

# **QUEER COMMUNITY IN CRISIS: TRAUMA, INEQUALITY & VULNERABILITY**

Policy brief



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**OXFAM**

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On August 4, 2020, Lebanon was ravaged by a disastrous blast in Beirut's port, resulting in over 200 deaths and 6500 injuries, and causing massive destruction over a 10km radius from the explosion site. Primary data collected from LGBTQI-focused Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and from queer individuals right after the explosion has pointed to an overwhelmingly negative impact of the blast on the LGBTQI community, particularly in terms of their access to basic services, resources, and safe spaces.

The areas most severely affected by the Beirut Blast, particularly the neighborhoods of Mar Mkhayel, Gemmayze, and Geitawi, were known for their reputation as the most queer-friendly neighborhoods in Beirut. Being home to many queer residents and queer-friendly restaurants, bars, clubs, community centers, and public spaces, these neighborhoods offered a refuge for queer individuals in an otherwise hyper-(hetero)sexualized city of Beirut. As such, these areas allowed queer bodies to be safely visible, and offered an alternative space to develop non-heteronormative discourses and to gather, organize, and resist against all forms of oppressions they face. Subsequently, the potential loss of these spaces as a result of the Blast could have an especially damaging impact on queer individuals given the scarcity of similar inclusive and safe spaces elsewhere.

The Beirut Blast was not the only catastrophe that hit the country in 2020. The country had already been facing its most precarious economic crisis since the end of the civil war in 1990. Since 2019, the Lebanese Lira has devalued by more than 85 percent and unemployment has reached a record high, leading to economic recession, high inflation, more capital and bank controls, and crucially, devastating social conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic, which also arrived in 2020, has made a disastrous situation only worse, especially for the LGBTQI community - an already vulnerable group that constantly suffers from systemic discrimination, lack of governmental protection<sup>1</sup>, and deep-rooted legal, social, and economic inequalities. The series of COVID-19 lockdowns implemented by the government since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 have raised many concerns among queer individuals, with LGBTQI-focused CSOs sounding the alarm about their safety and wellbeing put in jeopardy.

Within this context, Oxfam conducted a research study aiming at understanding the impact of the series of crises on the livelihoods and wellbeing of queer individuals in Lebanon, mapping available and needed services and resources, and generating recommendations to guide and support future efforts targeting the LGBTQI community in Lebanon. The findings of this research showed that members of the 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.



## LIMITED ACCESS TO SAFE PLACES

Over the past 10 years, the areas of Mar Mkhayel, Gemmayze, and Geitawi have witnessed major transformative processes due to the opening of many bars and restaurants, the curation of art galleries and exhibitions, the booming nightlife, an increase in performance arts, and the opening of community centers, all of which have distinguished this area from others in Beirut with similar characteristics.

The affected area had also become a destination for expatriates, young people, and migrants because of its diversity. As a result, this created a climate that was more welcoming and inclusive of diverse gender and sexual identities and expressions, and offered safer spaces and better prospects for social and professional activities for minority groups, including queer individuals.

One could also argue that many of these spaces were also claimed by queer individuals themselves, as reported by one of the business owners Oxfam interviewed, who emphasized that although they did not set out originally to create a queer-friendly space, over time, queer individuals became accustomed to this venue and others who were not tolerant of diversity tended not to revisit the space.

<sup>1</sup>The Lebanese penal code criminalizes sexual practice between consenting adults of the same sex in public or semi-public spaces under Article 534 of the penal code. The law prohibits "any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature" without specifying what constitutes the order of nature. 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.

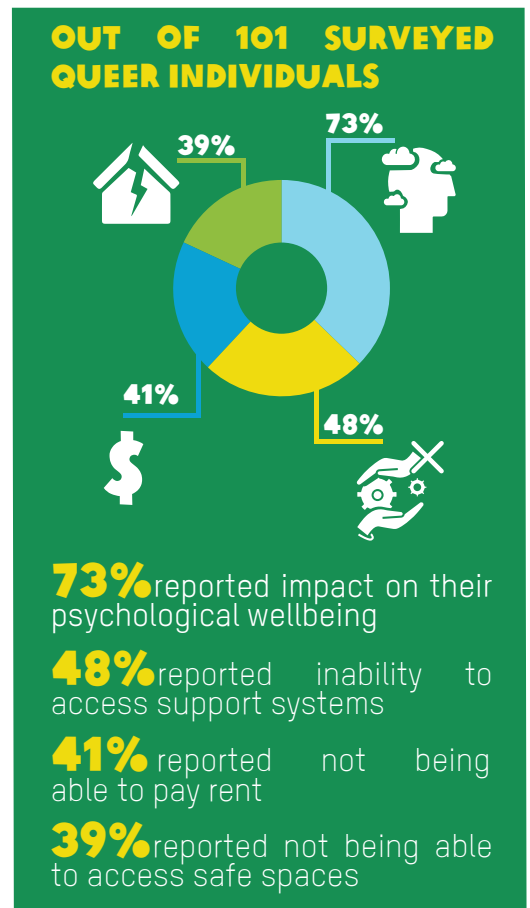
The fact remains that spaces often and safely frequented by queer individuals are exceptionally few in Beirut, and the Beirut explosion did not only destroy many of them, but also caused enough structural damages in the affected neighborhoods that it threatens their future ability to bounce back and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

Data collected from interviews with queer individuals also indicates that many 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 informal aid groups for the LGBTQI community, who emphasized the negative 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.

## HOUSING CRISIS

LGBTQI individuals, LGBTQI CSOs, informal aid groups and service providers cited housing among the top challenges currently faced by the LGBTQI community. When asked to rank challenges, all of the surveyed 101 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%). Our data also indicates that 40% of queer respondents' living situations 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. When asked to rank potential interventions by LGBTQI-focused CSOs by order of priority, providing housing subsidies (37%) and safe shelters (35%) were second and third.

Heightened police and army presence after the blast also contributed to many individuals leaving the relative safety of their neighborhoods, fearing discrimination, harassment, and potential detention by armed forces. Many have ventured to more affordable areas outside Beirut and Mount Lebanon where their sexual orientation and gender identity may expose them to violence and discrimination. Many others relocated to live in collective shelters or gathered with larger groups of friends and acquaintances in order to be able to afford 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, as well as greatly increases the risk of individuals contracting COVID-19.



## SKYROCKETING NEED FOR BASIC ASSISTANCE

According to our survey data, 66% of respondents reported that they did not perform any income-generating activities at the time of taking the survey, of whom 70% said they lost their job during the past year. In fact, almost half of our survey respondents indicated that they relied on other sources of income to make 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.

Trans individuals who face systemic and longstanding barriers to formal education and employment are also often forced to work in low-income jobs in the informal sector, with many resorting to sex work to make ends meet. During the pandemic, many informal businesses have struggled to survive, and demand for sex work services sharply decreased due to a decrease in expendable income, making an already dire situation even more devastating. Similarly, queer refugees, who have 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.

However, it is important to note that the impact of the crisis was not uniform across all members of the community. According to our interviews with queer individuals, CSOs and informal aid groups, Trans individuals, non-binary individuals, and queer refugees seem to be suffering the impact of the crises the most acutely.

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.

The severe impact of this crisis on the financial wellbeing of queer individuals was also confirmed by 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 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 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 into the crisis, a significant indication of the severity of its impact on the queer community.

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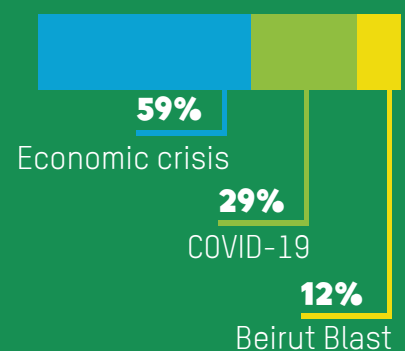


**WE ARE STIFLED FROM ALL ANGLES. WE CANNOT GO OUT WE CANNOT**

**WORK, WE CANNOT RECEIVE PROPER SUPPORT, WE DO NOT HAVE SAFE SPACES TO EXIST"**

said one of the interview participants about his experience as a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon.

### IMPACT OF CRISES ON ACCESS TO SERVICES BASED ON SURVEY DATA



With regard to accessing healthcare services, our survey participants reported an overall decreased access to general health services and sexual and reproductive health services. According to our data, 46% of

participants reported great difficulties accessing general healthcare services since the crisis began, compared to 29% before, while 44% reported the same regarding sexual and reproductive health services, compared to 32% before. These numbers point 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 needs in general and Trans health needs in particular. 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.



## WORSENING MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

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. In fact, mental health was cited unanimously by all our 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 a 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.

**75% OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS SAID THAT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH WAS NEGATIVELY IMPACTED TO A LARGE EXTENT DUE TO THE THREE-LAYERED CRISIS.**

As previously noted, the queer community has faced significant unemployment in the past year. 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 programmes. Moreover, many of the industries employing a high percentage of LGBTQI individuals, like the food and beverage industry, the retail industry, the gig economy<sup>2</sup>, and the informal sector, were hit hard by the pandemic and the Beirut Blast. These financial burdens have taken their toll on the mental wellbeing of members of the LGBTQI community, most of whom reported a direct correlation between the economic crisis and a general increase in levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. In fact, when asked about the main challenges they are currently facing, survey respondents ranked psychological wellbeing first, with an overwhelming margin among cited challenges (74%).

**62%** reported increased exposure to violence in their current living spaces.

**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.

In addition to the financial crisis, social isolation and lockdown measures have been especially difficult for 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, 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 significant shifts in people's lifestyles, social interactions, income generation, and so on<sup>3</sup>. 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

<sup>2</sup>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.

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

respond and tailoring their mental health service provision to online modalities as a contingency measure, it seems that the gap in mental health services and resources available to the LGBTQI community is only getting wider.

## 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.
- ✿ 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.