Challenging stereotypes, providing services, convening, and advocating

A multi-layered approach to promoting LGBTQ rights in Lebanon¹

By Oxfam in Lebanon and Qorras, Lebanon

Context

The Lebanese penal code continues to criminalise sexual practice between consenting adults of the same sex in public or semi-public spaces under Article 534, established under the French Mandate in 1932. The law prohibits ‘any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature’ without specifying what constitutes ‘the order of nature’.² The law is predominantly implemented to criminalize homosexual acts primarily by males, but has been used against others as well, particularly transwomen who have not amended the legal registration of their gender identity.

As of 2007, Lebanon had witnessed a number of judicial rulings that challenged the implementation of Article 534.³ Nonetheless, there was an increase in the persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals by the police,⁴ as well as an increase in police and intelligence forces detaining⁵ and harassing⁶ the organisers of queer events.

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¹ For further information on the project outlined in this document, contact Nizar Aouad, Senior Project Officer (NAouad@oxfam.org.uk) – Oxfam in Lebanon.
LGBTQ-related issues are still considered taboo in Lebanon, and limited research has been conducted to fully understand them. Despite a slow positive shift, data still highlights different forms of societal discrimination against LGBTQ individuals. In 2015, a national study highlighted a lack of awareness among the Lebanese public about the lives of LGBTQ individuals; it found that 77% of people were not aware of Article 534, and 50% believed that homosexuals were not mistreated in Lebanese society. The study also highlighted major myths and misconceptions, with 79% of respondents believing homosexuality to be caused by a hormonal illness, and 72% believing that it is a mental disorder.7

Interviews, testimonies, and documentation of communities’ experiences have consistently emphasized that LGBTQ individuals go about their lives balancing multiple concerns – including surviving legal discrimination and prosecution, and familial and social violence. The minimal legal protection of LGBTQ individuals, combined with harmful social norms and prejudices compromise the access of queer individuals to healthcare.8 While sexual health and psychosocial support is provided by some local organizations, these services are largely limited to the capital city of Beirut and are not widely available.

Project background

Oxfam and Qorras designed the project ‘Challenging Stereotypes, Providing Services, Convening, and Advocating: A multi-layer approach to promote LGBTQ rights in Lebanon’. It was designed in consultation with members of the LGBTQ community in Lebanon and selected service providers. In light of the restrictive context, Oxfam, Qorras and the LGBTQ community also conducted a risk analysis and identified mitigating measures. For the project’s risk matrix, please refer to Annex 1.

The project is planned to run from January 2020 to December 2021, and is funded by the EU through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. The overall objective of the project is contributing to the protection and promotion of LGBTQ rights in Lebanon. This is to be achieved by supporting civil society organizations (CSOs) to effectively reduce discrimination and promote legal, health, and psychosocial rights of LGBTQ individuals. Throughout the design of this project, the team took every measure to ensure they did not duplicate any other initiatives. A mapping exercise showed that few interventions were tackling the target issue with an innovative approach that makes use of technology and creative tools.

Organizational partnership

The partnership between Oxfam and Qorras is strategic. Qorras – with its activist history, grassroots nature and high level of acceptance among the target community – brings its contextual knowledge, networks, research experience and acceptance in the LGBTQ community to document stories of LGBTQ individuals and translate them into forms accessible to both the LGBTQ community and the public. Oxfam complements Qorras’s expertise by bringing strong experience of managing sub-grants, organizing interactive networking events, and influencing. This complementarity has been well received by other stakeholders, including members of the LGBTQ community consulted during the design phase and selected service providers that expressed support for the project. Moreover, experts in digital media (e.g. a podcast expert who supports start-ups) were consulted to help strengthen the feasibility of implementation within the available resources and timeframe.

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Approaches

Recognizing the sensitivity of working on LGBTQ issues and the absence of a legal framework to protect LGBTQ individuals, the project adopts a multi-level approach that adheres to ‘Do No Harm’ principles. The team has selected approaches that focus on increasing knowledge through safe yet visually and/or audibly appealing tools, such as comics, public installations, maps, interactive events, an information guide and podcasts. Qorras’s knowledge of the context and their investment in different forms of art, audio-visual channels and social media make them capable of capturing the attention of individuals – especially youth, who are agents of change. The use of these tools impacts the opinions and views of the public and facilitates dialogue without imposing any harm on LGBTQ individuals. Oxfam complements this tactic with evidence-based advocacy, whereby the monitoring data collected throughout implementation will be translated into policy recommendation documents. These documents will be strategically used to increase awareness and advocate for the rights of LGBTQ individuals.

In addition, sub-grants to local CSOs will be used to improve the availability and access to safe services for the LGBTQ community.

Implementation

The project consists of three main components:

1. **Knowledge creation.** This component aims to provide safe opportunities for LGBTQ individuals to share their experiences and journeys across different aspects of their day-to-day lives, document their cases and increase general awareness about the different forms of discrimination and obstacles that hamper their lives. Through Qorras’s existing connections and snowballing techniques,9 the team is reaching out to LGBTQ individuals to directly participate and share their stories. These stories are translated into different forms of sharable knowledge, such as comics and maps, each with specific communication targets. The team is implementing four interlinked initiatives – two knowledge production initiatives (Kan Ya Makan and Tajassod), a podcast and a comic series – that tell the stories of LGBTQ individuals from different regions of Lebanon, sharing information about their everyday realities and the societal and legal discrimination they face. While these initiatives aim to increase the level of knowledge and awareness among the public, they also serve as safe venues for LGBTQ individuals to engage with one another and express themselves, both online and in person.

2. **Sub-grants.** Sub-grants of €60,000 have been agreed with four local organizations engaged in the provision of legal, health, and mental health and psychosocial support services, in an effort to respond to the identified gaps in services and to improve access to services for LGBTQ individuals. It will serve approximately a total of 3,600 people from all nationalities (e.g. Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinians).

3. **Advocacy and networking.** The advocacy and networking component is expected to bridge between the awareness-building and service provision components through the production of policy documents and networking events. This component, scheduled for the second year of the project, is expected to build links between members of the LGBTQ community and key stakeholders (e.g. human rights organizations, CSOs, lawyers, activists, academics, social media activists, health providers, donors and policy/law makers) through events. In addition, it will advocate for the rights of LGBTQ community through the development of evidence-based policy documents. In the long run, the increased level of awareness and support from the public, coupled with the policy actions, are expected to slowly but surely contribute to the

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9 ‘Snowballing’ is a technique often used in sampling, in which researchers rely on initial informants to suggest subsequent informants – thus expanding the sample size. Here, it is used as a networking technique, in order to reach LGBTQ individuals in a safe manner.
civic movement to reduce societal discrimination, deconstruct stereotypes, strengthen bottom-up advocacy to improve the protection framework, and eventually reduce the burden on LGBTQ individuals.

**Highlights**

**Knowledge production initiative: Kan Ya Makan**

Kan Ya Makan is an initiative that aims to establish a relationship between the use of public spaces and LGBTQ stories, while highlighting the different roles and forms of discrimination faced. Qorras has been organizing a series of workshops and group discussions with LGBTQ individuals to map trajectories and lived experience, remembered and narrated by LGBTQ individuals navigating different public spaces in Beirut. The discussions aim to explore the following questions:

- What does it mean to live and move as a queer body in Beirut?
- How does the city’s public space react and interact with queer bodies navigating it?
- How do the trajectories and experiences of LGBTQ individuals converge and diverge across the city, by gender identity, expression of sexuality, class, ethnicity, ability, age and geographical area?
- What diverse stories of discrimination, harassment, violence, resistance, pleasure and reclamation of public space can be narrated by queer individuals?
- What alternate geographies are produced and what informs them?

The information gathered is being transformed in creative formats onto an online map and later on into onsite interventions.

**Knowledge production Initiative: Tajassod**

Tajassod is an initiative that aims to increase the level of knowledge and networking between trans individuals living in different areas of Lebanon. Qorras is implementing ‘practice-based research’ with trans individuals from different regions. The research aims to collect their stories, identify their needs, and bring them together, with a focus outside Beirut, contributing to links and informal networks between trans individuals from all regions in Lebanon through a snowballing methodology. This activity will result in the production of information guides for trans individuals using the results of the practice-based research that focuses on medical (including mental health) services for trans individuals. The guides will be translated into Arabic and distributed to LGBTQ-friendly health professionals, health institutions and trans-inclusive spaces.
## Annex 1: Risk matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Mitigation measures</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social/ political</td>
<td>Deterioration of the security situation in the country leads to delays in implementation and impedes access to the targeted areas during the provision of services</td>
<td>a) Re-scheduling of activities; b) continuous Steering Committee meetings to find alternative modalities of implementation; c) strict abiding to Oxfam’s Security Plan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Religious and/or conservative groups express frustration and take action to stop the public activities</td>
<td>a) Carry out a risk assessment before the implementation of any of the initiatives and circulation of any of the products; b) continuous consultation with the legal team; c) develop a very specific and low-visibility dissemination plan; d) consult with the Steering Committee and members of the LGBTQ community on the design of events and list of invitees.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social/ physical</td>
<td>Hacking, vandalism or blockage on social media channels that will showcase some of the initiatives; and/or online bullying, trolling, doxing of partners, stakeholders or participants</td>
<td>a) Develop a digital security plan that protects information online; b) consult with lawyers and digital experts on options to protect owned sites; c) protect some of the sites and ensure that personal information is not available on any channels; d) seek support from allies to implement necessary training on digital security; e) ensure access to information or guidelines on digital security and data protection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Beneficiaries do not receive quality services as part of the provision of services by the third parties</td>
<td>a) Set a monitoring and accountability framework, and collect monitoring information through spot checks and field visits; b) ensure service providers include the Oxfam hotline as part of their service provision; c) closely coordinate with the providers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Economic crisis affects the banking sector, resulting in limits on withdrawals, capital control, liquidity issues and/or increased inflation rates</td>
<td>Oxfam’s finance team negotiates with relevant banks the best deals to limit the impact of the crisis on partners and the people we work with.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political / security</td>
<td>Crackdown on LGBTQ activists following the formation of a new government</td>
<td>a) Ensure constant assessment of security situation and the likelihood of a potential security threat, and tailor the level of public visibility accordingly; b) coordinate with lawyers to assess risk situation and plan accordingly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to safe spaces</td>
<td>Government crackdown on queer-friendly public spaces and LGBTQ-focused events</td>
<td>a) Use Oxfam’s offices whenever possible to host roundtables, focus group discussions or workshops to decrease the risk of crackdown; b) prepare a list of queer-friendly spaces to serve as alternative venues for public activities/events within the project’s framework.</td>
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</tbody>
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