

Hello, my name is Cem Öztürk and my pronouns are they/them. I work as the LGBTI+ Helpline Coordinator at SPoD.

SPoD is an Istanbul-based LGBTI+ NGO, founded in 2011 by a group of academics, lawyers, and activists, carrying out rights-based and service-oriented work. SPoD aims to contribute to the making of social policies necessary for a life in which LGBTI+ people in Turkey will not feel oppressed about their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). We aim to set examples for public institutions by developing service models for LGBTI+ communities, to eradicate all forms of discrimination, and to provide services to LGBTI+ people through public and private cooperation.

In my speech today, I will talk about the peer support role of our LGBTI+ Helpline, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and present data for the year 2020.

As it is known, a factor that can affect the mental wellbeing of LGBTI+ individuals is their anticipation and fear of stigma, discrimination, abuse, violence, and exclusion that they may experience. Such experiences, often described as minority stress, can lead to increased vulnerability to mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, and a higher risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

A sense of belonging is paramount to mental health and wellbeing. While many minority groups can share their identities with their families and seek support from within this structure, this is often not the case for LGBTI+ people and therefore they may feel like they don't belong.

Peer support can help LGBTI+ individuals reduce the social isolation experienced when they feel lonely about their identity. Peer support is increasingly used as a health promotion strategy, because individuals are more likely to discuss their personal issues with their peers rather than families or health professionals as peers are generally considered more trustworthy and non-judgmental.

Peer-based work can be an effective method to connect with hard-to-reach groups who may face difficulties in accessing mainstream healthcare and support services. Peer-based approaches can be beneficial for those delivering support and for those accessing it. Trained peer counsellors often feel a sense of empowerment resulting from sharing their knowledge and skills with their peers. On the other hand, individuals accessing a peer support system often feel empowered to take responsibility for their own wellbeing.

In a study conducted by the LGBTI+ Helpline, which is an LGBTI+ peer support system within SPoD, both service providers and beneficiaries reported that the most important outcome of this initiative was an increased sense of social connectedness and belonging. They stated the value of lived experience in providing emotional and practical support, and noted that this support benefits both volunteers and counselees.

It is important to recognise that most peer support initiatives are typically preventative strategies and aim to provide social support. The LGBTI+ Helpline program reinforce and integrate SPoD's support system, which consists of legal, psychological and social counselling, with peer counselling. The LGBTI+ Helpline offers one-to-one support and makes referrals to relevant professional services inside and outside SPoD.

The LGBTI+ Helpline has been in service since 2017 in order to provide accurate, up-to-date and reliable information for questions and problems focused on SOGIESC. The LGBTI+ Helpline provided 475 consultations in 2017, 621 in 2018, and 1082 in 2019. Of the 2085 consultations provided in 2020, 76% were provided by telephone and 24% by email. Compared to 2019, there was a 92% increase in applications to the Helpline in 2020. This change started as a 50% increase with the COVID-19 pandemic that started in March in Turkey and continued throughout the year.

In this figure to the left, you can see the distribution of counselees by age groups. In 2020, we received applications from at least 55 different cities around Turkey. In addition to the domestic applications, we also received applications from Germany, the USA, France, Spain, Canada and Sudan.

The applications received are classified according to their subjects while they are reported by the Helpline volunteers. Counselees can request support on more than one subject within a single application. Emotional support applications constitute 33% of all applications received in 2020, which is 3.7 times the same category in 2019. 27% of the applications were referred to other services. 26% of the 809 referrals were made to the SPoD's Psychologists Network, which consists of volunteering psychotherapists experienced in working with LGBTI+ counselees.

2020 has been a year that has made the struggle of LGBTI+ people and their organisations even more difficult with the COVID-19 pandemic. LGBTI+ individuals, who already had difficulties in accessing fundamental rights and services in Turkey, were faced with both violations in accessing rights to health, housing, work, education, and security and bullying, targeting, and hate speech

in the media, social media and politics. Besides, they tried to deal with increasing levels of domestic violence and economic hardship.

One of the most prominent among the scapegoating of our community by public figures was Prof. Ali Erbaş, Head of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs, delivering a Friday sermon targeting LGBTI+ people and stigmatizing people living with HIV. He said: "Islam curses homosexuality. Homosexuality brings with it illnesses and decay to our lineage." This central sermon, dated April 24, came on the 45th day of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Turkey and was broadcast live on TV. In the 45 days following this sermon of hate, there has been 100% increase in applications for discrimination and violence based on SOGIESC to our Helpline. In the meantime, many other public figures and politicians, including the President of Turkey and ministers, joined in the anti-LGBTI+ discourse, which caused our community to feel increasingly insecure. Please note that these events lead to Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, on the false grounds that it promotes homosexuality and threatens the family.

In a nutshell, 2020 was a busy and difficult year for the LGBTI+ Helpline. The fact that public institutions did not develop a rights-based approach in the fight against the pandemic made the needs and demands of LGBTI+ people invisible, leaving the community basically unprotected. We were always aware that our counselees might need to reach us more than ever during the troublesome process we went through. With the awareness that discrimination and inequalities multiply in times of crisis, we tried our best to keep the Helpline accessible since the very beginning. We tried to build solidarity with our counselees to address our needs. Despite all the oppression, violations, restrictions, the decline in our living standards, and all kinds of hardships, we continued to look out for and strengthen each other and raise our voices together. Despite the physical distance and isolation, we tried to maintain our wellbeing as much as we could.

Last but not least, volunteering in the field of psychosocial support is a truly unique experience and certainly employs a different form of activism: the community empowerment approach. I would like to celebrate the great work done by the Helpline team, the volunteers who passed through the Helpline over the years, all LGBTI+ activists who provided peer support at some point in their lives, and all LGBTI+ organisations, including SPoD, which provide these services.

I hope, for all of us, an equal, just and free world under the rainbow. Thank you.

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