

It's your problem that you're homophobic

Hello. Today I'm here to share my experiences as a member of the LGBT community who comes from a provincial city in Greece. I am 20 years old and I grew up in Larissa. Like many other people, I can start by saying that from a very young age I somehow knew that I did not imagine a future for myself with men. However, being from a small town, I had no knowledge of what was out there.

Because of course there was no one to tell me that there was an entire community, so many people out there loving whoever they love, feeling good and accepting themselves and so it took me several years to come to terms with everything. I had no exposure to the LGBT community at all, I had no idea that this part of the world existed.

It all started for me in junior high. At that age we're basically kids beginning to explore romantic topics a little bit, starting to discover ourselves, starting to have feelings towards people. Little crushes, that kind of thing. It was around that age that I found myself being out of sync with my female friends, not really feeling like I was in the same situation as them. But I didn't yet have any conscious awareness of liking a particular girl or being interested in girls in general or anything like that.

The whole journey really got started when I met a girl – that's usually what happens, right? And as we were getting to know each other, she told me that she was bisexual and that's when I first learned that there was an entire community out there. I was 13 or 14 when that happened, and it was a time for me in which I had so much to learn, because up until that point, all I knew about LGBT issues and all I had in my mind were negative judgements and negative opinions, mostly about gay men, because unfortunately that kind of prejudice is extremely widespread – belittling gay men with slurs and rude comments.



So growing up, the only exposure I had to the community consisted of very negative opinions expressed by straight people, mostly curses about perverts. In our rural city this was judged very harshly and everybody prayed that this kind of perversion wouldn't happen in their home. People in the LGBT community were singled out for harassment and judgment, and unfortunately in my family environment there is a lot of homophobia. My parents themselves grew up in a provincial town, so I don't know how much you can expect of them, but at the same time there's no excuse for their behavior and their opinions because they've actively chosen to be uninformed. Of course, from a very young age they too were taught that all of this is very bad, they were taught that LGBT people are choosing to be deviants. Besides, there was no one in their environment standing up to say 'I'm gay, I'm transgender, I'm this, I'm that, so they never had the motivation to try and learn more and sympathize with people. Yet at this point, I'm not going to be that person in their lives either.

So in school and in my family there were these negative views. However, I would like to mention that I never heard anything too extreme either, that is, nothing that made me fear for my physical safety. In that way I had it easier than some other people, especially those in even smaller towns and villages. The only exposure I had to LGBT issues was very negative and maybe that's why I didn't look any further. I wasn't well informed because it was framed as this very negative minority that is bad for society. At the end of the day, it never occurred to me what anyone was doing in and out of bed and it goes without saying that there was no visibility, not at all. It wasn't the same as how it is in Athens where you might see someone kissing, someone holding their partner's hand and walking around without fear. In Larissa, everything happened in secret, in the dark, everyone saying, "don't let them see us, don't let them know... I don't want my friends to know, I don't want my family to know." That's how we grew up and that was my experience during my years in Larissa.



As for school, there was no visibility there either, just as there was no advocacy for any social minority group at all. If there was any discussion about people who were outside of the dominant paradigm, our teachers would try to stop the discussion as soon as possible because it always created tensions. The teachers didn't want to deal with any strong opinions. They weren't willing to teach us to respect people's differences...not just in the area of sexuality but also for religion, anything. So of course if they won't approach the basics of human respect they won't confront racism or homophobia either.

So that's how the years went, every time there was any mention of LGBT topics, I can only remember fights and tensions in the classroom, with two very polarized viewpoints being expressed. I think that hasn't changed, to this day. There will always be at least one person in every classroom who has something negative and ignorant to say about the community. Unfortunately. We want to believe that that will change at some point.

So, while I was a junior high student I met a girl who I hung out with a lot and who ultimately came out to me, who told me that she was bisexual. That was the wakeup call for me when I realized that there is a huge world out there, a world that for some reason I hadn't looked into before, maybe out of fear, maybe because of ignorance, maybe because I didn't want to know what I would find. Perhaps because I had it hardwired in my mind that this was something very negative that I should avoid, not go out seeking.

But inspired by this girl, I finally started searching and seeking out more information. I was discovering identities, discovering different sexualities and trying to understand what I was finding. I started identifying with some of the things I found, but I also had a lot of self-doubt. I was thinking, yes, I feel this way too, but is this normal? Is it okay? Because ultimately what I was finding didn't seem like something bad or awful, it didn't seem wrong. At the end of the day it was just people who loved people other than the group they were supposed to,



or people who didn't identify with their assigned gender, and it's not as if people were going out of their way to choose to be abnormal deviants. And that's when I unraveled the whole homophobic lie that I had been taught. And somewhere in there I also found my own identity but at that time it was still something I kept very close and I didn't share it.

I never went to anyone to ask for advice or support or opinions. Because up to that point I had never asked my friends what they thought of LGBT people. Because we really didn't know of anyone who was openly LGBT and we had no role models or examples to look to, so it really was the elephant in the room; completely undiscussed. So I didn't know where to go to get help, I didn't know who I could talk to, and it was still very, very fresh so I was very hesitant to share how I felt.

I was afraid that there was something wrong with me. I was afraid that if I told my close friends they would say that what I was feeling was not normal and not acceptable. Back when I was about 14 I went to see my school psychologist for the first time. It was before I had come out to anyone, and I told the psychologist that I was worried about it, that I thought I was gay, and I had these concerns that were bothering me. I remember clearly that the psychologist was extremely uncomfortable. She turned to me and said, "Well, what do you want to do, tell your parents all about this?!" I was there in tears, telling her how I felt, how scared I was, thinking I wasn't normal. And instead of trying to reassure me or help me calm down, her response was, "Okay, think about it carefully. Don't make any quick moves. Don't tell your parents, don't tell your friends. Let some time pass; it's a phase." This was such a disheartening reaction to hear as a teenager who was having all these difficult thoughts and worries, and to hear that from someone who was supposedly a trained professional?



So for a long time, I didn't share anything. I think it was about a year before I finally confided in one friend and said, "You know what? I think that I'm bisexual.. I think I might like girls too." But at the same time, even though I had no interest in guys I pretended that I did so I could still hold onto some part of normalcy. It was just that, you know, I might like girls as well.

And that first friend that I told, it was someone I wasn't particularly close with, just so that I could see what it would be like to tell someone and because I was afraid that if I told my best friend she'd have a negative reaction. She and I had never discussed gay issues before, and while she hadn't gone out of her way to show that she was homophobic, we had never approached the topic at all. So I wanted to get practice telling people and seeing how people reacted, and it also helped to get it off my chest. So the friend I told first, she just said, "Oh, okay, fine." And in my gut I was thinking, "Oh, that's it? You don't care? You don't think it's abnormal?" And through that experience I gained the courage to accept that this is how I feel, it's not a bad thing, other people can accept it, and if some people don't that's their problem and they're homophobic. It's not me liking girls that is the problem.

It was in the final year of junior high that I met the girl who was bisexual, and shortly thereafter I started to meet more people—accidentally, or maybe not—more people who are part of the LGBT community. So it helped me come out of my shell a bit and stop telling myself, "I'm the only one in all of Larissa who feels something different than everyone else," and that's when I realized that it's probably more common than I thought and it's probably very covert. This girl and I became friends, and somewhere in the midst of it I started to have a crush on her. This was new for me, and I was thinking, "well, who can I talk to about this... that I think I like her?" Because at the time all my female friends were telling me about their crushes on various boys and how cute they all were. With my crush, I thought she was absolutely gorgeous, and I was interested in her not as a friend...and I distinctly remember the moment when I wanted to tell my



best friend about the crush. She is still my best friend to this day, we've grown up together since we were three years old. So when I wanted to tell her about my crush, I had so much fear because she was, and still is, my favorite person and it felt almost as heavy as if I were coming out to my parents somehow. I remember we were sitting in a café and I told myself, "I have to tell her today... I have to tell her today... how is she going to react? This might be the last day that she speaks to me! She might never speak to me again!" And I was too nervous to say it outloud so I picked up her cell phone and I typed a note saying I think I'm bi and I think I like so-and-so, and I showed it to her. She was shocked but it wasn't a bad shock, it was more like surprise. And I remember that she turned to me and asked, "Why are you so nervous? Do you think I don't love you anymore, or am I going to stop loving who you are because you have a crush on so-and-so?" And I was full of so much emotion, just so happy and relieved that my best friend still loves me, she doesn't think this is bad or unreasonable. I had confided in someone who was so important to me and it made me feel so safe and like everything would all be ok.

Life went on, of course. There were other girls that got my attention, and in the course of it all there were more coming out experiences, some of which didn't go well. There were actually friends of mine who thought it was a bit weird or said things like "OK, sure, she's a very pretty girl, but you can't have sex with her. I mean, how can you even do that? Technically it doesn't really count the same as sex with a man, right? And how about when you grow up? How will you have a family?" All kinds of questions like this, which come from a place of ignorance. But again, I would say that I'm lucky because I didn't face any particularly extreme reactions. No one said they wouldn't talk to me again because of my not being straight. I think after high school it started to be clear to everyone that ultimately I didn't like men at all and I think everyone figured out that I was a lesbian without me making a point of saying, "You guys know what? I think I'm a lesbian after all." Being with a man never occurred to me.



And eventually it was just an obvious part of my friends's social dynamic that I was a lesbian, it was very present in a lighthearted way.

And I think I got to the point at the end of high school where I could clearly say yes, I'm a lesbian, I like women and I don't care if someone has an issue with it anymore. I've accepted it. I know how things are. I knew that there was a huge community out there somewhere and my mind was focused on the fact that I would be taking my university entrance exams and then leaving. I would tell myself, "I'm going to leave this small town, I'm going to go to Athens. I'm going to go to Athens where I know there's a community and I know people are more open." Of course, I'm not saying that everyone in Athens is accepting and there's no homophobia, right? There is a lot of homophobia out there. However, people here don't care that much, unlike in the countryside or even smaller villages, where they will indeed point the finger at you and you can't talk about who you are dating because there is so much gossip being passed around, from relative to relative, and people will say judgmental things like, "oh, that's too bad! She was such a good kid."

So in high school there were the first flirtations and crushes and it's when you usually make your first move with a girl, have your first kiss, and feel it all so intensely. Especially if you've had some experiences with guys in the past and didn't feel anything, and then suddenly do something with a girl and it's like, "oh, is that what I have missed all this time?" And it's great because you can finally feel what people should experience in their teenage years, that excitement and romance. And eventually as you grow up, the full range of love and commitment.

So I left the countryside after high school and came to Athens, where I can say with certainty that I have never had to hide my identity. It's not that I'm meeting people and saying, "Hello, I'm so-and-so and I like women." It's that if we talk, my girlfriend or my ex or whomever I'm dating will probably come up in



the conversation. I take it for granted that you won't have a problem with it. And if you do, ok, it's your problem that you're homophobic and you need to solve. And if I kick someone out of my life who is homophobic, someone who will never accept the people that I love, it's no loss to me.

I've been very lucky. I don't have to hide my identity at my university department, which is generally a pretty open-minded place because of the subject matter, and I don't have to hide myself at my work or in my social circles either. And I have felt very safe and very welcomed in the LGBT communities that exist here in Athens. It's interesting to hear the stories from people who grew up in a big city because indeed, when I was growing up in Larissa... when I was hiding and feeling afraid all the time, now I see a lot of people being themselves, without being afraid and suddenly I can hold hands and walk around Thiseio, or walk around Monastiraki, without being looked at strangely, without being pointed at, without being scared and it's definitely a new experience. Yes, and even now at 20 it's still a new experience.

I'm still not completely accustomed to the fact that now I'm in a big city and I don't have to hide and I don't have to be scared. I can go out and walk around and hold hands and hug and kiss and everything. I'm still getting used to it, I'm still trying to get the fear out of me because of how I grew up and how my discovery of myself evolved through the environment that I grew up in.

As I mentioned I'm lucky enough that at school, with my friends, and at work I've never had to be afraid of my identity or have to hide parts of myself or cover up some stories I want to tell. I don't have to hide my past or my present. However, one piece that I'm still working on is coming out to my family. I still can't imagine it happening. I thought that when I left home it would be so easy to just leave all those feelings behind and say "I don't care if you accept me or not."



However, it's harder than that. You can't just block off your feelings and say things that you know will be hard for them to hear, or least I'm not a person who can do that. I don't think the word lesbian has ever been brought up in any conversation with my family. My parents don't know anything accurate at all about gay people, transgender people...they really know nothing. They might see pictures from Pride during the summer and they'll say something like, "What is that? They've got the perverts gathered at Syntagma Square!" I remember one summer when I was in high school, I think my parents had recently joined Facebook so they were seeing more kinds of news, and they had watched some moments of Pride coverage that was presented really poorly and out of context. So they drew a very negative conclusion and remember them sitting around and yelling and talking badly about the whole LGBT community. Meanwhile, I was in my room crying or just feeling very upset that they were seeing things this way. There was another moment too, when I was in my second year of high school, that my mom had read or seen something homophobic and she spoke very harshly about the community. I actually broke out of my silence at that point and told her, you are so wrong. These are people living their lives, they did not make a choice to be perverts and bother you and I tried to teach her a few basic things.

However, she was not at all receptive to listening to me. She gave me the classic parent line, "I know more than you, you don't know anything, you don't have any real world experience." Which obviously wasn't true and of course she doesn't have any real experience here either! Even today, I don't think she has been exposed to as much as I have, even being only 20 years old and living in a big city. I think people, especially older people, who have grown up in a country town, can't see the boundaries they've built to keep things out, boundaries which are not just physical and geographical, but also spiritual and cerebral for sure. I remember having this conversation with my mother and trying to change her mind and trying to get her to think for herself. I was trying to defend gay people and people who don't identify with their assigned gender



and people who don't feel the sexual desire like most people do, and she just looks at me and asks, "Why do you care so much? Why do these faggots concern you anyways?" I started crying at that moment and tried to explain to her that the way she was talking was so rude and that it's rude to talk to anyone that way. I don't think that I was upset because my mom thinks I'm a pervert, because we've never had the kind of relationship in which she would ask me if I like a boy or if I'm in a relationship like my friends were.

Because on top of everything my parents thought that any relationship before age 18 was very bad. I think they believe that sex is, let's say, just something that happens after university or at least after 18. Sex was a big taboo in our house, you couldn't have a conversation with anybody about that kind of stuff, so there was nobody even trying to teach me about straight relationships! No one to say, this is how these things happen, you have to keep these things in mind, protect yourself in this way, you always have the right to say no... And this is why we have so many problems in Greece, because families are so unwilling to teach their children about sex. Even if I were straight, I wouldn't have been able to talk to my parents openly. All this to say that when I had this confrontation with my mom, I really wasn't in a position to turn to her and say "you know what? Yeah, those perverts include your child, so get over it. " Instead, I went back to my room and cried for the rest of the night. I remember a very good friend of mine was a volunteer that year at Pride and she was at the flag and I remember asking her how it was, how was it, how was your experience and she said it was just great, an amazing experience, and I was so jealous and I couldn't wait for the time when I could go too. Well, I haven't been able to go Pride yet due to the circumstances...of course it didn't happen due to COVID, then the next year I was working, but I'd like to go this year.

So to this day, at age 20, I still have not revealed my identity to my parents, but it's also because of the type of relationship we have with each other. I don't think I would even feel comfortable sharing a heterosexual



relationship with them! However, I no longer feel the obligation to come out to them either, because I don't feel that I am the problem here. I feel that they need to work out their own issues. If and when the time comes that I want to tell them, "this is my partner, the person I love" they will need to digest it and take it in. I'm no longer willing to waste any mental energy wondering what would be a good time to talk to my parents about it, because I've come to accept myself completely.

I think that if I'm talking to anyone, having a conversation about my identity, I think it's completely on them to resolve their own prejudices, it's not my obligation to feel like I'm the problem. As far as family is concerned, there is always fear and anxiety for me because as they say, it's such a small world, and if somehow word gets out, if somebody says something like, "oh, I heard that your daughter in Athens is doing this and that," I do worry about what would happen if my family found out from somebody else, and I won't have the choice to say it in my own way and the way I want it to be said, in whatever way it is. I don't think I'm so much afraid of the reaction, I'm more afraid that someone will have taken this moment from me, taken something personal of mine and used it against me, knowing that it will hurt my parents. Because my parents are obviously not the kind of people who seem like they would receive that kind of news well, so if anyone said something to them about me, it would definitely be with bad intentions. I think it's quite obvious that my parents have issues, a little homophobic, a little racist, all of that unfortunately with the upbringing they have and their assumptions. So I do have this fear that someone would take the moment away from me and I would lose the opportunity to externalize who I am to my parents in the way I want it to happen.

The reaction would definitely be...Well, I would definitely have fear and anxiety about how they're going to react, because you really don't know what's going to come into their minds at that moment, how it's going to go. However, this is something I no longer spend time thinking and worrying about. I'm over it ,



and when the moment comes, whichever way it comes, I will welcome the moment, sit with it, and I will face it as it is.

That's how I see it now. Maybe three years from now I'll see things differently, I don't know. This is how I feel now that I have the security of my home, my friends, and my chosen circle. I'm no longer dependent upon only the people that have been imposed on me. I have overcome almost every fear and anxiety that I have, although even in Athens where people are more open and things are relatively safe, it goes without saying that there is fear here too. There is fear, there is homophobia. We frequently hear about incidents of harassment and violence towards homosexuals and other groups. And about police violence. So you never feel completely safe. Even in the capital city you can't say, "I came to Athens and now I feel 100% safe and I will do whatever I want without fear." That's what I believe. Until we reach the point at which we are actually protected by anti-discrimination law, I think it is very difficult to feel comfortable and safe going out in public and acting just like a heterosexual person does.

There are still many challenges that need to be addressed. The process of changing legal gender is still long and complicated, and it's difficult to access gender transition resources. There are also legislative issues, like when will LGBT families gain rights? Especially in Athens there are unfortunately so many families in which both parents do not have equal rights. It's sad to see two people giving all their love to a child but without the protection of the law that heterosexual parents have on their side. So there are many issues that still need to be resolved and there needs to be a lot of visibility for LGBT families in Greece, the so-called hidden families among us. And the younger generation needs to teach their children that there are families with two dads, with two moms, and that all these families are equally valid and love their friends equally, there's no difference.



Athens has definitely played a role in my identity today and shaping who I am, because I have continued to learn things about myself here. While I had thought that I already knew everything about who I was, what community was like, how lesbian community works, I discovered an even bigger world here that I didn't know in my little provincial town. And I'm still learning. Lately I'm starting to read more things about the LGBT community, different identities, about concepts in Gender Studies, and I'm starting to understand the role that Athens played, how the community here started to become more visible, how we got to where we are now. Because things may not be perfect but we're not at zero anymore. And so, I've started digging around, learning as much as I can, and talking to older people who tell me how they experienced things, how their generation grew up, how they started to rebel against the expectations of their time. And we got here, through magazines, posters, books, through all the places that were created for people to gather. Places that were safe, and we still have those but you don't have to be limited to them, you can be who you are elsewhere too. So definitely, Athens is part of my identity and it's my home now, no doubt about that.

The best parts of this journey are that I've discovered myself. I feel safe, I feel that I'm not alone, and of course, all the love and respect I have for women and the security I feel with my partners. Thankfully, I've never been in an awkward social situation where a friend of mine said something to me like, "you made me feel uncomfortable," or "I felt like you were hitting on me." Fortunately it's clear to everyone that if I'm complimenting my female friends it's done from a place of respect and joy, I'm saying something that any friend would say, and it doesn't matter that I am a lesbian. No one has accused me of making them feel uncomfortable or speaking in a vulgar way. And so that makes me feel good, accepted, because I see that my friends see me for who I am.



The biggest fear I have is that we may never overcome the hatred, the attacks, the homophobia that is directed towards our community and that we may never see 100% acceptance, at least not in my lifetime. Maybe people will indeed continue to see love between two people, or to see someone's true identity, as wrong or abnormal or a problem for society. I want to believe that this is just ignorance and that in the years to come there will be much more acceptance and people will have changed, they will have become better informed, and that it's time to put an end to all of the se myths that circulate around homosexuals, transgender people, and asexual people.

In closing, I wish—and I think a lot of people who have grown up in the country will identify with this feeling— I wish that I could say to my thirteen-year-old self, “you know what, just be patient because you're going to get to 20 and all of this is going to seem unbelievable to you.” Back then when I was thinking, “and what; and how; and what is this ? And what is a lesbian? and what is gay? And is it wrong? And how can someone feel that way? And no it's abnormal, it's wrong. I don't really like this girl. I have to find some boy to like instead, I have to pretend.” And when you think back to your little self, you want to grab them and say, just be patient, things will change, you'll be yourself, you'll find people who accept your identity and most importantly you'll feel safe, you'll feel like this is who I am, this is who I am and okay, it's not the end of the world. You just like women, that doesn't change who you are and how much you can love people and care.

So, if anyone listening to us is suffering right now, and thinking that it will never end, I want to say that it's not permanent. There will come a time when you will feel safe, you will feel welcomed. There will come a time when the suffering about your identity is a distant thought in your past, you will have optimism for the future and what it brings. At some point you too will meet someone who makes you feel everything, you will be in a relationship one day in which you feel safe, in a city and a country where you feel safe being yourself.



Eventually, no one will point fingers at you anymore. And all of this suffering will end and it will be a very bad memory, but it will end. That's my experience and how I see it, and I just wish I could grab my little self and say, "Listen, at 20 you're going to be very happy."

