

QUEER COMMUNITY IN CRISIS: TRAUMA, INEQUALITY & VULNERABILITY

An Assessment of the Impact of the Economic Crisis, Pandemic and Beirut Blast on Queer Individuals Living in Lebanon



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OXFAM

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SUMMARY

Since 2019, Lebanon has been witnessing multiple and interlinked crises that have shaken its very foundations and threatened the security, health, livelihood, and development of its population. These included major political upheavals, a severe economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut Port Blast. Crucially, it has impacted minority groups – including the queer community – to a larger extent, not only because of the explosion that destroyed an area that is one of the few known to be inclusive of queer individuals, but also due to lockdown restrictions and subsequent financial hardships that limited opportunities for mobility, income-generation, social connections, and safe shelter. However, the extent of the damage resulting from these crises, along with their subsequent effects on queer individuals, is limited given the scarcity of research conducted on this topic. To that end, Oxfam sought to investigate this topic in an attempt to map the needs, inform future relief efforts, and call for specific policy reforms.

The aims of the study are threefold: (1) to understand the impact of the multiple crises on queer individuals living in Lebanon, (2) to map available and needed services and resources that meet their needs and challenges, and (3) to generate recommendations to guide and support future efforts targeting the LGBTQI community in Lebanon. Through a mixed-methods design, Oxfam in Lebanon launched multiple efforts in which qualitative and quantitative data was collected from various groups and stakeholders. These included (1) an online survey which 101 queer individuals across Lebanon completed, (2) interviews with three business owners of queer-friendly venues, one urban planner, two representatives of informal aid groups, and ten interviews with Queer Individuals, and (3) a focus group with five representatives of LGBTQI Civil Society Organizations. Data was collected between December 2020 and March 2021. Qualitative data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis, whereby themes were reported for each group, and quantitative data was analyzed and reported through a descriptive approach. A synthesis and triangulation analysis of all data was reported in the discussion section.

Given the extent of the collected data and the diversity of the targeted groups, the thematic analysis for each group yielded different yet complementary results that were synthesized and discussed under the following categories: (1) loss of homes and safe spaces, (2) growing needs for basic assistance, and (3) struggling mental health and psychological wellbeing. Notably, the findings highlight disproportionate effects on queer individuals across all three categories, whereby socioeconomic standing, nationality, and gender identity played significant roles in their responses to the crises. Those exposed to larger discrimination and those impacted by legal restrictions, including trans individuals and refugees, are in higher need of assistance to meet basic survival needs such as shelter, food, health services, cash, and opportunities for income generation. Other queer individuals discussed the importance of the symbolic representation of the area affected by the blast, and the potential loss to the queer culture that could ensue from the damages. Important findings from the

synthesis of the data highlighted the necessity of (1) providing shelter to vulnerable individuals, (2) protecting queer individuals from abuses not only from potentially abusive household members, but also from police and security forces, (3) providing opportunities for legal income generation, (4) improving access to mental health services, (5) improving access to essential medications for chronic conditions, and (6) increasing spaces, venues, and community centers that are inclusive of queer individuals. Each of these points along with subsequent policy recommendations are discussed in this report.

METHODOLOGY



Design

The present study employed a mixed-methods design. Given the aforementioned research questions, and since the approach of the research is exploratory, the emphasis was primarily on collecting qualitative data from focus groups and interviews, in order to capture the richness and nuances of participants' experiences with the issue at hand. This was also supplemented by quantitative data collected from queer individuals through online self-reported surveys. Given the recency of the intersecting crises in Lebanon and their presumed impact on queer individuals - especially following the Beirut Port Explosion - and given the absence of recent data on this issue, an exploratory approach serves to better understand the extent of the problem and the potential opportunities at hand.

In addition to the data collection efforts, Oxfam in Lebanon conducted a desk review of published and unpublished literature on the topic in order to better situate the findings within the larger context.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of the series of crises Lebanon has been facing on queer individuals? Which factors are exacerbating/worsening the effect of these crises on different segments of the community and how? (i.e. class, nationality, gender experience, sexual orientation, etc.).
2. What are the challenges faced by queer individuals as a result of the crisis on the level of their general health, mental health, financial capacity, legal conditions and psychosocial settings? What are the most urgent needs of queer individuals that require immediate response?
3. What are the available services and resources and what are the gaps that need to be addressed?

4. How did the explosion impact the relationship of queer individuals with public spaces? To what extent are reconstruction efforts accounting for voices from the community, and how? Are grassroots/alternate setups being put in place to allow the community to claim social, political and spatial rights in these neighborhoods?

Participants & Sampling

For the purposes of this study, Oxfam in Lebanon gathered multiple samples to provide diverse perspectives from different parties involved, with the aim of triangulating the findings to better guide policy recommendations. Accordingly, four participant groups were targeted, including:

1. Queer Individuals

Interviewing queer individuals is the main goal of this study, since understanding their needs, realities, and stories in the context of the recent crises is the central theme. The representation of queer individuals therefore was diverse, as it included individuals of different nationalities, sexual orientations, and gender identities and expressions. Queer individuals were also further segregated by location both within and outside Beirut, based on whether or not they resided in close proximity to the areas significantly damaged by the blast.

In addition to the interviews, a brief online survey targeting queer individuals was developed and circulated on social media platforms in order to collect quantitative data on the issue at hand. Recruitment of queer individuals was done through snowballing methodology, through social media advertisements, and through communications with key partner organizations. Because this is an exploratory study, in the first phase of data collection the research team recruited ten queer individuals and conducted interviews until we reached data saturation. As for the online survey, we collected data from 101 queer individuals.

2. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Since a secondary component of this research is to map and understand the available and needed services and resources for queer individuals, the research team also collected data from CSOs whose work either focuses on the LGBTQI community, or whose services are inclusive of queer individuals. The CSOs that were contacted included Marsa, Helem, Mosaic, Skoun, and Seeds for Legal Initiatives. It was expected that these CSOs would have unique knowledge of the challenges and opportunities associated with this issue based on the focus of their work and would thus be able to provide important and needed information for the study. As such, one key representative from each of the selected CSOs was recruited to participate in a focus group. They were contacted through personal invitations from Oxfam.

3. *Informal Aid Groups (IAGs)*

Seeing that not all support groups for queer individuals are formally registered organizations, and that many informal groups started forming after the blast to provide immediate support to members of the community, it was necessary for the research team to capture some of their perspectives. Besides being unregistered, these groups are different from CSOs in that they tend to have close relationships with members of the community as many of them are queer individuals themselves, and they tend to have key insights into the reality of their situations because of their strong connections with them. One representative from the selected IAGs was recruited through personal connections and snowballing methodology.

4. *Business Owners & Urban Planners*

Beyond queer individuals, CSOs, and IAGs, business owners and urban planners play a critical role in this issue, especially in relation to future efforts for reconstruction and policymaking. That is, many queer-friendly spaces, cafes, restaurants, pubs, and clubs from the affected areas have been shut-down in view of the economic crisis, COVID-19 restrictions, or the destruction ensued by the blast, which may have had negative consequences on queer individuals. For this reason, business owners' opinions were factored into the analysis since their role is key in providing safe spaces for social engagement. As for urban planners, because their work tends to influence and be influenced by political and social issues such as inclusivity of queer individuals in public spaces for example, their input on the topic at hand is crucial. It was assumed that urban planners, given their profession, can provide us with expert opinions on a range of issues such as the urban history of the affected areas and their inclusivity of queer individuals, the related disruptions that the recent blast may have caused, and on their recommendations for reconstructing queer-friendly spaces, among others. The research team recruited five business owners and one urban planner identified from personal and professional connections.

Groups	Tool	Total Participants
Business Owners	Semi-Structured Interview	N=3
Urban Planners	Semi-Structured Interview	N=2
Community Stakeholder Organizations	Focus Group	N=5
Queer Individuals	Semi-Structured Interview Online Survey	N=10 N= 101
Informal Aids Groups	Focus Group	N=2

Note: The semi-structured interview guides differ across groups

Data Collection Tools

As an overview, the data collection tools were developed with the aim of understanding (1) the impact of the sequential crises and the Beirut Port Explosion on the challenges encountered by queer individuals, including their relationship to commercial and public spaces, (2) the available and needed services, and (3) potential actions being taken to account for queer presence in reconstruction efforts. Additionally, these tools were administered across various groups recruited to provide differing perspectives on the issue at hand, while being adapted to the specific group. Hence, although many questions were common and could have overlapped across the data collection tools, each was tailored according to the target population (see table 1 for an example of topic guide per target group). The tools are listed below and can be found in the appendices 1 through 5:

- Online Survey for Queer Individuals
- Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Queer Individuals
- Focus Group Guide for CBOs
- Semi-Structured Interview Guide for IAG
- Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Business Owners
- Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Urban Planners

Data Collection

The research team collecting the data was composed of the project lead and a research consultant. More support was provided by the Oxfam team for data management.

Given the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all data collection activities were conducted online or over the phone. These included (1) one focus groups conducted online over Zoom with CSO representatives, (2) multiple semi-structured interviews with queer individuals, business owners, urban planners, and individuals from IAGs, and (3) an online survey targeting queer individuals. The focus group comprised five CSO representatives in order to ensure variety of expertise across participants, and to maintain engagement, which may be more difficult to achieve with larger groups online. In the case of queer individuals, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews as opposed to focus groups in order to provide adequate privacy and confidentiality to motivate them to share personal narratives in-depth.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, unless participants did not consent to it, in which case notes were taken instead. The focus group discussion lasted between 60 to 120 minutes, whereas the semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Finally, the online survey was relatively brief and required around 10 to 15 minutes to complete. All collected data (i.e. audio recordings and self-reported surveys) were stored in a private and password-protected computer which was only accessible to the research team.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis, was reported in terms of emerging themes, and was triangulated across the different data sources. On the other hand, quantitative data was tabulated and reported in terms of frequencies and percentages. The research team used Microsoft Word, Excel, and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were debriefed about the study when first approached, in addition to potential risks and benefits involved with participation. Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, all participants were provided an informed consent form that delineated their roles and rights in this research and were asked to provide verbal or electronic consent to participate. In addition, because many of the interviews were conducted with individuals who have had direct exposure with the tragic blast, all participants were informed of their rights to refrain from completing the interview in the event they may feel unable to continue. Participants were also provided with referrals to sources for psychosocial support when the interviews triggered any traumatic experiences. Interviewers were sensitive to sexual and gender identities and experiences and inquired about participants' preferred pronouns before conducting the interviews.

Limitations

While the research team recognizes the importance and timeliness of this study, along with the fact that such subjects are underexplored in Lebanon, the findings should be viewed in light of several limitations. First, the survey followed a simplistic and short design that gathered basic information about queer individuals without statistical testing, and that relied mostly on a descriptive approach. Second, the research team could not interview enough urban planners and business owners to reach data saturation and to come up with clearer recommendations for reconstruction efforts. It was challenging to find people with this kind of expertise who are also knowledgeable about or at least willing to discuss their intersection with queer issues. Third, given the context of the study, Beirut was the main focus the data collection efforts, and as such does not take into consideration the experiences of queer individuals in other areas of Lebanon. However, it is worthy to recap that the primary goal here was to focus on the affected area, it being one of the few inclusive spaces in Lebanon for queer individuals.



INTRODUCTION

Following the August 4 Beirut Blast, which happened within the context of three other major ongoing crises – namely the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis, and the political deadlock – Lebanon has been shaken to its very foundations¹. Any of the aforementioned crises would have had a significant historical impact on its own due to its devastating repercussions, and thus their compounded effects are arguably unprecedented in the history of Lebanon. The general population has lost over 70% of their purchasing power, experienced significant trauma, and lived through overwhelming and consistent stress. Many have also lost their homes, lost their loved ones, lost their jobs, or lost their sense of hope and optimism for the future.

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While these crises have had widespread adverse effects that affected the general population in Lebanon, minority groups in particular have been at higher risk of enduring worse consequences. Traditionally, the literature clearly demonstrates that minority groups such as queer individuals are at significantly higher risk than cisgender² and heterosexual individuals to have barriers accessing equitable services, to have less social support, and to experience additional discrimination and stigma³. These outcomes are not inherently associated with queer status, but are rather a result of the minority stress model, which posits that individuals from minority groups (e.g. racial, ethnic, sexual, gender minorities and so on) are at higher odds than non-minority groups to experience poorer outcomes because of the discrimination and reduced social acceptance they experience in society⁴. This is definitely applicable in the case of queer individuals living in Lebanon, where issues of gender and sexuality are still

¹ Saleh, S. et al., (2021). "It's all in the details" Administering the COVID-19 in Lebanon through a transparent and un-politicized collaborative approach. *EClinicalMedicine*, 32.

² A cisgender person is a person whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.

³ Abboud, S. et al., (2020). "It's mainly the fear of getting hurt" Experiences of LGBTQI individuals with the healthcare system in Lebanon. *Annals of LGBTQIQ Public and Population Health*, 1,3

⁴ Meyer, I. et al., (2013). Minority stress and the health of sexual minorities. In C.J. Patterson & A.R. D'Augelli (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology and sexual orientation*. Oxford University Press.

considered taboo, homosexuality is largely perceived by the public as a disease⁵, and Article 534⁶ of the Penal Code is used to prosecute, criminalize, and intimidate queer individuals⁷.

Despite these circumstances, LGBTQI-focused CSOs have dedicated significant efforts to provide the needed services and legal support to queer individuals, including basic assistance, advocacy campaigns, and policy work, all of which have been instrumental in empowering queer individuals and meeting their essential needs⁸. In addition, queer individuals over the past decade have sought refuge in spaces that were inclusive of diversity and that presented, over time, important avenues for social experiences and vocational opportunities. Some of the most prominent of these spaces were a number of the neighborhoods most severely affected by the Beirut Blast, specifically Mar Mikhael, Gemmayze, Ashrafieh. This area was known to have bars, clubs, restaurants, community centers, and public spaces among others, many of which are inclusive of queer individuals or that cater to them specifically. The potential loss of these spaces due to the blast could have a large negative impact on queer individuals, especially because of the scarcity of areas inclusive of diversity in Beirut and Lebanon more widely. With this in mind, this study seeks to investigate the impact of the sequential crises on queer individuals in Lebanon, from the perspective of access to and availability of services, and their relationship to the affected public space.

⁵ Nasr, N; Zeidan, T. 2015. As Long As They Stay Away. Exploring Lebanese Attitudes Towards Sexualities and Gender Identities. Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality. Retrieved from: <http://afemena.org/2015/12/04/as-long-as-a-stay-away-exploring-lebanese-attitudes-towards-sexualities/>

This is the only national study to investigate attitudes towards sexuality and gender identity in Lebanon. It was carried out in 2015 and highlighted lack of awareness among the Lebanese public about the lives of LGBTQII individuals, whereby 77% were not aware of Article 534 and 50% believed that homosexuals are not mistreated in the Lebanese society. The study also highlighted major myths and misconceptions, with 79% of respondents categorizing homosexuality to be due to a hormonal sickness and 72% believing that it is due to a mental disorder.

⁶ Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code that stipulates that "any sexual intercourse contrary to nature leads to a sentence of prison up to one year."

⁷ As of 2007, Lebanon witnessed a number of judicial rulings that have challenged the implementation of Article 534. However, these achieved legal milestones were met with an increase in police persecutions between 2012 and 2016, as well as police and intelligence forces detaining and harassment of organizers of queer events in the country.

⁸ Naal, H. et al., (2019). Developing an LGBTQI-affirming healthcare provider directory in Lebanon. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health*, 23,1



FINDINGS

Loss of Home & Safe Spaces

1. *Queer Presence Affected Areas*

Historically, the area in the vicinity of the port affected by the explosion was a center-point for low-income laborers and employees such as workers in the port, the previously active train station, the electricity company, hospitals, and schools. In addition, this area was affected by the migration of Armenians who settled in and brought along their artisans and artifacts, all of which enhanced its cultural and economic diversity. As stated by Abir Saksouk, Head of the Justice in Planning Unit at Public Works Studio, a multidisciplinary research and design studio that works on urban and public issues in Lebanon, these historical developments and the geographic location of this area at the outskirts of Beirut have made it accessible for the working class primarily due to lower rents. And while some other neighborhoods in Beirut share similar characteristics, this area in particular had limited religious and sectarian dominance relative to the others. The combination of these factors has made this area a natural target for gentrification, a process that has eventually changed its character through the influx of more affluent residents and a new economic activity.

THE AREA OF MAR MKHAEL, GEMMAYZE HAD LIMITED RELIGIOUS AND SECTARIAN DOMINANCE RELATIVE TO OTHERS AREAS IN LEBANON.

In fact, over the past 10 years, this area witnessed major transformative processes due to the opening of many bars and restaurants, the curation of art galleries and exhibitions, the booming nightlife, the increases in performance arts, and the opening of community centers, all of which have distinguished this area from others with similar landscapes. The affected area had also become a destination for expatriates, young people, and migrants because of its diversity. As a result, this has created a climate that was more welcoming and inclusive of diverse gender and sexual identities and expressions, offering safer spaces and better prospects for social and professional activities for minority groups, such as queer individuals. This is apparent by the uniquely high number of community centers, pubs, and commercial and public spaces inclusive of queer individuals in this area. One could also argue that many of these spaces were also claimed by queer individuals themselves, as reported by one of the interviewed business owners who emphasized that although they did not set out originally to create a queer space, over time, queer individuals became accustomed to this venue, and others who were not tolerant of diversity tended not to revisit the space. However, equally

important to mention is the negative impact of gentrification on the surge in rental prices in recent years, which in turn has made the area less accessible to queer individuals from lower socioeconomic statuses and forced many of them to evacuate and relocate to other areas.

At the same time, according to Saksouk, the affected areas still hosted many spaces that are relatively unsupervised by authorities and that are often sought after by minority groups, in this case queer individuals. According to her, unsupervised informal places and public spaces play an important role in queer individuals' lives, because of the relatively low vigilance and supervision imposed on them. In Lebanon, these can take the form of empty parking lots, football fields, staircases, alleyways, uninhabited buildings, public spaces by the seashore, among others. Their common feature is that they are not defined or heavily supervised, which make them appear somewhat safer than other spaces especially for queer and minority groups.

This was confirmed during some of the interviews with queer individuals, who described the affected area as a refuge before the blast, lockdown, and economic crisis. According to these interviewees, this area offered queer individuals the opportunity to hang out, socialize, and work, while staying relatively safer from discrimination and abuse than in most other areas in Lebanon⁹. While it was not the only queer-friendly space in the city, and despite it not being completely free from all forms of discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia, it did offer the space for queer culture to flourish, due to the many collective, public and commercial queer spaces it hosted. As reported by one of the interviewed queer individuals, "the affected area was a place where queer culture manifested most visibly. It was the place where most of the cultural and artistic events used to happen. It is where a lot of organizations and queer establishments that are queer friendly are based [...]." This was also mirrored in the data collected through interviews with owners of queer-friendly commercial spaces in the

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⁹ According to Helem, violations of the rights of queer individuals include the abuse of article 534 by the state and police forces, arbitrary arrests and detentions, systematic use of physical and psychological torture in detention centers, arbitrary work expulsion, lack of legal protection, bullying, blackmailing, hate speech and physical violence by members of public and/or family.

affected areas, who saw in their businesses an opportunity for their clients to have a second home and for their workers to be part of a larger family.

The fact remains that these spaces often frequented by queer individuals are exceptionally few in Beirut, and the Beirut explosion did not only destroy many of them, but also caused enough structural damages in the affected neighborhoods that today it threatens their ability to bounce back and regain the status and characteristics they had before the explosion, according to Saksouk. As a result, the area is set to become less accessible to queer individuals because of high rent, expected increased gentrification during the reconstruction process, potential loss of cultural diversity, and limited public spaces.

Data collected from the interviews with queer individuals also indicates that many queer individuals have been avoiding the affected areas for various reasons including but not limited to the trauma resulting from the Beirut Blast and the heightened presence of armed and police forces in the area. Expressing their frustration with the increase in checkpoints in the affected areas since the Beirut explosion, one participant described them as “an exaggerated form of implementation in which the power of the police is abused to discriminate against queer individuals and forcefully intrude on how they dress, walk or talk, who they are with, and where they are going.” This was also confirmed by members from the Informal Aid Groups, who stressed the impact of these checkpoints on the mobility of trans people whose gender identity does not match their identification documents and queer refugees who do not have legal permits.

An Alarming Housing Crisis on the Rise

All data sources cited housing among the top challenges currently faced by the LGBTQI community in Lebanon. When asked to rank challenges, the 101 surveyed LGBTQI individuals reported housing-related issues among the most challenging, with accessing community spaces and support systems ranking second (48%), paying rent third (41%), and having a safe living space fourth (39%). When asked about intervention areas to be prioritized by LGBTQI CSOs, enhancing access to mental health services ranked first, while providing housing subsidies (37%) and safe shelters (35%) were second and third. In 2020, Helem, leading LGBTQI rights organization, found the need for housing ranking first (329 urgent cases) in its annual

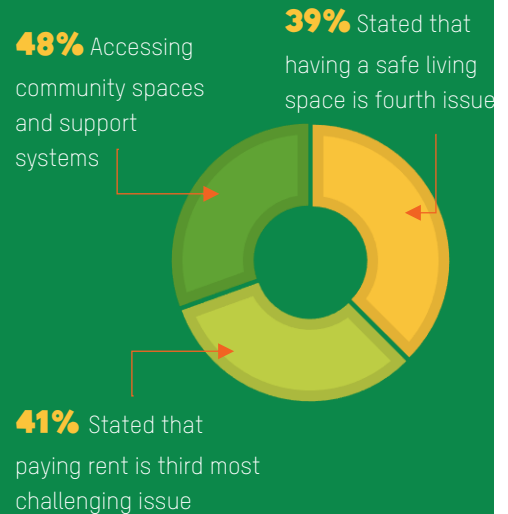
THE FACT REMAINS THAT THESE SPACES OFTEN FREQUENTED BY QUEER INDIVIDUALS ARE EXCEPTIONALLY FEW IN BEIRUT, AND THE BEIRUT EXPLOSION DID NOT ONLY DESTROY MANY OF THEM, BUT ALSO CAUSED ENOUGH STRUCTURAL DAMAGES IN THE AFFECTED NEIGHBORHOODS THAT TODAY IT THREATENS THEIR ABILITY TO BOUNCE BACK AND REGAIN THE STATUS AND CHARACTERISTICS THEY HAD BEFORE THE EXPLOSION

documentation of violations against LGBTQI individuals. From only 5 cases in 2019 (1% of the total), calls to Helem's hotline indicating need for shelter rose to 65% of urgent calls since January 2020. Moreover, in 2020, around 15% of Helem's homelessness cases involved youth escaping family homes after being outed or a confrontation with parents. These included cases of forced marriage, domestic abuse, home imprisonment, conversion therapy, and psychological torture.

Oxfam's survey data also points that 40% of queer respondents' living situations that had been negatively impacted by the blast, of whom 11% reported moving back with their families and 10% not having a permanent living space. Moreover, 58% reported that their residence suffered damages and 35% have had to relocate or change their living arrangements. Heightened police and army presence after the blast contributed to many individuals leaving the relative safety of their neighborhoods to venture to affordable areas outside Beirut and Mount Lebanon where their sexual orientation and gender identity may expose them to greater violence and discrimination. In fact, 62% of survey respondents reported increased exposure to violence in their current living spaces. Many others relocated to live in shared apartments or gathered with larger groups of friends and acquaintances in order to be able to afford the rent, which resulted in them living in overcrowded and small confined spaces. Although this shift does present opportunities for shelter, some level of social connections, and some level of protection, it certainly increases the risk of psychological stressors resulting from confinement, limited resources, and limited personal space. Equally important, this presents serious risks for COVID-19 infections. In one case, according to an interviewed CSO, the number of flatmates sharing the same apartment has increased from 3 to 13 individuals few months through the start of the pandemic in order to afford rent.

Specifically, queer individuals who are non-Lebanese such as refugees and migrant workers were more likely to experience challenges that affect their access to shelter, such as lower opportunities to generate income and

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70% of whom stated that they lost their job in the past year.

meet rent payments, higher risk of eviction, and higher risk of discrimination by landlords based on their nationality. This is concerning because many non-Lebanese queer individuals were placed in difficult situations and were “in limbo” as a result of the crises, by not being able to work, receive support, go out of their houses, afford rent, feel safe in public spaces, or even go back to their country due to travel restrictions.

Skyrocketing need for basic assistance

According to the survey data, 66% of respondents indicated that they did not perform any income-generating activities at the time of taking the survey, of whom 70% said they lost their job in the past year. Others who were able to keep their jobs were also affected by the crisis, citing reasons like currency depreciation, salary decrease, compulsory unpaid leaves, reduced working hours, and inability to access their salaries or savings due to bank restrictions. In fact, almost half of survey respondents indicated that they relied on other sources of income to make their ends meet, such as family support and humanitarian aid. While this is seen as a combined effect of the economic crisis and the restrictions on labor caused by lockdown measures, many queer individuals have also suffered the financial implications of the Beirut Blast, which destroyed, and in some cases caused permanent closure of many businesses in the food and beverage and nightlife industries that employed many of them.

However, it is important to note that the impact of the crisis was not linear across different members of the community. According to the interviews with queer individuals, CSOs and informal aids groups, trans individuals, gender queer individuals, and queer refugees seem to be the most affected by the series of crises. “We are stifled from all angles. We cannot go out, we cannot work, we cannot receive proper support, we do not have safe spaces to exist” said one of the interview participants about their experience as a queer refugee in Lebanon.

Trans individuals who face systemic and longstanding barriers to formal education and employment are often forced to work in low-income jobs in the informal sector, and many of them resort to sex work to make ends meet. During the pandemic, many informal businesses struggled to survive, and demand for sex work services sharply decreased due to significant decrease in expendable income, making an already dire situation even more devastating. Similarly, queer refugees, who had been struggling for years with legal restrictions that bar them from the formal job market and limit their mobility, found in this crisis another burden that made meeting their most basic needs even more difficult.

“Queer individuals who fit the heteronormative representation of what a man or a woman should look like tend to be more socially accepted and therefore have more opportunities,

while those with non-conforming gender expressions are often associated with to negative stereotypes and tend to be automatically excluded,” explained one interview participant.

This was also reflected in the clear division between the needs and priorities of queer individuals who are middle class, cis-gendered, Lebanese, and generally men, and those queer individuals who do not fit one or more of these categories. While findings from interviews with the former group were centered around the relationship with space and access to mental health, interview findings from the latter group were overwhelmingly focused on access to basic services and means of survival. As put by one interviewee, “we are not talking about rights and other aspirational needs; we are talking about basic survival needs.”

Needless to say, the interlinked crises facing Lebanon have crippled a significant majority of the population, irrespective of their sexual or gender identity or expression. However, for the queer community, who had already suffered years of systemic and structural discrimination in absence of any state protection or support, the outcome is particularly disastrous. Coupled with the active exclusion of queer individuals from state-sponsored support programmes, such as MoSA’s National Program to Support Poorest Families, the mismatch in supply and demand of LGBTQI-focused humanitarian aid¹⁰, and the huge gaps in data, queer individuals are exposed to vulnerability and violence today more than ever.



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“The series of crises has indeed impacted everyone in Lebanon, but queer individuals have been impacted 10 times more,” said one interviewee. “In addition to the insufferable conditions we are living under just as the rest of the population, we also carry the additional struggle of being stigmatized and discriminated against.”

Findings about the severe impact of this crisis on the financial wellbeing of queer individuals were also confirmed by interviewed CSOs, who reportedly witnessed an exponential increase in demand for basic assistance services, such as nutrition, medicine, and basic cash assistance. It was even noted that several CSOs that did not offer basic assistance services before the crisis have expanded their scope of intervention to include services such as food assistance or mental health counseling, and adapted their service provision models to online

¹⁰ Interviewed CSOs reported a widening gap in met and unmet needs of LGBTQIQ individuals, due to inability of their human and financial resources to keep up with the sharp increase in first-time beneficiaries requiring basic assistance.

modalities where possible, in order to attend to the urgency of the crisis. However, it was confirmed by CSOs that they are far from meeting the growing needs of the community, with several of them reporting a steady increase in the number of first-time requests by queer individuals for one or more forms of support they provide more than one year through the crisis, a flagrant indication of the severity of its impact on the queer community.

With regard to accessing healthcare services, survey participants reported an overall decreased access to general health services and sexual and reproductive health services, citing the economic crisis as the main contributor to this trend (59%), followed by the restrictions associated with COVID-19 (29%) and the Beirut Blast (12%). According to the survey data, 46% of participants reported great difficulties accessing general healthcare services since the crisis compared to 29% before, while 44% reported the same regarding sexual and reproductive health services compared to 32% before. These numbers point out to an already existing struggle in accessing all types of healthcare services by queer individuals, reportedly due to multiple layers of marginalization, lack of healthcare facilities that provide tolerant and safe environments for queer individuals, and lack of healthcare professionals who are experts in meeting queer health in general and trans health in particular (Naal et al., 2020). This has also been highlighted in the qualitative data, where many of the interviewed queer individuals, especially trans and non-Lebanese, reported refraining from visiting healthcare centers to avoid discriminatory behaviors or due to fear of being reported and arrested. CSO also expressed concern regarding potential discontinuation of essential medications that need to be continuously administered such as HIV drugs and Opiate Substitute Treatment (OST). According to CSOs, many queer individuals living with HIV or with addiction problems are at the risk of losing access to essential medicines due to many factors including the exponential inflation in drug prices, general shortage of basic medication, potential suspension of governmental subsidies, and inability of local service providers to match the growing demand for these medicines. For example, it was reported that the rate of relapse is increasing among drug users who are forcibly discontinued from OST or other psychiatric medications, causing a serious public health concern.

Worsening mental health and psychological wellbeing

Nearly 75% of LGBTQI survey respondents said that their mental health was negatively impacted to a large extent due to the three-layered crisis. The remaining 25% were somewhat negatively impacted. In fact, mental health was cited unanimously by all data sources as one of the top challenges affecting queer individuals living in Lebanon today. Queer individuals in Lebanon suffer from systemic discrimination that has historically denied them equal access to general healthcare and mental healthcare services and put them at disadvantage

compared to their cis-hetero counterparts, which is why it is very important to focus on the impact of the current crises on their mental wellbeing.

According to the survey data, nearly 50% of survey respondents said they lost their jobs as a result of one of the three crises, and 66% are currently not performing any income generating activity. Among those generating income, two in three said their income was affected due

Nearly **75%** of our LGBTQI survey respondents said that their mental health was negatively impacted to a large extent due to the three-layered crisis. The remaining **25%** were somewhat negatively impacted.

to factors like salary reductions, compulsory unpaid leaves, currency depreciation, and inability to access private funds due to bank restrictions. Many queer individuals, especially those with non-conforming gender expressions, generally survive on lower incomes than their cis, hetero counterparts, due to higher rates of unemployment, labor discrimination, and lack of inclusive government protection and humanitarian assistance programs. Moreover, many of the industries employing high percentage of LGBTQI individuals, like the food and beverage industry, the retail industry, the gig economy¹¹, and the informal sector were hardly hit by the pandemic, with some businesses permanently shutting down after the Beirut Blast. These financial burdens have had their toll on the mental wellbeing of members of the LGBTQI community, most of whom reported a positive correlation between the economic crisis and a general increase in levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. This was corroborated by data collected from HELEM, indicating a 30% of reported cases of suicide ideation through their community hotline in the first three months following the start of the pandemic. In fact, when asked about the main challenges they are currently facing, the survey respondents ranked psychological wellbeing first with an overwhelming margin among cited challenges (74%). This trend was also applicable across different respondent groups, whereby psychological wellbeing was named a top challenge by 7 in 10 gay cis-men, 9 in 10 lesbian cis-women, and 1 in 2 trans persons. Similarly, mental health service provision was cited by most of the survey respondents (58%) as one of the most urgent areas of interventions to be prioritized by local LGBTQI service providers.

In addition to the financial crisis, social isolation and lockdown measures have been especially difficult to queer individuals, especially those who had to quarantine or move back with often intolerant and potentially abusive family members, while losing contact with their supportive social networks and access to their safe community spaces. In general, recent findings have shown that mental health challenges have significantly risen internationally as a result of anxiety associated with COVID-19 infections and lockdown restrictions which caused

¹¹ The gig economy is a labor market that consists of short-term contracts and freelance work as opposed to full-time positions or permanent jobs.

significant shifts in people’s lifestyles, social interactions, income generation, and so on¹². In Lebanon, the economic crisis and trauma triggered by the Beirut port explosion not only amplified these challenges, but also decreased access to mental health services as a result of mobility restrictions, financial difficulties, and the pre-existing cultural stigma around mental health services. Despite CSOs acknowledging the urgency to respond and tailoring their mental health service provision to online modality as a contingency measure, it seems that the gap in mental health services and resources available to the LGBTQI community is only getting wider. These findings have been reflected in the survey data where 44% of participants described their access to mental health services as “very difficult to access” or “not accessible at all”, compared to 28% before the beginning of the crisis.

As a coping mechanism, many members of the LGBTQI community are increasingly resorting to health risk behaviors, such as substance use, alcohol use, and unsafe sexual practices, which are directly correlated with higher risks of exposure to and transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections such as Hepatitis B and C, increasing the underlying risks for mental health issues, and worsening the symptoms of mental health disorders. Local service providers have reportedly seen an alarming increase in the use of cannabis, tobacco, and other psychoactive drugs such as cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, crystal meth, salvia and other medical tranquilizers. This worrying development was also confirmed by a surge in the rate of individuals seeking mental health services and substance use treatments from local service providers, who are now struggling to keep up with demand.



CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to understand (1) how the crises affected queer individuals, (2) what kind of services have been available to them, which were not, and which should be prioritized, and finally to (3) generate recommendations to guide and support future efforts targeting queer individuals from a service and public space perspective. To do so, Oxfam in Lebanon conducted one of the first research studies involving various stakeholders, including members of the queer community themselves.

As an overview, the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data funnels into 5 main sections that explain the impact of the crises and the subsequent needs of queer individuals, leading up to specific recommendations per sector. These sections address the housing crisis and

¹² Talevi, D., Socci, V., et al. (2020). Mental health outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Rivista Di Psichiatria*, 55,3

lack of queer-friendly public spaces, the growing need for basic assistance, and the worsening mental health and psychological wellbeing of members of the LGBTQI community.

Crucially, the present study is, to the best of our knowledge, the only one tackling this subject, and thus offers unique data and situational analysis for researchers and actors in this field. The difficulty in analyzing this data and drawing comprehensive conclusions lies in the fact that each of these crises had its own detrimental impact, and in that they subsequently overlapped on many levels which amplified their effects. For example, starting with the economic crisis which is arguably the worst since the 1930s Great Depression¹³, it reduced the populations' purchasing power, caused many individuals to lose their jobs, and induced fear of not being able to meet basic survival needs. The COVID-19 pandemic built on this stress by limiting people's ability to receive social support - which is an important protective factor to buffer the effects of general stress - induced additional fear of infection and of infecting others, and presented psychological and physical damages resulting from confinement. Finally, the Beirut Blast induced collective trauma, destroyed work, public, and residential venues, and triggered the need for a basic sense of security.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ The Government of Lebanon and the Ministry of Public Works should prioritize inclusive spaces in their reconstruction plans, ensuring that the historic characteristics that the area of Gemmayze and Mar Mikhael are persevered, and that the area remains accessible to the population that used to reside there.
- ✓ The Government of Lebanon and the Ministry of Public Works should develop a housing policy that is inclusive of the LGBTQI community, ensuring that individuals are protected from evictions based on their sexual orientation and gender preferences. The policy should also include access to affordable housing schemes including for members of the queer community.
- ✓ The Government of Lebanon should prioritize inclusive and universal social protection schemes to ensure the members of the LGBTQI community, irrespective of their social status, gender, or nationality, have access to social protection, including healthcare, shelter, and job opportunities.

¹³ World Bank sees Lebanon GDP shrinking 9.5% further, one of history's worst depressions: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/world-bank-sees-lebanon-gdp-shrinking-95-further-one-historys-worst-depressions-2021-06-01/>

- ✓ The security agencies in Lebanon, notably the General Security and Internal Security Forces, should adopt and implement anti-discriminatory policies that refrain its members from harassing members of the LGBTQI community.
- ✓ The Lebanese parliament should decriminalize homosexuality by repealing the article 534 from the Lebanese penal code and adopt legislations that protect LGBTQI individuals from discrimination and uphold their fundamental rights.
- ✓ The international community, including donors and actors in the aid sectors, should prioritize tailored relief programming for the members of the LGBTQI community who sometimes are not qualified for aid targeted at other minorities. Further needs assessments focused on the members of the community should be conducted, and activities that ensure the welfare of those individuals should be designed as part of wider aid schemes.
- ✓ International donors should also support the establishment of further community centers that can be safe spaces for the LGBTQI community and can offer multi-level supports.