, it is the same language. Let's start with that. You are born in the same place, same town, etc. You use the same words that come out of your mouth, and you are still dividing us along these lines. And it is just crazy that it is legal! It is insane that they keep justifying it by saying, "We have different systems or different histories." We have the same history, baby. You want to tell it in a different way. You want to tell your own story, your own agenda. At school, I mostly learned about Croatia's history or geography. Our books have a little bit of text about Bosnia, but I am from Bosnia! The school system in BiH is the most destructive, the most horrible thing that is currently legalized in our country.

Some community members, such as Luka 2, are lucky, as they were not exposed to any biases toward other community members because their parents were living with people from other communities before the war. His parents never expressed any frustration about these people. Prior to the war, they were living in a city where the majority were Bosniaks (85 percent), but during the war, their house was bombed, so they had to leave for Serbia. His family mentioned nothing negative to him about Bosniaks or Croats because he was always taught that "ordinary people are not guilty in this war." After five years of the war, his mother saw her Bosniak neighbors for the first time, and "they [mother and her friend] cried like a baby. It was too emotional for friends who got separated."

Similarly, Strahinja says that he was never brainwashed by his parents, but he was not exposed to other ethnicities. He said he is grateful for his parents' socialization process because growing up, he never heard biased stories about other communities. The stories he was exposed to were peaceful and were about coexistence, such as how they lived together with other communities and their good friends were from other ethnic groups in Yugoslavia. However, Strahinja 's neighborhood was not as peaceful as his family's. He grew up in a neighborhood that was narrow-minded, stating, "If you don't have a Serbian first or last name, that was an excuse for them to discriminate against you."

Social events, according to Strahinja, also lead to a societal security dilemma, which created distrust among community members. When a negative event, such as robbery or assault, happens, it creates more fear, and each community finds a scapegoat. There was an incident in Banja Luka, from where Strahinja was born. A young woman from the community was assaulted, and the perpetrator allegedly left a cross mark and a knife on her body. No one knows who did it, however it was rumoured and perpetuated that it was a Bosniak man. Eventually, families advised their children not to socialize with Bosniaks. Strahinja says that "sometimes certain people bring and put fear into the community," and it affects their behavior.

> We are 10–15 minutes [by bike] from the border of the federation, and they have a huge public pool. During that summer, I wanted to go there with my bike. My parents gave me the money to go there. It was a Muslim community, and I remember [that] a neighbor saw me with a backpack and asked where I was going. When I told him that I was going to the pool in that Bosniak town, he was outrageous and said, "Are you mad? Are you crazy? Why are you going there? You want to get killed?" Nevertheless, I went there.
>
> When I got there, I looked at the people who were around 14-16, and I was like, "But they are humans like me." The only difference was that I had the cross, and they had the moon and the star. Some of them were in shape; some were out of shape. Some of them were black, and some were yellow. I honestly never judge people. I just couldn't recognize that they were Muslim; they were like me. The only difference was that I had a Serbian accent. I remember getting French fries with my accent. They just looked at me and smiled. That's it.

Even some family members who are more liberal and open-minded can have unconscious biases. Milana reflects on an experience when her family questioned why her brother chose his girlfriend. She was shocked when she discovered her parents' attitude toward her brother's girlfriend who was Bosniak. Eventually, Milana and her brother addressed these biases within the family, recognizing that even in a close-knit family, it can be challenging to overcome such prejudices.

Some family members have harsher expectations and do not want their children to be in contact with other groups at all. Mladen 1's parents' attitude toward other ethnic groups was like others,' and these negative attitudes prevents communities from coexisting in shared spaces. His father refers to Bosniaks as Turks, which is a derogatory term. Men make decisions for families and determine the rules. Out of 43 interviews I conducted, 41 participants' fathers did not want either their wives or children to hang out with people from different ethnic groups. Mladen 1's father also forbade him from being friends with Bosniaks. Men's destructive patriarchal influences shape the way families think of other ethnic groups. Mladen 1's mother also advised Mladen 1, "Don't do drugs, and don't be friends with Bosniaks." He says his mom somehow equated these options with "bad habits": no drugs and no friendship with Bosniaks, and these notions have passed from one generation to another.

These dynamics create hidden walls all around BiH, and the notion of apartheid becomes more visible in every aspect of life when communities go to the ethnically segregated schools and hospitals and live in different neighborhoods. Some families still live with fear inspired by the war, and most participants are experiencing intergenerational trauma that cause them grief, hatred, mental health issues, and more.

Almost 80 percent of my participants who are relatively younger aged between 18-40, indicated that Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats share the same destiny, as they have a similar historical backgrounds and cultures, and they all are in this "dysfunctional economics and politics", yet they are also separated along ethnic lines.

> ALEKSA: So we are all together in this… and we all have the same problems. So I never saw any Bosniak or Croat in Bosnia or somebody that is not familiar to me. Because I think people in Bosnia are not really religious. If you ask them, they will say yes, they are religious, but that's not quite true because of communism. I think we don't really participate in a religious way of living. So, there is no such difference between a way of living from Bosniak, Serb, and Croat. That's my point of view… I never felt any difference. Of course, you have a different name, or you are going to a church or mosque or whatever. But there wasn't really something that was very strange to me… And I believe that this is the case for the other sides.

Coexisting in the public sphere is quite challenging because communities do not share the same space. Mostar is a small city of 113,169 people, and it has so many coffee shops for people to socialize together. As one of my participants said, "everything starts with coffee and ends with coffee." However, each ethnic group socializes in its own ethnically divided neighborhood. During my field research in Mostar, I met many young people who had never visited the historical Mostar Bridge. This was a shocking moment for me, as there are many bars, restaurants, and small shops located there. I had to ask, "What else would one do if one doesn't go to the Old Bridge? What are the ways in which younger people can coexist in these spaces so that they can build a common ground for the future?" Strahinja was nine years old when he met someone for the first time who was from a different ethnic background. It was a national competition in physics and chemistry when he was in elementary school. Strahinja met many Croats, Bosniaks, and Jews for the first time in his life and recounts his joys from that experience:

> I couldn't wait to get in contact with them afterward and, you know, to have a friend named, for example, Ahmed or Adnan or Mohammed or whatever. And honestly, I mean going back to 1999, people always described or labelled people: "Don't be friends with Bosniaks or Muslims; they are not nice. Don't be friends with Croats. They did this and that. Don't be friends with Gypsy people."
>
> And I was always like, "Oh damn, I mean I want to be friends with them. If they are nice to me, they are good to me, I don't see a problem." Honestly, I couldn't wait to get into a relationship. I mean, to have a friendship with someone, you know, to be in contact to stay close, or to chat with them.

He notes that it was amazing to see many people from all over the country, from Tuzla to Sarajevo and Mostar.

Contrary to Strahinja, A.K. comes from a mixed family, meaning that they have family members married to people from other ethnic groups. Those who live with other ethnic groups tend to be more accepting because they celebrate everything together, which seems to allow for greater tolerance. A.K. never distinguished between any of the religious holidays, as they said that they have celebrated all of them since they were little. During one of the Eid celebrations, A.K. was at a big Muslim event, and they realized that there were other ethnic groups within their family:

> I think from a young age, there is this whole idea of visiting the neighbors for their respective holidays… You know, you are a child, you are trying to understand the language, you are trying to understand human relations, many different things. During one of my neighbors' Easter, I remember there was this elder Catholic lady in our neighborhood who would make eggs for the children. It's pretty common practice in Bosnia.
>
> On that day, I remember saying the equivalent of Eid Mubarak that is used in Bosnia, which comes from the Turkish way of pronouncing it. It's called *Bajram Šerif Mubarek Olsun*. I would say this to everyone at the family gathering, [and] some people and children would smile at me or sort of laugh at it. And I was like, why don't they reply. Eid Mubarak? So then I realized at some point that some from my family are from so-called mixed marriages. That is why I never distinguished it.

People's coexistence realizations vary depending on their ethnic background, family, the educational level of their family members, and the school they attend.

Jovan 1 was 10 years old when he realized that his ethnic group was not the only one in BiH. He was quite surprised when he heard another language spoken in the country:

> For the first time I realized that there's someone else called Bosniaks was when I watched TV, and there is this show where they help kids with homework and stuff. They would do 15 minutes of mathematics, 15 minutes of biology, etc. After some time, the presenter went like, "Okay, we are proceeding to the Bosnian language." I was like, "Whoa, what does that even mean?" because I speak Serbian. That was the time I realized that [the existence of other ethnic groups]. Then I asked my parents, and they said, "They are Muslim." I didn't even realize that there is a country called Croatia. I thought we were all in the same country.

While Jovan 1's experience with other ethnic groups was limited if at all, his encounters pushed him to think more critically about them.

Mehmedalija also believes that the communities have lived peacefully for years and there is a great chance to continue that with deep reconciliation and coexistence. When I asked about the possibility of coexisting, he got frustrated and sighed, saying, "We always get such questions as if we never lived together." Mehmedalija has noticed how people get in touch more often in larger cities, as he finds people there are more liberal, but he continues to provide evidence of how people used to live or have lived next to each other for years:

> My hometown is Bugojno, and 22 km [after] is Gornivak, which is a smaller town. Every 500 metres or 1 km, you have one village, and each one of them is lined as a Bosniak or a Croat village. It's a big mixture. And of course, people will get in touch in 20 to 30 years. They will, you know, sell a car from this person or will buy a car from that one. For example, in Prozor, we have one Imam who is a Muslim religious leader in one local community, and he drives a few Catholic grandmothers to church every Sunday.

Most participants, especially young people, shared similar stories to emphasize such harmony. Mehmedalija continues to speak about this issue in the following manner:

> Less than a year ago, [there was this] one Imam from Gornji Vakuf. In this town that is 20 kilometres south of me, he had a car accident, and he went from the road into the river. One person who happened to be a Bosnian Croat who was

> living abroad but on holiday here in a car saw him, and he stopped to save him. So how come one says people can't live together? They absolutely can.
>
> Another example is in the town of Bilij, which is near the border with Montenegro. There is one woman. She is a Serbian Orthodox, and when it's Ramadan, she always goes to the mosque to play the *ezan* [call to prayer] because in that village, there are no more Muslims. You know that is a beautiful soul.

Mehmedalija also shares another story from the town of Foča, noting that the town is famous because "the most disgusting crimes happened there." Bosnian girls and women were imprisoned at a hotel in Foča, and many were exploited and raped by the RS's Serbian army. During that period, the army also destroyed one of the largest mosques in Bosnia. One Serbian woman saw a Quran on the ground, and she took that home and hid it for years. She did not tell her husband or anyone. When the Bosniak community rebuilt that mosque a few years ago, she went to Gorenje, which is a Federation Bosnian Muslim majority town, and returned the Quran. Mehmedalija considers this the best example of "how people can live together and how good people are on every side but it's always politics because politics here is really corrupt and deep. Otherwise, communities can live together when [the right] conditions are created." Mehmedalija continues to articulate how Bosniak neighbours help Croat and Serb neighbours to rebuild their places of worship:

> In the city of Cazin, I know that Bosnian Muslims built the Serb Orthodox Church. In one town in Montenegro where Bosnian Muslims are the majority, they also built one church like that. And in Sarajevo, one business [person] built one mosque, and I don't know how much money he gave to help one church in Sarajevo. So, we have a lot of examples like that.

While the challenges to reconciliation and coexistence are apparent, there are great efforts to achieve mutual understanding for lasting peace.

There are many obstacles to reconciliation, including political corruption. As the DPA created ethnic apartheid in BiH, each political party employs its own members without qualifications when in power. Mehmedalija underscores the issue of political corruption,

denoting BiH as "the land of corruption," and highlights how it is linked to other issues. During elections, political parties trigger people's war traumas and create the fear of a potential war that creates a societal security dilemma. These triggering factors force people to support the main ethnic political parties. Mehmedalija explained:

> This is a land of corruption, you know, and it's everywhere: in hospitals and police schools, in every single building here. You can't do anything without corruption. And of course, if one political party is in government for four years, they will put their members in the state companies, you know—electric distribution or telecom organization, you know…
>
> And if, for example, [the] electric distribution [agency] wants to build some hydropower plant, they will give that job to the members of their political party or if they are making the road in one town, but those businesses [have access to] tens and hundreds of millions of dollars. And they steal a lot of money, and if they lose the elections, there is a big chance of going to prison.

Participants believe that the elected leaders engage in so much corruption based on the assumption that they will get away with it and will not be tried in courts for misdeeds.

Adnan K. mentions another challenge to coexistence namely media coverage. He notes that the media promotes war journalism, and local people buy-in to the divisive narrative perpetuated by partisan media outlets Although young people speak English fluently, those who experienced the war are more narrow-minded in thinking and are not quite open to other perspectives, as they only follow their local media. Adnan K. also argues that communities outside of BiH coexist perfectly fine; the problem occurs more predominantly in BiH, which has its own challenges:

> It's easy to say that [but] it's hard to put it in practice because… people are the way they are, and they have terrible lives. Their economic situation is terrible… There is a huge community of people in Bosnia and in Western Europe, even here in Canada… and they coexist very well… because they have other interests in their lives and… in their career… on how [to] buy a new house, to buy a new car, to get a mortgage, to put kids through a college. While in Bosnia, they don't even have any opportunity for any of that.
>
> And all they can do is sit and watch TV… Speaking of media… people in Bosnia don't have access to any foreign media because they don't speak foreign

> languages, and nobody reads anything remotely close to independent or professional journalism… What they see on TV or on the news is basically very bad journalism… most in the media are kind of supporting certain parties, certain people, most of the people in power… And it is really hard to see high-quality news. So, in that situation… it is really hard to suck it up and coexist.

Accessing the international media is quite different for young people. For example, Adnan K. mostly discusses how the older generations are stuck in their ways and just access their local partisan broadcasting networks.

In contrast, when I was in Bosnia, I witnessed how the youth does everything to break down the barriers and because the country is quite isolated, the younger generations are interested in learning different languages, and they travel to other countries for exchange programs, conferences, and youth gatherings. These experiences help the youth to be exposed to other cultures and societies. Also, 40 out of the 43 participants speak English fluently. This can be considered a gateway to Western societies, whereby most participants acquired language skills for employment opportunities or educational purposes.

**Intergenerational Trauma: PTSD and War Memories**

Intergenerational trauma in BiH is complex and a deeply rooted phenomenon that stems from people's traumatic experiences of the Bosnian war that took place between 1992 and 1995 and various earlier conflicts that occurred in the region. Post-conflict traumas are not unique to BiH but is particularly prominent due to the severity and duration of the war, which caused social, economic, psychological, and intergenerational family traumas. While earlier researchers pointed out that "the prevalence rates of PTSD, depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, and other forms of mental illness in Bosnian populations have not been extensively studied," (Goff, 2003, p. 308) this is particularly an issue within the marginalized groups in today's BiH. Almost 90 percent of the participants in this study reported the critical aspect of mental health in Bosnian

society. Participants either have experience with mental health issues themselves or have a family member who at least deals with a mental health issue.

To have sustainable peace, there must be work done toward healing the trauma resulting from violent events and when the trauma is not transformed into positive actions then it is transferred into deep violence (Funk & Berry, 2020). So-called peace is fragile in BiH, and years of peacebuilding effort is indeed required after the legacy of the war trauma. After 32 years of the war, the country is in frozen conflict without effective interventions to address the individual and collective trauma (Funk & Berry, 2020). Such trauma limits the communities individually and collectively.

Due to the stigma around mental health services, parents do not seek support and they pass their unresolved traumas from the war onto their children (Balkan Insight, 2013). As reported by almost all the participants, intergenerational trauma and PTSD are visible in society. Such trauma leads to anxiety, depression, drug abuse, and mental and physical health problems.

Luka 2 notes that they blamed their parents for many years for all the mental health issues and the unstable country that they grew up in: "At some point in my life, I was really angry at my parents because I was really affected by the way they treated me due to their own trauma." People of BiH lost their loved ones, uncles, aunties, nieces, nephews, cousins, parents, friends, and siblings. It has only been 31 years since the war ended. The wounds are open and fresh, and their trauma is reinforced by the state's nationalist policies.

After some years, however, Luka 2 realized the situation and started acknowledging their parents' circumstances:

> I think no one should live with the feeling I had because it is really bad for you and other people around you […] If I was in the position of my parents, I would probably kill myself four billion times [over].

> They are like 55, 56 years old, and they experienced the terrible war in Bosnia. My mother had two brothers in the war, and her father had his family members thinking about the fact that they could die every day for four years.
>
> There were floods in Bosnia for four days in 2017, and I was losing my mind. I wasn't able [to] watch [the] news and see people's suffering, losing their homes and everything. And I can only imagine how it is to live in a war like for four years and to know that your house in your city is on fire.

Fireworks are fun for some people. It might mean celebration or excitement; it could bring joy if you watch them, but not everyone thinks the same. Fireworks might mean trauma or could be triggering for many people in BiH. A.K. is still triggered by fireworks to this day, noting that they fail to comprehend how explosions bring joy: "I just don't see that happening, even if it is an explosion in the sky." A.K. is also triggered by the sound of a helicopter or a plane passing over because the first thought is war.

Like A.K., Abraksas's parents were traumatized by the war. Although Abraksas's father did not fight in the war due to a health issue, he had to live through it:

> The war contributed to my father's state and [his] resorting to alcohol to deal with emotions rather than [seek] therapy because it is not socially acceptable to seek psychological therapy. He resorted to that [alcohol], but he tells me he still has nightmares. They are fleeing somewhere in his dreams. My mom also has nightmares. I am sure these traumas come from wartime. You know, they were fleeing for four freaking years, fleeing for their lives, going into the basement, hiding from bombs.

The Bosnian war had a devastating impact on people's everyday peace. Bombing, shelling, and gunfire became a regular occurrence, disrupting daily routines and forcing people to either choose to flee or to be stuck in their homes. J.D. shares how the war disrupted his childhood:

> I remember it was April. It was a very, very, very sunny day. I don't know what day it was, but it must have been Saturday or Sunday because we went on a field trip with my mother and her best friend and my beloved childhood friends. We were four children and two adults. We went together to visit Trebević Mountain. It was a quite normal day.
>
> We took a bus, but we couldn't go all the way up to the hill in the mountains because the roads were blocked. And some men in some sort of military uniform asked, "Are you crazy? Go back immediately!"

> That was the moment I realized something was very wrong. Can you imagine how hard that must have felt for the bus driver? Keep in mind that it was the regular bus line. Imagine you are going to Toronto, and someone stops you in the middle of the way and says, "Go back! Are you crazy?"

Mak remembers the war; it was his first-time experiencing loss, as his dog was murdered. He states that he could not process the fact that someone would want to kill his dog. Mak paints a picture of brutality and innocence:

> What was the guilt of my dog being butchered in pieces by a grenade? I remember asking my mom questions about the reason my dog had died.
> Mother said, "He is mortal."
> And then Mak said, "Well, wait, did my dog die? Does it mean that I can die?"
> And Mother said, "Yes."
> And then I started crying because I said, "I am a child. I don't want to die. Why [do] they want to kill us? What did we do? What is our sin?"
> She said, "You know, some people are bad and evil; they don't like others. They are afraid of others, and they react to this fear by destroying something that is different than them."
> That was the time when I stopped believing in Santa Claus and all of those things. I think that was the moment I grew up.

As demonstrated above, children's experiences during the war are as traumatic as their parents. Their socialization cycle was disrupted dramatically.

Similarly, Jovan 2 shares how postwar trauma impacts their parents as if the war happened yesterday. This is what they had to say on the issue:

> I am pretty sure my dad has PTSD. He was never fully diagnosed because of our community's way of thinking and stigmatizing psychiatric diagnosis, but he was always distanced during our childhood because he was still going through [the war]. He was trying to get back to his life as much as he was able [to]. He did it as much as he could.
>
> However, as he is getting older, it is getting more visible. When he was younger, he managed to have some hobbies— [such as] working in nature—just to take his mind off things.
>
> I remember him never being patient. As he is getting older, he is [becoming] more irritable, much more anxious than he [ever] was.

Whether physically present in BiH or not and whether one fought in the war or not, postwar Bosnians are experiencing structural violence, anxiety, and PTSD, which is one of the most

common mental health issues impacting this group. Leila indicates that the worst thing, however, happened when they were in the country. When one is constantly in a state where they do not know whether war will break out or not, this triggers trauma. Leila reported on this issue as follows.

> You keep thinking about a potential war, and you don't feel safe and free. We have so many people with PTSD. It is everywhere, but we don't have good services for helping these people. People live and pass their trauma onto the younger generation. Although young people were not in the war, we can feel it from our parents' traumatic experiences. Anxiety, fear, and sadness, you feel it.

The war generated constant fear in people. Aida changed her habits after the war. She was a "control freak" before the war, needing to know every detail before she planned something. For example, Aida notes, "[If] you and I were to go out for a coffee night, I needed to know which day, which coffee bar, what you would be ordering and wearing, how long we would be staying, etc." After the war, Aida was no longer attached to material things and always needed to be in control because "the war took that away from me. I could not tell in the morning how my day would end up. I ended up living in the moment, which makes me very happy." It only took a one-centimeter piece of shrapnel for Aida to make a change.

> I lost everything with this tiny, less than one centimetre, shrapnel… It hit my room in the closet where my wardrobe was hanging… I couldn't recognize my room. I didn't know that tiny little piece of metal could do something. The first thing that I noticed was that I was not attached to stuff any longer but to memories.

Intersecting identities, such as being queer or/and being a member of the three ethnic groups, play different roles for each person. While some believe that ethnicity itself does not play much of a role within the queer community, others believe that it determines the future of people's relationships. Most people are exposed to other ethnic groups when they are in high school or university. Luka 2, a university student, mentions that he has several Bosniak and Croat friends

and that he has never felt any discrimination between the two groups. After a certain period, he decided not to present the notion of nationality that some people use in BiH to show victimization or compete with pain. Growing up as a Serb in Banja Luka was completely normal because BiH is a multinational country, at least that is what Luka 2 was convinced of, yet he also understood that is not really true because the communities are divided. Luka 2 feels uncomfortable with all the hatred on social media. He says that the community is not able to ignore that. As part of the queer community in Banja Luka, he says he was running away to identify himself as a victim, considering all the experiences queer people face. However, Luka 2 does not want to be "that guy who always plays the victim" anymore:

> After two years of going to a therapist, I came to a realization that I definitely am a victim. There is no better word than that. I know it is cliché but the main reason I was denying that I was in a role of victim because there's a lot of people are suffering, and my problems are not that big enough. This thinking caused me a lot of anxiety in my life because I was fighting with that feeling. When I was talking to my friends who were not from Bosnia about my childhood and teenage period, they were shocked and called my experience a nightmare. I thought it was a normal childhood or teenage era, but it was not.

Luka 2 notes that the saddest part of his journey was that he normalized the situation he was in BiH. He found being queer in Banja Luka particularly challenging in elementary and high school. He experienced so much bullying from his peers as his "queer visibility was too obvious." Luka 2 was "strange" to his peers because he was only socializing with his girlfriends and others were asking why he was not hanging out with the guys. Luka 2 had a valid reason—he no longer wanted to be bullied by the people he called friends:

> Find me one guy who didn't want to hit me and wanted to be my new best friend. I was definitely a victim of bullying. I remember after school, there were 20 guys following me to my home, and they were threatening me all over social media. I was brave.

When Luka 2 was 15, a group of students created a Facebook group called “We Hate Luka,” and it had a picture of him with a red cross. He then posted that page on his Facebook account and wrote “Haters make me famous.” In reality, Luka 2 did not feel that way; it was his coping mechanism. He was lucky because many people in a similar situation have committed suicide or tried to harm themselves. He saw some hate comments or hate speech when he was in high school, and he thought that they were not bit a big deal, but they indeed were.

Forty-one of the 43 participants reported experiences of bullying in different forms, leading most of them to be silent in their own queer cocoon. Strahinja noted that the bullying started immediately when he put on his sister’s Barbie bag:

> I was very young and didn’t know anything about queer, LGBT, etc. I started asking the reason people were so angry about that Barbie bag. Even though I was young, I knew that I needed to hide that part of me somewhere inside to protect myself and never let it out again.

The school structure and curriculum are also quite heterosexually oriented. As heteronormativity was embedded in every aspect of education from textbooks to class discussions.

**“Okay, I Get It but What About Us?”: War Whataboutism in Bosnia**

Whataboutism is an argumentative tactic when an individual or a group reacts to an accusation or challenging inquiry by diverting attention elsewhere (Curtis, 2022). Instead of addressing the real issue, whataboutists counter it with the “but what about us or them” question. In other words, whataboutists come forward with a counter-question through a counter accusation. The term was originated in Northern Ireland in the 1970s (“What about yah, Billy?”). In a letter to the Irish Times published on January 30, 1974, a reader named Sean O’Conaill expressed his complaints regarding the use of the tactic by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), whom he referred to as “the Whatabouts.” Three days later, the Irish journalist

John Healy wrote a column in the same newspaper discussing the same issue dubbing the tactic "Whataboutery."

Whataboutism can be used by persons, states, or politicians to deflect certain issues. For instance, during the NBC's Megyn Kelly interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin, about Russia's American election interference, Putin, instead of answering the question, used the tactic of "whataboutism" by simply discussing how "the American officials are interfering in internal election processes elsewhere." Politicians and their systems often employ such tactics for the manipulation of public opinion.

In BiH, a similar pattern emerges with the application of whataboutism in the context of genocide and war. Genocide deniers employ whataboutism as a rhetorical strategy. While there are those who do not acknowledge the existence of such a genocide, the majority accept it with the condition "but our people also suffered/died during the war. What about them?" This is a common defense strategy employed primarily by Serbs and to some extent, by Croats.

Mak is frustrated because of such a strategy:

> I think we're done with this. I just can't accept it anymore. We need to accept it, full stop. We're done with this genocide. The genocide happened. We're done with this. We need to accept everything happened, right? We have witnesses. We have sources. Yes, we need to accept it.
>
> There was a recently in Sarajevo organized commemoration of the Kazani Murders Massacre where a certain number of Serbs were killed in Sarajevo as a sort of like; you know, tooth or nail or however you say nail for a nail, tooth for a tooth experience.
>
> So that is one massacre example where it was like a payback or whatever. That was acknowledged not by the nationalist parties, but it's used by the nationalist parties. Oh, our heroes, you know, died here and so on.
>
> So, there is no more aboutism and we should start with whataboutism? You should look at Srebrenica Whataboutism? Because some of my friends who do research on genocide mass atrocities, and they say that this is a form of denial. Whataboutism is a form of denial? Whataboutism there is just know the cowardice.

Mak also urges community members to accept Srebrenica without a "but" point and move on in reconciliation.

Abraksas's statement also supports what A.K. shares as he underlines that Srebrenica is the biggest war crime committed during the war:

> Nobody says that Bosniaks did not commit crimes, but they are not really bigger in scope. So, it's crazy. But [let's look at] the statistics in Hague. The 90 percent of all the convictions are Serbs. I think 70 percent Serbs, the 20 percent Croats and only like 10 percent Bosniaks.

Jovan 2 argues that pain, suffering, and loss is what unites different communities, and these communities often compete against each other to show who has more rape survivors within their groups because "that makes them a better or bigger victim."

Jovan 2 is aware of such a complexity in BiH and calls it "real deep."

> So, we focus on the fact that women suffered periods, all women suffered regardless of the ethnic group they were in that apart kind of well, it benefits, benefits the perpetrators as well. Because that in a way shows them as victims because there's this ongoing push in the Balkans to see everyone suffer. Therefore, everyone is guilty. Therefore, no one is guilty than the other, which is a product of the lack of clear winner in the conflict.
>
> In 2018, Germany published a book for the first time ever on sexual violence committed by the allied troops and Russian troops against German women during the 1944 to 1945 war. Well, it took them seven decades to even talk about that because there's a hierarchy of things. And when you're talking about crimes, go from the biggest allies. Maybe in 50 years from now, when there are no living witnesses but only memories, people will be able to, you know, talk more empathetically about crimes.

Adnan K. does not see living in denial as part of reconciliation since what happened in Srebrenica is well documented and everyone, including the international community, is aware of it. He also points out the fact that there are still witnesses living in the communities and accepting what happened in Srebrenica is a first step toward coexistence. Adnan K. does not believe that accepting something that happened in the past is going to make anybody bad:

> If you accept what happened in Srebrenica, is it going to make you better or worse person? No. Did you kill people in Srebrenica? No. What happened in Srebrenica? As long as you are, as long as you accept that and say, "Okay, that's horrible. This is what happened, and these are the people who are responsible for genocide. I don't support that, it's not my responsibility."
>
> In Bosnia, there's a few examples where Bosniaks committed war crimes against Serbs. And I acknowledge that, and I think that's a horrible thing, and I never defend that. And I would never defend people who did that. And I think that those people are war criminals, and I think most of them have been killed by now, but they haven't, they should be in trial as war criminals.
>
> You know, we just have to look at the facts and knowledge, what's happened and, you know, distance ourselves from people who committed those crimes. And if people share that perspective, I think that we would be able to move forward in reconciliation much easier. Otherwise, our history keeps us hostages, you know, and because nobody wants to admit what happened.

Jovan 2 does not see one casualty to be an excuse for creating another one. He is also concerned with the Ukrainian war as people say "Ok, its wrong but it was also wrong for the U.N. to bomb Serbia in 1992." Such a way of thinking, he finds, is dangerous as it also undermines other important issues such as LGBT rights. If one discusses LGBT rights, then people will argue that there are more important rights before ever getting to LGBT rights and they will keep asking "What about sick children getting rights, what about animal rights?" Jovan 2 said:

> Not a lot of people here are willing to accept casualties on other sides because we are all portrayed in our own minds. OK, we were the victims, and we were the saviors. And I know that's the situation with pretty much all sides, all participants in the world. We're all presenting ourselves as OK and everyone else was the enemy. And we have casualties that are horrible and everyone else was just a product of war because it can go to war and expect no one to die, right?
>
> It isn't really accepted as the very thought that just war is wrong, it's hard to accept here because it's always the excuse by some other train of thought that's mixed in that and just thinking about human lives were lost. One life is too much. I don't know why it's so hard to accept that everything, even one life, would be too much in that situation, and they're starting to debate. OK, wait, what number of people did die? It really doesn't matter. It happened.

Regardless of continuing trauma, Jovan 2 is hopeful, and he believes that reconciliation is possible. He believes that it depends on a person whether they are willing to accept the harms done toward other people. One should accept it and try to move forward Jovan 2 noted.

> If Germany managed to move forward from World War Two, if as a country, they managed to move forward after the Holocaust, after everything they did, after the horrible things that they did, they managed to move forward. And we're still stuck here, almost 30 years later, we're still stuck in [despair] despite rejecting everything that happened because nothing happened because we're all saints here, even though blood was soaking the country, right? Basically. And I'm just not really understanding why is such a problem even living here and being born here, I'm not really understanding why is it such a problem?

Aida's older daughter went to a public school in Sarajevo. Her school never took her to Srebrenica. She was shocked by the school's behavior. She took her daughter personally to Srebrenica so that she would be aware of it, and everything that happened there including the culture of which she is part. Her daughter knows what kind of juices they are making there, what the taste of their *ajvar* is. Aida does not go to Srebrenica on its anniversary, she says it is just for showing off. She advised me to not go there during that time "because when you come into the memorial place, if there is a spot on the planet where silence screams, that's there."

When Aida's daughter attended primary Catholic school, they went to Srebrenica twice because "Croats don't have any issue with it, whether Srebrenica took place or not." She urges the educational system to change. During her time in Yugoslavia, when she was in primary school, the school took them to Jasenovac concentration camps where Croat Ustashi fascists conducted atrocities. "I was not told that Serbs suffered there, Croats or Jews suffered, but fascists in general, fascists among us. To this day, they are getting stronger in some countries." Aida sees such a notion of fascism increasing in Bosnia despite queer people's stronger opposition.

**Distrust, Prejudice, and Bias: The Role of Ethnicity in Queer Identity**

Trust can serve as a critical indicator of reconciliation after violent conflicts in post-accord societies such as BiH (Whitt, 2010). However, gaining trust is challenging, which

requires time, reformed institutions, and parties that are known for their trustworthy reputations. In a context of ethnic tension, people may avoid trusting those from different ethnic backgrounds due to "some potential threats," as they prefer to trust only those within their own ethnic group. According to Whitt's (2010) study, only 8.33 percent participants believed that most people could be trusted in BiH. After seeing such a study's results, it can be challenging to rebuild trust after violence in the country as "distrust feeds the cycle of violence" (Brewer & Gaertner, 2001, cited in Parent, 2023, p. 88).

According to the 2022 USAID National Youth Survey conducted in BiH, interethnic trust has increased among youth compared to 2018, which is promising and expected considering the dynamics of Gen Z who are relatively more open-minded and connected with the world, yet the percentage is considerably lower than the general population. Religion still plays a critical role as 60 percent of respondents rated religion as an important community affiliation. National identity (BiH) is more important for Bosniaks (59 percent) than Serbs (33 percent) and Croats (28 percent). (USAID, 2022).

Respondents also reported that they trust people of their own ethnicity more than other ethnic groups. Although the report portrayed the fact that 83 percent of people interacted with other ethnicities as a positive outcome, one can also be concerned about such a result, which means that 17 percent of youth never interacted with people from other ethnic groups. The report also indicated that respondents reported experiencing anxiety when interacting with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. However, on a more optimistic note, approximately two out of three respondents (62 percent) stated that they would not mind having people from ethnic groups other than their own as neighbors (USAID, 2022).

Ana who comes from a mixed background says that her parents are very open. Her boyfriend is from Serbia, they celebrate each other's holidays openly and she says that they quiet enjoy doing it because they do not have to celebrate the same holidays at the same time. They are comfortable with it as long as Ana is happy with her boyfriend: “if he makes you happy, you should stay with him.” Most of her friends also come from mixed marriages.

However, in a collectivist culture, like eastern Europe, the influence of families can play an important role, and one might be exposed to close contact with loved ones or family members more often. Ana’s aunt was not as happy as her parents that she was in love with a Serb. Ana says that her “aunt has these awkward moments sometimes.” She believes one of the main reasons that she was suspicious of this relationship is because she had to live in Germany for a few years during the Bosnian war. She worked in a government institution where things were stricter and more divided, according to the ethnic group and the religion. So, her aunt still has those experiences and feelings.

Ana has a Croat best friend whom she has known for over 10 years. Her aunt keeps reminding her that “You can’t trust her. She will always go to take care of her own people more than she will take care of you.” Ana finds this offensive and believes that such narratives also come from family members who have a low educational background or who never meet people outside of their own circle. She continues, “So all the stereotypes which we're going to see about somebody who's more conservative, like they embody them.” Because her aunt lives in a city that is predominantly Serbian, she would not know what an ordinary Mostarian or Sarajevan would do daily, they would not understand what happens in these cities. Ana’s other aunt from her mother's side, who has Serbian citizenship through marriage, tries to explain to Ana “how is it like to live with a Serbian” and tells Ana stories based on her visit to Serbia once a month. This

makes Ana upset because she believes that her aunt has biases and generalizes about who Serbs are as a people. “They have their own opinions and perceptions of what our people live like, but they are not self-aware.”

Ana met her very first close friends from other ethnic groups when she went to university. She was in a big city where many mixed people were located. She believes people need to be exposed to each other in such a situation. In other words, one needs to live together to get to know each other.

Structural segregation is a common occurrence in BiH, which makes dating across ethnic lines difficult (Sokolić, 2022). While younger people are luckier than their parents, the influence of intergenerational segregation is still alive in the country. Individuals had to go through different experiences to overcome structural segregation so that their children do not (Sokolić, 2022). It is worth mentioning though that attitudes toward inter-ethnic dating are still a challenge for the youth who do not come from mixed marriages.

Dunya comes from a mixed marriage. Her mother is Bosniak and her father is Croat. She also took advantage of being in a mixed family as they are more open-minded toward other ethnic groups. Dunya’s grandfather (her mother’s dad) disowned Dunya’s mother because she married a Catholic man. She also adds that her father’s side is also deeply conservative.
While those who come from mixed marriages experience fewer challenges with integration or coexistence, individuals from single ethnic groups tend to be isolated or socialize with their own ethnic groups, preventing communities from reconciling. This issue is further discussed below.

**“It’s Not a Big Deal but Are They Muslim?”**

Forty-two out of 43 individuals I interviewed identified as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Those who come from mixed marriages have a better understanding of the

challenges of different ethnic groups and they tend to be more tolerant as they grew up in a mixed family. However, families that are not fully open-minded, have subtle biases toward other ethnic groups. Such family "concerns" can be found in everyday language or interactions with one another. Families who are proud to be more liberal tend to ask their questions indirectly and often such questions start with "but."

When younger generations make friends from other ethnic groups, families would state that it would not be a big deal, which would be followed by a question about whether their friends are Muslim (Bosniak) or not. This is a common issue I heard from participants, but other ethnic members also stated how their parents are biased toward other ethnic groups due to historical events.

J.D. is both Croat and Serb and lived in a relatively open-minded family. He grew up in Sarajevo where the majority is Bosniaks. Whenever he had his friends from the university over, his grandparent would be curious about the ethnicity of his friends. She would often say "It is not a big deal but are they Muslims?" J.D. said it was not something his grandmother was being racist about, but she was very curious about his guests. This was a common discussion I had with participants. Although some of the participants did not see it as having a racist undertone, the subtle bias plays a role in determining the acceptance of one's surroundings.

J.D. believes that his father holds a grudge that his children were baptized in the Catholic church. He said he (father) was conflicted with himself, and he realized that he would not explain to it other people as he felt the societal pressure. J.D. says that it is common that people tend to explain themselves to others, which is a standard behavior in BiH. Everything is questioned J.D. adds, "And if you are not married then a lot of people will be like "oh you are not married? What do you cook today? What do you have in your grocery bags." So, I think that he was a little bit

ashamed, but we never actually discussed it very openly." J.D. says that especially in Sarajevo, people are not talking openly about heavy topics. They feel like it is better to keep them buried and just move on with life.

Growing up, Jovan 2 always played with children from different ethnic groups because they lived in mixed neighborhoods, but his parents' distrust would be clearer whenever he travels to other cities or communities that are mainly populated by other ethnic groups. He says that the fear is always there and gets activated from time to time.

In contrast, Mladen 2's father makes derogatory comments about other ethnic groups. He would refer to Bosnians as "Turks," which is a derogatory term. The term has a historical context as Bosniaks were socially constructed as "Turks" during the war by the Bosnian-Serb Assembly (Suljagić, 2020). Such a social construction of Bosniaks was part of the ethnic cleansing and genocidal policies that were attempted to be implemented by various agencies, and institutions of the assembly (Suljagić, 2020). When the Bosnian-Serb Army (VRS), led by Ratko Mladić, captured the town of Srebrenica, Mladić declared his "victory" with pride in front of the cameras and said:

> Here we are, on 11 July 1995, in Serb Srebrenica. On the eve of yet another great Serb holiday, we give this town to the Serb people as a gift. Finally, after the Rebellion against the *Dahis* [rebellion of the Serbs against local Ottoman rulers in Serbia in 1804 and 1815], the time has come to take revenge on the Turks in this region (Suljagić, 2020, p. 568).

Historically, Bosniaks were referred to by different derogatory terms including *Ustaśa* (representing members of the Nazi-puppet movement that played a role in the genocide against Serbs in Croatia during World War II), *Balija* (a racially connotated word used to describe a primitive, crude, and uneducated person, which has gradually transformed into a racial slur to refer to Bosniaks and Turks) (Suljagić, 2020). Finally, another derogatory term, Turks, is used to

dehumanize Bosniaks, arguing that they are racially different, therefore, "foreign" to BiH. During my interviews I also heard people referring to Bosniaks as Turks to highlight that they were brought to the region by the Ottomans, which is a disturbing negative and destructive narrative for Bosniaks. Such narratives influence people from different communities in the country.

Mladen 2's father also told her mother that she should not be friends with Muslims. He commented that the narratives about other people were passed down from generation to another. He remembers hearing such narratives during his school years. While on a school trip passing through Sarajevo, Mladen 2's classmates made negative comments about Bosniaks. What was shocking to him was that the teachers did not make any comments on the young student's disrespectful comments. When he went to his teacher to complain about it, the teacher said that she did not hear what was happening. Mladen 2 says that he never felt accepted in his school and after that school trip, he decided to transfer to another school, which was Catholic in Banja Luka. He felt more welcomed "even though it was a Catholic school." His school had zero tolerance for any discrimination, which he found liberating. The school was also a great opportunity to meet other people from different ethnic groups including Bosniaks (although the school was Catholic, some Bosniaks were also attending there).

Ilma is a youth activist and advocates for queer rights. She is the only non-queer participant in my research. She had a Serb boyfriend from RS, and her parents had a problem with it. Her parents are open-minded when it comes to hanging out with people from different ethnic groups, but the relationship was considered a different case that would be unacceptable. She thinks that the war experience has a lot to do with it when it comes to her parents' stand on interrelationships. Her parents would also warn her that she should not trust people from other

ethnic groups: “You never know and things they did [to us] is not okay!” She also sees a different reaction when she says that she will hang out with her Muslim friends versus Christian friends. Her parents will ask additional questions if she hangs out with Serb or Croat friends.

That said, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brings back people’s war memories, which trigger PTDS and anger. Arman’s mother has a close Serbian friend. He remembers them drinking coffee together one day and her friend brought up the topic of the bombing of Belgrade in 1999 and the general health of Serbians at the time. Arman’s mother could not believe it because she said, “I thought she was my friend and now she is talking about war, but we never talk about it together!” Arman says people who are affected by the war talk a lot about it, it is kind of natural in BiH. He feels like maybe after the next four or five generations, the war will not be discussed anymore. His parents have many Serb or Croat friends but when they talk about them between four walls, they allude that they do not trust them. Arman challenges the narrative and asks his parents: “Well, if you don’t trust them, why are you hanging out with them? I wouldn’t do it if I don’t trust someone.” He believes that it will take so much time, energy, and effort to “fix” these narratives.

Lamia is half Bosniak and half Serb, and her father was a lieutenant in the BiH army, which is 40 minutes away from the place in which she grew up. Žepče is a place where Croats are the majority. Lamia used to go there with her family, playing with the children. She remembers how nationalism was deeply present, and one could easily see it in the air but as a child, she just did not notice it.

> I think that in Žepče, it was the first time that I noticed Croat flags and those things and the names but the thing is, I didn't really think too much of it. In my household [I heard] those war stories from my father; however, nobody really said that one group of people is bad or that somebody is right, and somebody is wrong. Even though I've lost my uncle to the Croat forces, and nobody really say that

> they're bad or something… It is just a very traumatic kind of experience that my parents held.
>
> As a kid, I was thinking that OK, the war happened, we move on. It was not really like that. Because my parents were not originally from that place where I grew up, which is a village called Begov Han, they're not originally from there. They were kind of like sheep of that village because that village was heavily Muslim. When I was little, I only had my sisters to play with. I didn't really play with other kids who were Muslims. And I remember attending mosque and those lessons at mosque… I remember that my family and my sisters were always looked differently in that little community there because our mother was a Serb.

She does not blame the little children who did not play with them, but she believes that their parents did not let them play with Lamia and her sister. Children who come from mixed marriages have similar challenges to being the "black sheep" of the community. However, they are not the only ones, their parents also struggle for the same reason. Lamia's mother who is Serb was insulted and was called "*Chetnik*" (a name for royalist Serb forces loyal to the Yugoslav King during WW2, and a derogatory term for Serbs) and different words by her grandparents (father's side).

Igor also discussed how each ethnic group is perceived by others in Bosnia. These stereotypes are created through the misinterpretation of historical facts so that the ethnic groups are seen as deviant. I asked him to provide me with some examples to understand this perspective. Igor said that he can and laughed, and shared the following story with me:

> Some are ugly, for example. Let's start with the Serbs since I am Serb. The Serbs are wild people, they are blood thirsty, wild beasts and dirty. Serbs don't wash themselves. But at the same time, there is something positive in that stereotype. When it comes to the gay community, for example, Serbs are by Muslims and Croats seen as the ultimate tough guys that will give them a very hard fact.
>
> Bosniaks are seen as only Muslim [not an ethnic group], they look only at their own interests. They are always up to coming. There is always some conspiracy behind them because they are backed up other countries [such as] Turkey and Saudi Arabia. They give them money. They gave them fire. So, they want to rule us like there were ruling during the Ottoman period. They beat their wives, their wives, Muslim wives are lover beings because that religion is just like that. And. I cannot remember anything more.

> But also, there is something other positive stereotypes because they are from the perspective of Serbian queer people. Bosniaks are seen that they have the oriental sensuality of sex. The ethnic groups within the queer communities are somehow sexualized and fetishized. Croats, I have to admit that for me, they're a little bit funny because now my cliché is that what my personal fetish about Croats is that they are seeing as they see themselves, as more Western and more European because they are Catholic.
>
> They are not Orthodox. They are not Muslims. Croats are Catholics, so they are more Western, and therefore they are always members of Western civilization, and therefore they see themselves as better than others. There is also a conspiracy that they want to eliminate all Serbs from Bosnia.

The perpetuation of these stereotypes, biases, and assumptions about other ethnic groups are passed onto the next generation, limiting the younger generation from embracing each other and coexisting peacefully together.

**Role of Ethnicity in Queer Relationship**

When I asked how ethnicity plays a role in everyday people's lives, each participant provided detailed challenges; however, this is slightly different in queer interethnic relationships. Although the current status quo or so-called functioning democracy in BiH was built to improve everyday peace among ethnic groups, it was also built at the expense of LGBT rights, human rights, and environmental policies, among many others (Sokolić, 2022). While there is almost no data existing about interethnic queer relationship in Bosnia, my findings suggest that most queer people do not mind being in an interethnic relationship with other ethnic groups especially those who come from mixed marriages.

For example, when I asked Ana about the role of ethnicity in queer relationships, her answer was quite straightforward. She highlighted the following in her story:

> It has no impact; it was never a topic for us. We just would not care about it, never the focus of ours. We just like made jokes about me having dual citizenship like the Croatian one. And because Croatia is now in the European Union, like if they would want to marry me and like have citizenship from a country that's in the European Union. But other than that, like nothing and maybe a couple of Catholic

> school girl jokes because I was in a Catholic dorm and raised Catholic. But other than that, we never took it seriously. It was never an obstacle. It's not something that was paid attention to.

Ana does not see any major issues to prevent interethnic relationships because she believes that it is not just a matter of being open-minded and progressive, but rather it is a practical consideration. She jokingly says that interethnic relationships are not an issue for queer people yet whether a partner is vegetarian or not is. This is more important for them to share a life, she says laughing. She points out that in a heterosexual marriage, the focus is on the marriage itself. However, if one is unable to legally marry or raise children due to cultural or religious differences, it becomes difficult to prioritize those aspects. She finds this situation sad but also finds herself laughing due to the irony. Ana suggests that the traditional reasons for heterosexual individuals to seek similarities in their partners do not necessarily apply in interethnic queer relationships unless there is legal recognition or plans to move abroad to make their dreams happen.

In contrast, Strahinja sees queer interethnic relationships as much more complicated than heterosexual relationships. He finds the queer relationship to be more liberating. He finds on an internet dating site, where people can post about their preferred relationships, types, etc. how someone describes what he was looking for, "I am 43 years old man, I have a job, I live alone. I do this and that. A woman he is looking for needs to be a Muslim, etc." He does not see LGBTQIA+ individuals dealing with these complicated layers or expectations, and he adds: "If you have a good thing down there, it doesn't matter who you are."

Although Mak sees the situation much better compared to heterosexual relationships, he still senses prejudice among different queer ethnic groups. When it comes to ethnic groups, he noted the following in his narrative:

> You have these situations in the sense like when you chat with someone who is from Lukavica which is the Serbian part. And they ask do [you] have a problem [that] I live in Lukavica, and you are like, no, why? And they say some people have a problem with it. As long as they say they are from Lukavica, they block me. Someone who is Bosniak would get rejected immediately. You don't even know what the person looks like, it is just his residency where he lives.

Mak's experience underlines the imperative for reconciliation on multiple levels. While there are continuous issues faced by BiH's queer people, they appeared to be more willing to change the current issues that are seen as an obstacle to peaceful coexistence in society. Although their task is not easy, it remains within the realm of attainability.

**Key Findings**

Queer marginalized people face many everyday challenges to coexist in BiH ranging from the Two Schools under One Roof system, the lack of socialization with other ethnic groups, the failed constitution, which was created as part of the DPA, ethnic whataboutism, and intergenerational trauma. Six important themes emerged inductively from the data regarding challenges to everyday coexistence practices.

First, narratives about the three communities' distrust with the DPA has made people of BiH live in limbo in which uncertainty creates fears and anxiety about the future especially for the youth. For example, 40 participants out of 43 expressed their concerns about the legitimacy of the DPA. Participants see a paradox within the system as they still feel as if they live in a "deep crisis" and that the DPA "solidifies differences alongside ethnic lines" instead of creating coexistence.

The DPA has also created more political corruption since the constitution was designed to include multiple levels of government with many different branches. This new political system slows the decision-making processes as the country has three presidents, each representing one

ethnic group. Many participants also argue that the DPA institutionalized ethnic divisions in BiH as there are the federations of BiH and RS, and one condominium named the Brćko District. While a few participants believe that the DPA was the right decision to end the violent conflict at the time, several participants do not see any major contribution to the BiH peacebuilding processes due to the DPA. The purpose of the three leaders signing the DPA was to institutionalize reconciliation, prosperity, and sustainable peacebuilding to strengthen peace and democracy in BiH, however, the participants do not believe that any of these critical elements have been achieved or have been built into the country's socio-economic, cultural, and political system.

A few of the participants acknowledged the importance of the DPA as it stopped the war at the time, the agreement, according to most participants, is outdated and "everything goes today" as they believe that the divisiveness still plays a key role in today's frozen conflict. Surprisingly, the U.N. worker sees the DPA "as an epic success. Otherwise, the country would have mass graves today."

Second, the Two Schools Under One Roof (2SU1R) system is arguably one of the most divisive systems that has been built into BiH. 2SU1R was mentioned by every participant who lived in places where 2SU1R is still applied. This system has exacerbated the conflict today, which was not prevented or transformed by the DPA. Even people who were not exposed to the conflict got to learn what it was when they were divided based on their ethnic lines in these schools. Some participants said that they questioned the issue more as they were curious about the fact that they were divided by the school system. Years later, the language of "us vs. them" was used more often and each ethnic group learned the same history from different ethnic perspectives, which sabotages the right to coexist in the country.

The S2U1R system also impacts young people's socialization. Mostar is ethnically divided, and many young people do not visit their neighborhoods as often. The participants also argue that the ways students are taught in schools impact the socialization among community members as they are "taught to be cautious" about the neighborhoods in which they reside. Such an institutional segregation also continues to divide people from each other, and it doesn't bring about integration in terms of understanding one another.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted or multi-track peacebuilding approach that includes a reformed educational system aimed at fostering tolerance, empathy, and intergroup understanding. Additionally, efforts to bridge physical and social divides within Mostar's neighborhoods must be prioritized to create opportunities for meaningful socialization among community members. Dismantling the existing barriers that keep communities apart can help BiH to achieve true integration and build a more harmonious and inclusive city for all its inhabitants. For such trust to move beyond ethnic boundaries, institutions must play a critical role in bringing people together in the spirit of reconciliation (Weingast, 1998; Knight, 2001 cited in Whitt, 2010) which can be challenging to achieve when there is so much division in society. The support of the international community is essential for sustaining the peace in BiH.

Third, ethnic socialization is a critical process in youth's life in BiH. Those who did not attend the 2SU1R system or come from mixed marriages are more tolerant of each other compared to those who did. These participants' comments toward other ethnic groups are often positive or they consider other groups as part of their communities having no concerns or fears of interacting with them. Those who come from mixed marriages and did not attend 2SU1R are more open-minded. Even if one of their parents is not as tolerant toward other ethnic groups, they are confident to call them out as they have been living with a liberating freedom to express

their ideas and concerns, which also means discussing sensitive issues in more humanistic ways in which their parents identify with other ethnic groups as scapegoats.

The RS participants seem to have fewer socialization opportunities even compared to those who live in divided cities, like Mostar. Even within the queer community, they seem to prefer to be in a relationship with a partner from the same ethnic group than with someone who is Bosniak or Croat. Although 90 percent of queer participants reported to not have any preferences when it comes to relationship or sexual interaction, this picture changed in the RS as a few participants also reported that on popular apps, such as Grindr, one of the first questions posed is around a person's ethnic affiliation. Some people also reported getting blocked if they identify that they are from other ethnic groups.

Forth, war whataboutism among the three communities' members creates a backlog in reconciliation. Instead of acknowledging genocides during the war, such as in Srebrenica in 1995, community members choose to victimize themselves and blame each other before even tabling the discussion of Srebrenica. This seems to be one of the main obstacles to bringing about real peace in the country. Bosniaks are more sensitive about Srebrenica not being acknowledged as they lost over eight thousand people there. Nationalism seems to be a factor for other ethnic groups not being willing to accept that there were atrocities and gross violations of human rights committed in Srebrenica. As one of my participants noted that they think that their entire ethnic group would be "in a wrongdoing cycle but it is about the people who committed to the genocide, not the entire ethnic group."

Fifth, the role of ethnicity in queer identity has different meanings for each ethnic group. My data suggest that queer people tend not to care about their partner's ethnic background. Although a few participants mentioned the importance of being with someone from the same

ethnic identity, the majority do not support the ethnic division in queer relationships. In other words, most queer people do not see an issue with being in a relationship with someone of a different ethnic background. Sixty-five percent of the participants are in or have been in a relationship with a person from another ethnic group, which offers a different explanation compared to those in heterosexual relationships in BiH.

Although the numbers are promising, there are still challenges that queer people experience. For instance, those who are "out" to their family or friend-circle experience more structural challenges. They get asked questions such as "why not from the same ethnic group?", "How is it like to live with a Bosniak/Croat/Serb?", or "It is not a big deal but are they Muslims?" Older generations tend to ask these questions more often than younger generations, as some of the participants explain this as a "generational curiosity." Or they tend to be more suspicious having gone through and experienced the Bosnian war of the early 1990s. The role of ethnicity in queer relationships plays a less important role as some of the participants see different patterns of acceptance for queer people. There is no legal recognition of queer people by the state. Thus, their preferences or priorities differ. Sex is also liberating for queer people and most participants agree that having sex with a lover does not discriminate against anyone due to their ethnic affiliation.

Sixth, intergenerational trauma such as war memories cause PTSD for people who have experienced the war or are the children of victims. This trauma creates an unsafe environment for queer people as it has only been 29 years since the war ended in 1995. Almost every queer person I met had a family member who suffers from PTSD or has mental health issues. The government's lack of counseling services reinforce trauma, which creates a dysfunctional family cycle for queer people. Most people who survived the war still have nightmares and live with

undiagnosed PTSDs and other mental health issues. Some queer participants reported that they do not feel like "it is their turn yet" as family members' states of mental health do not allow them to focus on anything else but war survivors as there is also a guilt attached to the children of victims as the priority is given by them to the war survivors.

Structural issues such as "closeted queerness" are waiting to be addressed by the BiH's government's policies. Although there is funding available to support local queer and/or women, NGOs are promising possibilities for assisting LGBTQ people and women with their mental health related issues. There also seems to be more work that needs to be done for queer people who have experienced double traumas such as experiencing war and/or living with parents who went through the war and as they are living in a homophobic society where queer voices are silent with limited socialization opportunities for young LGBTQ people.

While international funders' commitments have been laudable in addressing the needs of war survivors, there is a pressing concern regarding the lack of attention and resources that are allocated to queer survivors in BiH. It is imperative to recognize the unique challenges faced by queer survivors or queer children of survivors as their negative experiences remain largely unaddressed.

**Conclusion**

Chapter six examined the crisis of coexistence in the public sphere and the challenges presented to queer people due to divisive policies maintained by the Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats since the Bosnian War. The chapter also highlighted the failure of the DPA, which leaves discretionary control over the transitional aspects of education without any minimum standards or safeguards to prevent education from turning into a weapon of division. The chapter also discussed the expressed need for structural changes in institutions and the social sphere to institutionalize

reconciliation and embed positive peace in the society. Almost all the participants mentioned that their family members suffer from PTSD because of the war and have passed it down to the next generation. However, the BiH government has made little effort (if at all) to improve the existential, sociopolitical, cultural, and economic circumstances of individuals.

The participants stories indicate the complexities of everyday life in BiH for members of ethnic and queer communities, as they exist at a liminal point between conflict and resistance. These stories are further documented and discussed in the Chapter six, providing renewed optimism for forging strong bonds within the queer community, as well as creating shared spaces to foster reconciliation and dialogue.

## Chapter Six: Structural Violence and Post-War Memories

### Introduction

The psychological effects of war and conflict impact more people and they become locked into intergenerational trauma. Poverty, discrimination, exclusion, and war memories (trauma), etc. may exacerbate conflict and escalate into more violence, divisions, and inequalities in communities, leading to a sense of alienation that leaves long-term and protracted conflicts like the BiH communities have been suffering and enduring over the years. Hence, it is crucial to understand different communities' needs that may vary depending on the region or society. If their BHN such as identity, recognition, and security are denied, ethnic conflict escalates overtime.

Chapter six explores queer people's overall perceptions of trauma and how queer BiH people's war trauma has profound and lasting impacts on their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. This chapter further discusses how the effects of different forms of structural violence are profound, leading to higher rates of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicide within the queer community.

### Constant Displacement During the War

The Bosnian war caused 100,000 deaths and the displacement of over two million men, women, and children (Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, n.d.). People were constantly forcibly displaced with loved ones, and they lacked safety, security, and having their BHNs met. The scarcity and irregular availability of life-sustaining basic needs was used by military and paramilitary forces against civilians (Maček, 2007). Many lives and daily practices were changed overnight. For example, a plane mechanic found himself on a farm, a hardworking government

staff member became a “housewife” overnight, and the children’s socialization cycle was lost. These were challenging changes for every community member living in BiH at the time. Ana is one of those individuals.

Ana’s parents used to live in Central Bosnia. When Ana was born at the start of the war, they decided to move away to another city while her father was in the army. After the war, her father found a job in a city called Drvar, which is in a completely different part of the country, five-to-six hours from Ana’s hometown in which she spent her first 15 years (until she finished primary school). I asked Ana to describe what the place was like. This is what she had to say:

> I don't remember the first couple of years, but it was mainly a lot of people who consider themselves to be Croats and Catholics from central Bosnia. And after a certain period, a few years after the war, like the Serbs started coming back. So there were a lot of issues like we had two schools under one roof. They split us up according to the languages, the history and geography. Serbs wanted their apartments, their houses back, which were like populated by the Croatians, the Croats.
>
> And so there were a lot of issues about the housing situation in the city, so it did not look good and the only reason why people move back there it was because it was their home or because they had like this huge factory that employed most of the people that lived there. And then my parents have me [go] to Herzegovina for four years to be in high school, and it was like 20 minutes away from Mostar.

Ana finds the high school she attended different because it was mainly “right-wing conservative Catholics Croats [that] attended.” She also reports how small the city was for her, which meant that everybody knew each other. Ana found herself hearing about “gossiping a lot.” She highlights how one’s difference would be known by everyone: “because I was technically not from there, I was in a Catholic dorm with 30 girls who were very strict, and familiar with who we were. And then after that, I already went to university in Sarajevo, so that's the capital of the country.”

Ana says that the Bosnian war brought her family stress and mental issues. During the war they had to move around because they did not feel safe where they were living. They always rented places and whenever they experienced an issue with the apartment or the house, they had to move somewhere else. Her father was the only person who was working in the family and his job was never secure. Thus, they would have to pay very much attention to money because economic resources were always the main issue for them. After the war, her parents finally recovered (seven or eight years ago) when they moved to Croatia. Due to the family's war experiences and the intergenerational poverty in the city, Ana still feels like she might end up in a situation where she lives in poverty, which concerns her: "In the sense that like, you still think you're very, very poor, but you're not, even though I'm 30, have my own job that is totally safe and stable, whenever I go to the supermarket, I always think I'm going to end up like missing money due to the impact of the war."

Although individuals like Ana did not experience the war, the intergenerational aspect of the war mentally exhausts individuals from BiH as they are constantly navigating between their parents' lives, their own lives and a future that remains uncertain for many.

**Losing Loved Ones that are Dear to One's Heart**

Every participant I interviewed knew someone who lost their loved ones during the war whether that was friends, family members or neighbours. Seventy percent of the respondents reported that they have lost close family members like an uncle, aunt, grandmother/grandfather from either or parents. For example, Lamia's father lost his brother during the war. This loss impacted her childhood dramatically as his father was grieving and "he couldn't let it go." Lamia felt the loss of a man that she never knew but at the same time she felt that she and her other

family members were forced to remember her late uncle. She said she feels bad to sound rude, but she did not know why they were remembering him.

That said, I told Dunya that the war may not have a direct impact on her as she was not born at the time, but she challenged me.

> It is insane in how many ways it has affected me. It's so weird because it's very… you can't quite catch it. You know, it's there. But how did it come? How is it there? How did this develop? It's really strange. So, I don't know, because it's really funny because my parents didn't ever talk much about what they went through [and] how it was for them and all of this.
>
> So, for me, it's also insane to imagine that they were, I don't know, 30 years old when this happened, and now I'm seeing all of these differences. We've been talking more recently and it's like crazy, crazy, crazy stuff that was happening. And I don't know; I'm sure it affected them a lot, but to me, it's interesting to explore this dimension of how it affects generations after [the war/conflict].

Dunya is currently doing her Bachelor of Arts degree abroad and because her education focuses on human rights and conflict, she said that she has been exploring the personal conflict dimension.

Luka 2's Serbian parents had to move to Serbia during the war. He grew up hearing stories from his family and brother about the war as he was not born at the time. His brother told him how challenging living in Serbia was back then because he was from BiH, a war-torn country. His friends were bullying him even though he was ethnically Serbian like them. Luka 2 says, "Kids can really be mean." He also remembers when NATO bombed Yugoslavia and Serbia in 1999. All his relatives including his brother (except his parents) were in Serbia, which was a stressful time for him. He also remembers his brother asking his grandmother what were "all the bombs and everything in the sky?" His grandmother would say they were fireworks. She tried to protect her grandchild from the painful experience and change the narrative of the day. "Look how amazing the fireworks are!" she used to respond.

Luka 2 also echoes what Ana says about poverty:

> We didn't have much money. We were living in a really old house. Maybe that affected me, maybe all that war situation and the situation I was living. At one point, I was like, I will never succeed in this life. I will never make success because my starting position is very low. And something that my parents were giving me signals like not directly, but giving me signals like, you need to be rich to get out of the situation that his entire family was in.

That moment was also an awakening one for him, but he says that the rumor was something that helped him to cope. He would motivate himself through rumors to keep going every day. Luka 2 recounted the following in his story:

> I was like, OK, I can choose two sides like to be a victim of the war or be a successful person. I used to tell myself I will be successful, and I know one day I will give an interview to the most famous show talking about the way I was born, like in a hospital that was all on fire. In my culture, like in Bosnia and Serbia, or whatever culture, there's always there's a saying for situations when you when you're like complaining about stuff.
>
> They were like "*može biti gore*- could be worse" That means like, it's always worse for someone else, which is really toxic if you ask me, like because they are not allowing you to feel your emotions like my emotions are always validated, like if I'm feeling bad because of this glass. I know there's a bigger problem in this world. I know there's a people dying in Yemen. I know there's a people dying and wherever. I was like, I have every right to feel bad and they have every right to feel discriminated against.

Daniela also still experiences the structural reality of the war as her parents do. "The war impacted the whole country, especially Sarajevo, one of the longest sieges of modern history." She believes that her mother is bipolar because she has many panic attacks especially on New Year's Eve when there are fireworks. She gets stressed because of the memories of hand grenades exploding on the streets and the shrill sound of the flying shrapnel splitting the air. Daniela's mother has part of a grenade fragment still lodged in her body that hit her during the war. Even though she lives in Europe, far away from BiH, she says that she still lives in that moment, "living with the consequences of it every day."

In addition, Strahinja was born before the war, and he remembers the story of his mother. He says Tuzla was a larger city at the time than it is now. His mother went to Tuzla to give birth. During that time, there was some tension between Serbs and Bosniaks but he does not remember the reason why. The doctor in Tuzla, who was Muslim, said to Strahinja's mother to lay on her side, lay, and put her legs so close together so that she could kill Strahinja. The doctor thought that she was Muslim and married to a Serbian (her name was like a Bosniak name, Safia). Because Strahinja would be the second child born to her, his mother decided not to follow what her doctor was telling her, and she went outside of the clinic.

> And my mom remembers this perfectly. Fatima, a nurse, she came outside and said, 'Are you crazy? She (doctor) wants to kill your, baby. Push!' And I wanted to find that woman, honestly, to see who she was. But she doesn't remember certain names. She just remembers her name, Fatima, and that she was small. And she worked in that children's hospital in Tuzla. But that was it. I mean, and of course, I was born and that day, 12 July.

Strahinja says that his parents never thought about the possibility of war or how things would change overnight because they were peaceful and had many great opportunities open to them at that time.

> During the Yugoslavia time, they lived in peace and prosperity. They had a decent salary. They had a perfect country because Yugoslavia at that time was the strongest country in the world. You didn't need a visa to travel the world. I believe you only needed [one] for Israel and South Africa. They traveled a lot. They had like summer vacations and winter vacations. I mean, it was a totally different time from you had if you had like your job or if you finished a school or whatever, you knew that you would get a job at the end of it. As soon as you get out from the school, you will get to work. And they never even think that it could change because they were in peace.
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> When they saw the tension between the parties, they never thought that the war happens, they thought it would get resolved, but it didn't. They lost those things what they were used to, like a safe and stable country, health insurance, a good salary, stable companies. Lack of such opportunities affected them psychologically a lot. Not just them, us as well, especially when those inflation and sanctions came after 1999. For example, you used to buy so many things with 100 Bosnian Marks, but it had changed overnight, and you couldn't even buy, let's say a bubble gum for that money. It was hard. It was really hard.

The war has also had a huge impact on A.K. He says that he is very much triggered by the sound of fireworks to this very day. He is also triggered by the barking of German shepherds, because oftentimes they were the breed of dog that was used for securing households or as protection from intruders. He also has dreams about a World War and when he hears the sound of a helicopter or a plane, the first thought he has is about war. A.K also witnessed how resilient his mother was throughout and after the war. She also had to sacrifice and make the decision of whether to go into refuge in Germany as she wasn't with my father at the time when her life was threatened. A.K. remembers what his mother said to herself during this time as follows:

> "OK, I'm going to stick to being in a [place] where my partner is and stick with my children in our country rather than go to Germany with this uncle of mine." And who knows, maybe not see my dad ever again. You know, I mean, there are quite a few things there that I'm directly impacted with. I found letters between my parents when they were writing each other through a Red Cross Mail at the time, that was the only communication.
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> [I] discovered a sense of writing or reading through these letters, you know, at that [time] asking how much you grew more, you know, mom writing what she was doing those days or something like that. Then also obviously stories about, you know, there's a sense of time division, and that's a pretty representative thing as well, where you're like, "Oh, time for the war time after the war in real time."

Life struggles profoundly influenced A.K. and one of the most significant factors was his father's struggle with alcoholism. His father had been a drinker even before the war, but he believes that the war exacerbated his condition, pushing him further toward alcohol consumption as a means of coping with his emotions, as opposed to seeking therapy. A.K. explains that this was because seeking psychological therapy was not as socially acceptable during those times.

His father constantly has nightmares and shares them with A.K. in which he flees somewhere and the constant fear that accompanied their lives for four long years still haunts both his parents. During the war, they hid in basements, hiding from the bombs, and were uncertain

whether they would survive the next moment. These harrowing experiences left a deep impact on their mental health, making it difficult to pinpoint a single cause for their present-day struggles.

J.D. also remembers living in a basement, and not having electricity or food and being under constant shelling from mortars and artillery as well as hiding from snipers. He reflects that it was very dangerous to move around because one would never have crossed the street and instead would move from connected building to building to prevent being killed.

> You would walk through those plastic sheets to avoid sniper shots because Sarajevo was in a very sad position because it was surrounded with the mountains and still, I don't know. I don't get it. How and why? Why haven't they overtaken the city? I don't know. They had means, they could have done it. We weren't armed and everything. Fortunately, I haven't seen anybody killed. I'm glad no one was killed in my family. And our house somehow survived more or less in one piece. I would consider us lucky. But we had to move from the siege.

The Bosnian war had psychological impacts on everyone who survived it; however, children's war memories are particularly traumatic, as a significant number of my participants experienced this tragedy at a very early age. J.D. remembers those days vividly:

> From the part of the city, from one parts of the city to my father's part of the city where his mother used to live. So, we would sit there and would hide at my mother's place or grandmother's place. So, it was like, I think it felt later on because of course I was ten. You don't have much spiritual, psychological and mental capacities to work on it. I think that you accept that as a normality. But where you would continue playing, you would know you are not allowed to go outside. I have to play here, and we will tell children we will meet here. And that was it. I think it was in a funny kind of way, but it felt normal.

He remembers something just was not right when he saw many military personnel asking him and his family to go home and telling them that they should not be outside in the open. Despite all these sudden changes, he reveals that they were never pessimistic as there was this unbreakable hope and belief that nothing would happen because there were many mixed marriages in the country noting that, "We cannot kill each other. It's not possible. It will not happen." J.D.'s father did not participate in the war because he had back issues. His mother was

also working daily despite the ongoing war because as J.D. says, “life goes on.” They maintained hope that tomorrow would be better.

> You can also draw some parallels with [the] Ukraine war. It’s also they are also hoping Yes, OK, it’s lasting one month, but tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow they will make [an] agreement and they will stop killing us. And then [the] day after tomorrow will be better. And then slowly you get used to it and you try to make the best of your life where you are during the winter, you would be already in bed at 2:00 pm because it’s fucking cold. You didn't have any heating and then you would cuddle. Everyone would cuddle in one room and tell stories or jokes or something like that and sleep. And yeah, it was not always very interesting for the children during the wintertime because you could not go out a lot.

During the war, the Serb army was planning to cut off the city directly from J.D.’s neighborhood. He calls it “quite dangerous”. J.D. is a Serb, and his mother called her best friend for help. His friend picked them up in his green Mercedes Benz and took them to a part of the city where his grandmother lived. He and his family stayed there for up to a year; he is not quite sure the exact time. After that period of time, the Serbs started camping on that side of the town. Ordinary people routinized the violence and war back then and eventually it became “a very normal life” for J.D. For the first couple of months, he saw the city being bombarded from the hills. He calls the condition he was living in as “hell.”

> It was like a hell on earth because we were living in constant fear of being chemically attacked. I still remember vividly like hiding in one room and covering all the doors with wet towels, soaking soap to prevent all the chemicals to get into. And I think in that moment we really thought, OK, we are going to die because you're fighting some invisible enemy because you don't know what you are going to inhale and when it would start, you know, a bombshell, you could hear a bombshell exploded. It hits you or not. It’s over.
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> And this you don't know you are constantly emancipation. Oh, something will happen know. Something will happen. Have I done enough? I remember especially that detail. I always said, I'm blessed for the experience. I mean, it may sound very, very harsh, but still, you were forced to build up yourself, show your personal competence very fast. It was not like today's children with the frustration tolerance or intolerance with older. You had to behave properly, or you would get killed. So, there is no choice, right?

Abraksas also says how the war crushed their family's world "because they were completely oblivious of nationalism in Yugoslavia like mixed marriages, they never saw each other as different ethnicity, and then it all changed." His father fled to Sweden while his mother stayed back in BiH with Abraksas and his brother as they faced very different challenges. Abraksas contends that his mother was sent off to work because she was a woman who has a mixed background. "Mixed people were considered as traitors or something like Nazi Germany which was discriminatory." Although Sweden was convenient for the family to go to, which would also provide them with an opportunity to move back there as a family, Akraksas's father "couldn't take it anymore" due to the lack of communication with his family and the uncertainties with paperwork, etc. When he went back to Banja Luka 2, he could not have his apartment back because "some Serbs from Sarajevo were moved into those apartments."

In contrast, Namo's mother was born in Croatia; however, during the war, the BiH government cancelled his mother's passport and made her stateless. He is not sure how all these events happened but when they went to Germany as a family at the beginning of the war, they had a Red Cross card as his mother did not get her citizenship for two years. At the end of 1998, she received her Croatian passport and all her other documents. Namo and his mother believe that she was targeted in this way probably because she was married to a Serb. After the war when they were living in Germany, the ICC tribunal court contacted her, but she did not want to go through the process as it would take longer, and that was almost toward the end of 1998.

At the same time, however, Mak considers himself monotheistic after he lost his best friend (his dog) to a hand grenade, he remembers the war like it was yesterday. He pointed out the following in his story:

> This is [an] eight-year-old, talking with my mother and my grandmother. So, I said to them, you know, I've lost my best friend, and my grandmother asked me to

> pray to God. I said 'Why pray to God, if he had such a supreme being that made everything on this planet. How does God allow innocent children to be killed and what kind of lesson [do] we need to learn from.' So, I don't know if God exists, but you know, I really don't like why he's allowing this to continue and happen. And but I'm very spiritual and I'm more like a Buddhist than I'm Muslim to be [honest], I more believe in like karma, energy and things like that than just like [the] monotheistic way of looking at stuff I see.

Mak adds that the war destroyed his family because they were in their early 30s and lost everything in one day, a house, a job, and a life and then spent 40 years trying to survive the dreadful memories from that time.

> I think one of the most terrible experiences that can happen to you is actually living through the war because war is truly hell, it's like living in hell. And after all of this destruction and traumatization and everything, you need to pick yourself together and start again from scratch. But you lost 40 years of your life.

Jovan 1's parents met during the war. His mother is a doctor and she served at the refugee camp. He says that his mother never discusses anything related to the war as he thinks it is deeply hurtful for her. Jovan 1's mother was almost shot by a sniper, yet she refrains from discussing it.

> I think she has a trauma from it but doesn't speak [about] it in a hateful way. You know, it's weird. I guess you kind of found her peace with it. The only thing that she talks about is how she felt alone during the war, because all of my relatives emigrated to Canada, and she was alone in Bosnia because she just stayed there because of my dad. And she also has her best friend, who got married with an extremely religious Bosniak, and he doesn't allow her to talk to my mom.
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> So, she was kind of left pretty heartbroken. And then my dad also doesn't really talk about it, like he jokes about it when we pass through something, 'this is where I stayed during the war etc.' The only impact the only type that he had was he suffered from like lymphoma three times because of depleted uranium, which is generally recognized by the U.N. as a cause of it. But it's happening. There is a rise of leukemia in Bosnia because of it. So, he had it three times.

Traumas are not healed easily. They become the topic of conversations occasionally, if not every day. Because social justice has not been achieved yet, the communities' traumas are hanging in the air, and it is impossible for one to ignore them. For example, Amina remembers discussing the impact of the war on her family with her friends recently. Her parents got married before the

war and they had two children at the time. Both her brother and sister are still alive. She believes that her parents married each other with love and then the war broke out. On her mother's side, many family members got killed during the war and the key trauma Amina's mother experienced was when her youngest brother got killed by someone from the Croat side.

Amina's father was in the BiH armed forces, and he oversaw many military operations, and those responsibilities and memories still fall heavily on his shoulders. She says many people who fought during the war endure the post-war situation and their relationship with themselves and others have significantly changed. Her mother stayed during the whole war in BiH, and her family did not go anywhere else except for Amina's father, who participated in the war. Amina made it known to me that it is the most critical situation for the family:

> My mom needed support and she needed to be the parent for her kids. And she had all the trauma going on and the emotional drainage and the emotional exhaustion. And my father on the other hand also had the same thing, but he was a man in Bosnian society [heteronormative behaviors that men are not supposed to be expressive when it comes to their emotions]. He didn't share anything, and he was closed. So, they started to distance themselves from each other. And I remember when I started growing up, I always remember one time that my father and I were going somewhere.
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> And my brother and sister were very loud, and they were playing in the car and so on. And he started yelling at them because it triggered him. And then he told them to get out of the car and ordered [them] to toe the line. So they had to stand in line because he was still in the war in his head, he continued and continued. After someone died while he was serving in the military, he decided to leave the army and to do beekeeping because it was the only thing that didn't stress him out. But I always remember that my mom and him were yelling at each other during my childhood, and I think that is because you couldn't communicate all the things that had happened to each other.

Amina shares her relationship with her sister who married with a Croat man (with a Croatian-sounding name). Amina's uncle (mom's brother) was killed by the Croat army, and her mom forbade her sister to marry or date with that Croat man. "After a lot of discussions and hiding, she (mom) finally approved of their relationship." However, Amina doesn't believe it's "fully

sealed." Her sister has been married for five years now. "They have a beautiful child, but I don't think it's still fully accepted yet; it has been accepted within my close family, but not within my extended family. It's not so much approval that it occurred just because of his name."

When the war broke out in 1992, Igor was in Banja Luka with his family, and he did not experience anything violent, but he and his family did experience electricity and food shortages. However, he remembers "some ugly things happened" in Banja Luka as people who were ethnically not Serbs were persecuted and he adds that ethnic Serbs may not accept what non-Serbs experienced but he said, "I remember that very badly." When I asked him to expand his perspective on the experiences of non-Serb groups, he disclosed that people often do not want their ethnic group to relate to some of the ugly things that happened in the BiH conflict. He says that all these three ethnic groups including Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs look at their groups as the main victim "and the other one other two are the ultimate villains in the story, the ultimate bad guys. And we are not bad. We are not bad guys. We are good guys. And they are evil. That's a never-ending story."

Igor considers himself lucky because he was aware of all the human rights violations and how the ethnic tensions were on Bosniak, Croatian, and Serbian sides. He was never told not to hang out with other ethnic groups but rather his family required that he should "believe each other and to establish healthy communication and to consider each other as equal." He believes that BiH ethnic groups do not want to accept each other for who they are, and each group expects other groups to validate their points. Thus, Igor believes that this position creates an issue of distrust. He also does not see the world paying attention to the sensitive issues evolving in BiH as much as they used to during the war, so "we are like capsule in our small space, and we stay somewhere behind."

Dino also remembers that at some point in his life he realized that he was living in a country that has recently been in a war. However, he says that he did not have any problems, or he was not discriminated against based on his ethnicity, because most people discriminated against him because he is gay. Dino described the issue in the following way:

> There's always a joke which is reality in Mostar. People say Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats were divided on all terms but when it comes to hating and beating up LGBT people they unite. And that's shocking to me. So, they always saw me as a fagot. Well, more than a Bosnian, I would say, sort of a second nationality. Regarding my parents, I noticed that they don't talk about war. I remember asking them whether anybody from my family died in the war? And they will always avoid the question or answer it.
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> But I noticed from stories I've overheard, there are people who had died. My mother who is from Foča, which is a really to say the least interesting part regarding nationalism. And she never talks about it that much. I know when I went to Foča alone, she was really scared and skeptical, she doesn't go there or even considers not giving permission for me to travel there. And now, then I realized, oh, she has memories of something bad happening, and she knows that it can be bad, but she doesn't really want to talk about it. And I think it's mostly her trauma. It is the same with my dad.

Jovan 2 also sees all the symptoms of PTSD in his parents; however, they were never diagnosed due to the stigma and shame that people attending counselors face in BiH. His father never interacted with him and his sister because of his trauma and as gets older, he becomes a more anxious person. The Ukrainian war also impacted most of my participants and their families as it was still ongoing when I conducted my interviews. Jovan 2's father is triggered by it as he sees his father hiding his emotions as much as he can as he suspects that his father does not want to stress the family out. However, Jovan 2 says that his anxiety is visible as he is traumatized.

His mother, on the other hand, had to live through the Bosnian war all alone, as many BiH women had to because his father was participating in the war. His mother fears many things and she developed phobias because of those fears. Jovan 2's sister was born on the day after the DPA was signed and during that time his mother was doing her best to provide the best support

she could for her children. Jovan 2 says that both his parents tried as much as they could. Jovan 2 and his family grew up while watching the war on TV. “One cannot escape it even if they want to” he says. Many of Jovan 2’s family members participated in the war and whenever there is a family gathering, they share their memories of the war. Thus, every individual in the family is eventually exposed to those memories. Jovan 2 says that the family dynamics become part of the society because whenever he talks with someone whose parents were directly involved in the war, he hears pretty much the same experience that they went through. One of Jovan 2’s friends’ parents from the federation involved on the other side of the conflict shared with him that they developed many phobias that both Jovan 2 and his sister had growing up even though Jovan 2’s family are Serb, and his friends’ family are Bosniak. They were fighting on opposite sides of the war yet experienced the same events and consequences of the war equally.

Jovan 2’s mother developed phobias of being alone as well as claustrophobia and fainting in closed spaces because when she was pregnant, she always feared that something would happen to her, and no one would help her. They still do not discuss much about their mental states, yet Jovan 2 sees his parent’s visible scars every day. Jovan 2 adds that, “I'm not even thinking up things that they tried to hide from us. And what it's concerning my sister and me, we develop well, mainly the fear of war and general anxiety.” Jovan 2 is also concerned about dreading that something bad is likely to happen at any moment “because everything is going so well and there is always that at least the small voice in my head thinking about, okay, what if something happens right now? What if I'm not able to leave when something starts to happen.” Jovan 2 has not passed his driving exam yet because something as minor as a road test can also produce anxiety and too much stress when it is directly correlated with the war. One of his greatest fears is that “what if something happens and I have no one to drive me out of the

country? I have nowhere to go." This is always in the back of his mind whenever politicians provoke the war agenda with threats and ratchet up the tensions. Jovan 2 articulates that everyone in his family has anxiety with different severity levels. He sees the situation as very challenging; however, every family member has found their ways to live through the trauma associated with the war. "You find some at least ways to survive it."

One of the first things Edin remembers about the war is "really big political meetings" in his birthplace. He remembers that so many people were going there because one of the key political figures in the 90s was from Velika Kladuśa. He remembers many people from all over BiH coming to Velika Kladuśa for those political meetings. As a child, seeing those who were coming to such a small town was appealing for Edin and his friends. The war did not hit his hometown until 1994, "there was war in Sarajevo and all over the places in Bosnia but not in my place." But when the war hit his hometown, Edin and his family left the country (his father was working in Germany during that time). His mother's siblings were waiting for them on the Croatian side of the border. They walked 5-10 kilometres to reach the border; however, they could not get there because they were cut off and were sent the other way by Serb military personnel. Eventually, they became refugees for three months in Croatia, but at the time of the military operation in the region, they were under the control of Serb military forces, and they eventually went back home. Edin describes those three years without seeing his father as challenging because they had no communication whatsoever and he considers it as the greatest tragedy he experienced during the war.

Leila also learned how to live with trauma, and she calls the impact of the war on people as "horrible, many issues that people never felt before". Individuals like Leila constantly experience anxiety due to their parents' traumatic experience, whether they were present during

the war or not. The common fear of history repeating itself also creates a constant state of uncertainty and anxiety for the community members, as they feel unsafe and restricted. Leila notes that living in a frozen conflict with the lived experiences of her parents during the war leads to a high prevalence of PTSD within the family as well as within local communities.

> If I start talking about like the psychological aspect of the war, we have so many people with PTSD. It is everywhere [and] we don't have those good services for helping people. So, you have them [those who have PTSD] all around and they live with their traumatic experiences, [and] they pass their trauma onto the younger generation. So, it is a very big percent of problems. Even us, we were not in the war, but we could feel it from our parents' traumatic experience that is anxiety, fear, and sadness with many emotions, and you feel it.
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> The best way to understand the situation would be through the movie called Joker. The atmosphere is the same as in that movie Joker. You have a lot of people with PTSD, and you live with them or when you are on a tram or bus with the someone who has PTSD. You don't know what that person will do to you. You used to those kinds of people, but you do not feel like safe around that.

Thousands of people still live with traumas that were passed onto them from their war-witnessing family members. Because reconciliation is not truly embedded within the mental health and the structural causes of the war, the system that was created after the war, fails people daily, which then becomes an intergenerational trauma.

That said, Ilma's father still carries psychological burdens from the war as he was in the Yugoslavian army, which included Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. He lost many of his friends from all sides and he speaks openly about it. However, he advises Ilma that she should not trust other ethnic groups and adds that "they did those things, showed their true colors." The way he perceives other ethnic groups today bothers Ilma as she sees her friends as part of her family.

Damir also sees the impacts of the war everywhere in society. He believes that it is not normal to survive war and then be normal. He has an older sister who was around six years old when the war broke out and she still remembers the war. Damir does not also feel comfortable when he hears the sound of a helicopter. Damir narrates that the country needs so much time and

money to recover because the war impacted everyone in the country. One can easily figure out that there was a war when they see the buildings that were badly damaged and destroyed during the war.

In contrast, Bojan's family became refugees in their early twenties. They needed to run away with a small child to live in his grandmother's house in Sarajevo. His father had to be part of the army despite not wanting to take part in the war. As a result, Bojan was raised by his mother alone. Even back then, she was feeling depressed from living in the ethnosectarian society. Bojan adds that his Mum displayed all the classic symptoms of PTSD as she continued to provide for and protect him and siblings:

> Imagine you have depression and PTSD in the beginning of your 20s. It's not so easy. She was living in a community that she didn't know [moved due to the war], members that she doesn't know, hiding in the basement all the time. And I remember when we ran away from Bosnia, she spent days and days just watching news, crying, and having a cigarette after a cigarette.

Bojan did not remember his father well from that period when he ran away to Serbia. He did not see him for two or three years and he forgot what he looked like.

> He [father] never talks about the war, what happened in that period when we were separated. But I remember my mother was not happy at all and when I think about my father today, he is not happy at all. Two days ago, they were sitting here when we were talking about the things happening in Ukraine. They asked me if I'm ready to run away again if anything happens in Bosnia.
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> And then I realized that this earlier experience made me ready to run away again because I have a suitcase under my bed. I just said a few days ago, all my documents are ready, and I have another small bag with a few things in it like two T-shirts, socks, underwear. And I was like, oh my God, I'm doing the same things that my parents did during the 90s. I'm ready to just grab my bags and run away again.

Almas also noted the impact of continuing trauma on local people. "How much did you have to hate being there [Sweden] that you go back to a terrible place like that?" Almas asks herself occasionally when she thinks about the experiences of her mother and siblings who were

refugees in Sweden for a few months and her mother “couldn’t take it anymore” and decided to go back to Bosnia. “She took us back to an active war zone” Almas pointed out the following in her story:

> The war left them very traumatized. Both had some near-death experiences alongside other hardships. They had three small children to take care of. And even today, it’s not just them. You can see the signs of collective PTSD on pretty much everyone living in the country, especially now with recent events happenings in Ukraine. People are just walking around the streets like zombies. Everyone's so shaken up that you can just see it on people they have like TVs. Some like the old part city, like some cafes of TV's outside, it’s like rockets, grenades, shelling people. Just like going down the street and seeing the news it is very hard.

In contrast, Aida was born in 1968 and she was a young university student who was studying law when the war broke out. She never practiced law as she studied law to satisfy her father. She always wanted to be a journalist. When the war started, Aida never thought of the possibility of being a journalist as she believed that the war would only last for a week.

> Because we are Europe. Europeans will kind of take care of this and not realizing that it is not up to Europeans, but Americans. And that time there was this Republican in power. And we were not high on their agenda. And then those things were kind of coming in waves. First, you are scared, like you're scared beyond explanation in any language, your heart is beating here because somebody is firing at you shells up all over the place. I'm a city girl. All of a sudden, I don't have access to water. I don't have electricity. Try to live one day without electricity, fear aside. And then you kind of enter this survival mode.
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> You don't analyze, you simply live moment by moment. That there is no time for why they're doing it, you know you want to eat, you want to sleep, you want to feel safe. And then there was this buildup of fear during the first year, let's say, but after that there is apparently amount of fear that your system can’t handle. All of a sudden it became “Go fuck yourself, I couldn't care less. If I die, I die.” And really, that was the attitude I stopped running the crossroads because we were forced to run over the crossroads to sniper and everything.

It was January 1, 1993, and Aida had long red hair, and she used henna to color it. She was at a crossroad holding a big Christmas tree in her hand, she heard a shot and felt that part of her head/hair was falling down. The shot aimed at her head creased her skull and she was lucky, she

survived. These experiences built up her fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. At that moment, the first thing that Aida learned was not to become attached to anything.

The war also impacted Aleksa's family dramatically. His family used to live in a city near Mostar and then they had to move to a small community where their lives had completely changed. His father is originally from Mostar, which is a multi-ethnic community. He had to change his job. He was a mechanical engineer working at an aircraft industry in Mostar. However, when he moved to a small city, there was no aircraft industry there and he became a car mechanic. His mother's life also completely changed. She was an accountant and when the war broke out, she could not find a job and became unemployed, or as Aleksa names it, she was a "housewife." What was normal for Aleksa's father was to be in the same class with different ethnic groups, which was not normal for Aleksa. School systems, such as the two schools under one roof, were dictated to the communities by the BiH government, which is the legacy of the Bosnian war.

The war also significantly changed the demographic landscape of the country, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, internally and externally. This sudden displacement not only uprooted individuals from their homes and communities but it also gave rise to their profound sense of displacement and a loss of belonging.

For example, Amar's parents were newly married in 1992 and he grew up hearing how the war affected them. His mother always felt less a Yugoslav in Tuzla where they had to move to during the war. Arman's mother's perspective of being a Yugoslav was positive, and she believed in siblinghood and the connection with other people during the Yugoslavia period. The war disappointed her, and she is now suspicious of other ethnic groups. Despite that she knows that not all Serbs are "bad guys", yet Arman says she is always suspicious of them.

When Russia's invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, Amar's mother visited him in Sarajevo and said, "We need to talk about this war." Due to her experience in the Bosnian war, she now believes that Russia supports Serbia, so that the Russo-Ukrainian war might also spill over into BiH. His father is much more suspicious of other ethnic groups than his mother. Amar is tired of listening to their lack of trust of other ethnic groups and he adds the following in his story:

> I just don't listen to them because if I listen to them, then I will judge everything by ethnicity. And I think that there are a lot of bad peoples in every nation. I think that tomorrow, even in Bosnia, I think that we can change the rules like Bosniaks can do something to the Serbs, you know, and Serbs can do something to Bosniaks even more. But I think that we should not prepared for the war. We have to analyze everything. But we don't have to affect our daily relationship with others based on that fear.

Armin reminds us how most people who survived the 1995 war "Lost their nerves and got depressed." Due to the financial crisis that arose after the war, many people tried to go back to their normal lives, but as Armin points out, nothing went back to normal, it just got worse. Armin avers that the war stories are a common occurrence within the family, and he still suffers because of the war.

> It is very hard to earn money and survive. I don't actually have a great experience in my childhood because I was seeing the people that are not happy anymore. And that's because the war left you with psychological trauma. People were traumatized with what was all happening and are triggered by a sound of a gun and everything. My sister can't be around the fireworks [she experienced the war] because she always remembers when people were firing the guns, from their rifles, from grenades. You know, it's a horrible thing, you know, and it is consequences are so much bigger than we can ever imagine. And it's affecting a lot after that. Everything has changed since the war. Totally!

Similarly, Amila also experienced the structural impact of the war. Her father was an officer, a General in the BiH military and all her uncles were fighting in the war. That said, all the women, including her mother, lost their husbands in the war, which also means that Amila's brother lost

his father. All these traumatic experiences left her with PTSD. “The war destroyed” her life and now she deals with it all the time.

**Key Findings**

Young people and their families continue to experience and suffer from continuing PTSD as the embedded violence in the political and sociocultural institutions continue to drive a wedge between the ethnic groups. The recent wars in Ukraine and Gaza have also opened old wounds and suspicions as other ethnic groups are distrusted and blamed for the war as vivid memories of the war come flooding back and place theses survivors in a victim mentality. Five important themes emerged inductively from the data regarding challenges to structural violence and post war memories.

First, constant moving during the war disrupted family life and traumatized young family members as their lives were torn apart by the war. The participants reported the changes that were made in their lives because of the war. They found themselves in a constant cycle of moving around to escape the violence. Participants reported that they did not feel comfortable where they had to move to live due to safety concerns with the constant fear of “what will happen to me or my family?” deep in their psyche. New places also meant that so many Bosnians experienced poverty for the first time.

People’s jobs were not secure, and money was the focus in their lives in post-Bosnia. However, intergenerational poverty fear now surrounds the war victims, and they always feel like they might end up in a similar situation, which is mentally exhausting for them as they struggle to eke out a frugal existence. The participants who did not experience the war, also grew up with poverty stories and how their families were financially broke both during and after the war. This negative experience seriously impacted the participants mental health as they fear that

they will never succeed in life because of intergenerational poverty as “their starting point is very low.” They also mentioned how their parents gave them indications that the only way they could get out of their current economic situation is to get rich, which also instills anxiety in them since not everyone aims to go in such a direction.

Most family members suddenly started discussing a potential war erupting in BiH after the Ukraine invasion at their dinner tables, which is triggering for most people living in BiH as their war memories come flooding back and impact the wellbeing of entire families. Some participants heard their parents whispering some possible plans to flee BiH in the event of a war, and whether they should move to Sweden where their sisters live or Croatia. People’s everyday socialization continues to change as they are exposed to war discussions through family members, new outlets, and schools.

Second, post-war traumas and mental health issues are also common themes and are on the rise in BiH. Every participant knows of at least one family member who has PTSD or mental health issues because of the war. Some people live with parents who show every sign of having bipolar disorder or PTSD. However, because it is culturally not acceptable or common for a person to go and see a doctor or a therapist, “everyone lives with their undiagnosed parents with trauma.” The participants remember the war in different ways, either living with a particle of a hand grenade in their bodies or suffering from constant mental health issues. As Daniela noted, people “live with the consequences of the war every day.”

Such a drastic and violent change from a relatively stable Yugoslavia to an unstable post-BiH was also traumatizing for people. The participants indicated that people used to live in a safe and stable country with good health insurance, salaries, and stable companies to work at and this all changed with the war. The lack of economic opportunities affected them psychologically as

they had little hope for the future. When the inflation and sanctions came from the international community after 1999 and the subsequent war in Kosovo, BiH people experienced dramatic poverty. As some say, “it changed everything overnight.” Participants reported that people could not even buy a stick of bubble gum with 100 Bosnian Marks when they were used to buying many groceries with it.

Third, symbolic trauma came after the war when events and celebrations that are supposed to remind people of good fun things to do in fact did the opposite for BiH war victims. For example, common symbolic fears noted by the participants are fireworks, German shepherds, and helicopters or planes that act as triggers as they are forced to remember the war. Soap is also a common personal hygiene item, and typically, one may not associate it with anything else but for maintaining a person’s hygiene. However, this is not the case for those who experienced the Bosnian war. Many people covered their doors and windows with wet towels soaked in soap to prevent chemicals from getting into the house that constantly reminds them of death. While sunrise is a symbol of a new day, happiness, or hope for some, it represented a new day of the war that brought daily suffering for locals. The interpretation of these symbols, signs and events continue to traumatize the community members today, causing ordinary people to suffer anew due to the lack of social services and ongoing direct or subtle ethnic tensions.

Fourth, the participants suggested that everyday family practices that were considered “routine” changed during the war. Before the war, intermarriages were much more acceptable compared to today as they rarely happen. During the war, people who had intermarriage experiences were considered as “traitors” by rival ethnic groups of the spouse. Consequently, to escape the violence and to search for better economic opportunities, families had to leave the country, and some were separated as mostly fathers left for countries like Sweden or Germany

during the war. Some people also became stateless as their passports got cancelled and, in their own words, they became "a double refugee."

The political viewpoints also separate people who are in love with each other. Participants stated that some of their family members were disowned because of their interethnic relationships. While this is still a common practice that are routinized and normalized in BiH, the younger generation and queer people mostly have different experiences, which are discussed in other chapters. Although younger people experience a strong backlash from their family members, their determination to be open to all people seems to change many dynamics within interethnic relations in BiH.

**Conclusion**

Chapter six provides queer people's perspectives of structural violence and the memories of the war in post-accord BiH. It also reveals the continuing war traumas that are embodied in the younger generations many who did not experience the war in person, yet they continue to suffer from their parents' PTSD, which exacerbates the embedded structural violence and poverty that exists in the country.

Younger generations are now born into poverty and experience that for a very long time and many for the rest of their lives. This results in young people's disbelief and distrust about the new generations' futures as they are not provided with critical platforms to excel in their own local space. Providing a safe and inclusive space for all citizens is significant, and this opportunity can be created through the establishment of appropriate transformational justice systems, practices, and methods. One of the most important ways to create a just, peaceful, and sustainable society is through the implementation of peace accords, which includes every community and provides them with the space to be visible and feel included, ensuring harmony

in the society. International actors' signatures can bring an end to violent conflicts; however, to be able to truly move forward, a society must foster positive peace or social justice wherein all community members are heard, respected, and equally enjoy the benefits of social justice and the peace dividend.

## Chapter Seven: Activism and Resistance Despite Internal and External Homophobia

### Introduction

Activists' experiences and challenges center on how they make sense of everyday homophobia or support for BiH's LGBTQ community. The participants shared their stories based on their everyday interactions with the space, people, institutions, and their agents. By highlighting the complex nature of activism, Chapter seven presents the respondent's experiences of activism, Pride Parades, and queer violence. It further elaborates on the lack of police support for the LGBTQ community and their narratives of the impact of internalized and externalized homophobia in Bosnia. The chapter also highlights the implications of queer stories in BiH, where visibility has its own unique challenges that start at a very young age.

Specifically, the chapter explores the history of LGBTQIA+ activists in the streets, the progress and challenges of queer visibility, the role of NGOs in queer activism in BiH and some critiques of activism from queer community members.

### People Write Their History in the Streets

BiH is a challenging environment for queer people due to cultural, religious, and societal norms. A country that is still recovering from the war needs critical policies, protections, and laws to support queer people's everyday existence. However, discrimination, harassment, and violence against queer people are still common and legal protections are limited despite the community's consistent activism efforts.

Before the wars of the 1990s, there was an emerging lesbian and gay community and LGBTQIA+ activism in the former Yugoslavia. However, this was predominantly present in the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia but not in Bosnia (Đurkovič, 2008 cited in Swimelar,

2019, p. 770). Queerness in the former Yugoslavia was a traumatic experience for the queer community, which queer people normalized by saying to the community that "they deserve it all for being something totally wrong" (Đurić, 2022, p. x). Agatha Milan Đurić, a prominent LGBTQ activist from Belgrade, remembers her experience as a transwoman in Yugoslavia and how she failed to adapt to the socially constructed gender roles that revolved around patriarchy and a culture of violence whether it emanated from her family or school, which were not that much different. She succinctly explains it in the following manner:

> To leave home meant encountering physical and psychological oppression, but staying at home also supplied me with its proper share of cruelty. Going to school equalled exposing myself to threats and harassment inevitably accompanied by guilt, shame, and fear that paralysed me strengthening my idea that I was solely responsible for bringing that calamity upon myself (Đurić, 2022, p. x).

While it was quiet challenging to see a transgender person like Đurić exist in Yugoslavia, seeing Western transgender LGBTQIA+ role models like David Bowie, Boy George, Annie Lennox, Queen Latifah, Amy Ray, Melissa Etheridge, George Michael, Jimmy Somerville, Dave Gahan, Morrisey, and many other public artists was crucial for her identity-development.

Throughout the Yugoslav succession war, nationalist leaders on all sides utilized patriarchal gender roles and demonized queers as traitors to the nation (Moss, 2014 cited in Swimelar, 2019, p. 770). Despite such a history, LGBT activism in BiH has increased since the early 2000s, a time when the country was still in the process of healing from the profound human and material losses caused by the war (Selmić, 2016). During this transition, the local people got stuck between the nationalists' agenda and international supervision, which is still considered as a top-down approach with neocolonial overtones (Selmić, 2016; Turčilo, 2012).

Although queer visibility remains relatively low, there have been some positive improvements in recent years especially after the first Pride Parade was held in Sarajevo in 2019.

This, however, also brought more violence and discrimination especially for those who have decided to be more visible or go out in public. Only 35 percent of my participants are willing to be visible regardless of the possible outcomes for them and the rest have various concerns that might put them at risk such as family disownment, domestic violence, violence on the streets, and structural violence related to finding jobs. In societies like BiH where LGBTQIA+ activism progresses slowly, there are some challenging layers to seeing the picture closer.

Ayoub et al. (2023) suggest four potential cultural outcomes for early-stage LGBT+ activism in societies like BiH, where the representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals are not known, arguing that "such cultural outcomes result from a combination of movement success at achieving both visibility and receptivity within existing cultural frames" (p. 3). In further elaboration of BiH's queer's cultural outcomes, they focused on visibility-"salience of new ideas in public discourse and the ability of people to interact with them" (p.3-4), and receptivity- "the degree to which communities are likely to embrace or feel threatened by the cultural diffusion of LGBT+ activism and support*"* (pp.3-4). Ayoub at al.'s (2023) analysis of activism in BiH reflects the current situation in which LGBT+ activism becomes more visible yet cultural receptivity of it remains low, which has been testified to by most of the participants in this study like Ana.

Ana has mixed feelings about activism because she believes that such visibility might come with golden handcuffs. She recounted the following in her story:

> I think we have to be very visible in the sense that we constantly show up, but you have to be very careful once you get that visibility. I know it's very sad, but you have to be careful about the way that you behave. So, you have to be very controlled, you have to be very patient because they want you to go out there and they want you to embarrass yourself and to cause issues just so they can confirm their preconceived notions about you.
>
> They don't want to change their opinion about you. So that's the trick… On the other hand, one must be careful about how they are not going to get

> anything working from the shadows and not actually being prominent or visible anywhere because people are just afraid to notice you when they're going to think it's a very isolated thing, there's like one or two of you. But once you get to the center of that stage, you have to be very careful about how you act.

BiH's LGBTQIA+ activism and Pride Parades resistance provides an opportunity for the LGBTQIA+ (and straight alliance allies) to come together, share a space, and celebrate their identities publicly and openly. While it takes years to be fully visible in society, the visibility that activism provides assists in breaking down stereotypes and increase people's awareness about queer issues, which can result in greater acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Pride Parades that started in BiH in 2019 were many queer Bosnians' first experience with queer activism. For example, Dunya recalls how beautiful their experience was by saying "It was beautiful, it was electrifying, it was everything, it was really, really super, super special. I think that year [2019] in Sarajevo the parade had the most turnout compared to all the Balkan countries. So, I was so proud of Sarajevo, Bosnia and of the organizing committee, it was amazing."

Dino has also been participating in Pride Parades since 2019. He said he wanted to be part of the history because "people are going to remember us being on the street." He is very excited about the progress that has been going on with the parades. Despite his fears about public homophobia, Dino said that he was so motivated to join the parade crowd but what he saw fulfilled his expectations and the wildest dreams that he had about the impact of the rainbow parade.

> It was shocking, to say the least. We all expected honestly 50 people to come, a maximum of 100. In all of my friends. I was the only person that had [the] courage to go there and just walk. It was a brave thing to do for anybody at that point because we all knew it would be on us. We are going to be remembered. People are going to remember us in the street. And in the worst-case scenario, we're going to get attacked. When I got there and saw so many people, I think it was like

> thousands of people, I don't know. And I was shocked. Mostly people that are not from Bosnia. But I was still shocked.

Being part of history is not easy. The purpose of the parade is for BiH's queer community's celebration and resistance against homophobia. The first pride parade was accomplished in Sarajevo under a heavy police presence, including snipers that were in buildings along the parade route. Despite media coverage of some protests at the parade, the queer community celebrated diversity as they collectively resisted political homophobia. For example, Dino shares his reflections on the first parade as he believes that the media reported it differently than how he experienced it on the streets:

> When you were walking down the street, it took a second to look at any other streets from the sides, you would notice that busses were parked. If this was a street, the bus was parked to block anybody to come. And I think thousands of policemen were there. And they were expecting at least 100 persons, which was a lot for 100 persons, and everybody was from the city. Snipers were out every building. Everybody expected the worst.
>
> And I remember there were moments of silence, rare moments of silence when we could hear people from, I think a km away. There was an anti-LGBT parade, mostly Muslim Bosniaks. It was very much oriented that we were marching at the Pride, and they were like reading stuff from [the] Quran and praying loudly for us to hear. And in moments, I heard them, and the chills got to me because I didn't want to think about consequences and there were consequences.

The younger queer generation lives in limbo and the conflict impacts them more often as they will pass their trauma onto the next generations, but they are determined for change to happen. Most young people I met are finding innovative ways to challenge the government and the homophobia they experience. Most of the youth speak English fluently. Speaking another language is a trend and it is so common to hear them switching from Bosnian/ Croatian/ Serbian (BCS) to English in the streets. Most European based companies also have a branch in BiH and speaking another language is also advantageous for the community to find employment. This also provides them with flexibility to travel to other countries for short-term workshop

opportunities, which helps them to connect with the rest of the world, and to build a global experience. This opens the younger generations' minds, and they have a clear vision of pride and queer activism. For example, Abraksas shares his observation about the role of youth as follows:

> I think the younger generation is more under the influence of this calling diced pop culture. And with that, yeah, I think this pop culture did more than gay activists or [the] younger generation to accept that. I think like people who are 19 are a bit more open. And also, the 19-year-olds here are pretty much quicker to out themselves than others. They're freer to out themselves and be feminine. And they're not ashamed. But the pressure of the religion and nationalism is still strong. And also, the women are more liberal and accepting it. OK, but having gay friends than hetero.

Jovan also shares the same vision as Abraksas, and he believes that the younger generations will bring the reform that the community needs into the society. Most of the participants are also convinced that sustainable peace will come when the younger generations take control of the political system and civil society organizations. Jovan believes that it is obvious that the older people are not willing to change. Thus, the younger people have more responsibility to reimagine the society. They are fearless and want to live their lives the way they want to.

Jovan's mom is a teacher, and she can see how young queer people live openly, kissing in the hallways and holding hands, and yet they experience "so much homophobia." Jovan is proud of them, and he also believes that they are luckier compared to his generation as their parents are much younger and open-minded than his parents were.

> So, they're getting acceptance at home, so it's easier for them to deal with homophobia and the culture and the society. So, I think in the next couple of years, it is going to be more and more open [...] And I'm afraid that that's going to push the public again in the ultra-right direction because it has happened in the neighboring countries… As much as the queer community gets [an] open and just society, the right side, the radical right gets stronger as well because the people now find a scapegoat.

Strahinja also sees the youth's potential for forging social change. He sees younger generations as being more open, "they don't give a damn about anyone." Parents are more supportive.

Younger people express their gender identities however they want. “They are much freer when it comes to the way they talk or dress” and their parents are okay with it, “which is shocking for me in a positive way, and I am happy for that.”

That said, Daniele is a firm believer that Pride parades help the community immensely because of its visibility and impact in local communities; however, they also acknowledge the fact that Pride is more than just a celebration as it is a catalyst for social change and the transformation of patriarchal societal structures:

> I believe it helps with visibility. Especially in Southeastern Europe, like as someone that is also attending Pride here in [county], here is just a love festival and know they don't have to protest anything. They already have all the rights, which is just nice. Here we go out in the streets, we celebrate love. But in southeastern Europe it plays a role because it’s a protest. The social protest of people wanting a change in the society. It plays a crucial role for a change. I would say so.

Activism means different things to different people. Someone who lives in a village in contrast to living in a city might have different experiences based on the opportunities or the lack thereof. For example, Adnan K. considers his coming out as a sort of activism. He believes that not everybody can change the whole society so that changing one person at a time will make some progress for the whole society. Compared to the people who expect many things to happen in a short period of time, Adnan does not foresee the change happening overnight. “In a conservative society like Bosnia with half of its queer people in the closet and another half active that frontal battle will never work.” Social change requires persistent, determined, and continuous peacebuilding efforts over time.

That said, the LGBTQIA+ community disrupts violence against it through small actions and behaviors (as well as big actions) in various ways. Say a gay man named Saśa who lives in a homophobic city with a population of 113,000 people, like in Mostar, goes to high school.

Everything that is established in the community where he lives is against his existence to be free. These include schools and their curricula, teachers who hold homophobic views, neighbors who are never exposed to the presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals, the worker at the corner *Buregdžinica*, a pastry store, stares at him as he stops by to get *borek*, which is a kind of pastry, before his school. Then Saša has four best girlfriends at schools, as Gen Z would call it, besties. They adore him, they always hang out together, go to coffee shops together during breaks, celebrate each other's accomplishments, and they go to Sarajevo for a weekend getaway. Saša's friends' kind of know he is gay, but they do not want to comment on it as they do not want him to feel uncomfortable.

After a while, Saša sees the great friendships that have come out of his school, he cannot hold it in anymore, and he comes out to his besties. They all act like they were surprised but they thanked him. Although they love Saša, they do not have many ideas about what that "gayness" brings other than the queer social media influences they are following from Serbia and Croatia. They start asking Saša some questions, whether he is out to his family, does he have a boyfriend, who is on the top and who is on the bottom in the relationship, has he slept with a girl, how sure is he about his sexuality, among many other questions as many young LGBTQIA+ individuals get. They then get to know a different side of Saša and his sexuality is also normalized in their friendship.

Saša now feels more comfortable. He can also point out how handsome a boy is when one passes by on the street. He can show his celebrity crush to his besties without having any concerns. Saša's friends become a strong ally and they challenge anything that is against the LGBTQIA+ individuals in their family or in other friendship environments. Such a domino effect normalizes the presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Saša feels empowered and can act or

behave more freely around his friends. He dresses a bit more comfortably. When he goes to the *Buregdžinica***,** he has hearty laughs, and he cares less about how the store staff stares at him. After a while, they also normalize him and start having small talks. Saša and his friends start challenging the teachers whenever they use derogatory terms or misrepresent the LGBTQIA+ community.

This allyship grows and they discuss the LGBTQIA+ issues freely. Saša gets to know a lesbian schoolmate from another class who was feeling uncomfortable about coming out but finds the courage after meeting him. She joins the friendship zone, and they meet a few other queer students from other high schools. Saša and his friends' local small scale micro peace actions, resiliency, and persistence connect them with a larger scale of friends, which can eventually lead to political elite decision-making people, such as the school principal, mayor of the city, or they may even organize a big youth march with the Ministry of Education to improve their conditions, etc. These small actions are part of everyday peace and when Saša and his friends practice everyday peace, their acts are exploring "how peace or situations approximating peace, are lived, enacted, embodied, and experienced in everyday life" (Mac Ginty, 2021, p.12). It is prudent to see the potential of everyday peace in small acts, actions, behaviors, or things that people get used to, such as greeting someone, but something they never consider as potentially part of everyday peace.

Despite the potential of queer activism, some of the participants refrained from the idea of being present in Pride Parades for various reasons. While several don't want to be part of the parades due to their fear of homophobia, others simply think that Pride Parades are "too much" for a country like BiH. For example, Emir 1 believes that there are more serious issues to be

addressed, suggesting that the queer community must bide it's time to be able to topple the conservative power structure:

> I'm very much not pro-parade, especially in Bosnia, definitely not. I think it's one of the reasons why we queers get a bad name is because it seems as if you're trying to rub it in somebody's face. And I understand that the whole concept of fighting for your rights. That's how it works. It might work that way somewhere else, but we know that in Bosnia, it doesn't work that way, and we know that people have much more pressing issues in their lives. And I'm not saying, you know, somebody's fighting is not important. I'm just saying that we have way more important issues in Bosnia than that. And you should stand in line and wait for your turn…

Forty percent of the participants had a similar suggestion: "wait for your turn." I had a hard time processing how a queer person does not want to prioritize their own rights despite experiencing homophobia in their everyday life. One participant said, "this is not Spain, you cannot act like that" as 70-75 percent of the interviewees also stated that they would go and participate in Pride Parades in other countries but not in BiH. While 50 percent also mentioned the fear of being outed by the media or others, they also felt the need to add an additional comment to justify their reason for not joining the Pride Parade by indicating that Pride is not for BiH.

For some, the ethnosectarian country is not ready for transformative change. "You just need to wait on the corner for your time. When we have a functioning country, I am sure you are also going to get your rights, what right you want…" Emir 1 claims that "the time is not right." Despite such thinking, he is glad that "everybody's safe."

> But I think, you are drawing a target on you, on your head, on your back. And I personally would not jeopardize my own safety for something like that…. I don't think it is appropriate in Bosnia, in some other places, I'm fine with it. I don't want to see people having intercourse in the street. I don't want to see people pissing all over each other in the street.
>
> I don't want to see those things. And those things have become synonymous with Pride in some places. In Bosnia, we have this thing of your four walks, like you can do whatever you want to do in your home. And I think this really belongs in your home. If you know this is intimate and I don't want to see

> it. I don't want to participate in it by doing that, I don't think we should force people to see that…

He claims that if a society is hesitant to "give people the right" to get medical treatment, he does not think that one can make a huge leap forward anywhere and he adds: "You're just going to get beaten up somewhere."

Whether it is a "personal reason" or internalized homophobia, older participants do not see Pride to be a "good fit" for BiH. Consequently, Strahinja, avows that parades go beyond the purpose of educating and socializing the public about queer rights and become more about shock and awe that in effect has the opposite impact.

> I'm not a big fan of that Pride… OK, you're walking for some rights and for freedom and for the way you want to look and not to be judged. All right, but to show that sexual part which gets me annoyed, honestly. I don't know you have that certain group of people who will do like public sex, walk naked or put the cock rings on them and they're having things around. And when I see someone who is a member of that community, when I look from a side, I'm like, but I don't want this person to represent me. You know, why is he doing those things?
>
> I mean, OK. I don't judge anyone, but I do judge those people, because why will you show something which is private like in your bedroom, know that things in your bedroom. You don't need to put your fetish things outside like it's private, it's between you and me, not between me and the whole city or a whole country. I mean, it's nice to show that there are different people, all right. But just show that a little better way. You know, and that's why I don't like to go on that Pride because everything it's not even the Pride for a foreign community, it's like more Pride for fetish things.

Strahinja suggests that queer people should show their identities "in a better way" as he argues that everything is about "fetish things, it is not even Pride for the foreign community [those with a foreign passport reside in Bosnia]."

On the one hand, there is a generation filled with hope that aims to change the system and to be free without whataboutism, on the other hand, there is a generation who still questions the limit of space for other people. In BiH, there doesn't seem to be a consensus about the celebration of Prides, but change does not come overnight, it takes persistence, determination,

and patience. Elena is a great example of someone having that patience. Despite facing violent attacks, exclusion, and challenges in expressing her true self, she hopes for a better future for herself and for people in similar situations. Her story is moving, and her journey took a very long time.

**A Story of Elena: "A Very Long Journey to Meet the Self"**

During the recruitment process, I received an email from Elena's friend stating that Elena wanted to participate in the research [Elena does not speak English]. She was currently going through transitioning and her friend sent Elena's campaign for support but stated, "this is not a precondition to participate but I wanted to send her campaign email in case you want to share it with your network." After exchanging a few emails, we were able to conduct the interview. At that time, I was still in Canada, so the interview was done via Zoom. Elena was very excited to share her experience and great news about the transition with me. While I had a diverse group of participants, I wanted to dedicate this section to Elena as she was the only trans individual person that I interviewed. As I discuss the underrepresentation of transgender individuals in BiH, trans individuals are less visible in BiH, and I wanted to spotlight Elena's story.

Elena is a 71-year-old trans individual who waited so long to transition. She says coming out to herself was a form of activism for her. She said that she was around 13 or 14 years old when she felt different for the first time. When other girls in her schools and neighborhoods developed their breasts and started having beautiful faces, Elena used to steal her mother's wardrobe to wear for herself. At the age of 17, when she was fully dressed as a woman and walking on the streets, she got arrested by the police and spent a night in jail. So, she kept hiding and dressing as a woman but "it was well hidden," Elena said. She hid herself until the moment she realized that transition exists. "It was great news, and I wasn't aware of it earlier in my life,

otherwise, I would have done this transition much earlier. In Bosnia, such information is very limited."

Due to social pressure, Elena eventually got married to a woman and "became a father of a son." She was still married with her wife when this interview was conducted. Even back then when Elena and her wife were dating, she revealed to her that she "was kind of a feminized man" and her wife told Elena that that was okay: "She told me that she is aware that there are some males dressing up as females that she insisted that I don't date either men or women while in a relationship with her." Elena said that her wife had a very strong influence on her telling her to

> […] just to behave like a man, like a proper man. Even though I was still hiding every now and then, I would wear something that was feminine, like underwear and stuff. But by the early 2000s, I completely decided to cut it off and stop wearing feminine clothes.

Elena started wearing female clothes again around May 2000 and after an interpersonal attack, she decided to free herself from a life that was dictated to her by the patriarchal culture. The year 2015 was a boiling point for her as she relates in the following story:

> Even though I had the urge, I had the feelings on May 2000 I started wearing female clothes, and it went on like that. On October 2015, I had that kind of attack in the middle of the night. I was convinced it was a heart attack, but actually it was hormonal dizziness. I went to the bathroom to kind of water up a little bit and then stuff and I took clothes from my wife. And after that, I started sleeping as a baby. So, the following morning after the attack, I spoke to my wife, and I told her that I have this hormonal attack and that I am going to buy underwear for myself and would continue to wear it, and I told her that I simply needed it.

After 2015, Elena went outside in female clothes for a walk in her neighborhood for a few hours, and she calls it "liberating." However, she would not spend any more time outside as she received threats including death threats, so she walked back to her apartment when she did not feel safe. She was chased and insulted on several occasions. On one particular occasion, she was

wearing a long skirt and high heels. There was a man some meters away from her with a gun pointed at her, but she says, “I wasn’t afraid, I really wasn’t”:

> There was no way that I could run in high heels, so I simply turned my head away from him. I said a prayer inside silently the way that I knew how. And that was it. He said very ugly things to me, but I decided to take him order to avoid any further reactions because I was aware that he could become very violent. Five minutes after that incident he left but tomorrow he met my wife and told her “Your husband is not afraid of anyone.”

During the initial period of their marriage, her wife was under the influence of her sister, and that sister tried to take both her wife and her son away from her, and Elena was laid off from work together with six other workers. As such, she was economically dependent on her wife, and in the end, her wife was dependent on her sister, and that was used to some extent against Elena.

On one occasion, she was followed by a car with four boys inside, but Elena escaped with shortcuts through the neighborhood. One man on the street talked to her and even escorted her to the very entrance of her building. She was surprised by the support that she received that night:

> So, since he was not hostile, I kind of thought to myself, why didn't I turn to him and then started talking to him? After that, I wasn't scared any longer, but I was still very careful and I knew I used my common-sense and my intelligence to avoid any kind of problem and how I did it was I was very aware of my surroundings, whether there is a couple of females coming towards me or if they were children or if there's a group of boys. So, in order to avoid them, I would like to pretend like I am looking on different sides or [at a] mirror etc.

After that positive experience, her existence became kind of public knowledge, so she was contacted by numerous TV media in BiH. Her first interview was with TV HouseN1, which is an affiliate of CNN. She did those interviews and those were followed by more appearances in various print media. After that, she appeared in the news outlets not only in BiH, but also in Serbia and in other Balkan countries. Elena’s son also became “kind of silently okay with it” and she even gets her son’s advice on which part of the city can be dangerous for a trans person and

he advises her not to go there, etc. Her wife is also retired and has her own income from her pension.

That said, Ivana defines activism as "living your truth." This makes everyone an activist. Ordinary queer people living their lives, challenging the heteronormative way of living, doing their everyday activities, and being present in their spaces are ways of activism. Such determination also comes with challenges. For example, Jovan's friend got beaten up outside of a club because he was simply being himself and dancing. When they reported the attack to the police, they did not follow up with the case.

Despite all these challenges, Jovan who lives in Banja Luka, RS feels empowered when the community organizes itself, meets up, and has a large crowd. "I mean large in our respective number here, where a lot of us [are] working and being together in one place and having fun, dancing, you forget where you are living." He says that these moments have been some of the most positive for him. He does not see the Pride Parade happening in Banja Luka or RS, so he sees his friends gathering as the only option for queer activism.

Mladen 2 also sees coming out to somebody who he knows as one form of queer activism because that person can also empower others through allyship or understanding. When one of his colleagues came to know that he was gay, and when he quit a job for other internal issues in the company, that colleague hugged him and said, "thank you, you have managed to change my opinion about what gay people are like." He calls that moment his high note activism.

In contrast, Aida is considered a queer mother in the community. She introduced me to Elena (one of my participants who identified as a trans woman and gave me permission to mention her story) who was fundraising for Elena's surgical transition at the time. When I met her, I saw a very positive person who was willing to discuss the issues queer people have faced

in the community without hesitation. When I saw her at the Sarajevo Pride, I saw someone who was surrounded by many young people with love and compassion beaming from their very essence.

I asked Aida what activism means to her and what types of activism challenges she faces. Aida explained it beautifully to me in the following manner:

> Listen you can sit down and cry, wishing the situation is different or you can stand up and seek solutions. I'm not only a queer activist, but I am a feminist, queer, disability, and animal right activist. There is a lack of understanding that people don't believe that one person can change the world. I get the question of 'how come you don't get tired?' And my answer to that is 'how come you don't get bored just by sitting in front of Facebook or complaining about [the] situation, yet doing nothing? Do something!'
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> You need to educate people and it is a never-ending story. For example, for the first Pride Parade or for the first animal that got tortured, in order for people to understand the seriousness of the issue, there needs [to be] constant education and explanation, because what I've learned over the years is that people simply don't look at it. They are not aware of many things. If they don't get in direct contact with people who are marginalized or oppressed such as children with autism or a gay person, they either don't have a stand, don't think about it or they hate it because they don't know anything about it, and they're afraid, that's the hate.

At the same time, however, Emir 2 is a U.N. worker who argues that the queer community needs more emotional and psychosocial support programs and that often these programs favor people who are already out. He believes that the best way to help the queer community within the country is to set up emotional and psychosocial support programs. While he contends that legislation protects individuals from hate crime, which he finds to be effective in some way, he points out the necessity and importance of these services especially for "closeted people, talking to someone, telling them things will be okay overall in the long run. That's what we need; however, foreigners in these organizations expect all gay people to be out and those who are not out, they are like 'fuck you!'"

Emir 2 argues that such organizations either directly or indirectly ask those who are not out "to go back to their closet." Emir 2 urges hotlines for queer support services and "telling someone that they are loved is crucial." This would help people much more especially if they are looking for different services, such as legal assistance, as knowing one's rights can be empowering and Emir 2urges these organizations to be extra cautious. It was surprising to me, after a fruitful discussion with Emir 2, that he would expect "a softer Pride." This is what Emir 2 had to say on the issue:

> But there are many people who are hurting in silence that they have no issues. No one was bullying them, but they feel alienated and almost no one's focusing on them. No one is sending our messages of acceptance. You know, we have Pride, but it is not about acceptance in the Balkans. It's about, you know, being up in your face. Could we make it a bit softer for people who are in the shadows? And I feel so sorry for them. I don't know how to help them.

Suggestions from the community members focus on identifying people who are not ready to openly express their identities but are in desperate need of support from the community. The critical question that needs to be addressed is how the NGOs/CSOs can find a way to reach out to the LGBTQIA+ community without causing harm or inadvertently outing them.

**Queer Violence, Families, and Symbolic Police**

Resistance means disrupting everyday violence, civil order, and the society, however the community members who were upfront in the first Pride parade paid a huge price. Dino was beaten up after 10 days of Pride by 10 men when he was on a tram. He fainted when the ambulance arrived. Dino reported it to the police, but no one got prosecuted.

> One month after the parade, I was riding the tram at night. I think it was 9 pm in Bosnia and 10 guys recognized me from the internet and they knew I was gay, and they knew almost everything, and they beat me up in front of the tram. When I got out to escape, I tried to run. They beat me up and a police [car] and ambulance came and the whole another story with the police… they never got prosecuted.

> Nothing ever happened. Bosnian politics basically.… I was really badly injured because I was bleeding a lot because this one guy was from the bottom of his heart hated me, that's what I saw in his eyes because he took me and smashed me on the pulse on the floor and I was bleeding on this side. And he picked me up to look me in the eyes, to smash me again.
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> And the other guys that were with him asked him to stop. 'Stop it, stop it, stop it.' They literally had to grab him to stop, and they left. Finally, I somehow, I woke up and started to run. I don't know even where. And that's when somebody called [an] ambulance and [the] police, and they came. And I went to the hospital, and everything was kind of fine because I didn't need only some antibiotics and they didn't stitch me up or anything, so I was kind of good.

Almas was also very nervous to participate in the parade. Their partner told them not to go but they did not listen to them. They said, "The whole day I was so terrified… and I had no idea how it would go, what the security [would] look like, but I wanted to be there." Almas also find the youth's resistance to patriarchy and homophobia admirable:

> Especially, you know how it went in Belgrade the first few times there was a lot of violence, there was bloodshed, and I was like, I do understand that you have security here, but I'm still know very terrible, violent, and armed people are here. But I was like, OK, I'll just suck it up. And you know, it's hard. So I didn't know how many people would be there, whether the security is going to be good.
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> If someone's going to see me like my employer, I was [working] for a very religious person at the time I was like, if someone photographs me and I come up on some news site, sure, it's over. It was beautiful though. A lot of young people at such events who are like dressing the way they want, who aren't scared to put sets in their Instagram bio. And I think that's very admirable. Like, I'm really happy for them, you know, and I hope that they can stay safe and live their lives. I felt safer this way because, you know, safety and group go well [together].

Although Jovan wanted to be part of the parade, he was scared for some personal reasons. He said that he would not explain it to his family if they happened to know he attended the parade. He was also nervous about being captured by the media. Jovan did not want to lose his pocket money, family support, or the scholarships he gets from his school.

> I'm not willing to participate in Sarajevo, not because of the political issue or anything like that. It's just because I would have to explain to my parents why I'm going to Sarajevo in that period, because it really is represented in the media and a big fuss is made about in the media, especially by homophobic people. So, I would have to explain why I'm going there and because it's a small amount of

> people [we] would probably get photographed or videotaped in that moment. My life would get destroyed. Unfortunately, if I was found out to be gay because a lot of the structures right now that are keeping me well, I don't know busy and working and going to college would really be destroyed.
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> And I'm not even sure what would happen between me and my parents if they find out because right now, I depend on them because I have no way of working right now. So, I mean, I have some scholarship from my university because of my grades and everything, but it's not enough to live by myself. So, I depend on them. So I'm really not able to risk it that much. Concerning Belgrade Pride, it's geographically nearby. So, it's easy to go to Belgrade. I didn't participate, but I'm still open to participating [in] Euro Pride this year. I think it's going to happen in Belgrade.

In contrast, Amina is a well-known queer activist in BiH and due to their visibility, they received many threats and have experienced assaults. However, the police failed to respond to the violence inflicted on them like other assault and battery cases against queer individuals. Initiating a lawsuit against the man who tried to kill him made Amina feel empowered. He notes that, "Well, for these events that happened to me, I go to police and report on it. So, I do that, I put a lawsuit? There is a lawsuit against the guy to try to get us to kill us? So it's still in the process. Luckily, I really am very proud [to be] doing that though."

When I asked how Amina would cope in such terrible violent situations, their answer was to put a smile on my face: "My community!": "I hang out with people and play in the places that are friendly. And even when I get into some other cities or someone, I have this bubbly personality. Yeah, that distracts people. I think that plays a role in not getting homophobic comments as well. And I'm always very pleasant to people."

Amina, however, sees how the education system promotes violence and discrimination, and they say that they know who is guilty and they also point it out as being the critical role for NGO sectors and technology in BiH to nurture a more tolerant society:

> I remember this incident in 2019 when the two boys, threw rocks at me and my girlfriend at the Jewish cemetery? So that also happened… I tried to forget about it, honestly. I know all the reasons why they do that, and I know that I'm not the

> guilty one here. Yes, I know. It's not because of me. It's because of the society, the education system and the political, about everything that it's not actually me.
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> What I can do with there is that I can talk to them. I'm always ready to talk to them and try to explain to them. And I think there is a lot of youth that has more knowledge about these topics rather than it was the case ten years ago. Thanks to the internet of course. And the other thing that we also have the impact of the NGO sector here. I think the NGO sector is really open spaces for the youth and for queer kids, and that is especially important in the smaller communities.

Education is supposed to be a critical opportunity to socialize the youth with positive and constructive societal values and norms. However, it plays divisive roles in BiH unless there are personal efforts made by ordinary people to promote reconciliation. Most people start experiencing homophobia either from their teachers or peers, if not at home.

Dino chose a school that was 15 kilometers away from his hometown because he "wanted to escape this place." He felt people were gaining popularity by bullying him. He said that he was treated as "someone with special needs." This is how his teachers addressed the homophobic behavior of their students.

> They always had a different approach to me, and they always had a sense or thinking that I wasn't able to accomplish something that they didn't have any high expectations, or they mostly had really, really low expectations. I know that in Bosnia, you had five grades, one worst five well, but I noticed that no matter how hard I worked, I would always get like three. Like the middle at the best and in tests where it's like they really don't have a judgment of deciding my score, they were always shocked that I had high grade that I did well.

Dino's high school choice freed him, and he was able to find himself. He was respected and accepted for being who he was compared to how he was treated in his homophobic elementary school. However, Dino had already paid the price for being who he is in his elementary school, so he was very cautious:

> I remember very clearly the first day, we were sitting really close to each other. And it isn't a regular classroom, it's like a sea of chairs. Very hard to explain, it doesn't even matter. And the girl next to me was sitting and she really reminded me of somebody who used to bully me. Mm-Hmm. And what shocked me is she

> asked me right on the spot without like even really getting to know me much whether I was gay.
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> And I froze because I didn't know what to say, but if I say yes, OK, I'm free myself to some extent, but if she is homophobic, she'll probably start a group of hate on me. So, I sort of didn't say anything. I don't know how I pulled that off but in a few days. I told her that I was gay, and I decided that no matter what happens, I will unapologetically say that I'm gay. That's it. Do what you want but I am gay because I realize I needed to take the power from them, at least a little bit, because they couldn't say, "Oh, you're *peder* (fagot)."
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> And in high school, I thought it was the most accepting place, the most wonderful. I had an opportunity for a fair grading. It was like, oh my God, I have a chance now I can do good. And I was very excited about high school, but it's my fourth year and I'm realizing that like much politics in Bosnia, it gets to a level of acceptance that they cannot avoid and stops there.

In his new school, Dino constantly challenges his teachers, the school principal, and peers to institutionalize more accepting and inclusive school policies. Dino goes to an art school, and he is the only man in his class. Make-up companies often contact his school for make-up classes. One time, they wanted 15 girls, and everyone was about to go to be part of the make-up, but Dino said that he wanted to join the 15 girls too. He described the situation in the following way:

> I was like, so do I stay here? What's happening? Because I want to go there? The staff told me that it was only for girls, and I was shocked that she was saying that to me. I thought she was more accepting. And I called them out and said it was discriminatory. And she thought I was joking because I have very sarcastic jokes. And I was like, "I'm not joking. I said I wanted to go there, please do something about it…."
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> I said, "go ask them and I'll come anyways regardless of what they say." So that was, I realized, kind of yesterday that my school is accepting only because it has to be because mostly everybody accepts LGBT people in school and there are many LGBT persons in our school. I would say, about at least 60 percent. But our school gained popularity because of its inclusivity and generally, in Sarajevo, people who lean towards art are more accepting. The school is more popular, and a lot of kids want to go there.

Students experience homophobia at every level of schooling in BiH from teachers, staff, and students. However, Mehmedalija mostly experienced structural rather than physical violence. As many other queer people build more confidence to be out because they also have another family member at school so they would have "brothers to fight with them." He remembers the

homophobia that he experienced in high school as if it happened yesterday. He recounted the issue in the following manner:

> Well, it was in high school, and it was from my professor of mathematics. And I was sitting on the chair, and you know that chair was making some weird sound. Every time I moved, he aggressively spoke to me and said: "just move one more time, and you will go through a window, you and that chair now." I said, "I'm sorry." After maybe like before the end of class, my pen fell on the ground, and I wanted to pick it up. And [the chair] made that sound.
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> And then he screamed at me: "Go out." And he said, "we in Mostar, have one-word mars" (a French word that refers to the army marching) which means like something like fuck off in the Bosnian context. As I was leaving the classroom, I heard everyone laughing. And when the class was over, a few friends came to me and they said, "oh, he said like, we should send you to gay pride in Belgrade. So, you can jump on someone's lap or the thing."

Mehmedalija said that when queer people experience this type of behavior, it discourages them from continuing their education as they do not want to attend school and live with such fears. All his classmates were distant after that incident, and it was tough for Mehmedalija as he still had to work with his classmates. He kept skipping school and he realized that the teacher's goal was to force him out of his classroom and the school:

> For me, it was [a] really bad experience because, you know, after that all of my classmates were kind of distant from me. They were skeptical when we had to do some teamwork or something like that. And of course, that was maybe one of the reasons why I'm not usually, you know, going to school. I was going, but every time I had some classes, I was just leaving the school and going downtown to drink coffee with my friends that are not going to the school. It was different, you know?

Mehmedalija dropped out of school after two weeks when he started university. He saw a few local people from his town who were also attending the same faculty. He was afraid that someone from his school or town might have told them about his sexuality. Due to social pressure, queer people find ways to cope in their small queer social circle if one is lucky to have that community compared to those who live in a small village or town that are not so lucky. Most queer people attempt to move to bigger cities to live more freely. In a homophobic society like

Bosnia people who are not out pay the price as Mehmedalija did by dropping out of school. Mehmedalija was careful not to hang out with any known queer people, so they would not find any proof of his sexuality. “It was too stressful for me, and I said ‘no, I can’t do this’ and then I left that faculty. I dropped [out of] the school.”

Stereotypes about other communities or marginalized communities (gypsies, queer people, etc.) are normalized through the schools, books, and soccer games. As a community organizer, Aleksa is concerned about how deeply entrenched homophobia is in society. He says that one learns that homosexuality is a “disease” by their professors because they have also learned it the same way from their teachers. The so-called scientific knowledge about homosexuality that is taught at schools creates a narrative that is taught to be “fact.” These so-called ideas and “truths” about queer people continue in every public sphere. Aleksa reported on this issue in the following way:

> For example… if some soccer team plays bad then the trainer of the team is [a] faggot. You know, we connect that word with something bad. And if you are a loser, you are faggot… and if you read the title of a newspaper that indicates the person as faggot it is because of the match results. Maybe if you are more sensitive, that will hurt you. For me personally it does not.
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> Also, you can read the different comments on the other networks… about how someone looks, and it is more about women than about a man because of that physical look. People are more women, girls, and boys, so you can read it sometimes not directly to you, but to some popular people. You can read on forums, and you can read also different statements by religious communities. So, all of that is homophobic. It sometimes is not directly to you, but sometimes it can hurt you.

Aleksa also highlights another distressing issue that plagues the community namely the prevalent presence of homophobic comments and attitudes. He observes that “some networks for a gay dating [site] can be ultra-homophobic.” This paradox becomes even more bewildering as the owners of these networks are gay, yet, when they are in the public eye, they actively express sentiments that are staunchly against the queer community to protect their economic bottom line.

Aleksa personally knows some famous people who are in the community, however, these individuals lead lives that conform to societal expectations, including having wives and "traditional" families.

Queer existence is one way of resistance to homophobia and patriarchy. The role of police protection at queer events, for example, ensures the safety of all attendees. When police protection is ensured, it also sends a strong message out to the entire community. Jovan, however, believes that BiH has a long way to go for ensuring police minority protection. He said that he was traumatized by the attack of his friend:

> Well, trying to actively make a change and I mean in any way possible. Right now, it's more based on organizing events, private events for the queer community here, and it's happening. I mean, every three or four months right now, and they are local events, pretty much it's only the queer community knows about, because if anyone else found about it, you probably have issues. I mean, my friends were beaten up for nothing. Four people attacked him and beat him up.
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> And just because he was dancing outside of the club and the excuse wouldn't matter because it really doesn't matter. And they beat him up. And when he barely, he stayed alive, thankfully. But he really did have heavy injuries, serious injuries. Then when he reported to the police, they said "it is better for you, not to press charges against them because it is going to push forward a lot of different issues. You are not going to get through anyone." Basically, they were just pushing him to just ignore it. They beat him up. But like, who cares, who cares? Who beat you up? It's awful. And that's why I mean, the fear is prevalent.

Damir found me via my recruitment poster after I advertised my recruitment poster on a community Facebook post. He was very friendly; and all I saw was his positivity and his smile. After I explained the study to him, he said "why not, let's do it now!" He was eager to chat, and it ended up being such a fruitful conversation. When I asked him about his experience with homophobia, he said he had many examples but was not sure if I had the time to listen. He shared his specific experience with his parents right before he left BiH for an opportunity abroad [the name of the country is not shared due to confidentiality]. Damir lived his entire life with fears: "What if someone outs him, what if his family knows about him?" COVID-19 made so

many people mentally exhausted. Damir sought support and he used the therapy service that was offered by the SOC, a well-known NGO in BiH. During therapy, he started writing about his life in a diary that was kept in his room when he was living with his family for two years during the pandemic. Things did not go as Damir planned:

> No one ever entered that room, and I was pretty sure that no one will ever find it. And the day before I came here in [country], I was packing my things all over the room and apartment. And as I was waking up the day before my flight, my mom came into my room and started crying, and she said she found my diary. So because of the lack of the sleep, because I didn't sleep for many days because I was packing and changing my life… She was asking me to tell her that that's not true. And she was telling really, really offensive stuff and advising me that if that's [that he was gay] true, you should cure yourself.
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> And I was always so proud of you. And now I found out that you are doing this as if you are taking drugs, that's the same thing for me. And she said really bad things. And for me, that's what's hurting, just because you need to know my mother and know that she's like the best person in this world. She never had anything bad to say about anyone. But now you know the look she gave me. Like, I never saw this look in her eyes, and it was like, really painful, but not in that moment because I was in shock and I was like, OK, how to react?

Damir arrived at his destination, and it was like a flashback for him, and it became hard to process just what had happened. His mother wanted to talk to him that night, but his father was also at home, she wanted to make sure that he would not hear, so she wanted to not have that conversation about Damir's sexuality:

> And she waited for us to be alone. So, my father wouldn't hear it because she said if he found that out, he would go crazy, and she was so afraid of his reaction. So, when she was saying all these things to me and crying, I was just sitting on my bed because I just woke up. And I had a flight tomorrow, you know, I have so many things to do. And it was like unbelievable, unimaginable.

His mother found his diary in Damir's room but the only thing that he could do in that situation was lie as he was supposed to travel the next day and in that last conversation with his Mother, he did not want to deal with the fact that his mother knew that he was gay.

> So, I lied, and I don't know why, but she actually believed me. I tricked her. I said it was not mine. I was maybe good at it. Or maybe she just wanted to trust me. I

> felt good on the end of the day that she did trust me. And but it was still hurting because she said, she couldn't sleep all night, [she] was crying and thinking, where did she do wrong? And but I gave her a speech.
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> I was like, "Mom, you cannot think like that because you know that diary is not mine, but what if it was mine? Is that a reason for you to be disappointed in me? Do you really think that gay people are less human than you, they even can have a better marriage than you?"
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> And she was like "Yeah, I know, I know, I know. But I just don't want my kid to be gay. I don't care about others but just I don't want my kid to be that." We talked for maybe one hour and I know I was on the side of the gay people, but she just didn't want me to be it. And she said if you are not gay, why you never had a girlfriend? And so, I thought, "You don't know that because I don't tell you everything." And yeah, and then she was like, "oh, my God, you are going tomorrow?" And she started crying and hugged me. She was skeptical, like she said now.

Damir's mother said that she was even more afraid for Damir because he was leaving for another country where everything is more open and different. Damir, however, said that his communication with his mother is really good now:

> And I think now when I'm looking back six months ago, I think that one big part of her did trust me, like, OK, really? And we speak pretty often. We speak on the phone almost every day. I don't know the words. Yeah. So, our communication is really good. And but I don't know, maybe that because she missed me because that's our first time in life that I am so far away. Maybe because she has so many times to think about it. Maybe one part of her.
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> But now, you know, having flash back, like, that's just ahead. Maybe I don't know, because but my mom is like, [a] really calm person. And she is not like, I don't know how to say she's not so good at reading people. So, I wouldn't even be surprised if she trusts everything. Sorry for your long story. No, that's me. So I think that's maybe the most traumatic thing because, you know, when you are looking in the eyes of the person who you really, really love and you know that she loves you the most.
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> And you saw the look you never saw it before. And that was so fucked up for me. And that's in me for weeks when I was here thought it was actually worse than I came here in that moment because at the time I had to pack and everything. But now when I have time to think about it even more. And of course, in other members of my family, there are homophobic people as well.

In contrast, when Bojan came out to his family, "it was like horror because they got panicked." He was tortured for days because his family said to him that his sexuality would only bring shame to them, and he that was not allowed to leave his room and so he was locked in it.

> They [the parents] were fighting a lot in that period because they're trying to figure out whose fault was that. Was it mom's or was it dad's? But during that period of time, but they mostly tried to emotionally destroy me, like telling me things like that is a sin. They're going to live in shame. I should be killed. I should kill myself. I couldn't see my brothers because I was locked in my room for a month or two. I was constantly beaten up. So after that period, they considered that I was cured. I've had enough time to think about things that I was doing in my life, so I was cured now. In that period, I tried to kill myself. Luckily, I didn't do that.

Bojan moved out after that and went to college because it was much easier for him to move than to continue living with them. He moved away from the city with almost nothing and he did not talk to his family for 13 years. After that, Bojan saw his family occasionally, but they became too distant from him. When they had lunch at the same table, they would just remain silent.

People experience more uncomfortable feelings in school as it is one of the common socialization spaces for many children and young people. In BiH society, being identified as a bisexual man gets more exposure than a bisexual woman. Schools are supposedly safe spaces free from any forms of violence. None of my participants reported any direct violent experience at school but they did encounter emotional violence among many other psychological violent outbursts by faculty, students, and staff. For example, Strahinja lived in Serbia for a long time and then went back to RS. He spoke with a Serbian dialect, which he believes is prettier "because it is softer, doesn't sound harsh." When he went to school in RS, he was shocked when his teacher told him that he "sounded like a girl." He then started controlling his behavior and felt the need to behave "like a man." His teacher continued to bully him whenever he refused to play football with the other boys by saying "you behave like a girl." He said that he was lucky because his older brother was also studying in the same school, so his classmates could not bully him. Having a brother in the same school is important for most of the participants because it "gives them confidence, so no one can mess around with them, even some teachers!"

A.K. was also policed his entire school years. He said that he has a feminine voice, and he is often mistaken for a woman, when he is on the phone. We had a great discussion around how common an experience that was for queer people. All these pressures dropped off when he went into a gay club in BiH. He remembers how fascinating yet odd his experience was: "I have been policed about how I shouldn't be heard/seen femininely in my whole childhood, but I am whatever the fuck I am! I controlled how not to use my hands, gestures, etc. All these pressures dropped off from me when I went into a gay club in Bosnia during my master's degree." His experience in BiH was different from what he had experienced in the other countries in which he had lived. The bar was heavily guarded. There were three security personnel at the door but once he passed through the security, he was amazed when he saw queer people, Vogue was playing. Although he had mixed feelings about the shared space with others, he found it liberating:

> It was weird. I thought this is how people in the 80s might have felt in Christopher Streets in New York when the first Pride march happened. I didn't have that feeling when I lived in the US for four years, but I had it in Bosnia because I felt like 'oh my gosh, I can finally dance here. I can be as fem or as butch as I want to. I can accept myself. I embrace myself and all of my selfness… I am not going to put a value stamp on how masculine or feminine I am."

A.K., and many other queers, was policing himself before he explored this queer shared space. People in BiH are forced to police their voice, their presence, and the way that they are perceived. "It is not just trans people who are doing voice accommodation. I think everyone does it to claim for power. For men, for example, to be in a position where they feel like they are men." A.K. also was bullied in school. He was called a ballerina. He remembers it succinctly because he was "very visibly and presenting more female, but not consciously or by choice."

Just like A.K., most of the participants did not understand how they were feeling when they were children because it was part of their nature until someone reminded them of who they are. For example, J.D. remembers his own childhood memory and how free he actually was:

"During my upbringing I was a very funny and free child. My husband and I laugh at my pictures when I was a little boy in the seaside wearing high heels. What [was] interesting was that no one told me anything about it and I always thought it was quite normal and never thought that something was wrong with me." Later, one of his family friends told his family that what he was doing was not normal. J.D. then started feeling that if something was not normal with him, then it had to be hidden. That is how BiH society works according to J.D., and he believes that such a mentality plays a key part in the Bosnian queer community. "How you feel has to be hidden. I know a lot of gays who are married [to women], who are having children, who are unsatisfied because they are gay. You are living a double life, and it is hard."

The societal security dilemma is a staunch reality for queers living in divided communities. Thus, groups stick with others that are similar. Mak explains this phenomenon as "once you identify with the members of your group, it is in human nature that you feel safer within your group." Sticking close to one's "tribe" however, also creates many challenges for those who do not necessarily identify with other groups or who identify with those who are discriminated against, such as queer people. Mak explains this issue in BiH as follows:

> The biggest problem for people who feel different than other people is when you don't identify with one particular group. If you don't fit in the narrative that is expected from your [ethnic] group, the punishment is either discrimination, bullying, or open physical attack or absolute isolation which is the biggest fear. And then you have so many people who live in fear, who don't feel good in their skin or have serious frustrations, or mental health issues. These are all because they live in a sad society. The foundation of Bosnia is discriminatory.

Many people choose to cope with different challenges through various outlets. As Mak recognizes, "there is always a choice in life. You can be a sheep, or you can decide to be a wolf. Being a wolf means that you have to be very lonely but in the sense that you habituate yourself. That's the role I took." However, being a wolf also brings different challenges in BiH society.

When Mak was 17, in high school, three boys after school said that he was gay in an insulting way. This event changed Mak's future goals because he wanted to be a doctor until that event. After that experience, he entered judicial proceedings against these three classmates because they threatened to kill Mak. If they killed Mak while they were minors, they would not be held responsible for their actions. Many BiH minors experience traumatic experiences due to the lack of legal protection. That was a stressful period in Mak's life and made him choose his career and help other people who cannot help themselves. Mak finished law school in Sarajevo.

School is a critical shared space for children to socialize with one another. However, queer people have no room to express themselves or learn anything queer. Like A.K., Amina also met queer people during her visit to Banja Luka and Sarajevo. During that time, she got to know her own sexual orientation. She was amazed because she was only 14-year-old and she convinced herself that queer people did not exist in BiH. She thought that they were living in the U.S.A. or in Canada. She started watching YouTube videos of queer people, but she somehow still thought BiH is not for queer people. Then, she got her first girlfriend and told her friends about it. "They were cool even though they were very religious." After many years, Amina became more and more visible and she was fine about that visibility; however, it also brought about challenges for her. She experienced different events on the streets.

In 2019, Amina was part of the first organizing committee of the BiH Pride, and she became more visible in the community than she was used to in the past. That year, a guy threatened to kill her and her girlfriend on the street in the middle of the day. Two months after that incident, around 100 men surrounded Amina and her colleagues in Tirena. The men told them that they were planning to kill them, and that they would first rape them because they were queer. Amina's coming out process was not easy either. When she came out to her mother for the

first time, her Mum told Amina that she would set her on fire and then drown her. Their relationship is much better now. Her mother still thinks that she is going through a phase and that she will get a boyfriend one day.

Igor also had poor experiences with his teachers. He narrates the story about the "deep homophobia [he experienced] from his mathematics teacher. He despised me." Igor had earrings and that is why his teacher "openly hated" him. School-related homophobia leaves children with uncertainty about their safety and security. There are usually not many people, if any at all, to talk to, and the lack of connection pushes them further into loneliness, which brings about depression. Igor remembers clearly how challenging it was for him to cope with the stress of it all:

> There was absolutely no one to talk about such experiences. Even in one summer in my second grade of high school, I talked to a psychologist. The woman couldn't help me regarding my concerns. She even told me that "that's the way it is for my group of people and that I have to prepare myself for that." She even told me that my school would be hard because of my sexual orientation and advised me that I should marry, have kids and should act like a hetero which I never wanted and never did.

There was another incident nearby his place in Banja Luka. There was a bar where "tough local guys" used to hang out. Igor said that they were always laughing at him whenever he passed by that place. A few years later, he saw them in another place, and they offered him sex. Igor was so afraid of interacting with them, so he just ran away. "See [...] Bosnia is such a complex place to be in […]"

Queer people experience various forms of everyday violence that disrupts peace in their shared spaces. When they are especially impacted by structural violence, including its emotional, cultural, psychological forms, their mental health undergoes a drastic shift, putting them in a mentally unstable state of mind.

**The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Activism**

A functioning and diverse civil society is critical for encouraging dialogue, and reintegration into a unified polity, which can provide a vital base for transitioning justice while holding state institutions and its agents accountable on critical issues such as elections, legislation, and police training, etc. (Belloni, 2001). To mobilize the community on critical issues, a diverse civil society consisting of various actors, initiatives, organizations, and agents is required (Fialová, 2016; Gorkoff et al., 2021, Yavuz et al., 2022). When the DPA was signed to end one of the most violent conflicts in Europe, BiH was required to be restructured at all societal levels from the constitution to the state's institutions, to the electoral vote, as well as many others like education and policing.

Peace Accords bring opportunities for people in violent conflicts to be included in the peacebuilding process. However, this does not necessarily mean that post-peace accord societies would evolve and converge into a utopia if the civil society does not play a role in the peacebuilding and reconciliation process and marginalized communities are excluded from peacebuilding tables. Despite the ambitious effort of the international community as $9 billion is sent to the BiH annually), the country is far away from being a multiethnic society where tolerance and reconciliation are higher since the war (GAO, 2000; ICG, 1999 cited in Belloni, 2001, p.165).

Local conflict transformation practices and peacebuilding methods can be adopted in divided societies with the support of local queer NGOs. Embracing these local practices can help strengthen local activists' skillsets in presenting issues, transforming communities, and, more importantly, developing the local people's capacity to hear and engage with the voices of queer people that suffer and face all the obstacles brought about by past and current conflicts.

Amina, for example, works for the SOC, which is an NGO, and it advocates for human rights, specifically LGBTQIA+ and women's rights. She works as a program coordinator on LGBTI human rights and provides services, from free psychological counseling to legal aid. She is the only person who directly works with the LGBTQ community by organizing one to three events for the LGBTQ community with different teams. When I interviewed her in 2022, the Centre was working on conversion therapy, and she was very excited about the work she was doing. Her energy was passed on to me as she was an enthusiastic, young BiH LGBTQ community member.

I asked Amina why she thinks that the work she does is so important for herself or for the community? She shared her very personal experience with me of being part of the queer community and the SOC.

> I remember when I came to Sarajevo which was September 2017. I think it was a great thing to come to Sarajevo, but it was even a greater thing for me to go to the community and free myself there, so I could become part of that community. And SOC allowed me to do that. I started going to their workshops, their events, going to the festivals, after that I became a volunteer and all of that.
>
> I became who I am now. And I think the biggest thing that I see that is the means more to the LGBTQ community than anything is opening the institutions and the places that they feel safe. It's very important because we lack those spaces we lack those spaces, in our own homes. We like those spaces in our own streets. We like those spaces in our own schools.
>
> And when we organize something for [the] LGBTIQ community that they can feel safe in. I think you're giving them. I don't think I know we are giving these places to grow, to educate ourselves, to network, to meet today, to have fun. All those things are necessary for individuals to have a healthy life. And I think that is one of the main things that we all offer for the LGBTQIA+ community.
>
> Aside from that, we are also working on the laws that are unfortunately not being implemented as they should be. They exist however, they are not implemented or enforced. Actually, [the] non-discrimination law is protecting the LGBTQ community on the sexual orientation and gender identity and sexual characteristics basis. We also have that.

Amina discusses the importance of the hate crime law that protects the community. While there is legislative support, she emphasizes how implementation of those laws is lacking. Community

groups still believe that hate crime is important and must be prosecuted. She said NGOs and community groups attempt to decentralize the community and LGBTQ activism. They started to work with local communities in Zenica and some of the smaller towns and local communities as they try to expand the potential of these small towns like Zenica to be more tolerant.

> And we are ready to give our resources and put ourselves there for ideas and help them do something in your local communities. And in that way, we're also creating safe spaces for the queer people in those local communities so that to me personally, I think it's very important to also engage all of the identities in our work, so we're also doing to, but I think the first step forward is creating those spaces.

Similarly, Ilma is an 18-year-old youth activist who mostly does activism work in an organization called Our Children. At this organization, they have another branch organization called the Budi Moško Club Mostar, which means "be a man." As ironic as the name is, the organization advocates for equality, gender, and sexuality. She organizes meetings where the youth discuss LGBTQ+ issues. Because it is critical to expose these important issues faced by queer people, Ilma tries to focus on an agenda where acceptance and emotions can be discussed. She also joined several demonstrations for human rights. She believes that the role of the youth is crucial in educating people to create a more tolerant and inclusive society in BiH:

> All the youth needs to be heard and feel accepted in their own skin, no matter, it doesn't matter if you're in Bosnia, at this time is not so much. I don't have much acceptance for people who don't identify as most people. It's important they know that there are a lot of people that understand them, that are those that don't view them as any different like and so on. So, I think that's really important because if did not hear many other problems like mental problems, and so we try to prevent that.

When I asked about some of the activism challenges facing Ilma, she emphasized the importance of consistency. She said that reaching out to people is not enough, "getting into people's head is critical because people are just used to brushing off activism. They see it as "boring people doing

this thing again." As a passionate youth activist, Ilma says that she works so hard to make important change with her fellow activists.

> And I think the hardest part is to get people to converse to our side. It needs to be done individually oriented. We need to show people clearly that activism is a normal action, it's no harm to anybody. You're just trying to build a peace, a bridge between generations. Some people make fun of our work, which is really heartbreaking and really hard to deal with. And like I said, we just try to find some connection, something really specific that they can relate to. Like, I don't know, you may not identify as LGBTQIA+, but be onboard, you may have a friend, maybe your sister or your sibling. I think the most important thing is to just find that one string that will connect the problem.

Some community members have negative experiences or concerns when it comes to the role of NGOs in BiH. Aida believes that some NGOs never had actions in community development. She says that she almost had a four-hour conversation with one of the NGO managers. Aida says that the manager was strictly following the donors' agenda. This is what Aida had to say on the issue:

> There's zero activism there. And nothing that would kind of generate community as such because they need to know the context. In 2008, there was this attempt of [creating a] queer festival, not [a] Pride parade, but festival organizers Sarajevo, we got beaten up. There was mujahideen all over the place, [the] police did nothing. First thing that kind of made the community very silent and non-existent people gathering in the privacy of their homes.
>
> For several years, there was something going on in terms of activism and then one of [the] NGOs organized the first documentary movie screening about the manager I spoke to. And I got an invitation for it, but in the invitation, they said it was this password, knock three times on this door. Then when the woman opens, say, this and that, it was so undercover like as if we were producing nuclear weapons of some sort. And of course, there was [the] British ambassador to Bosnia, several influential news editors, everything but the community.
>
> Every time Sarajevo Open Centre organizes things, it's for them and their partners and [the] non queer community, which is fine, completely fine. But I remember I heard by accident about SOC creating making a first draft of law on same sex marriages. At that time, I was thinking about it for myself. I was in a serious relationship. It was something that was important for me because I had two underage daughters and I wanted to kind of sort out things in case I die.

Aida reported that the SOC created the draft without any consultations between any queer community members, which was not well received. She saw the Centre quoting some

questionnaire or surveys that it conducted. However, none of the community members she spoke to had heard about it and "It was nowhere to be found on social media or inboxes like nowhere".

J.D. who worked at different NGOs also maintains a similar perspective about the role of NGOs calling them "money sucking machines." He admittedly says that he was not brave enough to report the corruption that he saw in his previous NGO job. He observes NGOs to be doing pinkwashing work with external funders arguing that all the money that is given to them gets wasted. He says that he hates the projects and the seminars they provide as he does not see the point of doing them in the first place. J.D. recognizes that meeting in some hotels, and spending thousands of Bosnian marks to discuss issues as roundtables does not have a real purpose for local people.

> There are professionals who can really assist and revive activism to the approach that I have openly told you, they would provide further psychological support. Because I think it's also a psychological issue of accepting one part of your identity. It's not the issue of activism, the Pride will not bring me some relief and I will run through Sarajevo, and I would be, "yes, I'm gay. I'm openly gay. Yes, love me and blah blah." No! Because it's a psychological issue.
>
> You have to work on that part of your identity, especially not only in Bosnia, here in Germany, too, a lot of people who are very confused and to be in a confused state of mind that can also lead to some psychological distress. So that needs to be attended to the visibility of LGBTQ community in Bosnia. Through the psychological support of individuals that are belonging to other LGBT communities and to give them support in accepting who they are. They don't have to spread their wings and run through Sarajevo and tell everyone. They have to feel fine with themselves.

"Those NGO people are very resourceful. Do you know how many receipts we have copied. It needs to be really, really strictly supervised how the money [is] spent." J.D. said that he does not argue that all the BiH NGOs are corrupt; however, he said that he knows of many organizations that are organizing "useless seminars with a huge amount of money."

Alternatively, Arman is a prominent queer activist from Tuzla. He was 14 when he saw Emina Bosniak, the Executive Director of the SOC, and an activist named Leila Huremovic on

TV. As he was watching them, he felt encouraged and not alone in BiH. He first started queer activism in 2018 with the Tuzla Open Center, going to its workshops but he says that he "wasn't kind of too much into that because I kind of enjoyed life and to go to the parties." The year 2019 was a milestone for Arman when the Tuzla Open Center director called him and asked whether he would seriously like to join the Centre as an activist. He was an active member of the community, and he joined the BiH Pride Month organization committee in 2020. Arman sees activism as non-materialistic, and a person's commitment to the NGO is an important component of queer activism:

> I used to go to conferences where they pay my hotel, dinner etc. I decided not to do it anymore. I want to do the hard work. It's easy to be that activist in a hotel room. And I tell [the] conference room and saying, we could do this, we could do that. But when you have to go to the street, it's different."

At some point, Arman realized that he was a full-time activist, committing himself to advocating for human rights in BiH. This has also been a challenge for him as like anyone else, Arman, felt that he needed to find a job to pay the bills. He says that activism is fulfilling and instills good positive emotions in a person that are critical indicators of a person doing something good for the community, but in a country like BiH, activism doesn't put bread on the table or ensure an activists' financial sustainability.

Arman also points out another challenge for activists that is burnout because one is emotionally connected to one's job. He also realizes that activism requires so much more than what one has on one's plate, which means more effort and time must be devoted by the person working for justice:

> At one point I was working as a legal intern at [a] municipal court in Tuzla. I was on the committee for an organization. I was also active in this political party, but I was [an] expert [for the] Council for Human Rights. I was president of that Expert

> Council for Human Rights and that kind of interest in political activism. They even nominated me for the municipal legislative body of [the] canton.
>
> But I declined that because I was more interested in doing something behind the scenes because this expert council did great things like we introduced the LGBTQ topics into this party. We disciplined every hate crime that were coming from members of that party. And we made some progress and I think that you burnout because you feel that emotion to a job and you surround yourself with a lot of responsibilities.

Arman also highlights how activists have many responsibilities including certain projects which might seem short term, yet they require great energy and time. “When you feel like you are done with one project, you actually are not because after that obligation, there will be second or third projects.” Arman discussed further the amount of time activism requires and at the end of the day “when you look around yourself, you realize you have three or four different [unpaid] jobs,” and he sees this as the main problem.

Arman adds that activism means peacebuilding work that requires so much day-to-day effort and commitment. He explains that when one talks daily with other people, even if one is not on the same level of understanding of the situation, then that is a kind of peacebuilding because “you can introduce them to the subject that they are unaware of, and I think that's kind of activism on the primary level when then you talk to the people who are not very aware of the situation.” Arman also highlights the power of communication, and he believes that the result of healthy communication can have a domino-effect on forging positive change.

In contrast, Emir 2 works for the U.N. and when I asked whether the U.N. has failed the people of BiH, he pointed out that this type of argument fails to understand how the U.N. is not a monolithic body. Instead, the argument might be that the U.N.’s military diplomatic mission has not succeeded. It exists solely at the behest and goodwill and resources of Security Council members. So, the Security Council members have failed BiH citizens, not the U.N. whose development system has been working after the war to try to fix local conditions to make life

better for local people. Emir 2 continues that, “I do not know if there was ever a true assessment, and I am not defending the U.N., and that is why I'm just saying that it is a very reductive argument. So, what do you do with it? Yeah, it failed how do you fix it? You have no idea because of the intricacies of how it works are just impressed by that.”

In contrast, Aleksa has been working for NGOs for years in BiH and believes that NGOs should put more of a humanistic face into the peacebuilding process. She reports on the issue in the following manner:

> Not to be just the project-side of the story, but more a human story to hear the stories of everyday people who live in the field and to try to provide a new approach such as a woman’s side of the war and a woman's side of the peace. But also, to try to speak about the LGBT experience of the war and of the peace, what it means for the LGBT community, etc.

He sees the role of ordinary people as critical when they are onboard because they are the groups challenging the system that activists need to be part of. Aleksa is concerned about how most activism is done online so that street activism loses all its meaning. He finds it quite challenging as some people do not want to do, in Aleksa’s words, “nasty work” as he refers to the hard work that community members complete every day to support local people. “You can wave the rainbow flag on the bridge which is not illegal. But most of the people don't want to do that, but they want changes.” He finds this point confusing and illustrates it with one example as follows:

> We painted stencils all around the city, we did that. We did that because we want to be visible. We didn't do that on private properties though. And it was beautiful. It wasn't vandalism. But most people didn't want to do that. And not because they don't agree with us, because they don't want to do that dirty work, you know. And you have a lot of people who accept changes, expect changes, but they don't do anything about it. And I don't think that's activism in general, you know. If you want to change this political situation, why didn't you vote? This is a simple question that activism might require us asking.

Despite all these challenges, Aleksa recognizes that ordinary people see activism differently and he and his fellow activist friends are okay if someone does not want to do that hard work. Then

they include those individuals in some other activities like organizing parties as a different form of activism that is considered a "safe bubble" where people meet with other queer people. He wants to include everyone in the process so that people can feel safe and are surrounded with safeness and love.

In addition, Jovan sees how transphobia and homophobia are present even within BiH's queer community. He finds himself to be the lucky one because his experience opened up his vista. He now has a few trans and nonbinary friends. Even though he says that he was open-minded, he was not aware of queer people's struggles when he did not have them in his social circles. Regardless of the challenges, Bojan says "We need to live our life like a *Peder* (a reclaimed derogatory term used for LGBT+ people in Bosnia) every day. We need to fight and have a battle every day when we go out."

While some community members are on the fence when it comes to the functionality of local NGOs, local organizations seem to continue to challenge the policies which don't create visibility for queer individuals. The critiques of NGOs must be considered carefully by the stakeholders, so NGOs can rebuild trust and relationships to serve all people living in BiH.

**Key Findings**

We learn from the respondent's stories about their bravery, courage and commitment, and their activist work in resisting violent structures that oppress queer people in BiH. Subsequently, eight important themes emerged inductively from the data regarding activism and resistance to homophobic practices and structures in BiH.

First, activism is still challenging for BiH's queer community. Considering how new LGBTQIA+ activism is in BiH, the queer community is seeing how resistant the society is due to so-called societal norms. There is a large religious and cultural influence on how everyday

people see LGBTQIA+ activism in the country. The existence of LGBTQIA+ activism is often seen as non-Bosnian or Western-made-up indoctrination that is a threat to those who have anti-LGBT+ sentiments. An increased visibility of the queer community is associated with a decrease in cultural receptivity (Ayoub et al., 2023). In other words, as the visibility of LGBTQIA+ individuals increase in the society, the cultural receptivity within the BiH community tends to decrease.

Second, another challenging issue faced by BiH's queer community members is the lack of participation of queer people. Participants indicated that in certain places, such as in Tuzla, not that many people participate in workshops or community events. There are some pressing issues that the queer community is facing with visibility since it is a small city, which creates hardship in trying to organize and bring people onboard. Some participants who are actively involved in the queer movement suggest the need for queers to be present in the community and to have a specific agenda so that local people can start joining different queer events.

As the participants also reiterated, LGBTQIA+ activism often comes with golden handcuffs like controlling the activism agenda because of paying attention to certain issues that limit queer visibility. The balance between visibility and caution may control LGBTQIA+ individuals or organizations behavior or agenda. On the one hand, it is important for activists to regularly appear on the streets that is a critical part of queer activism, while on the other hand, caution is required once activists receive visibility especially from the media. This is linked to the idea that when one is in the public eye, one's actions and behaviors can be scrutinized more closely, and any missteps can have significant consequences that might affect the community negatively.

Also, it is important for people to realize that the local dynamics are a challenge so that there is a need to ensure that there is queer education operating on every level of societal institutions. However, this is not enough. The participants critique of the absence of services that targets everyone living in BiH, whether it to be people living in rural or urban areas, impact queer people's expectations of being out. Most services are for people who are visible. This expectation can harm people who are not ready to be outed as queer. Being visible in a homophobic country like BiH can be nerve-wracking, and not everyone has the same level of confidence to be out or the same level of activism experience. Providing more phone hotlines is also crucial in reaching out to people. "Telling someone [that they] is loved regardless" and providing critical services to queers like legal aid can also be a good way of gaining people's trust.

Third, activism/Pride reluctancy is a pressing issue in local efforts to move forward queer visibility in BiH. The first step is always challenging. When the first Pride Parade was organized, some participants reported how scary it was for them to participate as there was a moment of silence at the Pride space. Most participants reported that they were scared to be in that space due to media visibility but also because of any anti-Pride protests that might harm them physically and emotionally.

Even some well-educated participants reported that they were not pro-Pride, "especially in Bosnia!" The argument is quite common, and one can often hear it from anti-LGBTQIA+ groups namely there is "no need to rub your queerness in somebody's face." While some participants said that Pride is not for Bosnia, 75 percent asked LGBT+ individuals "to wait for their turn."

Some participants also elaborated on their experiences and perceptions of parades noting that being visible in the "publicly" queer space would jeopardize their own safety because of the backlash or discrimination they may face later. Some also reported that their friends or loved ones were disowned by their parents due to their visibility in the media. Two well-known activists I interviewed reported that they are no longer in touch with their parents, as they disowned them after seeing them march during the Pride parade in Sarajevo. Another participant said he did not see his parents for 11 years because he experienced violence from them after they found out about sexuality. Despite the potential costs, queer people find ways to liberate themselves.

Fourth, trans visibility almost does not exist in the queer community. That said, queer people experience several struggles including the lack of job opportunities, rental places, and accepting and loving families and communities. Most trans individuals also move out of the country for better opportunities, and they mostly go to Serbia or Croatia for their gender assignment surgery. Although the law on paper in BiH offers protection for queers on the grounds of gender identity when it comes to employment, and goods and services, etc., it is practically not enforced that fails trans individuals (ILGA, 2021). Access to healthcare also remains as one of the key issues for LGBTQIA+ individuals, specifically for the trans community. The procedure for changing one's gender marker in official documents remains quite complex in practice since it requires the person proving that they have had medical procedures, such as hormone therapy and surgery. However, due to the lack of medical professionals with expertise in gender transition, most people must go abroad to undergo these surgeries. Also, the state-funded health care system does not cover the expenses of these important medical procedures, which brings a greater financial burden on the individuals.

Fifth, the police maintain the state's ideological apparatuses and fail to enforce the law concerning human rights violations. LGBTQIA+ people do not trust the institutions' agents like the police, criminal justice, or health care. LGBTQIA+ people experience direct and structural violence daily. The police lose interest as soon as they know a violent act was a hate crime when queer survivors report violent acts directed against them. For example, many people were attacked during or after the first Pride parade in Sarajevo. Some individuals were targeted and beaten up by homophobes at night whereas others were threatened on the streets. None of these perpetrators were prosecuted. The lack of law enforcement means that LGBTQIA++ people lose trust in the justice system, which encourages systemic discriminations.

Sixth, the school system acts as a heterosexual indoctrination laboratory in which masculinity is produced and normalized by teachers, students, and staff creating division and exclusion of LGBTQIA+ students. The queer participants reported that they are treated as "someone with special needs," which means that they are not capable of accomplishing everything that other "normal" students can. Thus, the school's expectations for LGBT+ students are lower despite their great efforts, while teachers allot lower grades for LGBT+ students.

Teachers reinforce the patriarchal heteronormative school system by bullying their own students in front of others if they "appeared to be gay." Many students experience homophobia and their time spent at school completely changes if the bullying comes from their teachers. The classroom becomes distant for the excluded and bullied student that may opt to drop out of the school altogether. The bullying also impacts their mental health, and these students eventually begin skipping school as they feel embarrassed by their teachers. The schools also teach that certain groups like gypsies and the LGBTQIA+ community are "deviant" for the culture. Thus,

many stereotypes are reinforced through the schools as teachers also describe homosexuality as a disease that creates fear and stigma among the LGBTQ+ students.

Seventh, the queer space is liberating but getting to that space is thorny for LGBTQ+ individuals. Most participants noted that they went through various homophobic systems and had to live in a family in which violence against LGBT+ people are normalized. Some participants experienced direct and violent attacks by family members for being queer and many were disowned by their families. These individuals also often belong to families that find out their sexuality and react in angry and violent ways. After being physically and mentally tortured by those family members, LGBT+ people find ways to get out of these violent homes either by attending university, or going to work, or simply fleeing their town and moving abroad. Consequently, when LGBTQIA+ individuals find others who feel or look like them, they stop policing their own behavior and gestures or choice of clothes to wear to fit within homophobic systems like their family, school, or neighborhood. As soon as they find an organization, club, or gathering that is a safe space for them, then they feel liberated.

Eight, the role of functioning NGO organizations is critical to empowering BiH's queer community. The SOC is the most well-known NGO in the country. However, they are yet to be localized for some. At the same time NGOs such as SOC are organizing for the LGBTQ+ community various critical workshops, trainings, and community reach-outs and are also offering psychological and legal aid services. In addition, these NGOs also campaign for conversation therapy, and same sex partnership, among many others. However, some of the participants complained about the inconsistent work that NGOs do throughout the country so that queer activism is not quite settled as local people don't fully understand what it does. Some people also see NGO efforts as "boring people's work." The idea of "nothing would change in

this country" is quite a common narrative in places like Cyprus and BiH based on my personal experiences of living in these countries and that allows people to brush off queer activism easily.

Participants also disclosed that some NGOs strictly follow the external donor's agenda, and these donors fail to consult with community members, and their actions and agendas are not conveyed to the local community. The participants also argued that some NGOs become "money sucking machines," meaning that they spend large budgets on workshops in "fancy hotels," that does not benefit community members. Some queer activists are especially frustrated with how NGOS spend their money and do so little for the LGBT+ community.

There is also a major burden on the queer activists when it comes to mobilizing people that requires a significant level of energy. Many activists juggle part time work and volunteer jobs, which leave them with little energy and the burden of budgeting their time to work as volunteers at queer NGOs. This does not seem to be much of an issue for these activists who are relatively young. However, much older LGBT+ people emphasize the importance of having a full life with many reporting difficulties when it comes to paying their pills. Thus, it is important that they get paid while doing the activism and for which the international community should allocate their funds to NGOs to pay these workers so that they have a livelihood.

**Conclusion**

In Chapter seven, the participants narratives shed light on the prevalence of homophobia within families, communities, schools, and neighborhoods. Homophobia was not merely seen as isolated incidents, but rather as a systemic problem deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of BiH. The participants also emphasized that homophobia is perpetuated and reinforced by social institutions that promote heteronormative norms and behaviors.

Moreover, the participants shared stories of strained relationships within families, where gay sons and daughters are rejected, and are even with violence due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. They also described the immense pressure to conform to societal heteronormative expectations and the fear that they had of being ostracized or disowned if they revealed their true selves. In schools, the participants also highlighted the absence of inclusive curricula and supportive environments for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Homophobic bullying and discrimination were distressingly common, creating hostile learning environments that hindered personal growth and academic achievement. The chapter also described some of the personal experiences and coping strategies employed by the participants to navigate these challenging circumstances.

Further, the participants also noted that homophobia extends beyond familial and educational settings. It permeates communities and neighborhoods, leading to queer individuals' marginalization, isolation, and limited access to resources and opportunities. The lack of tolerance, inclusivity, and acceptance in these spaces creates additional burdens for queer individuals, who often face heightened risks of discrimination, violence, and mental health challenges.

By examining the multifaceted manifestations of homophobia in BiH, this chapter also seeks to raise awareness about the urgent need for societal change and the creation of safe, inclusive spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals. It explores some of the strategies employed by the participants to cope with homophobia, including seeking support from chosen family members, finding solace in online communities, and advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights and the visibility of queer people in BiH.

Through their stories, the participants reveal the profound impact of homophobia on their lives and emphasize the importance of fostering a more inclusive and accepting society. This chapter also contributes to the ongoing discussions surrounding homophobia in BiH and serves as a call to action for individuals, communities, and institutions to actively challenge and dismantle oppressive patriarchal and heteronormative structures and beliefs.

## Chapter Eight: Reconciliation and an Ideal Queer BiH for All

### Introduction

Chapter eight centers on how to reconcile and coexist as queer and Bosniak/Serbian/Croatian citizens living in a shared space where resources are distributed equally among the community members and the state power enforces the rights for all. This chapter also sheds light on the reality that true reconciliation cannot be achieved in the absence of a robust framework of social justice as it underscores the imperative need to discern and address the underlying issues that force a significant number of young people to make life-altering decisions of permanently leaving their home country behind.

This chapter finally seeks to initiate a constructive discourse by initially examining the fundamental conditions that lay the groundwork for fostering coexistence. It further explores the multifaceted elements that facilitate understanding, respect, and inclusivity among diverse communities. Thus, the chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon commonly referred to as the "gay drain," aiming to unravel its nuanced complexities, implications, and its interconnectedness with broader social, economic, and cultural paradigms. Specifically, Chapter eight explores hatred, the ethnonationalist discourse, constitutional challenges, youth in reconciliation, and language in peacebuilding.

Peace Accords do not necessarily bring about sustainable peace if continued dialogues are not maintained in post-peace accord societies. Transitional justice is, therefore, a key conflict transformation method, particularly during difficult transition periods experienced by a society from a time of violence to post-accord (Maier, 2020). The U.N. defines transitional justice as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms

with a legacy of large-scale past abuses to ensure accountability, serve justice, and achieve reconciliation" (2010, p. 2).

Communities still face more challenges in BiH, and some volatile circumstances can bring uncertainties for people, even after accords are signed. Most post-peace accord societies face reconciliation challenges, requiring the recognition of war crimes, such as rape, killing of civilians or prisoners, torture, the use of child soldiers, ethnic cleansing, and the reconciliation of enemies (Lee & Özerdem , 2015).

**"If I Start Hating Someone, I Consider Myself as if I am in War."**

Due to the lack of reconciliation, the communities in BiH are unable to actively engage with one another, and the ensuing dominance of international actors and organizations excluded the voices of BiH people. For example, J.D. noted that the political system does not foster reconciliation. This is what he had to say on the issue:

> The Dayton Peace Agreement stopped the war but only stopped the war. But that's the only benefit to stop the bloodshed. That's the only benefit of the Dayton agreement. Nothing else…. In my opinion, it doesn't enable a normal peace process. I would be pleased if the Dayton peace agreement would be completely abolished. And I want to say oh you can be whoever you want. We have a country that needs us. We are choosing our political leaders based on their competence, and we have one president for all blab la bla… But we don't have.
>
> You know how many presidents [do] we have? Three! You know how many parliamentary assemblies [do] we have? Twelve for each. So that's stretching [the] parliamentary system. Do you know how many ministers do we have? A lot, over 500. So, what caused the Dayton agreement is a rubbish. It's nonsense. It's stupidity. Well, why do you need all these things for a country of four million? But come on, only the only positive thing is that war is stopped, and the bloodshed is stopped. The rest is bullshit.

While most people have historically been able to heal and move on from the trauma of the war to reconciliation, they want to be ensured that what happened in the past would not be repeated (Jeong, 2005). Therefore, to create sustainable peace for people who seek relief from their past

grievances, it is vital to propose comprehensive peacebuilding approaches (Anderson, 1999) and reconciliation through conflict transformation. The peace accords and the peacebuilding processes must feature local voices and must be inclusive and sustainable. These should also aim to restore broken relationships in a nonviolent manner by not excluding any groups.

Thus, the quote, "If I start hating someone, I consider myself as if I am in war" was told to me by Aida. She said she made a pact with herself that if she starts hating, she will consider herself as if she is in the war. Aida recounts that hate means divisiveness, it takes everything from the people and leaves them like an empty jar that does not function in any way. She continues by adding that she doesn't not want hate in her life at all: "I stopped hating and generalizing. I think life is complicated enough…. Our priority is, just to me, stupid." At the same time, however, reconciliation is not an easy path for the groups who are in conflict. One of the main problems in BiH is that nearly 30 years after the war, the politicians are still pushing the same ethnocentric narrative, which creates more ethnonationalist stories that are divisive. For example, Jovan does not see this approach by the politicians as contributing to reconciliation, rather it creates the "evil other." As Jovan points out, "That is how they keep their self in positions because unfortunately our large communities of people on all sides are still well prone to thinking negatively about different communities." A high level of distrust is being promote by the politicians to maintain their power and control so that before each election, the discussion of the war starts and retraumatizes the three ethnic communities. Producing more fear places people in a societal security dilemma that they feel the need to see people who can "save them" from a potential war in BiH.

Although 30 percent of the participants do not see a war reoccurring in Bosnia, the majority are still fearful that the war might repeat, so people always have alternative plans in place just in case. This is what Jovan had to say on the issue:

> Many people who participated in the war were stuck here and whoever had a chance to escape abroad, they did. My parents were stuck here. They didn't have an option at the time. My mother was pregnant with my sister and my dad had to go to war. They are still not over it though. I understand that the fear was implanted in both me and my sister as we always have had an escape option.

Jovan's sister is already abroad and working in her field and his plan is to leave the country as soon as he finishes school. This is a common plan for most of BiH's youth that is like young people in other divided societies like Northern Ireland.

Despite experiencing many different challenges, queer Bosniaks/Serbs/Croats want to see more space and opportunities for people to coexist. For example, Ana connects peacebuilding activities where the youth from the three ethnic groups are provided opportunities to meet each other because she believes that they have so much in common. She also thinks that it is too late for her as "It is a bit late for me, for older people, because they have formed their opinions but for young people, I think there is still a chance and there is definitely and area to work on these kinds of things."

In contrast, Lamia believes that the narratives that their families teach them prevent them from achieving peace. Lamia finds it hard if it is achieved at later times, stating that the focus on empowering youth is critical in building a sustainable peace process in BiH.

> When it comes to peace, I think it comes from one's household and how they're raised. If you're raised up to hit or, I don't know, physically harm, verbally harm another person, then you will never be able to achieve peace. I think it all comes from a very, very young age and all those stories that our parents tell us. Acceptance, it doesn't have to necessarily be understanding but accept, accept that there are people who are different, and those people are not into the same thing that you are. So yeah, peace can be achieved through acceptance. And because if

> you're at peace with who you are and your peace… I don't think that there is much that can touch you.

Dunya also points out that inclusivity and religious tolerance must be promoted at a very young age, and that many individuals, groups, and organizations are responsible for building a connected peace system for the youth:

> I think it all begins with small steps, sort of groundwork, it's all about inclusivity. If as a little kid in primary school, you're put into programs that promote values of inclusivity of like religious tolerance, open mindedness, like you're raising future generations that will have a productive mindset and mentality to be able to instill positive and productive changes to society. Whereas if you're raised in obviously an institutionally segregated society, this is going against peace, like literally quite directly. And this, for me, is the most important part, dialog, it sounds very cheesy, but it is like starting with groups, trainings.
>
> And I think this is where the importance of non-governmental organizations comes in to have these NGOs in every city to serve as a place of just community, for youth, for kids, for high schoolers doesn't matter, where we talk about things, we discuss things, we go through them, we build friendships, we build a community and a sense of belonging to each other, to this country, to this community and step by step, this is how we can build it, especially in such a war torn, traumatized place such as Bosnia. This is the most effective way to do it right now. We have all of the tools that go against this.

Peace is socially constructed. Peace is based on the experience of the individual and their parents. Most references to peacebuilding come out of the war or fear from which communities to live in the continuing psychological trauma. They want to experience and feel harmonious relations that enhances peacebuilding efforts. Strahinja notes that peace is living "without fear, not to be concerned when you go out." He reflects on this issue in the following way:

> If you are a parent, if you put your kid outside on the street and not to be worried, will he be bullied or attacked by some other people, just to live life without fear and not to judge other people. Look for your life, live your life. Life is short and don't be obsessed and or disturbed by things that you can't change, like religion, race or whatever…. At the end of the day, what really [is] important is that whether you are happy or not.

The participants highlighted the critical role of coexistence that can only be achieved at an early age when parents encourage their children to socialize with other ethnic groups instead of

limiting them. Hateful narratives toward other ethnic groups are still common in different forms in BiH. Some also pointed out how religious tolerance can enable individuals to coexist, as religion has a vital role in BiH; however, it appears that the current political system does not align with this ideal.

**"Homophobia is Part of the Bosnian Culture that is Made up!"**

Adnan K. reveals that peace means coming out. He had to live in a bubble of constant lies in his life to survive until he came out. He found the coming out process liberating and realized how much of a burden he was carrying with him. His coming out process was a long journey. He first came out to his gay friends and then the circle was expanded a bit more every year. Now, he is at the point where he would say most of his friends and family members know that he is gay. He says that this is what makes him feel peaceful because he does not lie to himself or others anymore as he accepts who he is as a human being:

> The other thing is that realizing that what people think about you and your life doesn't matter. I'm who I am. I know what's right and what's wrong. As long as I'm not hurting anybody physically or emotionally or financially, I don't care about what they think about me and my life and that's what makes me peaceful. That's not something that can be done overnight, that's a process. Now, as you grow older, you realize those things more and more every year.
> So, you know, I would say that the fact that I came out to most of the people in Bosnia or in Canada.
>
> I never gave up and the other thing that [I am] happy about is that my connections with my friends and our relationship actually became much, much better from the moment I came out, because they're completely fine. [There are] several people in my life that I consider as friends used to be very homophobic at a time when I lived in Bosnia, [when I came out to them it] completely changed the tone. They accepted me, and they supported me in every way. But like I said, like being homophobic in Bosnia is part of culture [and] is not like something that's right. It is the same culture that doctrines that all men have to love football and stuff like that.

The moment Adnan K. came out to his friends, they started having authentic conversations without any walls between them. Many of his friends, whom he considered well-educated and

well-travelled, still did not know about BiH's queer culture. "It is like the whole new world topics that open between us, and they have tons of questions. And I'm trying to educate them to be sure to know who RuPaul is." Adnan believes that coming out is an opportunity for LGBTQIA+ individuals not only to educate people but also to turn their narrative the other way around upside down. He sees that most of his friends now react differently and positively to him and queerness. Those who would not react to the homophobic comments or attacks before, started changing. Adnan believes it is important to know that such negative reactions to the LGBTQIA+ community and disproval of homophobia come from straight people, not from gay people.

In contrast, Ilma is a youth peace activist who works with organizations to build a better BiH for both its youth and its future. She sees that the key challenge is reaching out to the community that resists engaging in discussions about peacebuilding and LGBTQIA+ issues.

> When you are doing peacebuilding people who are attending are people who are willing to do peacebuilding and who are already on their way. They know what they want. They know what is right. And the hard thing is to get to those people who are not interested in peacebuilding. And that's the hard part, and that's the work that needs to be done. And that work, I think, cannot be done just by workshops because, like I said, they don't come to those workshops.
>
> I think it's important to do [it] by daily interactions with people one by one. For example, I go out with my friends, and we don't talk about some silly things. We talk about peacebuilding and the situation in our country, and I think that's what really makes a change. Peace is something that everybody can be themselves and do things they enjoy by just bringing goods to their community and everybody working together towards something… that will benefit everybody.

Aleksa also emphasizes outreach to people who are often impossible to reach. Aleksa like Ilma sees how easy it is to make a connection with people who have some interests or passion, yet it is hard to reach out to 98 percent of the population. She reflected on this issue as follows:

> Well, I told you there is a problem. How to reach out to the 98 percent of population, it is not a problem to speak with me about some topics because I am ready to speak about it. I read about it. But what about people who live in their narratives? And also, if your school programs support that narrative, if you go to one school and you don't learn any authors or any poets from other ethnic groups how you will respect that ethnic group because you are building or giving [a] boost to small nationalists.
>
> You know you're building nationalism and that is support by the state. I mean by directly not like that is a plan, but you are doing everything necessary to establish a new generation of nationalists. And of course, at the end, you are not, you know, I think the space for progress is to ask the question. In our school system, you just need to memorize and then to tell it without asking questions. And also, someone already gives you the "total truth." You don't have [an] opportunity to ask questions.
>
> And what if you finish just the primary school and that is end of your education? You know, that is a problem because you are not ready to ask questions. And how then at the age of 35, because you are living in that small community with Croat, Serb or Bosniaks. Of course, for the first time at that moment you have [an] opportunity to meet someone else. How that's going to change your mind. It is impossible. Yeah. You know, because we are not, no one is giving you a chance to ask whether something is right or not.

The construction of peace must focus on BiH's youth who experience intergenerational trauma. However, this educational focus must consist of trauma therapy, reconciliation, and investing more money in knowledge that brings people together. Aleksa points out the critical issue youth face. Young people are still learning about traumatic events from their schools and family members. They are taken to memorial sites that are triggering for many people who have lost family members on each side of the war. He suggests investing in peace education, reconciliation, and mental health support for those who have post-traumatic syndrome:

> Well, you know, I heard one time that for each new democracy, you need 70 years to establish that democracy. And twenty-six years after war, we are unsatisfied with the results. Maybe we need to wait for another 45 years? You know, time can heal. Also, maybe with time we will see that maybe the situation is still not so good. Like, for example, we see that the whole European continent, that right wing politics are rising that is normal for Europe.
>
> We like to hate. I mean, we like to see each other that it's normal for us. You know, there is one famous Croat author she was a columnist and now she [is an] author. And in one TV interview, she said, 25 years without war between Croats and Serbs, we need to start a new war. You know, that was a joke. We

> need to start new, more politicians than that for 25 years. There is no war. You know, that is not funny. There is no war.
>
> We need to have something, you know, because it is constantly happening and that is always happening on the European continent. But what I think that we need to understand that not only us here, but there are two things that reconciliation is a process that is the first thing. And another thing is that we need to invest more money in knowledge in that part, you cannot see children in Tuzla who are at the age of 10, this week we are going to visit the memorial complex in Foča.
>
> And you are going with children to Srebrenica and then give them some movie to watch with the bones, with the blood, et cetera, and then come back and say nothing happened and you say you support those children. You know who said that it's OK for [kids at] the age of 10 to go to the memorial center? You know who will support me if I have nightmares? If I have post-traumatic syndrome at the age of 10. That is a problem because we are doing a lot of things, but without enough support of scientists to have some practical [application] because a lot of money is going to us. But I think in the wrong way. You know, and yeah, we are expecting that something can change overnight.

Similarly, Aida demands two very simple items be included to generate and nurture a peaceful society and those items are a lack of fear and a society with equal chances for every member in the community. She notes that "That would be the lack of fear, for example, would have been my definition of peace. And not only a fear of war, but here, of course, whether I can earn enough, whether I can pay my bills and whether I can safely return from the restaurant whatever. Lack of fear is peace for me."

Emir 1, on the other hand, demands constitutional change, which he argues is very critical to the development of a pluralist, democratic, and tolerant society. He highlights the need for this change in the sense that BiH cannot continue as it is in a zero-sum political stalemate dependent on international agencies for its survival so that the political parties need to decide a better political future for everyone. Another issue Emir 1 observes in BiH is that it is the only country that has a discriminatory constitution in the sense that it includes three dominant ethnic groups namely the Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbians that have all the political privileges through their sectarian political parties while the other marginalized and minority groups do not. Emir 1

contends that, “This is another issue because you have other people in your country that they live, but they are not equal. And that’s why the constitutional people they fight not to change the constitution because they don’t want to lose the privileges.” That said, BiH needs to be organized as a civil and democratic state, which entails equality for all its citizens, no matter their ethnic or sexual identity background. Building a civil identity, a BiH identity, was also suggested by participants who mostly come from a mixed or Bosniak background, like Emir 1. This is what he had to say on the issue:

> People need to feel Bosnia as their own country. First of all, our flag is not our flag. It was suggested and enforced by the EU Bosnia is the only country that doesn’t have lyrics to its national anthem because three constitutional people could not agree upon the lyrics. This shows you how fucked up this country is. We need to change this. We need to become a normal state.
>
> Maybe a U.S. [federal] model could be a good one in the sense that everyone is an American citizen but within the state you can be Chinese, Italian whatever. No one cares. But outside you are American, and you are proud of your country because this country provided you with [a] good job, peace, stability, whatever. Keeping such a constitution just prolongs the conflict. I don’t know how constitutional people will give up their privileges. This is the catch.

In contrast, Abraksas sees the situation in BiH as a “law of silence in [the] Italian mafia.” Communities are not willing to openly discuss their issues and they pretend as if nothing happened in the past. Abraksas points out that this is one of the major challenges facing the reconciliation process. The lack of communication and responsibility to move forward prevents communities from coming together and rebuilding a future for all. Abraksas was instructed with several different versions of the war from his grandparents who were Serbs and had a different narrative than his foster parents. “How can we get this story right when it is never discussed openly” Abraksas asks.

Moreover, Jovan’s mother has always been religious. She grew up in Banja Luka, which is an ethnically cleansed Serb city. However, she lived in a part of the city where the majority in

that neighborhood were Bosniak Muslims. She only knew Muslims all her life. She always hung out with Bosniaks and then the war broke out and her neighbors had to flee. Jovan's mother helped her friends to flee the city and he says that he never heard anything negative from his mother about her friends. He does not recall his parents making any comments about the Croats either. Jovan's father grew up in a Croatian village until the war broke out when the residents fled to Croatia. His father also "shared a history" with them. As his grandparents got older, they started to become suspicious of other ethnic groups as they occasionally advise their grandchildren to "be careful, we don't know their intentions. Not everyone thinks like us." When community members forget about the invisible walls and embrace each other, there is much stronger ties that can help to forge a sustained and shared future for all. This research is also evidence of seeing when people spend more time together, there is cohesion which reminds me of the importance of contact theory.

**"To See Peace, We Really Need to Wait Until Our Parents and Grandparents Die."**

Generational peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts (or the lack thereof) no longer work in BiH. Ethnic tensions are more obvious and are part of daily dinner table conversations. Any small disputes in the region are triggering for BiH's people who have been experiencing intergenerational trauma. There are different responses for the cause of BiH's ongoing direct or frozen conflict.

Jovan also believes that everyone is filled with hatred and false information, which creates more conflict between each ethnic group. He is hopeless and does not see it getting better any time soon "because to see peace, we really need to wait until our parents and grandparents die, right now, my generation doesn't feel that hate." He also sees how some people are still

biased as he suspects the reason is because they grew up with “this nonsense. So, and it’s really hard to eradicate them.”

Reconciliation is more possible in places where people live with different ethnic groups because regular interactions with individuals from various ethnic backgrounds can foster understanding, multiculturalism, and differences and it can diminish stereotypes about other ethnic groups which eventually lead to the creation of a more empathetic society. In this study, it was also a clear sign that the level of tolerance is significantly high in diverse places. Amina used go to Sanski Most when she was a child. Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs lived together in Sanski Most and she would always go there with her family because they were beekeepers, and she remembers how much fun she used to have there. She remembers a “very poor man” named Dradan who identified as a Serb and who also participated in the war on the Serb side. And Amina’s father, who participated in the war on the Bosniak side was friends with him, and he loved him. Amina also adored him because he would give Amina and her sister toys. She would even hang out with his pigs although “pigs are a big no for Muslims.” Despite that she would still play with the pigs and ride the horses. And there was also one of their friends. She cannot remember his name. However, she remembers that they were all friends who would go to lunch and dinners together. She did not see any differences as all she did was have fun as a child. She remembers how “We would really be friendly with them, and they would be friendly with us. And we didn't even notice that difference. I would, of course, see it from my side.”

Amina notices now as her parents are getting older and especially with the current political and economic crisis in BiH that they are more and more comfortable living among Bosniaks for the security it provides. This is what she had to say:

> They are trying to avoid Serbs at all costs because they had to become refugees as Serbs kicked them out of their homes. My parents’ experience also had a role in

> my life personally, but those consequences in me didn't affect [the way I think about other people] because I see a person, I don't see their ethnic or any kind of background.

Compared to Amina, her parents identify every Serb as a bad person as it was Serbs who participated in the killing of Bosniaks and Croats.

> But also on our side, there were people who did the same thing… I think it is more difficult for them because we live in separated communities because of the political situation here. As they get older, they get more comfortable in their own apartment, in their own living conditions, and they don't travel as much as we did when I was younger. So, I think those are the factors.

The older generation that went through the war is resisting reconciliation efforts, which raises many issues about coexistence especially as people age, they tend to socialize only within their own ethnic groups.

**Srebrenica**

In July 1995 in Srebrenica in the Republika Srpska, Bosnian Serb forces under the command of General Ratko Mladic murdered 8,000 Bosniak boys and men after separating them from their families and taking them away from Dutch UNPROFOR to be slaughtered over several weeks and buried in mass graves. Consequently, Arman does not see communities recognizing their mistakes that were done during the war like the massacre of innocents in Srebrenica.

> Srebrenica happened. It was a genocide. It is a fact, many of us accepts that. What is scary though [is that] my older daughter went to public school in Sarajevo. Their school never took them to Srebrenica, never! I took her personally on several occasions, and she is aware of Srebrenica, and she knows grannies that are still living there. She knows everything about there.
>
> The taste of *ajvar*. She gives them hugs. We don't go there in June though. That's for show off. If you ever want to go there, don't go during that time. Because when you come into memorial place, there is spot on the planet where silence is screaming, that's there. On the other hand, my younger daughter attended primary Catholic school and they went there twice because Croats don't have an issue whether Srebrenica took place or not.

Aida wants the educational system to change. Her educational system in the former Yugoslavia was so different where her classmates were taken to the plains where Utasha fascists conducted atrocities during WWII. They were not told that Serbs, Croats, or Jews suffered there. They told them that fascists made people suffer.

At the same time, however, Luka 2 who is a Serb wants more Croat visibility in the country, which he believes can be critical for reconciliation. He would also like to see all politicians who were connected to the war to be fired immediately because "if we want some changes but politicians are connected to the [Bosnian] war, they cannot be involved in decision making." He also does not see BiH's potential being used to emancipate the people financially, which he blames on the politicians who are actively engaged in corruption instead of creating opportunities based on BiH's potential. He notes that, "We have really good dentists and a lot of people from Europe are coming to Bosnia just to use our dentists, dental care. Just to see like what Turkey has done with plastic surgery, they're earning millions for that every year, we can do that here as well." Luka 2 expressed his frustrations regarding the government's lack of attention to promoting tourism to attract international people to come and experience the geography, hospitality, and culture.

> You can't fool anyone that is impossible to make three million people to live normally. So, yeah, like the way I see Bosnia recognizing the three constitutional people being able to make decisions for themselves in the same legal way for everyone because you can't create a Bosnia without three ethnic groups. For example, when you have a BiH football play team playing [in] the World Cup, Serbs and Croats are not into glorifying that team. Only Bosniaks see that country as their own.

However, Luka 2 does not think that there it is possible to partition and divide the country peacefully, and he does not see the three communities living together in the future. He acknowledged how complex the political situation is today and he does not want to experience

the effects of any future wars. However, he does not see a future in a country where the unemployment rate is 37 percent. Thus, thousands of people are leaving the country every year. There are significant numbers of people who are leaving the country, which Luka 2 compares to the same number of people that left BiH during the war. Brain-drains create many issues for the country because there are not enough workers (e.g., bakers, drivers, etc.) as most workers leave for Germany or the U.S.A. Luka 2 suggests that in order for people to stay in the country, the government must increase people's salaries but few young people see potential in remaining in BiH and settling down there due to "its low standards" in economic opportunities.

The economy plays a crucial role in post-accord BiH. Most people are unemployed and live in poverty. The economic situation in the conflict is a critical indicator for the lack of intergroup reconciliation. When I asked participants whether there would be a continuing ethnic conflict if the BiH economy was prosperous and functioning, the common answer was "definitely not!" When people earn, save, and invest in their future, the current ethnic conflict in BiH would not be so visible and divisive. This is what Luka 2 had to say on this issue:

> When you talk with somebody who gets a good job, it [the conflict] is not a problem with that. So, everybody is probably thinking the same. You will always have some people who might think different, but I think that most people like me…. A lot of people don't have work. They cannot find a job and what they can do is to look on the internet to read everything, watch TV. You know when you are uneducated, you don't have your opinion, somebody would tell them.

Ivana and Milana also reported that their fathers refrain from discussing anything related to the war. They said that because their fathers went through the war and experienced horrific events, they do not want to bring them up and every time there is news about the conflict or wars in neighboring countries, they get triggered and do everything in their power not to watch the news. Milana says, "because of the trauma they went through, the fear they experienced that they can die at any minute and may not see their children is the fear they lived through."

In addition, Bojan remembers how certain sensitive political issues were covered differently on Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian TV channels. Serbs would be portrayed as deviant and when Bojan was in Sarajevo, he would also see how Bosniaks would portray Serbs in the media. He remembers being confused all the time with the main question lingering in his mind of "who is killing who in this history?"

Aleksa also says that he has the same story that was told to him by adults for years as it was in other ethnic groups' houses that, "There are good or bad people." He finds this perspective rather declarative. "If you don't have enough contact with people, if you still believe that someone is your enemy, and you need to be afraid [of them] at some levels then you don't believe that people are just good or bad." Aleksa blames the political elite for the current divisive political situation as they forged a very ethnocentric political society where people speak about the high politics of war, which is not easy for ordinary people to think critically about or coexist within society because nothing else constructively happens in society.

> I think in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also in Western Balkan countries we like to talk a lot about high politics and about important issues about that who started the war. That is the main question, who started the war, but not about our daily life, you know, so it is more important why Croats are good or evil, but not maybe how I can cooperate with some Croats from Western Herzegovina to improve my life. And that is a problem.

He believes that 10 years after the war interethnic relations were better than they are today as they have hardened over time and that saddens him. He also sees that more distrust has emerged between the three ethnic groups. He finds it unusual because at one moment between 2002 and 2004, the situation was a little better compared to today. He remembers discussing the European Union's integrations' goals in the country, which he suspects were the reason for better interethnic relations between 2002 and 2004 as people felt that joining the EU would bring many economic resources and would break down sectarian politics.

Growing up, he was also taught not to trust other ethnic groups communities in certain places and some of these beliefs were passed onto younger generations in a joking way. He thinks it is funny to think about it now, but he remembers hearing these stories from people around him:

> Never trust Bosniaks from Stolac (*Sitolatz*), Croats from Dolac (*Dolatz*), Serbs from Soklac (*Sokolatz*). And you have that ethnonationalist narrative that someone is not good, but also that one whole municipality that it is not important whether they are Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats? But you don't believe to the people from Foča. I mean, it doesn't sound good but that is funny.

He also states that "there is an anti-Serb mechanism within the narratives in which Serbs are declared as criminals. They made that propaganda for us." He also says that Serbs always mention that the other sides are criminals but when it comes to Serbs, other ethnic groups do not follow the same pattern.

That said, Daniela studies in The Netherlands and met a Bosniak friend whose parents moved there as refugees during the war. Her mother did not want her to hang out with Daniela because she is not Bosniak. She says that she was quite surprised to experience ethnosectarianism outside of BiH. She considers herself lucky as other ethnic groups were never vilified in her household.

Amila also remembers to this day that her parents advised her not to trust other ethnic groups, "so things that happened would never happen again. From her point of view, if communities do not trust each other now, it would not lead anywhere, and the conflict would be exacerbated overtime without much peaceful progress.

Although Emir 1's parents lost many friends during the war, he says that they are more tolerant today compared to years ago. However, based on his intergenerational trauma, he is not very hopeful for the future, and he still lives with anger. Emir 1 believes that the country's

political system created with the DPA is not sustainable. “It is not Sweden” he says. He does not see the current political system working for BiH’s people and he proposed the abolishment of the political system or the partition and geographical separation of the country.

> We either need to abolish the current administrative divisions within the country or that we need to sort of separate from each other because we are apparently, you know what we see consistently week after week and month after month and year after year again from the RS entity, we see that they are actively refusing to cohabitate with us although we are the victims in the war, statistically and in every other way. And we have the court decisions as well. We are the ones who makes [efforts towards] reconciliation, friendship, fraternity, brotherhood, sorority, whatever. And I simply think that it is not sustainable and that that ought to be changed. The sooner the better. I think it should have been done a long time ago.

He admits that having such a perspective might make him sound conservative, but he does not believe he is conservative. “If you see something’s not working, you don’t push it forward. You either fix that or completely change it.” Emir 1 also experienced violence during the war as both of his parents experienced the war in different ways. His father was in the army during the war while his mother spent four years under siege. These experiences shape his understanding about other community members but he, in essence, believes in separation as preventing future conflict.

> Everybody gets their own part of territory, although we would have to redraw borders because, I would not be like, “oh, you know, you committed genocide. OK, here is forty nine percent of the territory of the country. There you go, take it.” Definitely not. But I will say, “here is quite a decent chunk of the territory that it’s yours, take it or leave and then we'll be better off without you.”

Emir 1 seems to be quite disappointed by BiH’s current political structure. He says that he never experienced segregation in schools as he grew up in Sarajevo but the two schools under one roof system in other places in Bosnia reminds of him World War II Germany and being separated by wired fences. BiH’s education system is divisive and “it’s always about us and them, us and them, whoever the us and whoever that them is the question.” BiH’s fragmented society with a segregated education system makes it is easier for homophobia to occur.

J.D. also sees a challenge to reconciliation when it comes to the way that school's approach certain issues. For instance, in Croatian schools, students are not learning the Cyrillic alphabet, which is one of BiH's two official alphabets. However, in Bosniak and Serbian schools, the teachers teach the Cyrillic alphabet. He believes that the school system does not move youth toward reconciliation and building relationships with each other across the ethnic divide.

> If some youngsters who are well-educated finished all the school in Mostar in [the] Croat program and university and master's and PhD and comes to Banja Luka and tries to read something, it is not possible for them. I mean, one part is in Latin and one part is Cyrillic [and] that is not possible. And it is a problem, the war even affected us now in terms of where would go for a vacation.
>
> If you ask my parents, where you went for vacations during Yugoslavia holidays, they will say Dalmatia but normal vacation destination for me would be in Montenegro not in Croatia. And also, what funny situation here I was 23, and I decided to try for the first time to go to Kosovo, and my parents were afraid for my security. I was 23 that means that was 2015. In 2015, they were afraid something bad will happen to me. And the reason for that is, of course, because there is no positive news about Kosova in our media, in Bosnia-Herzegovina or only if something bad happens.

Although the current conflict in BiH is frozen, there are several challenges for the unification of country. Due to the lack of reconciliation, people tend to blame each other without having any empathy or willingness to reconcile. Although Serbs and Bosniaks mostly tend to blame each other more, every ethnic group constantly is reminded of the past, which doesn't leave any opportunities left for people to coexist. Hope and determination to work for peace are certainly the way to go but is everyone truly hopeful for having a better future?

**Hopes and Fears for BiH's Future**

BiH is a country scarred by a tumultuous history and deep-rooted ethnic divisions as it continues to grapple with the challenges of maintaining a cohesive and inclusive national identity. For example, Ana suggested that a radical departure from the current political administration is

needed. She advocates for the elimination of complex administration divisions, such as the presidency, cantons, municipalities including the districts of Federatsia, Brcko, BiH, and RS. Her proposal focuses on the implications of a new political transformation for the country's social fabric, language, policies, and the pursuit of a federal unit.

> I would get rid of most of the complicated divisions that the country has. I would try to find a better structure, so that [the] division is not that prominent because once you have it on the map, once you have it on all documents, it is something that you are constantly reminded of.

Exclusion reinforces marginalization and violence against certain groups of people so that providing space and strengthening the capacity of marginalized communities are essential for the members of those communities to thrive and challenge unjust systems to create social change (Bilić, 2016). Given that queer people's experiences in divided societies are traumatic, it is important to engage, understand, and work toward solutions for people to coexist in a peaceful and just society.

Ana also sees language as a divisive factor in trying to build cross cultural relations among the three ethnopolitical groups. Her concern pertains to the insistence that it is written on legal documents whether one is Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian. This linguistic diversity poses a challenge in terms of national unity, as it serves as a constant reminder of divisions. She demands alternative approaches that address the language marker issue. She reflects on the issue in the following manner:

> I would look into how we approach the language there because they demand everything to be written in Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. Then you have three different languages on all the documents and everything else. It is a constant reminder of what is happening and what's dividing us. A lot of government related things, they have to choose one policy that can serve each ethnic group.
>
> For example, it applies to Eurovision [song contest]. They have to choose one ethnic group each year, so such policies cover a lot of areas in your life. They realized the only way for us to work is to meet all three sides fully equal but then

> you have to make them really prominent, like you have to constantly emphasize that they are so different.

Ana indicates that the removal of language divisions can foster a sense of shared identity and collective progress. Even the Eurovision song contest can perpetuate the notion of distinct identities although one might argue that the Eurovision can also play a critical role in uniting the people into one BiH identity. While Ana's intentions behind this proposition are noble, its actual implementation raises various political challenges and necessities a thorough consideration of the potential consequences. It is crucial for BiH society to engage in open and inclusive discussions, weighing the benefits and drawbacks of such a transformative to chart a robust path toward a more cohesive and prosperous nation, while respecting the diverse cultural heritage of its citizens.

Similarly, Dunya also has similar wishes for the integrative national development of her country. Dunya wants the ethnonationalist divisions to cease and to have instead a unified presidency for one united BiH nation. Her goal is to actively engage with communities on an individual basis, particularly with the LGBT community and "the refugees that are stuck in Bosnia right now." However, she finds herself not able to fulfill these aspirations due to the absence of viable political proposals and tangible progress in the country.

At the same time, however, the participants' hopes are shaped by their unique lived experience as members of queer and ethnic communities. For example, A.K. hopes to create an environment in BiH where he can freely bring his partner home and introduce him to his family and friends without facing prejudice or being treated differently. A.K.'s desire is for his relationship to be acknowledged and accepted in the same manner as those of heterosexual individuals in the society. He also wants to have a harmonious connection with his family, where peace, stability, and security are ensured in his home in BiH.

While some young people aspire, dream, and have hope regardless of their ethnicities to collectively rebuild their future, some are tired of trying to work for it for so long. Young people find two options for themselves: to leave and forget about it or to stay and fight back.

### "All I Want is to Leave But if I Leave, I Never Leave. I Will Still be Obsessed with Things Over Here."

Ninety percent of the participants are still concerned about their future. While they want to stay back in the country, there is almost "no air to breath" for them. For example, Adnan K. is not very optimistic about the future of the country although all he wants to be hopeful for the future. For meaningful change to occur, Adnan says that it is imperative to have a significant number of individuals within all the sectors of society that are dedicated to driving progress forward. However, political, and economic corruption is a serious issue and Adnan K. wants to see some needed changes implemented to curb corruption in BiH. This is what he had to say on the issue:

> During the war, the university community, culture, in all other aspects of life continued to bear [substantial] significance. However, there are people who were left over from the war like professors, artists, politicians. When these people left or died, they were replaced by people who got the position just because they belonged to a certain political party without any credentials. Things are getting worse and worse. Unfortunately, I can't see how that can for better. Perhaps the U.S. is needed. I think the only way for Bosnia to change is to have [an] international protectorate or deal with corruption and then start from scratch. This is the only way.

Adnan notes that efforts by the international community to end corruption would empower the people and create a space for a fresh start that wouldn't be tainted by the legacy of nepotism and political favoritism that currently hinders progress. While challenging, it is likely that this is the only viable way to usher in the desired changes and foster a better future for BiH people.

Mehmedalija also perceives corruption as a key issue in the country. He also wants the DPA to be scrapped. He wants a country where ethnicity and religion will not matter for a person when it comes to finding a job. One's performance will not be based on one's ethnic background but rather it will on one's qualifications and merit. Mehmedalija articulates that, "You can't make jobs for three ethnic groups, or you can't hire for the same job for three people from each ethnic group. We also have Roma and Jewish people; it is more difficult for them since the constitution was only meant for the three ethnic groups."

When people do not have safety, security, financial means, and job opportunities, they plan to leave the country. BiH has been experiencing a brain-drain for many years now. Many educated people are leaving the country in search of better opportunities abroad. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 47 percent of Bosnians or 269,000 individuals aged 18-29 are planning to leave BiH temporarily or permanently because they see no future for them there (Sito-Sucic, 2022).

While Abraksas does not see BiH collapsing, he says it will not survive because its young, educated workforce is leaving for greener pastures. Unlike many others who believe that nationalism is the key problem, Abraksas contends that the actual problem is the brain-drain, and he adds that, "you cannot have nationalism without people. What you see in Russia is that people are feeling, and it is becoming an empty land." That said, J.D. narrates that he does not care about BiH anymore because he got so tired of the political theatrics. He calls the current situation a "never-ending story" and adds that these challenges continue with the DPA. Moreover, Igor is not afraid that there will be a war again in the future. He believes that the prevailing energy and attitudes among the people do not indicate an imminent conflict is very likely. Instead, his

concerns revolve around the specter of poverty, and life without real perspective for young people, including not having meaningful careers and personal growth opportunities.

Marginalized communities, including queer people, disabled people, elderly people, and youth, specifically face great challenges, such as the lack of employment, discrimination, bullying, and social exclusion, in post-peace accord societies (Byrne et al., 2018; Mizzi et al., 2023). The participants had various reasons to go abroad like the lack of jobs, poor public services, and endemic corruption in BiH. The country is still far away from joining both the EU and NATO that would provide BiH people with a sense of safety and employment opportunities. Mehmedalija also points out the significance of this issue and its impacts on young people because during his lifetime there used to be six classrooms at his gymnasium, but today there is only one classroom due to the brain-drain as families have picked up and left the country.

In contrast, LGBTQIA+ people experience discrimination, repression, bullying, hate crimes, and physical attacks daily. These experiences lead to anxiety, depression, a lack of belonging and low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress, exclusion, substance abuse, and suicide that puts queer people at risk (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Pachankis et al., 2015). For example, Ivana and Milana are a lesbian couple, and they are scared that homophobia and ethnosectarian behavior will remain the same for a long time. They also plan to leave BiH as they believe that their lives would be easier elsewhere. Ivana says that people do not leave because of the ethnic conflict but rather to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

The people of BiH remain in political limbo trapped between various political agendas including the ethnonationalist objectives of the local political parties and the uncertain supervision of the international community's representatives that are not local ensuring that peace is unsustainable (Selmić, 2016, p. 207). For example, Milana offers a critique of how BiH

has been perceived by the international community. She also expresses frustration with the prevailing perception out there that the main concern of everyday BiH individuals is the war. Milana challenges such a misguided perspective. She adds that within her close-knit and broader social circles, as well as among many people they know, there exists a multitude of diverse concerns that deserve attention. Further, Milana argues that if BiH were to experience an improved economic environment, the war would no longer dominate local everyday conversations.

Queer people, however, have more reasons to leave the country permanently. For example, Lamia does not see a future for herself in BiH where she can get married with her partner and have children. She blames the long-lasting political deadlock that remains as a zero-sum political game levelled against the queer people. This is what she had to say:

> When I am 40 or so, I want to marry with a woman and live with my wife in Bosnia. I want to leave something to her legally after [I pass away]. They [the government] don't have to give us anything else but marriage. Legal recognition is important for adoption, you can legally adopt a child as a single person as well.

In contrast, Luka 2 went to the United States as an exchange student, and he said that he finally felt like he was fully himself without having any fears or concerns about his sexuality. He was free, however, when he returned to BiH, all his friends scolded Luka 2 and asked whether he was insane to return to a homophobic nation. The reaction of his friends felt bizarre for Luka 2 because "I don't know why people keep saying that. I like my city; I love my friends and parents." He reflected on the situation that he was in at the end of that summer when he returned to BiH. This is what Luka 2 had to say:

> That summer, I will be honest, I was on a bus and sexting someone, but I noticed I needed to cover my phone. I said to myself but that's not a big deal. I can live with that. I can hide my phone when I'm on a bus, when I'm in a taxi, when I'm… around the people. On the other hand, though, I don't want to live like that. I can't

> imagine my life being like that or to have a date only when I travel abroad, that is my normal. That was like my normality that I didn't see that.

Due to the fears that Luka 2 experienced when he was younger, he is now scared of dating BiH people. He chose to date in other countries but "that's not [the] life I want for myself."

> [I'm] twenty-seven years old. I have never had a boyfriend in my hometown. And there was me fighting with myself like, oh, don't make a big thing out of that like, don't make it a drama or whatever. And that's not a drama. But that's not a life worth living for me. I want to be open about myself. I don't want to hide. I don't want to feel ashamed. If I want to text with [a] boyfriend, I don't want to hide it. That was the moment I realized we [queer people] are discriminated [against]. Gay people are really discriminated [against] because if you can live your life the way you want if you want to hold your boyfriend or girlfriend.

Similarly, Emir 2 also questions whether he wasted his time working in the Balkans for years now. He asks, "Did I make a mistake in 2007 when I returned from New York back to my city with the hope that I could fix my city. I probably made a mistake. The country is a victim of perceptions. Everyone is trying to persuade. There is no point to try, so I am afraid at one point people would give up before they should give up." As we discussed his decision further, he said that all he wanted was to leave but then he sighed and thought for a second, and then he corrected himself. He said, "I just want to forget. That would make it easier because I think if I leave, I will actually never leave because I would still be obsessing with things over here. Forgetting seems to be the easiest option. I am just very tired."

Many of the participants also shared their dating experiences in BiH with me. Due to social pressure and homophobia, queer people tend to live in the dark or they go to quite places, which are often dangerous at night. Many have been attacked by homophobes when they have met other queer people. Luka 2 certainly does not want to live a life like this, as he says "life is beautiful…":

> I need that right, too, because I won't die if I meet you in [the] dark in [a] forest. I mean I don't want to leave like that. So, it's a really struggle. Life is beautiful, but

> it's full of problems and it's really a circle of making decisions and waging stuff like. Yes, I'm the type of guy that even though there's a lot of bad things in the mentality of the Balkans, but that's my home and I can't hide from that.
>
> Like, I'm the part of those people and I'm proud to be from Bosnia and I'm proud to be Serb, and I'm always talking about the Balkan people in the nicest possible way. I really can't stand [it] when my people have issues with queer coexistence. When I say my people, I mean all Bosnian people as not tolerant, as wild. I think we are not wild. I think we are not aggressive. I think we are not open. I think we are just poor.

Luka 2 strongly believes that the opportunity for people to heal must be created by the people themselves and not be dependent on political parties. Healing means getting to know other people inside and outside of BiH. The older generations are less travelled and less educated compared to the younger generations who are well-educated and well-travelled. Luka 2 suggests travelling inside and outside the country is a peacebuilding intervention strategy to heal from homophobia that would expose travellers to queer people that are everywhere. He reported on this issue as follows:

> And I think [to] heal from homophobia is [creating the] possibility to travel. There is a possibility to meet gay people. There is a possibility to realize that gay people are next to you, like all around you. Like maybe your daughter is gay. Maybe you are gay. Maybe your daughter is gay and like the really good example for that because people in Serbia or Bosnia like the generation of my parents still believe gay people exists far, far away from them. And that's the reason they can't empathize with them.

Denying queer existence is prevalent in BiH so that the society needs to practice socialization and coexistence. For example, Luka 2 shared a remarkable example to demonstrate how hypocritical BiH people are when it comes to queer issues, but he also points out how the media can be such a critical tool in educating the society to be accepting of difference:

> And I remember there is a really popular reality show like a trash show of Serbia. Everyone is watching. People will lie about that and say they don't watch it, but they all do. And there are two lesbians in that show and the first reaction of the population of Serbia or [the] Balkans is "Oh my god, two lesbians like they will ruin our families, they will ruin our traditional values."

> After two months, people were familiar with the fact those two girls are real human beings. And I was watching it like as a sociological researcher. People were like, "this girl is not really loyal to that girl, like she deserves a better girlfriend." Maybe if we show to all people in the Balkans that that gay people are people like anybody else, things will get better. Some people still believe that the gay people are some aliens that will eat all of the Serbian children or whatever.

Those who are exposed to other cultures will likely accept queer people or become less homophobic. For example, Luka 2 has a distinct recollection of individuals from BiH participating in the work and travel program in the U.S.A. Many of these people who went to that program from BiH and Serbia expressed apprehension, wondering "what if there are gay people? Will they be hitting on me?" However, upon their return to BiH, they underwent a profound cultural and political transformation. Having lived alongside gay roommates or worked under gay bosses in the U.S.A., they emerged as entirely changed individuals. Thus, Luka 2 sees that the "cure" for a homophobic situation is to make queer people more visible, but he challenges the way it has been done in the country. He said that he is fully supportive of the rights to have Pride events, as it is a legal entitlement. However, he believes that the way in which the LGBTQIA+ community communicates with the general public is "fundamentally flawed." Luka 2 noted the following in his story:

> You need to be really smart to choose a proper language, to talk with homophobes because you're not talking to me. I already know it. But my mother is not on the same pattern as me. So, if you ask me, they're always choosing wrong ambassadors. And like, if we live in a perfect world, that will be OK. And I don't discriminate [against] anyone, but you choose ambassadors, like to be honest, I'm extremely respectful for their readiness to stand [up] for gay people. But maybe if I don't know some guy that Serbs adores like Novak Djokovic, for example, if he is brave enough to say we need to support LGBT people, the way he will be understood will make a difference. You will influence a lot of people.

Dunya's dream is to also live in a country where she can truly belong as a member of a large community. She worries that the current state of ethnonationalist agendas and mentalities will hinder any cross cutting political progress toward unity. These divisions directly impact the

queer community, as discussions about ethnic and religious differences often overshadow the urgent questions and concerns of queer individuals. Dunya made it known that "Until we address and resolve the fundamental issue of identity, we will not be able to engage in productive, meaningful and open conversations because we have so much more pertinent issues which are so deeply affecting the system in which we live in and it deeply affects just the way we were raised, our upbringing, school system, the job market, etc." Dunya fears that without significant progress in overcoming these obstacles, there will be no tangible advancements that she can hope to witness within her lifetime.

In contrast, Luka 2's main fear is to lose his mental health. He has had many panic attacks, and he is still processing everything that has happened or that is happening to him as a queer person. He sees his past related anxieties resurfacing now. He worries that his anxiety will increase in the future. Despite all these challenges, he does not have much trust in BiH's health institutions as he is afraid of using the state's mental health services as a queer person because of possible discrimination.

In addition, Jovan 2 is a cancer survivor who has several concerns about his future and the future of BiH. He often finds himself consumed by anxiety, constantly worrying about the possibility of war erupting, and plagued by troubling questions like "What if something starts to happen and my mental health decreases. What if I develop something else?" He was treated for cancer during the peace process. Even though the political situation was better eight years ago, he continued to face challenges in accessing medication, and obtaining the necessary medication took a long time. He considers himself lucky to have survived from his trauma when many of his friends did not.

In addition to his own personal concerns, he also harbors worry for his parents, who reside in BiH, fearing that they may not receive adequate medical treatment if a health crisis were to occur to either or both. Jovan 2 is apprehensive about the possibility of people being trapped in the country and as a result, he has begun actively planning to leave. He holds the belief that BiH does not offer an opportunity for individuals to thrive and live fulfilling lives. He also expresses uncertainty about whether his parents will be able to lead a decent life in BiH, especially as they enter their elderly years. In addition, he feels anxious because he is a "closeted" gay and he fears leaving his parents behind. He has been working with his therapist for a while now and he feels better than he did previously. His anxiety goes in a circle, revolving around various fears, such as health issues, the fear of social rejection and being stigmatized, abandoning his parents, and the fear of not being able to live in BiH. He adds that even if he secures employment in BiH, it would still not be easy considering how corrupt the political system is.

Jovan 2 always has a fear of getting stuck in BiH, and being recruited for a war that he would die in. He also has concerns about being a doctor during wartime. While he possesses a genuine desire to assist others, he remains uncertain about the extent to which he would involve himself, given the trauma he and his parents have been experiencing. All he wants at this point is to get his degree and leave BiH as soon as he can.

Thus, the intergenerational trauma impacts everyone who has a connection with BiH, whether they live inside or outside the country. For example, Damir left the country for greater Europe, but his daily thoughts are always about his country. He expressed his anxiety about a possible war breaking out as follows:

> If I hear that there is a war in my country, I will lose my mind because all the people I love are there. It would be too much for me. I don't distance myself with

> their thoughts. I was thinking what happened in Ukraine. As soon as the news broke, everyone back home was in constant fear whether it was Bosnia next.

Damir is still hopeful that the people of BiH will make the necessary political progress to ensure that the future of the country will be prosperous for everyone.

Similarly, Almas says that many BiH people have the same anxiety namely the outbreak of a possible war, yet when it comes to queer people, the anxiety gets deeper as LGBTQIA+ people consider if they will ever get their rights and will they be able to stay in the country and build a life there. Almas has a partner who lives in Poland, which she says is "a terrible place for queer people and for peace. We are both just sitting around worrying about where are we going to go?" She also does not see herself staying in the country in the future so that the plans with her partner are a work in progress.

At the same time, however, Amina is a highly engaged activist. She also fears about a potential war in BiH. She experienced violence in the past, and it continues to traumatize her, especially when she encounters tall, large men walking together on the street. Whenever she encounters a group of men walking together, she instinctively changes her direction to avoid them. Thus, her experience as a queer person with direct and structural violence raises many different concerns for her. The employment situation is also another concern for queer individuals, particularly for openly LGBTQIA+ people in BiH. It is particularly challenging for trans women to find employment opportunities.

That said, Amina considers herself lucky to have the support of an organization working for queer rights. However, she often wonders what would happen if she were to lose her job or become burnt out. She is not sure what alternatives would be available for her in such situations. "Would I be accepted as a waitress in a restaurant by the way I look" she asks. Amina went onto add:

> My gender identity is not widely represented or understood in our society. Whenever I go out, especially after getting a fresh haircut, I always attract attention. I was in Mostar walking with my partner yesterday. A man was staring me as he was walking. Even after he passed by, I noticed he continued to stare at me. These kinds of experiences leave me feeling frightened.

Amina also has a fear of starting a family in BiH, especially when it comes to raising a child. She said that her child would not deserve to be treated in this kind in society. Although she recognizes that someone must take that leap of faith toward creating a better life, she does not think she would do so in BiH due to the numerous problems that her child and family would likely encounter in a homophobic toxic milieu.

BiH is a country already grappling with financial poverty so that Strahinja finds it difficult to hope for the future because "the poor get poorer, and the rich get richer and richer. There is no middle class: rich and poor." The state puts in no effort whatsoever in generating foreign direct investment to stimulate the economy or in generating new employment opportunities. He is employed at an organization dedicated to supporting individuals living with HIV/AIDS. There are several obstacles for gay people to access proper treatment for AIDS. Thus, Strahinja dedicates his free time to advocacy efforts, engaging in numerous meetings with influential individuals, including clinic officials, the government's health insurance department, and even the mayor to advocate on behalf of HIV patients. During many of these meetings, they demonstrate an "empty appreciation" by saying "Oh, we know the challenges. Thank you for everything you have done for people blah blah blah. But at the end of the day, nothing changes." Strahinka was able to secure a donation to support HIV infected individuals from Serbia. The donation was readily available to be used to assist gay people in BiH, however, the offer was rejected by the Ministry of Health "solely because it was a donation, with no additional benefits to be gained by those in power." He sees the stigma and discrimination by higher levels of

government and the medical profession directed toward the LGBT community and HIV patients disheartening.

At the same time, however, another concern is inflation and rising prices that impact everyday individuals. People are in constant fear about the future, not because of a war breaking out but because of those vicious conflicts between rival ethnic politicians, which do not contribute to the wellbeing of the local people. Strahinja also adds that these financial concerns are growing daily, and people are consumed by fears that their business will survive, or they will be able to feed their families.

That said, people are also anxious about their future quality of life. For example, Aleksa's worry is his future well-being as he ages. He notes that, "Right now, I look good, it is not hard for me to find someone but what about at the age if 55, 60 or 70? What if I am even in a relationship with someone and I have health issues staying at a hospital? My partner cannot even visit me because he is not considered a member of my family. Thus, he is not allowed to visit. This is my fear. My fears about my future are deeply personal."

Aleksa says that he would not perform or pretend to be heterosexual just to fit into society. He would wish to marry someone and have children. However, he is concerned about living in a society that places pressures on them. He also does not see many positive role models in his surroundings. Aleksa compares the situation to investing in the stock market:

> If you, for example want to invest in a stock market, you want to see someone is gaining profit, otherwise you will be afraid to invest. In the same way you can think about the situation of queer community. If you see more openly gay politicians or community members, the situation will change. However, in current situation, you cannot see a role model who is accepted.

Aleksa holds an optimistic view regarding the legal landscape surrounding homosexuality. He points out that in 2023, BiH took a significant step forward by decriminalizing homosexuality

through a legal ruling. He anticipates that BiH will eventually pass a law allowing for civil unions and/or same sex marriages, aligning with the standards set by the EU.

All the 43 participants voiced their deep concern regarding the prospect of aging alone or finding a compatible partner. Arman, much like Aleksa, is not worried about the legal protection or rights of queer people in the future; however, his primary worry resides in the level of acceptance that the queer community receives from society at large.

> Okay, we will regulate same sex unions or marriages; however, we will not have a society that will accept that. When two heterosexual couple marry in Tuzla [a city in Bosnia], there is a big square where the wedding take place, people play music and dance. Then you get off the building that you celebrate your wedding in, get in your car and drive around to celebrate your marriage. If we have same sex marriage in two or three years, I don't think we are able to do the same thing. That is the main problem. We will have a law, but we won't have a society that is ready to accept the law. Where do we go from there?

Adnan K. agrees with Arman and says that even with the parliamentarians' votes, society will not accept it easily because they organize the Pride parade every year. He demands more structural changes that come with years of organizations.

While ordinary people living in BiH have similar concerns, queer people experience fears related to homophobia, the lack of resources like HIV clinics, a lack of a sense of belonging, discrimination at work, school and within their families among many other shared spaces. Most people I interviewed emphasized the fundamental human right to be themselves without violence, whether it is structural or direct, and the desire for someone to love and the freedom to live their lives openly without recrimination.

**Key Findings**

John Paul Lederach (1997) noted that post peace accord peacebuilding necessitates the restructuring of relationships and structures. Central to rebuilding relationships was the

reconciliation process that includes truth, justice, mercy, and peace (Lederach, 1997). Eight important themes emerged inductively from the data regarding how the interviewees saw reconciliation evolving in BiH.

First, the ongoing political narrative of war is considered one of the key challenges for reconciliation in BiH as it creates divisiveness, which is triggered more often than not in every election cycle. When the politicians constantly produce fear based off people's traumas like their fear of war, it intensifies societal security dilemmas, which eventually divides the people. Distrust is largely embedded in communities and is mostly caused by the virulent nationalist rhetoric of recalcitrant politicians. Narratives about other ethnic groups are taught by schools and families, which prevent the three communities from working together to build sustainable peace in the country.

Second, the older people become then the harder it is to achieve peace in BiH. The younger generations are more willing to reconcile and coexist together. During my fieldwork, I witnessed how many youths from different ethnic groups engage in dialogue with each other that is promising, especially considering how the age factor plays a critical role in the reconciliation process. Almost every participant that I interviewed expressed their hope that the youth are vital reconciliatory agents as they have more common with each other than they have with their parents as the older generations are stuck in the divisive ethnic narratives more often than their children are. Most of the older participants say that it is too late for them to reconcile with other ethnic groups as "they have [already] formed their opinions," which tend to be more narrow-minded.

Youth plays a critical role in reconciliation (Byrne et al., 2004; Polkinghorn & Byrne, 2001). Despite destructive ethnic narratives that are passed onto new generations, the participants

mention how inclusivity and religious tolerance can also be learned at a young age as there are more opportunities for the youth to cross boundaries through using social media and travelling abroad. Despite the institutional segregation in BiH over the past 25 years, the participants also see value in the promotion of open-mindedness in the schools and the curriculum. That said, it is critical for young people to contact each other more than ever as it seems to be a major challenge to BiH's reconciliation process as fostering understanding and collaboration among youth from different ethnic groups is essential for building a harmonious future for all.

Third, peace is socially constructed and must be reconstructed by local people in BiH. Local communities have their own peacebuilding practices as well as narratives of peace or violence, and they construct their everyday rhetoric based off other ethnic groups that are perceived as "others." The three communities went to war with each other in the 90's, and this circumstance prevents people from reconciling today as they are taught to think differently when it comes to peace or coexistence. This is also true for queer people. Those who have no queer friends around seem to be less tolerant and have less of an understanding about their challenges, if at all. Thus, some of the participants reported how liberating the coming out process was for them. Friends who were homophobic became allies for some after they came out to them. Their queer narratives were shared freely with the people who used to be considered homophobic. Thus, coming out helped to turn their stories upside down as they embraced their queer friends.

Fourth, reaching out to the people who are impossible to be reached is a key challenge for BiH's peacebuilders. Peacebuilding work requires diverse voices joining together to work for collective peace. Those active volunteers who are doing peacebuilding work are often the peacebuilders who are willing to do so. However, the activists and participants described the challenges around finding those new recruits who are "hidden somewhere" and may be willing to

be part of the work if they are approached by the active peacebuilders. The peacebuilding pool needs to be replenished with new blood as peacebuilders often burn out and need to downscale their work.

Moreover, CSO and NGO efforts to facilitate trainings and workshops for the LGBTQIA+ community are significant. However, they mostly attract "visible" LGBTQIA+ individuals. As many interviewees noted one-on-one discussion makes a critical difference for those who are uncomfortable being out as it provides safety and security for them as they tell their stories. In other words, it is important for the CSOs and NGOs to reach out to 98 percent of the queer population who fear coming out in a heteronormative patriarchal society.

Fifth, the ethnonationalist discourse promoted by BiH's schools reinforces populist nationalism so that students do not learn anything from other ethnic groups. In other words, the school system supports one ethnic narrative, which eventually establishes a new generation of prototype ethnonationalists. The way BiH's school system was structured after the war created a curriculum that is rote, and memory based rather than integrating critical thinking into the pedagogy. The curriculum fails to push students to think critically and outside of the ethnosectarian box. Teachers provide students with the "total truth" about themselves, and they t have few opportunities to ask questions or challenge the dominant power over narratives. This is especially an issue in the two schools under one roof system in places like Mostar or the Republika Srpska where the majority is Serb, so there is not much opportunity to learn about others.

Due to the lack of critical thinking in the schools, some students chose to not further their education after primary school that impacts the coexistence process in BiH. When students leave school at 12 years-of-age they aren't exposed to different people and new ideas. If there is no

critical education where students coexist or ask questions freely then they become susceptible to dominant ethnonationalist narrative because people pass their ethnic narratives onto the next generation. These young people like the older adults in their community then live in the same town or village and few interactions with people from other ethnic communities. Schools aren't focusing on the construction of peace, or providing trauma therapy, or facilitating reconciliation, or investing in knowledge. Instead, the trigger students by teaching them the same ethnic narrative repeatedly as well as taking them to memorial sites to remind them of the war's dark history from the perspective of their own community.

Sixth, normalizing peaceful language contributes to reconciliation in contrast to normalizing war language every day. Due to the nature of the war language that is embedded in local structures to socialize people they are surprised that they still live together, since the war ended in 1995. Investing in peaceful knowledge and peace education in BiH's schools is essential for building a tolerant and healthy society. When young people are brought to see a memorial complex or watch a violent movie about the Bosnian war, it seems to be impossible for them to come together and move on with their lives as if nothing has happened. Reconciliation is a process, and it will take time for it to transform relations in BiH as the conflict itself is still complicated.

Seventh, the internationally imposed constitution creates privileged individuals while it dehumanizes others. The constitution appears to be the key challenge to building a sustainable peace in BiH as it was established to share power among the three ethnic groups, namely the Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. While the elites within these three ethnic groups have all the privileges, other ethnic minorities like the Roma or Jews have no rights to run for the presidency. However, the interviewees also pointed out that the ethnic groups who run the major political

parties appear to be happy with the current zero-sum status quo situation as "they don't want to lose their privileges or power."

BiH also needs to be restructured and the constitution is a key obstacle to reconciliation as it does not create a civil democratic state, which equalizes all citizens regardless of their backgrounds. Important cultural symbols like each of the three ethnic group's flags and national anthems also work against reconciliation because they prevent the creation of a BiH national identity from forming. For example, the disagreements between the three ethnic groups means that BiH is yet to have lyrics to its national anthem. These cultural symbols need to be changed if a national identity is to emerge as the three ethnic groups are so deeply divided. The identity of "Bosnian" is still not very well accepted by all as the people refer to themselves as either Bosnian, Serb, Croat, Bosniak, as well as others.

**Conclusion**

Chapter seven discusses the reconciliation process in divided BiH. The chapter also highlights the importance of the political institutions supported by the international community that have institutionalized ethnosectarian politics in BiH. The respondent's perceptions of the usefulness of the DPA in today's BiH is negative, in contrast to the people's consensus that the DPA was necessary to stop the war. Thus, the DPA prevents communities from healing from the trauma of the war and coexisting together peacefully. This finding clearly indicates that the international community needs to put more resources into trauma healing in divided societies trying to emerge from violent wars.

The politician's ethnonationalist narratives inadvertently contribute to the construction of an "evil other" within the societal framework that clearly impedes the efforts to embed reconciliation within the society. They use tropes and dog whistles to protect their power and

their access to economic resources. Transformative change would be bad for business. Elections create fear among local community members and the politician's rhetoric about discussion a potential future war during every election cycle trigger people's trauma from the war. The rival ethnic politician's fueling of deep-seated animosities and fostering an environment of distrust are doing nothing but BiH's dividing communities. How can reconciliation be built in such a divisive atmosphere?

On my last day in Mostar, I saw a man who was standing next to me and waiting for the train to Sarajevo. Both of us arrived earlier and surprisingly no one was there other than us. I greeted him and asked whether I was at the right place to wait for my train to Sarajevo. He assured me that I was, and we started chatting. As he saw my University of Manitoba tote bag, he asked whether I was visiting from Manitoba. He then mentioned that he was also visiting from Vancouver, Canada; however, he is originally from Mostar. After a few minutes of chatting, he asked my reason for visiting Mostar. I talked about my volunteer and PhD work. It was a beautiful sunny day in Mostar, it rained a bit earlier, so I could feel the breeze in a typical hot summer day in BiH. I asked him whether he left during the war, and we continued to chat. He said he left five years after the war. He seemed to be very open and genuine as he shared his experience during the war. A stranger at a train station just started talking about his story. He said one day he was on his balcony alone, a 14-year-old boy who didn't mind Mostar's hot summer, staring at other houses. He knew he was in the war, but he said he didn't take it seriously. Suddenly, he was shocked with a loud noise but couldn't figure out what it was for a minute until he noticed that a sniper had aimed to kill him.

He went on and on sharing his very personal and emotional story with me and then there was silence for a second. He looked at my face and said "but you know what, we need to move

on. There is no other way." Now, it was my turn. I looked at him for a second and asked whether the three communities can reconcile today.

He said: "Yes, I think so. Do we have any other way? We made mistakes but we need to move on." Then he pointed out to a beautiful small hill which looked like a mountain.

"Do you see that view anywhere in Mostar?" he asked.

I said, "I think so."

He then continued: "We wake up to the same sun, we drink the same water that comes from this beautiful mountain. I think we can also share the same country together."

As he finished his sentence, our train arrived, and he continued: "Let's enjoy the view all the way to Sarajevo when we have a chance." We smiled at each other and got on the train.

# Chapter Nine: Conclusions: Implications for Theory and Practice

## Introduction

Chapter nine concludes this study by presenting a summary of the key research findings in relation to the research goals and questions set forth earlier. This chapter further discusses the key grounded theoretical concept of "good tune theory" (), which emerged from this thesis, along with the study's limitations and directions for future research.

GTT emerged from queer research as well as the experiences, activism, and challenges of LGBTQIA+ individual activists in BiH, particularly within the post peace accord context. The grounded theory in this study is critical because it focuses on issues that center queer people's marginalized status within Bosnian society that is shaped by ethnopolitical, and economic divisions. It further addresses how queer people navigate discrimination from within their own ethnic groups, and from the wider society, particularly in relation to everyday violence, constitutional rights, legal protections, human rights, and societal attitudes.

GTT critiques some critical elements that are discriminatory within BiH's current political and constitutional frameworks including the existence of DPA as a whole and how political structures attempt to alienate queer people in BiH. The theory further highlights how the existing structures perpetuate marginalization and lacks the critical integration of queer rights into current political and neoliberal peacebuilding agendas. As GTT underscores the critical integration of queer people in BiH's peacebuilding process, it also emphasizes the need for an intersectional lens as queer people's ethnic identities cannot be separated in the discussion of today's ethnic division reality, and such an intersectional approach also recognizes the diverse experiences and vulnerabilities of the LGBTQIA+ community living in BiH.

GTT further explores themes of interconnected solidarity among other oppressed groups like the Roma and Jewish communities, and it suggests that interconnected struggles for rights, liberties, and recognition foster broader solidarity and resistance to patriarchal dominance framed within an ethnopolitical discourse. The theory also focuses on amplifying queer voices to address the needs, rights, and challenges of the LGBTQIA+ community residing in BiH. This study also has import for the critical and emancipatory peacebuilding school within PACS as it centers LGBTQ activists as agents of social change, and it includes their stories and experiences in the peacebuilding process.

Peace activism promotes, protects, and ensures the fundamental rights and dignity of all individuals, as well as creating space for disadvantaged populations. While it has been slow compared with other countries in the region, there has been a consistent presence of peace activism in BiH. LGBTQIA+ activists, NGOs, CSOs, and ordinary queer individuals living in BiH have various goals that they are trying to achieve, and they are all very vocal about their daily struggles.

When I first conducted this research, I focused on the activist components of the three ethnic groups. However, this study went beyond that and heightened my awareness—as a researcher—of the daily struggles of ordinary queer people regarding constitutional rights, postwar traumas, structural violence, and the apartheid school system. Consequently, I also became aware of how masculinity, gender differences, homophobia, generational traumas, discrimination, and many other critical issues are produced and amplified by recalcitrant politicians. In other words, I came to the realization that there are many more structural issues that need to be overcome in BiH. Otherwise, the "thorny" state structure will keep failing the locals and marginalized people.

**The Key Grounded Theoretical Concept: Good Tune Theory (GTT)**

The LGBTQ+ Bosniaks/Serbs/and Croats that live in post-peace accord BiH reflected on their everyday context, which was multi-layered in terms of their struggles. The respondents collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of post-peace BiH from the perspective of queer individuals. This data led to the emergence of the grounded theoretical concept of Good Tune Theory (GTT).

The Bosniak/Serb/and Croat members of the LGBTQIA+ community where I lived in the post-DPA BiH reflected on their everyday contexts, which were multilayered in terms of their struggles. The respondents collectively provided a comprehensive understanding of the post-DPA BiH from the perspective of queer individuals. Such data led to the emergence of the grounded theoretical concept of GTT.

That said, Lederach (2020) highlights the absence of music in the empirical and theoretical development of PACS. His research introduces the term *music writ large* to expand the understanding of the concept as "beyond the narrow of view of music as simply song and performance" (2020, p. 139). According to most traditions, all human beings are gifted and "share this extraordinary living and breathing earth began in sound" (Lederach, 2020, p. 140). Be it a sound, vibration, or a tune—their use of language enables different forms of social relations to thrive. While "contemporary music" refers to the formal creation of socially coordinated entertainment, such as in the form of a song, its origins can be traced back to Greek mythology, where music encompassed rhythm and beat, lyric, melody, poetry, and song, among many other elements (Lederach, 2020).

The term muse refers to the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne who were engaged in different forms of arts in Greek Mythology. A muse is also referred to a person who is

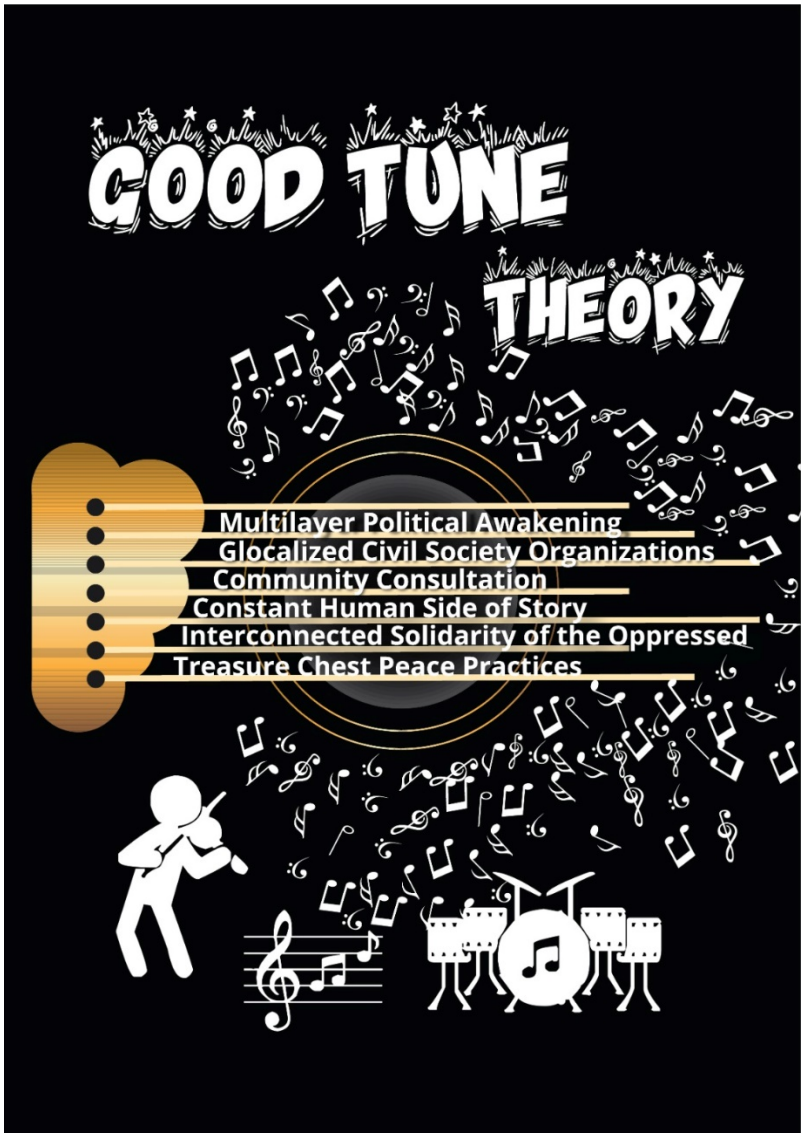
considered to be the source of inspiration to create art. However, muse is also used to "express hope in the midst of unspeakable devastation" (Lederach, 2020, p.140). Silence, sound, poem, slogan, chanting, gesture, mimicry, touching, feeling, and crying are different forms of music that one can use to express themselves, especially during struggles, conflict, or peacebuilding. Within this context, a "tune" is defined as "a succession of pleasing musical tones," "melody," or "correct musical pitch or consonance" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In other words, it refers to a piece of music that sounds pleasant to the ear and enjoyable to listen to, and then it touches the body through human experience and daily encounters with everyday social events. Further, a good tune consists of a catchy melody, a harmonious arrangement, and a rhythm that resonates with the listener. While people have different tastes in music, a cohesive composition would make any musical sound pleasing to the ear, body, and soul.

Related to this, GTT argues that implementing peace agreements one after another is often illusional, because there are many different tunes playing and they are not harmonizing well. In fact, what Galtung's framework of negative and positive peace has offered to the literature can be considered insufficient. Galtung (1996) noted that negative peace is the absence of direct and visible violence, including wars, while positive peace is social justice, implying the replacement of unjust policies with just policies. The implication of Galtung's framework in post-peace accord societies that have ended direct violence would be that these societies are stuck in a state of negative peace, so that working toward social justice or creating just policies are crucial. However, both dichotomous concepts in Galtung's framework do not seem to be sufficient to understand where violence is prevalent in divided societies.

GTT emerged from the data generated in BiH as part of this doctoral study. It argues that ending cultural and structural violence or working toward social justice means that negative or

positive peace are natural occurrences of peace agreements. However, the main question is whether what is promised in an agreement is to be institutionalized and maintained in post-accord societies. In the context of queer people, the BiH government has consistently passed critical laws that align well with the EU membership requirements, such as legalizing same-sex sexual activities, Article 12 of the Law on Equality of Sexes, the Labour Law of the Federation of BiH, adopting a bill amending the antidiscrimination law in 2016, and the current proposal debate on the recognition of same-sex relationships (Bilić, 2016; ERA, n.d.; International Labour Organization [ILO], n.d.). While these are critical acts and may be considered as policies that are part of positive peace, the country remains as one of the most homophobic countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. With that said, to create a just peace agreement, more critical and consistent efforts must be exerted to keep the promises made and ensure that the achievements are enforced through different practices. Consequently, GTT argues that the achieved peace must be protected at all costs and treated as a treasure chest: when individuals struggle to finally have their rights recognized, they must keep them; otherwise, they will be lost. This is what I call a "treasure-chest peace" (TCP).

I felt the need to expand my idea of GTT late one night in my apartment. As I stared at my guitar next to me, I could not think about anything else other than the six strings of the guitar to explain the GTT. Each string offers an adequate range of pitches and hundreds of chords that can easily be played by a human being. Thus, to hear a harmonious composition from this instrument, it must be well tuned so that all six orchestrate well together. In the context of the GTT, every string represents a critical step toward peacebuilding, which eventually leads to TCP. However, one must fully understand the critical steps represented by each guitar string.




**(1) Multilayer Political Awakening (the Constitution, the Political Structure, the DPA, the Police, etc.)**

Sustainable peacebuilding requires a multitrack and multilayer political awakening, such as granting constitutional rights for all, ensuring the protection and safety of individuals, establishing the police as a public agency and not a political one, and multimodal, well-integrated, and diverse school systems for all that are implemented at the multilevel in the society (Byrne & Keashly, 2000).

Queer liberation is either directly or indirectly related to the structures of the government as it is in BiH today. In the first place, the country's constitution is discriminatory and divisive; rather, it excludes anyone who does not identify as Bosniak, Serb, or Croat. Moreover, minority rights were not protected until the passage of the BiH Law on the Protection of Rights of Members of National Minorities in 2003 (OSCE, n.d.). With that said, when the DPA emerged, priority was given to the three ethnic groups, and the rest, including queer people, were excluded from enjoying any protection or further rights. Today, there are still critical human rights violations experienced by minorities in BiH. For example, no marginalized minority groups can be elected or run for presidency under today's BiH constitution.

Unfortunately, the government's ideological apparatuses, such as schools in towns like Mostar, still play a critical and divisive role in separating ethnic groups living in the same city. As such, people have almost no chance to socialize with one another as they learn different stories and narratives in their separate schools. As the data suggests, political, legal, security, and educational apparatuses like the police, the justice system, and schools, among many others, often play a divisive and discriminatory role when it comes to the protection of LGBTQIA+ lives. Instead of the police acting as a neutral force for all, they are utilized as a discriminatory force. Although the patterns of LGBTQIA+ protection vary over the years depending on the country's EU accession efforts and/or willingness to join the EU there does not seem to be consistent efforts by BiH to be a potential functioning member of the EU That said, BiH society can only achieve a good tune, and sustainable peace and social justice, through a collective multilayered political awakening.

**(2) Glocalized CSOs - Coexistence Practices, Shared Space, Collaboration, and Locally Sounded Practices**

After critiques of globalization that ignored the relevance of local and regional developments, Roland Robertson (1992, 2018) introduced the term "glocalization" (a combination of "globalization" and "localization"), arguing that globalization makes localization irrelevant. He further posited that local and global factors are interrelated and constantly influence each other (Robertson, 2018). While Robertson's research is not necessarily focused on post-accord societies or activism, the concept of "glocalization" raises an important concern for understanding the current issues faced by post-accord societies, specifically in the context of BiH.

Glocalized organizations are interpreted in this study as any NGO or CSO that is partially or fully funded by international donors and uses the funding to enhance local dynamics by investing in coexisting practices, like youth gatherings, summer camps, and after-school programs. These organizations also collaborate with other NGOs and/or CSOs to improve the already undermined conditions for ordinary local people to come together in the spirit of reconciliation. Further, these organizations implement locally sounded practices in their own contexts with the goal of including locally and culturally acceptable practices for all.

55-60 percent of participants in this study expressed their feelings regarding the role of NGOs or CSOs in BiH, mainly because they did not see any community development actions that had emerged from these organizations. Some also claimed that CSOs strictly follow external international donors' political agendas, thus preventing the emergence of bottom-up approaches to address the specific issues faced by ordinary queer people in BiH. While the presence of NGOs and CSOs, such as the SOC, is generally praised by a significant number of participants, their critiques of these organizations are also prevalent in their stories.

**(3) Community Consultations with Visible and Hidden/Invisible Individuals**

Community consultation is a critical peacebuilding practice with different forms and expressions like activism. Consulting with community members enhances the peacebuilding agenda and offers sustainable solutions produced directly by the people who have lived through experiences of war and indirect violence or those who suffer due to a lack of social justice and human rights conditions in their communities. When the government, political parties, and international donors and agencies consult with BiH's "marginalized" communities, it is critical that they reach the unreachable. In other words, the consultation must be done so that the voices of the people who are often forgotten in post-accord peace processes are heard. It appeared to me as a researcher that those individuals who are "in the closet" are somehow "punished" by excluding them from community consultations, and their voices are never listened to in any way. However, there are ways in which these community members can still engage in dialogues without feeling the need to be outed. This engagement could be accomplished through public opinion surveys, one-on-one interviews, or photovoice, among others.

The current peacebuilding agenda is set by those who are already visible in society, yet the most challenging issue is to engage with people who have not been reached. When CSOs organize certain peacebuilding activities, most invitees comprise those who have less fear of being out or who are already out in the community. In comparison, there appears to be a lack of effort to create a "safe bubble" for everyone in BiH so that they can feel safe and surrounded with love.

Some participants who are well-known activists expressed their frustration with some NGOs, as they believe they sometimes fail to consult with the community even with activists who are visible and known to the community. However, in the bigger picture, some participants

also explained the lack of community outreach, especially to those who are still "in the closet" and live in more rural places. People who live in a more rural environment virtually have few opportunities in terms of community engagement or resources compared to those who live in urban settings. Although some NGOs acknowledged this issue, the action of reaching out seems to be a work-in-progress.

**(4) Constant Human Side of the "Oppressed" Story**

Activism is part of peacebuilding and social justice-seeking efforts that require activists' day-to-day commitment. Unfortunately, most activists either do not get paid or are paid very little due to the lack of livelihood opportunities or resources to fund peacebuilders. Despite these challenges, peace activists continue to seek the truth through their daily communication with ordinary people, politicians, and other CSOs and peace activists. However, they require constant effort and the use of strategic tactics to obtain support and sympathy from others who are particularly hard to reach. Indeed, outreach connections to marginalized groups can have a domino effect of changes if the more human side of the story is put forward.

The activists whom I spoke to mentioned the power of stories. These stories are not necessarily related to a particular project; rather, they are human stories that can be used to help other people empathize with each respondent's unique situation. Humanistic stories assist ordinary people in accepting the oppressed when they are exposed to their human stories, such as those of women who experienced the war and the current peace process. After hearing an important human story, this must then relate to the everyday violence levelled against LGBTQIA + individuals. In this way, they can be connected with ordinary people who might not be supportive of queer people, enabling the former to empathize and understand their everyday struggles. In many ways, having everyday people on board with LGBTQIA+ issues is vital to

deepening the roots of the peace process. My data also suggest that when non-queer people are exposed to queer stories and share space with them, there is a critical opportunity for socialization and greater toleration toward one another. This seems to be the same for other ethnic groups in BiH as well.

**(5) Interconnected Solidarity Among Oppressed People**

The need to have an interconnected solidarity is a critical step in uplifting oppressed groups rooted in oppression struggles, strengthening their resiliency, and providing a sense of hope for activists. When marginalized groups are oppressed, it enhances their solidarity with similar disenfranchised groups, who also struggle and resist human rights violations. This is why oppressed groups are often in solidarity with each other. For instance, Black indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC), Kurdish, Northern Irish nationalists, and Palestinians have always been in solidarity with one another, often taking to the streets to support each other's struggles. This solidarity is rooted in the historical violent oppression of these groups.

As history has shown, the interconnected solidarity of the oppressed in the context of resistance can bring about significant changes in society. For example, on October 7, 2023, the Hamas attack on Israel resulted in 1,400 Israelis being killed and 248 taken to Gaza as hostages. This violent event, however, highlighted the 32,000 Palestinian deaths (at the time of this writing) due to the ongoing pariah Israeli government's occupation in Gaza (and Palestine) and its apartheid system directed against the Palestinians in the West Bank. As a result, millions of people took to the streets worldwide to show solidarity with the people of Palestine (Al Jazeera, 2023). At first glance, it was clear that left-wing Jewish, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ people were on the frontline, supporting an end to the violence and occupation, which was not surprising after

seeing such an interconnected social movement for peace. However, this international solidarity movement still requires a solid plan to mobilize millions of people worldwide.

On the local front, the BiH is home to multiethnic groups that have been in direct or frozen conflict for decades. Each ethnic group has distinct ideals and political agendas that they can use against each other, and this is not limited to the LGBTQIA+ community alone. For example, most of the LGBTQIA+ research participants stated that they had no problem being in an interethnic relationship compared with non-LGBTQIA+ individuals. Arguably, individuals' ethnic identities do not necessarily play a role in LGBTQIA+ relationships because of their intersectional identities and that they are well aware of the perceptions mainstream BiH people have of LGBTQIA+ individuals, that is, they are oppressed and unwanted by other ethnic groups.

As some participants have stated, if there is one common ground for all other ethnic groups to come together, it would be targeting LGBTQIA+ people violently as their presence is considered a "sin." However, the picture is not the same for liberal Bosniak, Croat, and Serb groups. My data suggest that younger generations who grew up in open-minded households have more tolerance toward LGBTQIA+ individuals. Some also find the political homophobia concerning and blame the government for its efforts to distract people away from the reality of everyday challenges like BiH's brain drain, unemployment, and corruption etc. In a picture like this, interconnected group solidarity can be crucial to shed light on everyday realities of ordinary people by emphasizing the real issues that are hidden by the government instead of their targeting of LGBTQIA+ individuals to cover up their misdeeds. For example, during my experience at the 2022 Sarajevo Pride parade, I saw many oppressed groups taking to the streets

to march with queer people in solidarity, which connects LGBTQIA+ individuals with the importance of interconnected group solidarity.

**(6) Treasure-Chest Peace Practices**

Peace agreements do not necessarily achieve the outcomes that many communities wish for. Rather, they offer—through multiple partners—an opportunity and guarantee to strengthen the promises for the future of their countries and communities. Consistent peacebuilding efforts must be exerted to achieve what has been promised in the peace agreements once they are signed. All these political promises made through local and international actors, critical legislation, and pragmatic policies and laws must be consistently enforced. Otherwise, these agreements would only be guaranteed on paper, and ordinary people would not benefit from them, as the political apparatus would have no incentive to institutionalize and enforce them. Thus, when there is an absence of enforcement from political institutions and their agents, it becomes vital to consistently demonstrate resistance. Otherwise, the promised rights might erode with changes in the government.

While it may take another decade to examine TCP practices in Bosnia, Turkey is a poignant example that can be used to explain TCP. Currently, the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Turkey face challenges and setbacks under the conservative government, the AKP. When left-leaning parties in Turkey left the queer movement alone due to their fear of losing conservative votes, this resulted in daily violations of queer rights under the AKP government. In this case, rights must be enforced by the political systems, including the political parties, supported by the resistance of marginalized people like LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Multiple individuals and organizations are also responsible for maintaining the TCP, including ordinary people, local and international NGOs and CSOs, the police, and peace

activists. If promises are not kept and enforced by the government, these individuals can generate community activism by forming a collective social movement to advocate for societal change. For example, when the first queer festival was organized in Sarajevo in 2008, the organizers and activists were beaten up. Some members of conservative religious groups attacked the organizers, yet the police did nothing to protect individuals from such groups. These attacks intimidated LGBTQIA+ community members for a long time, and some victims reported choosing to remain silent about them due to the lack of police protection. In this case, the police failed to protect the individuals' basic rights.

Over the years, BiH's LGBTQIA+ community has strengthened its strategic plans and has appeared to be more visible, despite constant attacks from different communities. After the 2008 attack, the LGBTQIA+ community organized its meetings in a very secure way, in which the community members were invited to events with safety precautions put in place for their protection (e.g., they were provided with a password and asked to knock on the venue's door three times). These were certainly challenges for the LGBTQIA+ community, especially for those who were newly out. Over the years, through different activists and organizers, they were able to organize successful Pride parades, which went well without any major issues or homophobic attacks.

## Overall Key Findings

### *The Constitution is a Dead Spiral*

Most participants expressed their frustration with the current political constitution, which they found to be structured incorrectly. While a significant number of interviewees acknowledged the importance of the peace agreement in stopping the war, there is a consensus that it pushed the community members into a deep crisis and conflict, resulting

in their daily struggles to preserve their sense of dignity and safety. With the events in recent years, it appears that the DPA has only solidified the ethnic differences instead of creating a unified BiH identity in the country.

Further, some of the participants noted that the DPA is only a piece of paper that benefits politicians by keeping them in power. In comparison, it does not seem to benefit communities that suffer from bad politics. As one participant (A.K.) alluded, the structural conflict in BiH continues to happen, and people do not see them getting out of the conflict because "in a democratic country, people would not actively debate on the main ethnic differences or who is the boss of the society," but rather opt to coexist collectively.

Meanwhile, some participants felt that the financial component of the conflict was the key indicator of the failure of the peace process. As prices surged due to inflation, the poorest and impoverished are being hit the most because those without land cannot grow fruits or vegetables. Some participants emphasized the importance of the economic situation, mentioning that BiH is not embroiled in a war, but also noted that it is critical to be aware of the difference between a country being in or not being at war. Some also do not see ethnic differences or tensions as the main reason for the ongoing conflict, there are more serious issues afoot like the financial burden arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the dysfunctional constitution that can be dealt with, and once these issues are addressed, communities may not necessarily see such a strong divisive ethnic politics in BiH.

The way in which BiH's political structure was established by the international community after the war also serves as a divisive factor in society, where many people

oppose its dysfunctional nature and prefer the current constitution to be completely abolished. Moreover, the participants reported that political leaders must be elected based on their competence and not on their ethnic identities. Due to the DPA's current political structure, people seem to find themselves trapped with "no light at the end of the tunnel." The participants also see the overall weakness of the state, characterized by two governance structures for the Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, in which marginalized groups have no right to be elected to those structures. Indeed, the current peace agreement is perceived as "the global example of how not to set up postwar reconstruction."

Meanwhile, the DPA has not achieved anything in the long run regarding the terms of creating a functioning federal state. In fact, most participants agreed that the DPA froze rather than transformed the conflict, and that there was no pervasive belief that the DPA brought peace to the country. Some disclosed that the changes they saw were akin to a social political revolution. When I asked them to elaborate on this point, they emphasized the importance of critical thinking and the mobilization of the citizens who want a better tomorrow for everyone by changing society. Many also believe that the integration of BiH into the EU family will bring that desired change and move the country progressively forward.

At the same time, schools serve as "hatred labs" where ethnic divisions and homophobia are perpetuated depending on where they are located. For one, Sarajevo is one of the largest and most diverse cities in BiH compared with other cities like Mostar or Banja Luka. Although most participants reported that they experienced more structural or indirect violence, its effect continues to haunt them for many years. For instance, it is common to hear teachers call out someone who is softly spoken and say that they "sound

like a girl" in front of others. The participants reported that they had to control their voices, as they had to sound "like a man." Furthermore, when students choose not to play certain sports like football or rugby, which are known as "heterosexual sports," they are often bullied and shamed for "behaving like a girl."

### *Unhealed Wounds Keep Bleeding: Everyday Trauma*

The participants articulated the constant changes that arose in their lives during or after the Bosnian war of the early 1990s. Those who remember the war also remember the constant migration in and around the country. Some drastic changes like a well-known engineer becoming a farmer, someone being a refugee in a foreign land, or another person losing sense of one's community, transformed their lives and gave them unpredictable futures. Most people had to leave their well-paying jobs for safety or security, causing them deep trauma and poverty. Constant adjustments from moving to different schools and neighbourhoods reportedly disengaged them from their livelihoods.

Their post-conflict trauma also arose from religious division. Most participants do not see religion as playing a unifying role, as it only sets community members apart. In turn, this causes much more trauma, as they focus on the differences that divide them. Prevailing religious narratives are also orally passed on to the next generations. Although about 25 percent of the participants said that religion can accommodate LGBTQIA+ individuals, it does not happen because religious teachings stipulate that LGBTQIA+ people "does not belong to this century." With that said, the separation of religious institutions and the state means that it is expected that they will progress as society changes.

At the same time, however, thousands of people lost their loved ones during the war, and the impact of that tragedy continues to affect their lives to this day. Indeed, intergenerational

grief affects the well-being of individuals. When a parent grieves after the loss of a sibling, it reflects on the entire family, as children watch their parents suffer mentally and physically. As this constant pain surrounds family members, some participants pointed out that "they are forced to remember individuals without knowing [them]."

The participants also reported that their parents have bipolar disorder or constant panic attacks, especially on certain days like New Year's Eve when there are fireworks or when they hear the sound of helicopters or planes flying overhead. This is because such events remind them of the war and the memories of exploding hand grenades or being bombed from the air. Some also mentioned how they became triggered by barking German shepherds, which were used to secure households from intruders during the war. Apart from anxiety and panic attacks, some participants developed alcohol addiction as a means of coping with their emotions instead of seeking therapy, which is prohibitive because of the culture and is not a common thing to do anyway. Moreover, their traumas from the war era are connected to their war experiences as they hid from the bombs in their basements, fearing death or having no electricity or food. These experiences have truly left a deep impact on their mental health.

At the same time, however, most women were left with many responsibilities during the war, including parenting and providing food for their households. Emotional exhaustion likewise impacted them significantly. While women could share their struggles during the war with other women, men kept to themselves, as they were culturally not allowed to display emotions due to the heteronormative nature of BiH society and the idea of the "John Wayne" tough man who does not cry. After a while, people who experienced the war distanced themselves from their families and communities. Men who joined the military during the war witnessed the deaths of many people, causing them to have PTSD and panic attacks that were, unfortunately, passed on

to their children. Further, many participants remembered their parents constantly yelling at each other growing up due to the heightened tensions and trauma resulting from the war.

Many participants also developed phobias like claustrophobia or fainting in closed spaces. For example, one participant revealed that when her mother was pregnant during the war, she had a constant fear that something would happen to her. Today, other participants are also afraid of a new war occurring and have no places where they can safely shelter. With that said, most parents today still do not approve of their heterosexual children marrying people from other ethnic groups. However, the situation is different for LGBTQIA+ individuals, as most are or have been in a relationship with someone from a different BiH ethnic group.

### *"People are Going to Remember Us": You Either Celebrate or Resist*

Although it has a historical background, queer resistance is part of recent activism in BiH. People learn about acting, resisting, and challenging the status quo. Moreover, acts of resistance take effort, money, time, and mental health. Those who are bravely taking to the streets every day when they leave their homes say that it is not an easy thing to do in BiH, which has become a challenging environment for queer people to navigate due to increased societal homophobia. Despite the slow progress they have achieved, queer people continue to suffer because of the lack of policies and laws and the poor enforcement of those laws to protect queer people against hate crimes.

In addition, individuals defined their activism differently. For some people, being a "closeted" teacher at their school is a victory because they hold an important leadership position to make a difference, even if it is a small one. Alternatively, for queer people in BiH, leaving home can mean experiencing physical or psychological violence, but sharing a home with homophobic family members does not necessarily make any difference for them. Unfortunately,

when LGBTQIA+ individuals are bullied by peers or teachers, it prevents them from functioning as full members of society.

While some positive improvements have taken place in BiH since the first Pride parade in Sarajevo appear promising, the visibility of the queer community in the whole country is troubling. Only 35 percent of the study's participants indicated that they live their lives without any visibility concerns, while the remaining 65 percent were not even near that visibility line. The latter continue to fear for their safety and security as they continue to experience violence in their workplace, home, and many other spaces in which they socialize. In comparison, Pride parades bring up memories of joy, happiness, and even resistance for most of the participants as they continue to challenge the status quo to celebrate their identities without any hesitation or fear of attacks. Younger people also reported that they were concerned about going out, but as soon as they saw hundreds of people gathering and celebrating in Pride parades in Sarajevo, they felt empowered to be there the following year.

Although the estimated numbers for the very first Pride parade were 50–100 people, it was quite shocking for the participants in a positive way to see thousands of people in the streets. The participants who were at the first parade specifically wanted to be there to be remembered by the next generation and to be part of history. The first Pride parade was completed under heavy police presence, yet the participants articulated that such a presence was necessary for their safety and for the safety of citizens attending future Pride parades.

Meanwhile, the younger generations seemed to be more energetic and determined to keep the soul of activism alive, with some participants emphasizing that they would rather pass their victories and celebrations onto the next generation instead of passing them on their trauma. As most of the youth speak English fluently, this enables them to connect with the rest of the world,

from which they draw inspiration and follow new trends. While members of the older generation in BiH are not as brave, they applaud the younger generation. Some participants expressed belief in the "diced pop culture" in which the younger generation appears to be willing to surpass what gay activists did in the past. Thus, connecting with the rest of the world through different social media is critical for young people, as this will educate and empower them to bring about changes and reforms that liberate and protect BiH's LGBTQIA + community.

At the same time, however, the youth seem to have less of an issue with acceptance compared with the older generation, although this generalization isn't fully accurate. For example, significant numbers of LGBTQIA+ youth receive support and acceptance from their parents, who continue to protect them. However, other dynamics should also be considered when discussing homophobia in various contexts. For example, the youth also express their gender identities freely. Recently, some youth I saw in Sarajevo specifically dressed in a way that homophobic people would not wish to see, which is also a promising indicator of future societal change for the new generation.

Along this line, Pride parades are a critical step in enhancing the LGBTQIA + community's visibility in terms of its resistance to homophobia and its celebration of diversity in the country. In the long run, Pride parades will make a positive impact on society. However, the participants perceived the celebration of the Pride parades differently. For example, some saw their coming out story as their way of celebrating and showing Pride. "Changing one person at a time" in a country like BiH is perceived to be an important step because "acceptance is contagious" and it will eventually spread to other communities.

While the struggle for freedom is an everyday reality for LGBTQIA+ individuals, the community also faces internalized homophobia. On the one hand, some participants did not want

to engage with Pride parades and LGBTQIA+ visibility issues as they seemed to antagonize mainstreamers. On the other hand, some participants do not feel that Pride parades are "appropriate" for BiH culture because some behaviours during the parades seemed to be over the top, alienating potential allies.

Arguably, in this study, those who live with traumatic experiences from the war must first overcome more pressing psychological issues before they move on to address their sexual identities. However, for many people, both issues are interrelated. In particular, individuals cannot prioritize their ethnic identity over their sexual identity as they intersect within their communities. The hesitation to do so mostly comes from the older generation (the over 40–45 age group), with a couple of exceptions.

Many participants also expressed fears of coming out due to media pressures. While they desired to be part of LGBTQIA+ events, especially Pride parades, they refrained from participating due to media coverage. Many queer people rely on their family members for pocket money or tuition expenses, so they are reluctant to lose their financial support systems. The queer community is small, and LGBTQIA + people are scared to be outed and disowned by their parents.

### *Trans Visibility is One of the Most Challenging Issues for Activists in BiH*

At present, trans individuals tend to experience greater violence, including death threats, in BiH (Vasić, 2014). Thus, most trans people are moving out of the country for better life opportunities. In fact, some of the participants' friends or family members moved to other countries like Serbia, Croatia, Sweden, and Canada, among others. Related to this, CSOs and NGOs are already having difficulties recruiting participants from the trans community, as most have left the country, fearing for their safety. It is especially difficult for the older generation to

come out as trans compared with the youth cohort because the former did not have many role models to inspire them. In addition, due to social pressure, some were forced to get married with someone from the opposite sex and spent most of their lives masking their identity from a person with whom they did not want to live.

At the same time, one trans participant reported a concern regarding the cost of gender assignment surgery in BiH. While a significant number of people go to Serbia for their surgery, they pay out of their pockets, and not everyone is lucky enough to afford the surgery, especially in a transphobic country where there are fewer employment opportunities for trans individuals. Further, although activists often support their trans community members by organizing different fundraising events, these are not always sustainable. At present, the BiH government is not tackling the issue, and this puts more trans individuals at risk. Not addressing this issue prevents trans individuals from having surgery that would free themselves from the shackles of gender dysphoria.

Meanwhile, as previously mentioned, some participants defined activism as "living truth," which might come across differently for each individual. For some activists, coming out is a form of liberation, and their activist practices are critical in transforming people's homophobic attitudes into strong allyship with the LGBTQIA+ community. In this regard, activists exist in a challenging space as they continue to resist heteronormative behaviours. Some respondents also alluded to the importance of sharing their space with "others" so that "you can't hate someone you did not share the space [with], or you were not in a dialogue with that person. It's just called ignorance."

### *Queering Emotional and Psychosocial Support Programs*

Historically, emotional, and psychosocial support programs have focused more on individuals suffering from the trauma of war, thereby excluding people within the queer community, which is problematic. Moreover, trauma healing programs often favour LGBTQIA+ people who are out, while those who remain in the "closet" do not receive any support. This is because most foreign CSOs/NGOs expect LGBTQIA+ individuals to be out; thus, people who are not receive little assistance. However, those individuals who are not yet out can still be supported through counselling or legal assistance hotlines, which provide much-needed services and remind them that they are also worthy of being loved. Needless to say, these hotlines can make a huge difference in the lives of disenfranchised LGBTQIA+ people. However, while these hotlines supporting the LGBTQIA+ community exist through the help of NGOs such as SOC, some participants argued that they are not at all sufficient to meet the needs of queer people.

### *Symbolic Police*

Police protection sends a strong message to the LGBTQIA+ community that everyone is protected in the society; however, it remains mainly symbolic in BiH. When LGBTQIA+ community members experience violence, the police tend to escalate the situation and revictimize the individuals. Many participants found the police presence intimidating rather than supportive of LGBTQIA+ people being harmed. For example, five participants reported experiencing violent attacks on the streets, and when they went to the police to report the issue, they were either turned away or discouraged from pressing charges against the perpetrators. As a result, the perpetrators were never prosecuted, and if they were, the cases would take months or years to be processed in the courts. When people fear for their safety and security, they see policing very differently. Consequently, to prevent attacks, many of the participants must adjust

their behaviours, their voice, and even the way they dress just to survive in the space that they also deserve to live in.

### *"There is Always a Choice in Life. You can be a Sheep or a Wolf. Being a Wolf Means that You must be very Lonely."*

The participants who came out to their loved ones experienced different forms of violence, including direct, structural disownment, and emotional abuse. A typical tactic used by parents is to shame their children emotionally, physically harm them, and then disown them. While some queer people chose to voluntarily leave the country to improve their living conditions, others were punished by their parents by being locked in their rooms for weeks or permanently disowned by their family members. Indeed, when people identify themselves with different narratives aside from patriarchal and ethnonationalist discourses, they are punished through discrimination, exclusion, bullying, or physical attacks by mainstream homophobes. As LGBTQIA+ individuals often choose to be the "wolf" in relationships, this also brings different challenges. For example, one can lose their emotional or financial support mechanism or community, thus pushing the person into deep trauma that they may be unable to cope with easily.

### *CSOs and NGOs for Social Change and Activism*

CSOs and NGOs are integral to activism, as they encourage, nurture, and facilitate sustainable peace, dialogue, and reconciliation in grassroots civil society. Significant efforts have been made by these organizations to challenge the status quo and the established governmental institutions, demanding that their agents be more accountable regarding issues that have been ignored for many years like same-sex partnerships, violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals and women, and a lack of laws to protect minority groups in BiH.

Most people who work for queer CSOs and NGOs also either identify as queer or have demonstrated strong allyship with queers throughout the years. Many also start volunteering or participating in dialogues at their events at a young age, which is a promising development, given that the staff understand what it is like to suffer as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. These organizations also foster a sense of belonging and safety, as well as creating spaces where individuals feel loved, which is crucial, especially for the youth. In recent years, these organizations have supported the community in different ways by offering counselling, legal aid, and training and by covering queers' accommodations for events, among others. Thus, the organizations' priorities create inclusive and welcoming spaces and opportunities for queer individuals.

At the same time, however, a significant (45–55 percent) number of participants complained about the organizations' focus on the "already-out people" who have less concerns about their visibility. People who choose not to express their sexual identity in public believe that the organizations are still silent and do not provide as much support to these LGBTQIA+ individuals.

In addition, the participants from Sarajevo, particularly from Banja Luka, find themselves lucky enough to have more economic opportunities and have fewer concerns about living in these larger cities. In contrast, nothing seems to be done to protect LGBTQIA+ people living in cities like Mostar, where religion has an omnipresent power. Given the low level of LGBTQIA+ visibility in Mostar, CSOs and NGOs could play key roles in bringing local communities up to speed in terms of socialization and education. At the same time, however, BiH's fearless youth activists play a pivotal and consistent role in transforming relationships between heterosexuals

and queers. Given the societal belief that people brush off activism, young activists are "getting into people's heads" to convince them to get onboard and support LGBTQIA+ rights.

Other concerns expressed by the participants include CSOs and NGOs inability to create a unique local activist pathway because these organizations, in their words, "strictly follow donors' 'agendas'" in ways that hamper local community activism. Some respondents also described CSOs as "money sucking machines," claiming that they do little for the community, while the economic resources are funnelled to expensive trainings or seminars at fancy hotels that do little for the community. It was suggested that BiH's CSOs must be strictly supervised in terms of how the funds were spent to prevent corruption.

### *Activism Burn Out*

Many activists who are not employed in CSOs devote themselves to LGBTQIA+ issues that they find rewarding. Some consider themselves to be full-time activists working for human rights and believe that this work is critical and rewarding for them. Many activists also report being burned out due to the greater commitment that they have toward working for just peace issues while also trying to pay their bills. Activists have deep emotions regarding these issues. However, the balance between financial sustainability and activism in BiH does not always go well together. Surprisingly, these activists are not experiencing burn out with regards to the activist work that they are committed to; rather, it is because of the stress and strain of trying to find a side job to pay the bills, which could be emotionally draining for them. Many activists are also collaborating with CSOs and/or NGOs on other significant LGBTQIA+ issues in "a never-ending job." When one activist task is completed, there are many more projects waiting to be addressed that require great energy, day-to-day effort, time, and commitment.

## Implications for Future Research and Practice

The study's participants offered their analysis of the factors that impact post-DPA BiH and the state of queer/LGBTQIA+ activism in the country based on their experiences and aspirations. The participants highlighted the critical blocks needed for building vibrant, inclusive, and visible activism in post-PDA BiH. They further addressed the complexity of the structural issues faced by BiH's queer/LGBTQIA+ people and their daily struggles. With these in mind, it is important to formulate interventions to broaden queer visibility and activism, as well as build a sustainable reconciliation in BiH.

### Collective Action for Justice

Arguably, the implication of transitional justice is particularly challenging for BiH. While external international actors played a role in ending and managing the conflict, they failed to offer a comprehensive plan for BiH's peaceful future. Thus, the current political situation reflects a frozen conflict with hidden walls dividing the three main ethnic groups, thereby hindering their social integration under the umbrella of one shared identity. As such, it is critical for the international community and the BiH government to invest considerable effort, ambition, time, and resources in resolving the ethnic tensions in BiH, which can also help achieve freedom for the LGBTQIA+ community. In other words, the liberation of ethnic groups can contribute to the overall freedom of queer individuals. However, the external actors in the current picture seem to manage the conflict rather than resolve it. In this regard, LGBTQIA+ individuals "must [not] wait for their time," as LGBTQIA+ issues are interconnected with the broader context of resolving BiH's ethnic tensions.

In this study, 30–40 participants reported that the BiH government either prioritizes ethnic tensions, thus leaving little space for addressing issues related to the LGBTQIA+

community or views these tensions as a larger issue so queer people should wait for their turn. However, the external actors and people who care about BiH's future and marginalized minorities must prioritize their emphasis on implementing critical policies that include and protect the LGBTQIA+ community.

**External Funding for Local Reconciliation**

External funding that institutionalizes BiH's reconciliation process and includes local people is vital in building a sustainable transitional justice and reconciliation process. While there are few studies on the impact of external international funding in BiH, research on other conflicts like in Northern Ireland, indicates the critical impact of external funding on ex-combatants and marginalized communities, including the youth, LGBTQIA+, and disabled individuals (see Byrne, 2023; Byrne et al., 2022; Byrne & Dean, 2022; Oloke & Byrne, 2022; Vogel, 2022; Yavuz & Byrne, 2023). While most participants held different opinions about the role of CSOs and NGOs in BiH, there is little research that focuses on the perspectives of CSOs throughout the country. Some participants believe that external economic resources require more accountability and oversight. In this way, community members can feel more confident and convinced about the effect of such funds on local communities. In other words, ensuring greater accountability for how these funds are used within these organizations creates transparency about BiH's funding that boosts the confidence level in local communities.

**Disrupting Tensions through Engagement**

About 90 percent of the respondents held the opinion that the current conflict surrounding ethnic divisions would likely diminish if the economy were stronger. In addition to the statistical data available, the study's respondents underlined the profound impact of unemployment on

people, especially the youth and LGBTQIA+ individuals. While socializing in coffee shops remains an important component of the culture, the lack of employment opportunities has left people with ample time to dwell on tensions and divisions among groups. Nonetheless, these coffee shops offer a welcome distraction for the locals who are sharing their stories, thus playing a key role in addressing employment issues. These issues require them to divert their focus to creating critical opportunities that can stimulate coexistence through different employment programs, as well as advocate for increased funding to create new jobs that might eliminate the strong ethnic tensions in BiH. This is important because the liberation of the LGBTQIA+ community is also interwoven with the financial stability of the country. Furthermore, external funding often comes with strings attached (Creary & Byrne, 2014; Hyde & Byrne, 2015), and the international community's pressure on the BiH government can ensure that economic priorities undergo transformation. This process emphasizes the need for comprehensive efforts to enhance quality of life conditions for all citizens, eventually fostering a more harmonious society.

The role of schools in inclusive education is also critical. The temporary arrangement of "two schools under one roof" in BiH is one of segregation and exclusion, preventing the younger generations from socializing with one another. At present, 56 educational institutions in BiH still operate under this arrangement (Jiménez, 2023). One key obstacle for youth in certain cities is the presence of these schools. Related to this, the OSCE (2018) mission to BiH mentioned that the lack of political will to integrate schools must be addressed because each ethnic community and its political representatives are embroiled in a cultural war that, in turn, justifies the existence of these segregated schools by emphasizing their strong ethnonational identities. In particular, recalcitrant populist leaders argue that if the youth are mixed and studied together in the same school, they will lose their unique characteristics of their ethnonationalist identities.

This cultural war in the educational curriculum perpetuates political, cultural, and social divisions. The students are pushed into ethnonationalism and are encouraged to recognize their differences and distance themselves from one another. Given the lack of socialization opportunities in these "two schools under one roof" institutions, the "anti-other" rhetoric toward someone who is not from the same ethnic group breeds alienation and discrimination. Consequently, because homophobia is strengthened and enhanced in segregated schools, the young generations are learning to discriminate against others, including queer students who silently experience emotional violence daily, which eventually impacts their well-being.

Through the active support of CSOs and NGOs, the BiH government must be pressured to institutionalize inclusive education practices and policies in every school in the country. However, their successful institutionalization relies heavily on the ability of teachers to deliver inclusive and diverse knowledge to their students. Hence, comprehensive pedagogical training programs must be part of teachers' training, enabling them to acquire skills in adopting intersectional practices that address the needs of all ethnic and marginalized groups.

**Interreligious Tolerance**

Significant scholarship on interreligious tolerance and interaction is emerging in PACS. The impact of religion on the socialization process through families, schools, and the media has created an unsafe environment for BiH's LGBTQIA+ people. Most have chosen not to affiliate themselves with organized religions because of the various forms of discrimination they experienced, including anti-LGBTIQ+ religious teachings and rhetoric. Further, the interviewees noted an observable decline in attendance at places of worship and a diminishing interest in participating in ceremonies or religious events.

While religion can bring communities together and serve as a unifying force, it actually plays a divisive role in BiH. Indeed, great benefits could be achieved if places of worship included LGBTQIA+ individuals. However, when they exclude LGBTQIA+ people, they also lose their loved ones and family members who support them, so there is a domino effect. With that said, places of worship must invest effort and time into bringing the community together by providing education about the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals, as well as addressing common misconceptions held about queer people. In addition, an inclusive theology must emphasize love, togetherness, and acceptance of all people. However, this can only be accomplished when religious leaders publicly express their support and empathy for LGBTQIA+ individuals regardless of their sexual or gender background and when various local societal organizations come together to create spaces for dialogue that allow mutual respect for all.

**Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research**

There are several limitations to this study that future research can address. While this study was able to reflect perspectives from each main ethnic queer group about the state of activism, peacebuilding, social justice, and reconciliation in BiH, the research could have benefited from a longer ethnographic study where I could have lived in every key city in BiH to fully immerse myself in local community life and comprehend diverse individuals' stories.

That said, given that the research commenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to travel to BiH in person to complete the interviews, and I had to recruit participants online. Therefore, the first 25 participants were interviewed online, and while some might see this as a limitation of the study, it allowed me to develop a strong friendship with the participants who later met me in person in BiH for follow-up conversations. The number of individuals

interviewed could have also been expanded if the research was completed in the field. In addition, even though I also interviewed people from RS in BiH, I was unable to travel there due to time restrictions because all the in-person interviews were completed in Sarajevo and Mostar.

In addition, all interviews, except for one were conducted in English. While ninety-two percent of the interviews went well without any language problems, I could have benefited from having an interpreter for two interviews. Even though I offered these two participants the option of using an interpreter, they declined because they were comfortable speaking in English. Furthermore, while they did not mention potential confidentiality issues with the involvement of an interpreter, I suspected that it may have been a concern for them. I also pointed out that the interpreter came from a professional company based in Canada; however, neither participant was interested in having an interpreter present during the interview.

**Conclusion**

This thesis analyzed queer people's perceptions and experiences in BiH. It further investigated queer activism strategies to cope with obstacles while challenging the daily status quo, dominant institutions and their agents, current policies, and oppressive attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community. Although there are a significant number of challenges and limitations to queer activism, coexistence, reconciliation, and forging a shared future for BiH, many of these limitations can be addressed through systematic political resistance, a critical consideration of local knowledge and collaboration, collective action, interreligious tolerance, and, more importantly, the implementation of an inclusive collective plan. The research participants further elaborated on other issues that serve as obstacles to and the root causes of failed reconciliation, increased homophobia, and dysfunctional state institutions in BiH. Finally, they suggested

formulas to empower society and enable it to overcome existing issues that prevent sustainable peacebuilding and statebuilding.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A – Recruitment Poster**

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

**Building Community Activism in Post-Peace-Accord Bosnia and Herzegovina.**

**OBJECTIVE**: This thesis research will investigate LGBTQ+ people's perceptions and experiences of peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the political queer presence there after the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. It will also explore queer Bosniak/Serb/Croat activism strategies that they use as part of a collective movement that improves community members conditions and helps them to cope with violence levelled against queer people.

**Please consider participating in this study to share your perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals living in Bosnia and Herzegovina.**

### ELIGIBLE PARTICIPANTS:

**IDENTIFY AS A MEMBER OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY IN BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA?**
**OR**
**WORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS IN BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA?**
**(WORKER/ALLY/LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUAL).**

Participants will be interviewed one-on-one either in English or Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian languages for 60-to-120 minutes via zoom.

**Confidentiality will be strictly maintained during the research study.**

**If you wish to communicate in BiH languages, there will be a professional translator available for you. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained, and the translator will have to sign a confidentiality agreement in advance of the interview.**

**To participate, please contact:**

Mehmet Yavuz, PhD Candidate, Peace and Conflict Studies
yavuzm3@myumanitoba.ca
**Advisor:** Dr. Sean Byrne, Peace and Conflict Studies
Sean.Byrne@umanitoba.ca

**This research has been approved by Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Officer at 204-474-7122 or HumanEthics@umanitoba.ca.**

**Appendix B: Email to potential participants**

## Appendix B Recruitment Letter

Dear [First Name],
Thank you for your interest in participating in the study "Are We Waiting for Anyone Else?": Missing Queer Presence in Building Community Activism in Post-Peace-Accord Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I am really looking forward to hearing about your experience as a queer/LGBTQ+ person or an employee of NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Before I schedule your Zoom interview, I would like to double-check that you fit the participation criteria for this study:

1. You are a member of queer/LGBTQ+ community or an employee of Queer Non-Governmental Organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
2. You are Bosniak, Serb, or Croat who resides in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
3. You are 18 years old or older.

If these statements above are accurate for you, we can move forward with scheduling our one-on-one interview on Zoom. Please let me know your availability in the next couple of weeks. Interviews usually take 1-2 hours, and I will send you the Zoom meeting link so that you can join using the device of your choice (cell phone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer).

You will only answer questions and discuss topics that you feel comfortable with. The session will be recorded and transcribed at a later date.

Please sign and return (yavuzm3@myumanitoba.ca) the attached Consent form to me indicating that you understand and agree to participate in this process and the Confidentiality Agreement form to preserve all of the information you share with me. You are free to ask any questions that you may have during or after the project.
I can be reached by e-mail at yavuzm3@myumanitoba.ca

Once again, thank you for your interest in participating in this study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Mehmet Yavuz,
PhD Candidate, Peace and Conflict Studies
University of Manitoba
yavuzm3@myumanitoba.ca

**Appendix C Informed Consent Form**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Research Project Title:** | Are We Waiting for Anyone Else?": Missing Queer Presence in Building Community Activism in Post-Peace-Accord Bosnia and Herzegovina. |
| **Principal Investigator and Contact Information:** | Mehmet Yavuz, PhD Candidate<br>yavuzm3@myumanitoba.ca |
| **Research Supervisor and Contact Information:** | Dr. Sean Byrne<br>Professor, Peace and Conflict Studies<br>Sean.Byrne@umanitoba.ca |

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

**Study Procedures:** I am inviting you to participate in a study of "Are We Waiting for Anyone Else?": Missing Queer Presence in Building Community Activism in Post-Peace-Accord Bosnia and Herzegovina. Your participation in this study will consist of one in-depth interview that will take place **in person or** virtually over licensed Zoom/MS Teams audio/video. I estimate that the interview will take between one and two hours of your time. If you wish to communicate in BiH languages, there will be a professional translator available for you. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained, and the translator will have to sign a confidentiality agreement in advance of the interview. I will ask you a series of open-ended questions, so you will have a chance to focus on what you feel most comfortable sharing about each topic. The interview will be audio/video recorded via Zoom and/or MS Teams. Addition to this, the interviews will also be recorded with a digital MP2 voice recorder**.** After the interview is complete, I will download the audio/video file onto my home desktop computer and immediately erase it from the voice recorder after the transcript has been checked for accuracy. I will then transcribe the interview, replacing your name with a pseudonym that you will choose for yourself. The purpose of using a pseudonym is to make sure that participants confidentiality is maintained. If you do not wish this interview to be audio or video recorded, notes will be taken by me.

**After the Interview:** During the transcription process, I will also remove any personal identifiers, except your ethnicity. The audio file and the anonymized transcript of your interview will be stored in MS Teams software, on my home desktop computer under password encryption. A research log connecting your real name and your chosen pseudonym will be kept in my home in an electronic safe under password protection. All the research materials will be accessible only to myself and my advisor, Dr. Sean Byrne. The research log will be destroyed upon the completion of my doctoral degree. I will keep the transcript for a maximum of five years (January 2026).

**Benefits:** You will not benefit materially from participating in this study. However, participating in this research study may provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your experiences as an ethnic queer individual of Bosnia & Herzegovina. You will also have the opportunity to contribute to recommendations that can help other researchers and NGOs to create a better understanding of queer individuals who reside in post-peace-accord societies.

**Potential Risks:** The risks of participating in this study are no greater than in everyday life**. The interview questions focus on positive resiliency factors, as opposed to negative events that might cause you emotional discomfort to remember and discuss**. If you find yourself feeling uncomfortable with a question that I ask you do not need to answer that question. You can also withdraw from the interview at any time and without penalty.

**Resources: A comprehensive list of mental health resources can be found below:**

**The Foundation Krila nade/Wings of Hope**
**Website:** http://wings-of-hope.ba/
**Facebook:** https://www.facebook.com/FondacijaKrilanade/

**Sarajevski Otverani Centar**
**E-mail:** office@soc.ba
**Free peer-to-peer or psychological counseling for lesbians, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people:** savjetovanje@soc.ba

Many of these resources continue to be available during the Covid-19 pandemic and can be accessed 24 hours a day, free of charge. I encourage you to access these resources if you experience any distress as a result of completing the interview.

**Confidentiality:** Your identity and any information including any document related to you as well as any emails you have exchanged with me during this study will be kept confidential. The audio/video file and the anonymized transcript of your interview will be stored on my house desktop computer under password encryption. The log linking your real name and your chosen pseudonym will be kept with this informed consent form and the confidentiality agreement in my home in an electronic safe under password protection. All the research materials will be accessible only to myself and my advisor, Dr. Sean Byrne. The audio/video file will be destroyed as soon as the interview has been fully transcribed, and the transcript has been checked for accuracy. The research log will be destroyed upon the completion of my doctoral degree. I will keep the transcript for a maximum of five years (2026). Whenever I write about or discuss the results of this study, I will refer to you only by your chosen pseudonym and, when relevant, your role on campus.

**Compensation:** No compensation will be provided to the participants of this study.

**Feedback:** You have the option to receive a copy of the transcript of your interview. If you wish to receive such a copy, I will send it to you via email soon, and no later than 6 weeks. You also

have the option to receive a brief summary of the research results [approximately 1-4 pages long). If you wish to receive a summary, I will send it to you via email or regular mail by August 2022.

**Participation and Withdrawal:** Your participation in this study is voluntary, meaning that you are free to choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you may later choose to withdraw without any penalty. You may exercise the option of removing your data from the study at any time before August 2022, in which case all the information you shared with me up to the point in time will be destroyed. You may also decline to answer specific questions that you are not comfortable answering, and still remain in the study responding to other questions. If you decide that you would like to withdraw from the study, you can email me at yavuzm3@myumanitoba.ca within 3 months after the interview. Withdrawing from the study is no longer possible after August 2022.

**Dissemination of Research Results:** I am undertaking this study as part of my doctoral degree in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Manitoba. As such, the results of the study will constitute a significant portion of my doctoral thesis and the thesis will be deposited in the thesis collection of the University of Manitoba repository MSpace https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca. I also plan to disseminate the results of the study in the form of journal articles, conference presentations, and presentations to post-secondary institutions. In all these research outputs, I will refer to you only by your chosen pseudonym and, when relevant, your role on campus, thereby ensuring the confidentiality of your responses.

**Destruction of confidential data:** The e-mails you exchanged with me will be destroyed by August 2022. The research logbook containing your real name and respective pseudonym will be destroyed upon completing my PhD degree approximately in January 2023. The interview's anonymized transcript, this Informed Consent, and the Confidentiality Agreement will be kept for a maximum of five years after completing my degree (January 2026), and then they will be destroyed.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at the research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the. Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or

humanethics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Please circle "Yes" or "No" for each of the questions below:

Do you agree to participate in this study knowing that you can withdraw at any point before August 2022 and with no consequence to you?

Yes No

Do you agree to have this interview audio-recorded?

Yes No

Do you wish to have the camera active/on during the interview?

Yes No

Do you agree with the following statement: If you do not wish your interview to be audio or video recorded than the PI will take notes.

Yes No

Would you like to receive a copy of the brief summary (1-4) of research results? This summary will be sent to you via email or regular mail by August 2022.

Yes, please send the summary to the email/mailing address below:

No

Participant's Signature Date

Researcher's Signature Date

PANEL ON
RESEARCH ETHICS
*Navigating the ethics of human research*

**TCPS 2: CORE**

# *Certificate of Completion*

*This document certifies that*

**Mehmet Yavuz**

*has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:*
*Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*
*Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)*

Date of Issue: **29 July, 2019**