**Intersection of Multiple Minority Positions of Arab-Palestinian Gay Men in Israel: An Exploratory Study**

# Abstract

Arab-Palestinian gay men (APGM) in Israel are considered a sexual minority and a national-ethnic-religious minority group. This locates APGM at the nexus of multiple marginal positions both in their local Arab communities and in Israeli society as a whole. Despite the complexity involved in the social position of LGBTQ+ Arabs around the world, social work research in this area is sparse. This exploratory qualitative study aims to address this gap by employing an intersectional lens to examine the social exclusion and inclusion of APGM. We applied purposive and snowball sampling for interviews (N=20) and a focus group (N=8) with APGM living in traditional-rural communities in Israel. The study findings reveal that participants experience numerous forms of exclusion in three major life spheres: family and community; organizations such as educational institutions and the labour market, and in the social sphere with respect to Arab-Palestinian groups and Israeli-Jewish LGBTQ+ organizations. We draw on intersectionality theory as well as International and Muslim feminist and queer scholarship to discuss the study findings and suggest implications for research, policy, and practice.

Key Words: *Arab-Palestinian communities, intersectionality, LGBTQ+, social exclusion, community social work*

# P[ublic Policy Relevance Statement](https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/ort)

This qualitative exploratory research explores the social situation experienced by Arab-Palestinian gay men (APGM) in Israel. Study findings reveal that participants faced numerous forms of exclusion both local Arab communities and in Israeli society.

The findings underscore the need for approaches that recognize and address the intersecting challenges faced by APGM, particularly in traditional communities in Israel. Policy implications for APGM may extend beyond this community, informing potential development for other sexual minorities in the nexus of multiple marginal positions:

* Healthcare and welfare policies that prioritize awareness to and inclusivity of LGBTQ+ individuals from socially marginalized groups, along with targeted measures to address the specific challenges they encounter.
* Considering the importance of social inclusion, policymakers are urged to promote community-based services tailored to the contexts in which they operate (religious, cultural, political etc.), while acknowledging and leveraging community bias and strengths.
* Despite apparent clashing positions, social workers can promote visibility of APGM, actively advocate for their social inclusion and challenge prevailing discourses thereby fostering a shared vision of social justice and hope.

# Introduction

Social work studies regarding LGBTQ+ individuals are limited, and even fewer relate to the Arab LGBTQ+ population ([Kahn, 2015](#Kahn2015); [Nothurfter and Nagy, 2016](#Nothdurfter2016)). This may be a result of taboos involved with sexuality in traditional Arab/Muslim communities (Alessi, *et al.*, 2016; [Hamdi *et al.*, 2018](#Hamdi2018)). However, there is a pressing need to expand knowledge in this area for social workers and other professionals (kahn, 2015). The scant studies concerning Arab LGBTQ+ individuals that exist, focus on religious or cultural groups either in majority religious Muslim countries (Aydin and Ozeren, 2020; [Hamdi et al., 2018](#Hamdi2018)) or in Western countries in which LGBTQ+ Muslims hold immigrant or refugee status (Akachar, 2015; Alessi *et al*., 2020; [Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2014](#Jaspal2014); [Kahn, 2015](#Kahn2015)).

In Israel, Arab-Palestinian Gay men (APGM) are at the intersection of multiple minority positions as a religious, ethnic, social, national and as a sexual minority group. This situates them in different levels of inequality with respect to hierarchical social systems, both in Arab-Palestinian communities and the majority Jewish society in Israel. This study employs an Intersectional perspective ([Crenshaw, 1989](#Crenshaw1989)), to explore the social experiences of Arab-Palestinian Gay men (APGM) in Israel. Intersectionality has been applied across disciplines as a theoretical and methodological framework to understand ethnic sexual minorities. intersectionality can also serve to “highlight the unique lived reality of those whose experiences are immeasurable and invisible in most research and whose needs are neglected in society” ([Ghabrial, 2017](#Ghabrial2017), pp. 53).

A part of a larger exploratory research project to gain a deeper understanding of the social situation of APGM in Israel, this part of the study was guided by two research questions: (1) How do APGM describe their social experiences; (2) What is the impact of these experiences on social inclusion.

# Intersectional Framework and Minority Experiences

Intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980s as a heuristic term to focus attention on “the dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” ([Cho *et al.*, 2013, p. 787](#Cho2013)). Like other major theoretical perspectives, intersectionality is not a unified theory but a range of theoretical and conceptual tools ([Yuval-Davis, 2015](#Yuval2015)). Originating within Black Feminist Studies, intersectionality explained how the multiple identities of Black Women locate them in different levels of inequality with respect to hierarchical social systems. As such, intersectional scholarship examines combinations of socially marginalised identities that dynamically intersect to aggravate discrimination and oppression [(Crenshaw, 1989](#Crenshaw1989); [Yuval-Davis, 2015](#Yuval2015)). This complexity generates a unique set of threats and opportunities that produce outcomes that reflect social advantages or disadvantages depending on context ([Abu-Ras,](#AbuRas) *[et al](#AbuRas)* [2021](#AbuRas)).

Intersectional analysis has been applied to study gendered groups within the Arab-Palestinian population in Israel such as Bedouin women and Arab female teenagers (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2017; Jeris-Loulou-Kassabri, 2022). Studies have also employed an intersectional framework to understand the social situation of ethnic minority LGBTQ+ individuals within their ethno-racial communities. For example, Diaz *et al.* (2001) found that as overlapping members of sexual and ethnic minority groups in the U.S.A, gay and bisexual Latino men have been affected by homophobia, poverty, and racial discrimination. This oppression prevented their full and fair participation in family life and the gay community and limited their educational and professional opportunities. In Canada, Crichlow ([2004](#Crichlow2004)) found that African-Caribbean Christian culture poses many obstacles for gay men, who face exclusion from churches, families, and communities.

More recently, scholars applied intersectionality to analyse the experiences of Muslim gay men ([Abu-Ras, *et al*, 2021](#AbuRas); [Ghabrial, 2017](#Ghabrial2017); Rachman, 2010). Rachman (2010) suggests that intersectionality is relevant to the analysis of Islamic culture and gender/sexual equality for three reasons: firstly, it demonstrates that cultures and identities are plural and overlap; secondly, intersectionality focuses attention to the standpoint and knowledge of the oppressed, and thirdly, an intersectional analysis has implications for the assumption that equality is a universal desired outcome. Since gay Muslim identities fundamentally challenge cultural oppositions, they occupy an intersectional social location, caught in the nexus of oppression between cultural and political Islamophobia and homophobia. Scholars, therefore, call for intersectionally framed empirical research concerning the lived experiences of gay Muslim men (Akachar, 2015; Rachman, 2010).

# Arab-Palestinian Gay Men in Israel

APGM’s multiple marginalised identities expose them to social exclusion from various key social systems. Any attempt to untangle this complexity of inequalities involves exploring numerus positions that APGM simultaneously hold with respect to an ever-changing social dynamic, as an intersectional framework considers that these inequalities interact to create unique forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Rahman, 2010). With this caveat in mind, we briefly present two main social positions that APGM hold, which serve to elucidate this intersection: the Arab-Palestinian minority position and the sexual minority position.

### Arab-Palestinian minority position

The Arab-Palestinian community in Israel is an ethno-national indigenous minority group of about two million people (21%) of the country’s citizens, which is comprised of Muslims (85%), Christians (7%), and Druze (8%) (Israel CBS, 2020). Arab citizens of Israel maintain a complex and conflictual identity in that they are Palestinian Arabs who are citizens of a country, perceived by its majority as the Jewish nation-state ([Jamal, 2018](#Jamal2018); [Smooha, 2019](#Smooha2017)). This affiliation often causes the state to treat them as a hostile minority, a demographic threat, or a fifth column ([Ghanem and Rouhana, 2001](#Ghanem2001)). The Palestinian-Israeli conflict also casts a shadow over the political, social, and economic position of the Arab minority in Israel, which is reflected in its inability to achieve equality in civil rights or in the realisation of its collective national identity ([Haidar, 2018](#Haidar2018)).

In 2018 Israel enacted the highly debated “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People”. This legislation defines the right to national self-determination as unique to its Jewish citizens. For Arab citizens, this law emphasized that they are, in the eyes of the state, a socio-economic and cultural group without collective national rights ([Jamal, 2018](#Jamal2018)). This law also changed the legal status of the Arabic language from an official language to a language with a “special status”, thereby undermining another central component of the collective identity of the Arab community in Israel ([Jabareen, 2018](#Jabareen2018); [Zeedan, 2020](#Zeedan2020)).

Most Arab-Palestinians live in small villages or towns on the Israeli geographic and social periphery ([Endeweld,](#Endelweld2019) *[et al](#Endelweld2019)*[. 2019](#Endelweld2019)). Decades of government marginalisation and the failure to develop infrastructure have led to poor economic, educational, health, and social conditions ([Weiss, 2019](#Weiss2019)). Although they are afforded full citizenship rights *de jure*, most Arab communities have inadequate infrastructure, insufficient services, and poor public transportation ([Baron-Epel *et al*., 2007](#Baron2007)). Israel has a high rate of poverty compared to the OECD and Arab-Palestinians are the group most vulnerable to poverty. In 2022, Arab households constituted 39% of those residing below the poverty threshold, in contrast to 35.3% of Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) and 14% of non-Haredi Jewish households (National Insurance Report, 2022). Despite progress such as the rapid improvement in Arab-Palestinian women's education and employment, the Arab-Palestinian population faces inequality in educational outcomes and large labour-market gaps (Koelle, 2023).

### Sexual minority position

Like in most countries worldwide, the LGBTQ+ population in Israel continues to struggle for social justice. Nevertheless, since the 1980s, substantial progress has been made in obtaining legal rights and social inclusion in Israel ([Pizmony-Levi](#Pizmony2009) *[et al.](#Pizmony2009)*[, 2009](#Pizmony2009)). In the past decade, surrogacy for same-sex parents was legally enacted, and public welfare, education, and health organisations in many areas now offer expert services for the LGBTQ+ community. However, this progress is primarily concentrated in Jewish-majority areas. Tel-Aviv is considered a global haven for LGBTQ+, but there is growing critique of the exclusion of social minority groups and especially of Queer Palestinians in the city (Atshan, 2020; [Kama and Ram, 2020](#Kama2020)).

In Arab-Palestinian society, like most conservative and religious social groups, the discourse regarding sexuality and gender is contested, especially concerning same-sex activity, which is illegal throughout most of the Middle East and North Africa. The two major patriarchal religions that comprise the Middle Eastern Arab population, Christianity and Islam, view procreation as the only legitimate purpose for sexual relations. Arab society forbids intimate relationships between men and women outside of marriage. Therefore, any such relationship is considered adultery and results in social sanctions ([Sherif-Trask, 2006](#Sherif2006)). Based on religious, moral, and legal attitudes, heteronormativity is deeply rooted in Arab culture and same-sex relationships are considered a sinful abomination (Atshan, 2020). This is reflected in the lack of language appropriately describing a sexual minority and no direct reference to *gay* sexuality (Atshan, 2020). Recently, there is a new local emergence of the term *Mithali*, emanating from a broader concept of *Majtama al-Mim* ("M-community" referring to the LGBTQ+ community) which includes gay men.

The Arab-Palestinian community in Israel is dynamic and heterogeneous. Although it has undergone many socio-economic and political changes in recent decades, it is characterised by collectivist, patriarchal values prioritising family and community. A recent study by Meler and Maenin-Distelfel (2023) that focused on the cultural perceptions of a "proper Palestinian-Arab family" found that despite some changes, family views remain heteronormative with a preference for males. The traditional family structure establishes hierarchical power relations based on age and gender, while parental socialisation encourages self-sacrifice, discipline, conformity, and obedience to authority (Allassad and Segev, 2023; Dwairy and Achoui, 2010; [Haj-Yahia, 2019](#HajYahia2019)). Most Arab-Palestinian parents expect to guide their children’s major life decisions such as career development, place of residence and choice of marriage partner [(Dwairy, 2006](#Dwairy2006)).

As patriarchal leaders, men are expected to confirm to traditional gender roles, marry, carry the family name, and accept responsibility for the family property and dependent relatives (Allassad and Segev, 2023; [Haj-Yahia, 2003](#HajYahia2008)). The traditional extended family system (*Hamulla*) is maintained through proximal living arrangements and intensive family connections. This collective familial system provides its members with support and protection while expecting their commitment, as well as their emotional and practical assistance ([Abu-Baker, 2016](#AbuBaker2003)). This creates a shared sense of success or failure linked to individual family members’ actions and choices. So that if a family member acts in a socially unacceptable way, the nuclear family may be blamed, and the extended family can be shamed ([Haj-Yahia and Sadan, 2008](#HajYahia2008)). Therefore, within the framework of Arab-Palestinian social norms and cultural values, particularly in traditional areas in Israel's periphery, an individual’s self-identification as gay may impact familial honour, and incur social repercussions. The multiple minority positions that APGM occupy, may thus put them at risk of social exclusion. To gain insight into the social situation of APGM, this exploratory study addressed two research questions: (1) How do study participants describe their social experiences? (2) What is the impact of these experiences on social inclusion?

# Methods

This qualitative study employed purposive and snowball sampling (Stern and Porr, 2017; Patton, 2002) for semi-structured interviews (N=20) and a focus group (N=8). Eligible study participants had to be adult Arab-Palestinian men who self-identify as gay and hold Israeli citizenship. The study was approved by the [removed for blind review] Institutional Review Board.

To reach this silenced population, recruitment involved anonymous online enrolment and outreach through Arab-Palestinian LGBTQ+ advocates. We aimed to include participants from diverse groups and various socio-economic backgrounds (Patton, 2002). The final sample included Muslim (N=12), Christian (N=7) and Druze (N=1) participants aged 19-39 from different residential settings (Arab-Palestinian villages, predominantly Jewish cities, and mixed cities), mostly in Israel’s Northern geographic periphery.

Before each interview, a research team member presented the study, explained the procedure, and promised confidentiality, then participants signed a consent form containing information about the study and their rights. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were free to withdraw at any time with no consequences. At the end of the interview, participants were asked whether they would agree to continue their involvement with this research in the future, with no obligation for further participation. Most interviews were conducted in Arabic in secure venues selected by participants and lasted 60-90 minutes. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that prompted participants to describe 1) how they identify with respect to different minority positions; 2) social interactions within their local community and Israeli society, and 3) the effects these experiences have on their daily lives.

ATLAS ti software was employed to analyse the data using a constructivist grounded theory approach, which promotes a deep understanding of social, political, and experiential realities and is especially suitable for social justice research that recovers marginalised voices (Charmaz, 2000; Creswell, 2012). For data analysis, research team members read the transcripts carefully and applied open coding to the data units. Then, the team met to re-read the interviews, discussed coding, and identified emergent themes (Charmaz, 2000) and patterns (Creswell, 2012). The ongoing dialogue between team members helped clarify data and allowed deeper reflexivity and consideration of diverging interpretations with respect to gender, culture, and language. The data were then converted into major categories that reflected study participants experiences in three life spheres: the family and community sphere, the organisational sphere, and the social sphere. Finally, to enhance research credibility, the main findings were communicated to a focus group as a form of member checking (Padgett, 2016). The group was composed of eight of the 20 study participants who had expressed willingness take part in process and conducted via Zoom to allow anonymity. At the beginning of the meeting, study participants entered with pseudonyms and closed cameras and microphones. Participants were informed again of their rights and the confidentiality measures taken in the study. As we discussed the main findings and reviewed remaining questions, we also informed participants of the study progress. No identifiable data were preserved, and anonymised data was carefully secured due to the sensitive nature of the study.

Our research team was diverse and included women and men who are Arab-Palestinian (of several religions) and Jewish, some self-identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community and others as allies. The team members worked together through the different stages of the research process, sharing knowledge, and lived experiences to inform the study. This also served to enhance the validity of the study through investigator triangulation (Franklin & Ballan, 2001). Due to the sensitivity of the study, in the findings section each quote is presented with a code, followed by the participant's age. A detailed anonymised list of study participants details and codes is provided in the supplemental material.

# Findings

**Family and local community sphere**

This theme refers to the study participant’s experiences with nuclear and extended family (*Hamulla*) and with the local community. Most study participants were initially rejected by parents, siblings, or extended family members when their sexual orientation came to be known. This manifested in various ways, on a continuum from subtle forms of rejection to severe emotional and physical violence. In the following example, a participant that hid his sexuality described what occurred after his parents found out:

[My parents realised] only when the rumour spread in the village, but it’s like they reject it. Every year I find myself reminding them that I’m gay when they ask: “When will you get married? When will you bring us a grandchild”.(5F1, 22)

In this case, parents did not exclude the participant from the family, yet rejected his non-conforming sexuality, with the expectation that he performs traditional heteronormative masculine duties.

For most study participants, however, family responses were intolerant. In this example, a participant described his mother’s reaction in a similar situation:

My mother… picked me up and started to hit me in the car to extract information and find out if I had shared this with anyone. She didn’t accept this at all and was very aggressive.(4A26, 24)

This mother’s response underscores the impact of a non-conforming sexual orientation not only on her son’s life but on that of the entire family. Families may, therefore, publicly ostracise their son, as another participant described:

In my neighbourhood, there were families whose boys came out. These families published an ad in the local newspaper and in other [public] places in the village announcing that their child is “dead” and renounced him from the family.(10A13, 21).

For several study participants, family exclusion also involved physical violence. In the following example, a participant, who lived in hiding at the time of the interview, described what occurred after family members discovered he was gay:

My cousin called and said my brother is coming to pick me up soon. I was very happy. But when he came, another cousin was also in the car. They told me to come in, but I felt something was wrong… so I told my brother that I’ll take a bus. He started hollering at me to get in the car. When I turned away, I felt a hard blow to my head and fell on the sidewalk. My cousin started hitting me and my brother just sat there in the car and did nothing. Luckily someone passed by and yelled at him to stop and called the police, so they fled. They left me with my face and clothes covered in blood. I passed out. Then an ambulance took me to hospital.(6M20, 27)

 This participant left his village and moved to a predominantly Jewish city. Despite his injuries, he did not report this to authorities:

When the police came to question me [in the hospital], I said nothing. If I tell them it’s my brother and they arrest him, I’m dead tomorrow. It’s been a year, and I’m still terrified. (6M20, 27)

The shame associated with being gay is such that even parents who wish to accept their children, face scrutiny from extended family and the local community. Therefore, study participants fear the negative impact on their entire family:

For now, my parents know that I’m gay so I’m not afraid *of* them; I’m afraid *for* them… I know they live in a society that won’t accept me and blame them for the situation... This is kind of a dangerous society.(7G4, 23)

 Since families of gay men risk persecution by the local community, participants tended to protect their families’ honour and preserve their social status by hiding their sexuality. Fear for family members is substantiated by community experiences as this study participant recalled: “Once they burnt down the family home of a boy when neighbours found out he was gay. It’s hard. And I don’t want anyone threatening my family because of me” (9B13, 21).Another participant said: “Bad things happen every day. I’m very worried because there are violent people that can do really bad things to people just because they are… gay”. (16V20, 21). Almost all the participants experienced exclusion in their family. However, for some, parental support help mediate community pressure, as in the following case:

A year ago, a photo of me and a guy circulated. I know my parents don’t accept this at all. But still, when my extended family opposed, my father and mother supported me. Because whatever happens, parents won’t give up on their child. (19T11, 25)

 Although in this case, parents continue to reject this participant's sexual identity, they publicly standing behind their son despite wider objections, is supportive and may promote future community inclusion.

**The Organizational Sphere**

This theme refers to participant's experiences with respect to organizational settings. All study participants experienced implicit or explicit exclusion in the context of education, employment, and business organisations. For most participants, these experiences started at school. This participant described his experience in class: “A student started to harass me… then he came with his friend, and they did stuff to me together and even told other students”. He did not elaborate on what “stuff” was inflicted upon him but continued to convey the school’s implicit support for his exclusion: *“*I was upset that the school didn’t intervene or try to help me with this. When students made fun of me in front of the teachers or the principal, they were simply silent. They did nothing” (13S10, 21)*.* These words reflect disappointment at the school for using its power to silently reaffirm exclusion. Such experiences may explain why most study participants did not seek school support. In one case where help was expected, it was denied:

I had a cool school counsellor. She supported me from the beginning. But when I shared this with her, she said that since this is a Christian school, it’s important to keep this quiet so that I won’t get hurt. So that’s what I did till graduation. (7G4, 23).

Trust and support initially permitted a teenager facing many problems to confide with his counsellor. However, this participant received a clear message that gay sexuality differed from other issues and was not tolerated. This may have been the counsellor’s well-meaning attempt to keep a student safe in his social environment. However, it also effectively perpetuated his exclusion. For another participant, the school actively promoted exclusion:

When I was in the ninth grade, a counsellor approached me and started asking uncomfortable questions like “Are you gay?”; “Do you like men?”; “Are you attracted to men?”. I said “no” because I was afraid, they would expel me or tell my family and other students. He threatened me and said that if I were gay, I would need therapy. That this is unnatural, and these “sorts of people” are not wanted in school. (7G4, 23).

Here, the organisation initiated a pre-emptive step to establish a heteronormative environment. In the context of traditional rural communities, organisational exclusion overlapped with family-community exclusion, as another participant said: “My aunt was a school counsellor. She had family issues with my mom, so she used this and started to tell everybody in my family that I’m gay; that I’m different” (17P4, 21)*.* In rural Arab villages, educational opportunities are limited, and, commonly, most residents are related to a few large families. Since a gay identity or being related to a gay person may have social repercussions, the misuse of organisational authority may prove detrimental to an individual’s life chances. Study participants encountered exclusion in work and business organisations. This business owner explained the reason for maintaining a heteronormative appearance:

It’s sad, but that’s how it is in our community… if they knew, no one would give me contracts. I’d go out of business… It’s not like the Jews have more gay people than we do. There are a lot of gay Arabs, but they are being intimidated just like me!(12A20, 32).

By referencing discrimination in the local business community, this participant implied that this might not happen in a predominantly Jewish area. However, other participants described experiences of exclusion within organisations in Jewish and mixed cities. In this example, a participant described workplace discrimination in a mixed city:

They knew I was Arab… and had me come for an interview and training… I felt uncomfortable as soon as I entered… It was how the other employees stared and how the manager looked and talked to me. I realised that even if I did a good job, they wouldn’t hire me because they could see I was gay… A few days later, the manager called and said I didn’t get the job. She was Jewish, by the way. (13S10, 21).

The emphasis on the manager’s Jewish identity may suggest an expectation that this organisation would be more inclusive of gay men. However, holding both an Arab-Palestinian and gay identity created new forms of discrimination. Another participant described this experience, while teaching in school in a Jewish town:

I had a conversation with the supervisor in which I said I was gay. She reacted harshly. She said they could barely stomach me being Arab and that being gay also was too much. That I shouldn’t dare tell the kids or put any ideas in their heads. I was shocked. I couldn’t believe an educator would say something like this.(6M20, 27).

This explicit message illustrates how organisations can create new forms of discrimination and exclusion for APGM, given their multiple minority positions. APGM participants thus faced exclusion in school, workplace and businesses both in and outside their local communities.

**The Social Sphere**

This theme relates to study participant's experiences in relationships with friends, peers, and social groups. All participants interacted with friends and colleagues from Arab-Palestinian and Jewish social spheres. Some described their experience in relationships with Jewish Israelis as inclusive. One participant said: “Most of my friends at university are Jewish and not Arab. We have very close and respectful relationships”. Another participant described similar experiences: “I get warmer treatment from Jewish society. My friends love me, care for me and are supportive… I don’t get this from Arab society”. (13S10, 21).

Inclusion of sexual minorities in larger predominantly Jewish cities can attract some APGM to leave their traditional communities, as this participant described: “There are daily collisions between being Arab-Palestinian and being gay. It’s hard. For most gay Arab men, it's easier to run away to Tel-Aviv. Life is simpler there, and you get everything” (2H14, 25). Indeed, in some cases, participants appreciated the freedom and support they received from Jewish peers, preferring it to their local communities. However, inclusion in predominantly Jewish areas that are considered more liberal can also be complex and conditional, as one study participant described:

They make you feel like you come from a primitive place and they’re here to save you… They had awful questions and stigmas. They would say stuff like, “How can you be Arab and gay at the same time?”… “You have such high self-awareness” … If you just live as a gay person without the baggage of being Arab-Palestinian, they will absolutely accept you, but if you carry your national baggage, you're not accepted (10A13, 21).

 Having lived in Tel-Aviv, he said: “I can’t judge my friends. They just had to escape a minority that wouldn’t accept them. But the majority also excludes them. It’s like they say: ‘Give up your identity, and we’ll partially accept you’ (10A13, 21).In these exchanges, LGBTQ+ inclusion was permeated with stigma towards the Arab-Palestinian minority. Such microaggressions suggest that in spaces that are often considered Western-liberal, APGM may continue to face exclusion. Several study participants referred to the Tel-Aviv pride parade to illustrate their experience in the nexus of seemingly clashing social positions: “The LGBTQ+ community, both Arabs and Jews, shouldn’t take part in the pride parade in a country that occupies other people and promotes oppression” (2H14, 25). However, for other participants, this position, while complex, is still experienced as an inclusive space: “Society is complicated, but generally speaking, there is acceptance… The pride parade is one of the best in the world. I know Israel uses it politically, but I still participate in it” (10A13, 21). Thus, despite diverse experiences, participant's words suggest that inclusion in mainstream Israeli LGBTQ+ community may come with an expectation that they brush aside Arab-Palestinian national affiliation. For some, this also means forsaking religious and cultural norms. This participant described his feelings regarding mainstream Pride events: “It’s not just the political difference, it’s also a cultural difference between me and the people I live with, which cannot be bridged!” Focusing on what he views as unrespectable and promiscuous, this participant described how he sees the Pride Parade: “Why do you have to get naked and dance in your underwear to get freedom? … Many homosexuals display themselves pornographically, which only intensifies our exclusion” (12A20, 32). These words reflect disapproval of more liberal forms of sexual expression, considered inappropriate in his traditional culture.

 In social interactions with other Arab-Palestinians in their milieu, study participants felt excluded because they were gay. One participant said: “My social circle reminds me that I’m Palestinian, and I can’t say that I’m not. But when an official Palestinian country is established, will I have the right to exist? For now, the answer is uncertain” (7G4, 23). Another participant said: “(they) say wait till after the occupation is over, we’ll deal with the homophobia… But, for me, this is existential exclusion. They don’t accept my existence” (3M19,21). These words suggest that to be included in the social sphere, some study participants needed to comply with heteronormative traditions and prioritise the collective national struggle. An Arab-Palestinian activist described a tragic event that highlighted the impact of multiple minority positions:

Several months ago, my friend hung herself! She was an Arab trans woman. Her family didn’t come to bury her and refused to even pay last respects! We had to bury her in an unmarked grave in a Jewish cemetery to honour her! (18A5, 39).

 This aggrieved participant described the lengths to which he went for his friend’s final honour. Another study participant with connections to both Arab-Palestinian and Jewish activist groups spoke of his hope of a joint struggle:“I don’t think the LGBTQ struggle should be separate. A Palestinian should fight for an Israeli and vice versa”. In his daily activism, he encounters conflicting responses: “Sometimes [Arab-Palestinian friends] see me as an amazing leader and sometimes as the whore of the Jews. It’s a split I don’t believe in” (15H30, 33).

 The “split” he described illuminates the social space APGM occupy, positioned between predominantly Israeli-Jewish society and Arab-Palestinian society, both of which limit their social inclusion.

**Discussion**

This study aims to explore social exclusion and inclusion of APGM in Israel through an intersectional lens, by focusing on participant's experiences and the way they impact APGM in various life spheres. The study findings show that participants experienced discrimination in three main life spheres: the family-community sphere, the organisational sphere, and the social sphere. These findings align with results from the first survey conducted by The Israeli Institute for Gender & LGBTQ Studies for applied social research, which found that an overwhelming majority of Arab LGBTQ respondents (83%) chose not to disclose their sexual identities for fear of rejection, physical harm, and ambivalence related to cultural-religious values (Gooldin and Da'as, 2022).

In the family and community, participants faced rejection from family members, the risk of expulsion from communities, and physical violence. These findings support previous research about gay sexuality in traditional and religious communities, specifically in Muslim and other Middle Eastern families (Abu-Ras *et al*., 2021; [Alessi *et al*., 2020](#Alessi2020); [Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2014](#Jaspal2014)). However, the narratives shared by some of our study participants indicate that, notwithstanding initial resistance, parents may advocate for their son's inclusion, challenging prevailing family and community norms, even while they continue to reinforce heteronormativity. In the organisational sphere, the findings show that APGM faced discrimination and exclusion from school, work, and businesses. Exclusion of Arab-Palestinian Israeli citizens from education and labour market opportunities has been identified in previous research ([Khattab and Miaari, 2013](#Khattab2013); [Weiss, 2019](#Weiss2019)), and LGBTQ+ discrimination persists in many countries, including Israel ([Kama and Ram, 2020](#Kama2020)). Our findings suggest that, for APGM, these two forms of discrimination intersect, especially in traditional communities in the geographic periphery, where limited opportunities deepen the impact of exclusion. In the social sphere experiences were diverse. While some participants experienced relationships with Jewish friends and colleagues as inclusive of diverse sexualities, others described microaggressions that reaffirmed their minority position in mostly secular Israeli LGBTQ+ communities. At the same time, some participants described Western-style LGBTQ+ spaces as exclusionary because they experienced them as incoherent with their religious norms and social traditions. Social relationships with Arab-Palestinians presented a mirror image that bolstered APGM’s national-political and cultural identity but demanded heteronormativity and placed the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights far behind the struggle for Palestinian national rights, if at all. These findings correspond with critique “pinkwashing” in Israeli society as well as accounts of that of widespread homophobia in Palestinian society (Atshan, 2020; [Kama and Ram, 2020](#Kama2020)).

Intersectionality examines how gender intertwines with race, ethnicity, and other socially marginalised positions ([Crenshaw, 1989](#Crenshaw1989); [Yuval-Davis, 2015](#Yuval2015)). This study suggests that in specific contexts, these positions may be perceived as clashing. APGM do not comply with their patriarchal, traditional, cultural, and religious codes or their community norms. Nor are their identities fully accepted by both heteronormative Jewish-Israeli society and mainstream LGBTQ+ community. Consequently, they face what can be understood as “hyper-exclusion" in the sense that it is prevalent both in local communities and in wider society; manifested in major life spheres; may lead to extreme violence; and is constantly evolving, fuelled by cultural, national and political conflicts.

Rachman (2010) suggests that a rigorous application of intersectionality for LGBTO+ studies must appreciate differences within oppressed identity categories. We draw on contemporary international and Muslim feminist and queer scholarship to suggest incorporating religion and nationality into the matrix of a wider and more nuanced intersectional approach. Purkayastha and Iwata (2023), suggest that the application of an intersectional framework in the global context, require awareness to localized forms of oppression that may replace race with other, more dynamic identities, emanating from culture, religion, and transnationality. Chaturvedi ([2021](#Chaturvedi2021)) argues that feminism, the origin of intersectional thought, remains a concept rooted in “Westphalian ideas of a democratic state with human rights and secular practices” (p.10). She points to the lack of attention to religious identity among intersectional scholars except for when they condemn religious-based discrimination. In an autoethnographic study that critically engages with the queer Palestinian solidarity movement, Atshan (2020) coined the term: “ethnoheteronormativity” to describe the reality of life as “racialised queer subjects experiencing intertwined oppression from dual systems of ethnocracy on one hand and heteronormativity and toxic masculinity on the other” (p. 10). In the case of APGM from mostly traditional background who participated in this exploratory study, intersectional inquiry of their social situation cannot rely on preconceived identity categories, but rather explore dynamic identities as well as dynamic power relations.

Notwithstanding a limited sample, this exploratory study has implications for research, and practice. Rachman (2010) posits that “There is a political and cultural power in simply rendering visible intersectional social locations, particularly when doing so challenges oppositional discourses” (p. 949). Social work research, practice and education have the power to promote such visibility. Social workers and health-care practitioners can actively support minority LGBTQ+ individuals and support their inclusion both within traditional communities and in secular Western-democratic institutions. [Chaturvedi (2021](file:///C%3A%5CDassi%20PA%5C%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%A7%D7%A8%5CExclusion%20-%20Gay%20Arab%202020%5CAJO%5CExistential%20Exclusion-Exploring%20Intersections%20of%20APGM_AJO.docx#Chaturvedi2021)) argues that promoting liberalism, secularism and democracy distances individuals from illiberal societies that do not relate to these ideas. Condsidering some of the current study findings, this suggests the need to develop culturally and context informed services that build upon the strengths and traditions of local communities to facilitate change. Indeed, the results of the first survey for the Arab LGBTQ population in Israel found that despite extreme challenges, respondents expressed a need for change and that there is some willingness to promote awareness and inclusivity (Gooldin and Da'as, 2022). To achieve a transformation, health and welfare policies must also address the unique challenges of sexual minorities confronting multiple forms of exclusion. This requires attention to the often-overlooked meso-level, namely, the local community and its specific context.

**Study Limitations**

This exploratory qualitative study has several limitations due to the number of participants, the specific social setting in which it was conducted, and the sensitivity required to investigate APGM. First, we used a small sample that may not be sufficient for generalization. Second, this research captures the social situation of APGM from traditional communities in a specific time and context. Family and community acceptance of APGM may vary in other communities and different circumstances. Third, this part of the study focuses on specific research questions, regarding the social experiences of APGM. Further empirical research is needed to explore these questions as well as other important aspects relating to the lived experiences of this diverse population.

**Some Concluding Notes**

Atshan (2020) sets a vision of queer Israeli-Palestinian solidarity in contrasting ethnoheteronormativity woven into both societies. Social workers in areas of conflict often work across boundaries to support diverse communities and are uniquely positioned to highlight the complexity of multiple oppressions (Author's own, 2022). This research effort is a challenging ongoing process. It commenced at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and persisted amidst escalating social and political tensions within Israeli society. At present, this article is composed during a dreadful time of fear and destruction. However, even when facing extreme conflicts and adversities, we contend that collaborative efforts in social work scholarship and practice have the power to contribute to this shared vision and promote hope.

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