Literature Review: Security of the LGBTQ+ Community in Lebanon

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Introduction

The plight of LGBTQ+ individuals transcends geographic boundaries. On the global level, promising efforts are being made to further the well-being and security of sexual minorities. It continues to be of concern, however, that LGBTQ+ individuals face hardships in all aspects of daily life: social, personal, economic, political, and legal. Security studies on this topic emphasize that the LGBTQ+ community experiences additional levels of violence on top of other identity-based hardships, and thus require urgent attention. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is not unique in its intolerance towards sexual minorities; however, the LGBTQ+ community in the region is disproportionately under-researched, and country-specific research is even more scarce. These factors heavily complicate and restrain efforts for informed policy proposals and movements for equality. Lebanon provides a strong case for the need to expand research on this issue. The country is unique within the Arab world as it is often characterized as the most socially progressive of all Arab countries. This creates a problematic discourse surrounding the perceived acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in Lebanon against the very real ostracization the community faces. As Moussawi (2013) states, the essentialist progressive depiction of Lebanon minimizes queer experiences and "renders them voiceless" (868). This literature review thus aims to unravel the multifaceted security challenges confronting LGBTQ+ individuals in Lebanon, a state entangled in crises due to the compounding impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, political gridlock, the 2020 Beirut explosion, a refugee crisis, and ongoing sectarian tension. Within this chaotic landscape, the LGBTQ+ community faces unprecedented threats to their well-being. Helem's 2021 *LGBTQ+ Rights Violations Report* highlights the community's vulnerability stating that "the events of 2020 and 2021 exacerbated an already entrenched system of violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in Lebanon" (2021a, 4). Oxford International's (2021a) report, titled *Queer Community in Crisis: Trauma, Inequality, and Vulnerability*, states that individuals of the LGBTQ+ community "have limited access to safe spaces, are facing a housing crisis, are in dire need of basic assistance, and are facing worsening mental health and psychological wellbeing" (3). Studies on the challenges of both LGBTQ+ nationals and refugees, particularly those fleeing from Syria, residing in Lebanon will be included in this review to analyze security concerns for the community as a whole. Helem's (2021a) report writes that "LGBTQ refugees face added violence and discrimination resulting from institutionalized homophobia and transphobia from both existing Syrian refugee communities as well as host Lebanese communities and institutions" (16). Additionally, this paper categorizes schools of research into four categories to display the research on the LGBTQ+ security landscape in Lebanon. By doing so, it highlights the interdisciplinary and intersectional nature of the issue. This review is not just an exploration but a call to action. Through a survey, evaluation, and comparison of pre-existing research, I aim to illuminate the LGBTQ+ experience, identify areas needing further research, and emphasize the urgency of addressing the community's security.

Health Administration, Data Collection, and Health Risks

Assessing human security in Lebanon's LGBTQ+ community involves examining the healthcare sector, including administration, prevention, and data collection, as well as factors like sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), healthcare stigma, malpractice, discrimination, and apathy. Existing health research and literature on these topics are majorly concerned with determinants of these issues and providing recommendations for policy reform. Kaplan and El Khoury (2017) expand on HIV and sex data by showcasing recent successes, lessons

learned, and obstacles regarding data collection for the community. They emphasize that health research faces obstacles such as how "key populations continue to be criminalized and excluded from surveillance programs" (1).

Within the literature examining the security of LGBTQ+ individuals in Lebanon, a pronounced concern emerges regarding the growing prevalence of HIV, increasing the vulnerability of this community. Researchers widely acknowledge the need for a focused inquiry into these escalating health risks. Men who have sex with men (MSM) are the most predominant sub-demographic studied in this research. Studies by Tohme et al. (2016b) and Heimer et al. (2017) survey HIV risk and prevalence within the community through qualitative data collection. Tohme et al. focus on the socio-demographic correlates of these disparities. Research on sexually transmitted diseases in the community helps draw conclusions about the security of these individuals and the lack of health resources. Civil society and international organizations also focus on these issues. Oxfam International's (2021a) study found that "46% of participants reported great difficulties accessing general healthcare services since the crisis began" (17) and that "44% reported the same regarding sexual and reproductive health services" (17). They underscore that queer individuals struggle in accessing healthcare services 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 needs" (17).

A discernible gap in mental health resources for LGBTQ+ individuals in Lebanon has been identified by researchers. Oxfam International's (2021b) studies reported that "44% of participants described their access to mental health services as "very difficult to access" or "not accessible at all" (19). Helem's (2021a) report writes that the organization recorded a "record 30% increase of individuals calling its hotline with suicidal ideation and thoughts of self-harm - and had more than 100 individuals on the waiting list for its free Mental Health Support program" (26). This adds an additional layer of complexity to their security concerns.

Health is a major area of research for assessing the security of sexual minorities, especially due to

healthcare stigma and anxieties widespread through these communities. Data collection faces many obstacles due to these issues, and further work is needed not only for healthcare reform but also towards ensuring safe spaces within healthcare are established for marginalized communities.

Systemic, State-Sponsored, and Physical Violence

A significant amount of LGBTQ+ security studies on Lebanon focus on systemic issues within areas of law, policing, and governance. Extralegal violence, abuses of power, civil rights violations, discrimination, and suppression are also prevalent research areas, underscoring the need for sweeping reform in the state administration. Additionally, both international and domestic human rights and civil society organizations have actively contributed to this discourse. Regarding obstacles entrenched by Lebanon's political structure, Nagle (2018) writes that "while consociational arrangements – predicated on a minority rights regime – theoretically open up constitutional space for LGBT rights, they often negate such possibilities by empowering ethnic hardliners opposed to sexual minorities" (1). Thus, the consociational system makes it so that LGBTQ+ visibility, activism, and policy movements are harder to achieve.

Police brutality and abuse as well as the criminalization of nonheterosexuality are a large area of research regarding systemic issues. In 2013, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a study titled *It's Part of the Job': Ill-treatment and Torture of Vulnerable Groups in Lebanese Police Stations*. This report focuses on Lebanon's main police force, the Internal Security Forces (ISF), which enforces morality laws against drug users, sex workers, and LGBTQ+ individuals. They write that "what these three groups have in common are their precarious status under Lebanese law as well as the social stigma that renders them particularly vulnerable to police abuse" (HRW, 2013, 1). HRW published a separate report titled *Dignity Debased: Forced Anal Examinations in Homosexuality Prosecutions* in 2016 highlighting Lebanon as one of the case studies (31-40). Similar to the 2013 HRW report, this helps assess the level of comprehensive literature and research on systemic issues and abuses.

Arbitrary arrests are important red flags for civil and human rights abuses. Helem's (2021a) report

writes that "Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which criminalizes 'any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature,' is commonly used to harass, detain, and violate LGBTQ+ individuals and acts as a legitimizing cover to most institutionalized homophobia and transphobia in the country" (4) and that victims of these violations are subjected to "arbitrary arrests and detention as well as highly criticized, degrading, and violent interrogation methods" (4). Helem (2021b) writes that the ISF was "active in perpetrating the largest number of arbitrary arrests and detention of LGBTQ individuals under Article 534 of the penal code" (6). Orr et al. (2021) take an interpretive approach to data collection by interviewing MSM in Beirut about their experiences with discrimination and violence. They found "71% of foreign-born and 32% of native-born participants reporting at least one type of discrimination or violence (10278). Their work expands the pre-existing research on sexuality-based violence in Lebanon and makes their own comparisons with their work.

Social Stigma and Risk Factors

Exploring the social roots of stigma, entwined with religious dynamics, is an important component of the research on LGBTQ+ security in Lebanon. Michli and El Jamil's (2022) work adds to the literature on how stigma and polarization create internalized homonegativity (IH). They state that "religiosity, parental rejection (actual or anticipated), and legal discrimination were significant risk factors of IH, while sense of belonging to the LGBT community was a strong protective factor" (1). They note that there is a lack of research on the topic as it pertains to the Arab world and use Lebanon as a case study for this research. Tohme et al.'s (2016a) research on psycho-social correlates of safe-sex practices amongst MSM refugees in Beirut is the first of its kind in the MENA. They found that "both condom use and HIV testing were influenced by multiple psychosocial factors on levels of health care utilization, sexual identity development processes, and patterns of social discrimination and integration within the larger MSM community" (S422). Wagner et al.'s (2013) qualitative study on MSM in Beirut adds to the literature on sexual stigma, stating that most men in their study "struggled at least somewhat with their sexuality, often because of perceived stigma from others and internal religious conflict about the immorality of homosexuality" (570). Similar issues revealed in these studies underscore the importance of researching social stigma in security studies, as areas such as physical and mental health are impacted. Additionally, Helem's (2021) report states that the LGBTQ+ community in Lebanon is often "blackmailed, threatened, or verbally abused, with knowledge of their sexual orientation or gender identity" (27) and that "such violations against the community are extremely common and prevalent, particularly on social media platforms" (27). Additionally, false perceptions of Lebanon as a haven for queer individuals minimize these realities. Moussawi (2013) has conducted sizable research on this issue, stating that "such reductionist depictions flatten queer Lebanese men's experiences and render them voiceless" (868). Moussawi's work furthers research on the queer experience, emphasizing how essentialized and orientalist portrayals result in minimizing the intersectional experiences faced in the country's queer community. Existing literature on this topic is in consensus that social issues are large obstacles that queer individuals face and have compounding impacts on other problems the community faces.

Civil Society Landscape and Efforts

Lebanon's civil society is an important area for research and activism, as it helps in assessing the support systems in place for vulnerable communities in the country. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have an important role as a third space in furthering the well-being of sexual minorities as they face hardships from both society and the government. As cited throughout this literature review, Helem has provided comprehensive research and publishing on LGBTQ+ issues. Saleh showcases Helem's (2015) efforts in Lebanon while addressing the challenges it faces in affecting change in Lebanon. Jones and Tell (2010) write that "while real political gains remain elusive for Helem, its success lies in the visibility it has given to issues of gay rights in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world" (137). Saleh, Jones, and Tell expand on the literature on the limits faced by CSOs in Lebanon, giving particular emphasis on the necessity for expanding legal protections for such organizations. Helem's work has reached many community members in Lebanon. Its 2021

report states that it has "processed 4,007 incidents of violations, risk, and/or humanitarian need with 2,331 different case evaluations within the LGBTQ community in Lebanon in 2021 alone" (2021b, 4). The report also provides recommendations to both the Lebanese government and other CSOs on how to further LGBTQ+ security. Oxfam International and Human Rights Watch are two predominant international organizations that have released literature on the LGBTQ+ experience in Lebanon specifically and have thus been major contributors to the topic. Challenges of activism and government suppression have played a large role in the security studies of LGBTQ+ individuals in Lebanon. Zeidan (2013) writes that "human rights defenders working on sexuality constantly face dangers" (201). Civil society and international efforts are highlighted in most of the security study literature in Lebanon due to the large role they play in advocating for justice and reform. Civil society is an important research focus not only for showcasing successes but also to call for increased support for their efforts.

Conclusions and Notes for Continued Research

The review aims to assess the existing literature and research on the security of LGBTQ+ individuals in Lebanon. The main findings of this review establish that security concerns and rights violations in the LGBTQ+ community are rooted in systemic and social issues that impact things such as health administration, policing, criminal justice, mental health, and disease transmission.

In analyzing major schools of research, areas needing expansion arise. One limitation of existing research is that MSM are the most largely surveyed demographic within the LGBTQ+ community. More research is needed on other demographics, like transgender women who consistently face violence around the world. Helem (2021a) writes that transgender women "face disproportionate sexual violence from traffickers, police, and other perpetrators and are far less likely to report sexual harassment and assault to authorities—suffering from a perpetual culture of impunity in these spaces" (18).

Beirut, with its sizable LGBTQ+ population, stands as the most researched area for the LGBTQ+ experience. Expanding this research to the entirety of Lebanon is necessary for addressing human rights concerns and violations against the community. It is important that research is being done in the capital city, and research there is itself scarce; however, queer individuals are everywhere, and especially in the aftermath of crises such as Covid-19 and the Beirut port explosion, the queer community has faced displacement within Beirut and relocation to rural and less populated localities (Oxfam International 2021a, 3). A large issue that is thus lacking sufficient research and attention is the security of LGBTQ+ individuals outside of the Beirut metropolitan area.

Research institutions must be better funded to expand their research into rural areas outside of city centers. Such gaps in research leave issues of sexual-based violence unanswered in certain geographic locations. This expansion of research is particularly relevant in issues of sexual health and sexually transmitted diseases. The literature review has established that sexual minorities face systemic, economic, and social barriers to health resources; however, geography could also prove to be a restriction for resources as well. Additionally, a rising HIV epidemic concentrated among sexual minorities in Lebanon is a large security concern, and researchers in this field agree that continued study is necessary for establishing prevention efforts and this must be expanded to all of Lebanon. Narrowing research to target these communities would provide a perspective that has yet to be introduced in the human security literature on the LGBTQ+ community in Lebanon and could reveal new security threats that queer residents in urban areas do not face. If the opportunity to do further research presented itself, I would target both geographic areas and sub-demographics most lacking in research to supplement the pre-existing literature and provide a more comprehensive picture of the security situation faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Lebanon.

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