

POL499- Senior Study Political Science

**Examining the Impact of the Intersectional Identity of Queer Syrian Refugees and their
Access to Health and Social Services, and Economic Opportunities in Lebanon.**

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Date: April 28, 2024.

Abstract

This research paper examines the intersectional identity of being a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon to identify the set of social, health, and economic challenges they have faced. This study also utilizes the Lebanese economic crisis in 2019, COVID-19 pandemic, and the August 4th explosion to illustrate the exacerbation of these challenges. This qualitative study uses and analyzes secondary sources from published scholarly articles and reports from international and Lebanese organizations containing testimonies from multiple people depicting their experiences being a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon. This study reveals that queer Syrian refugees experience violence, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, sexual violence, and have a fear of being outed. These social challenges influence the care they receive by healthcare workers, with many claiming being denied access to care. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a brain drain of healthcare professionals leading to sporadic appointments and exploitation of queer Syrian refugees. On an economic level, queer Syrian refugees experience extreme forms of poverty and unemployment which was only magnified during the economic crisis in 2019, COVID-19 pandemic, and port explosion leading to many transgender Syrian refugees pursuing sex work. Therefore, stressing the importance of implementing legal reforms regarding the legal status of Syrian refugees and decriminalizing same-sex relationships in the country. Other reforms should take place amongst the Lebanese civil society, UNHCR, and the international community to start addressing the social, health, and economic challenges faced by queer Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Keywords: Beirut port explosion, COVID-19, economic challenges, health challenges, intersectional identity, queer, social challenges, Syrian refugees.

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Abbreviations Page:

LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/ questioning, intersex, and asexual/ aromantic. Additionally, the “+” stands for all other identities not included within the acronym.

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

HIV: Human immunodeficiency virus.

STD: Sexually transmitted diseases.

STI: Sexually transmitted infections.

MDTF: Multi-donor trust fund.

NGOs: Non-governmental organizations.

Introduction:

Queer individuals and Syrian refugees face various forms of stigma, discrimination, and violence in Lebanon. This can be witnessed in the economic, social, and health sectors through the years. As such, this study seeks to examine the intersectional identity of being a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon to identify the set of health, economic, and social challenges they have faced. Subsequently, this paper will focus on three developments in Lebanon to explain the development or exacerbation of the economic, social, and health challenges, namely the Lebanese economic crisis in 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the August 4th port explosion in Beirut.

The importance and relevance of the topic is reflected in addressing the intersectional identity of being a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon. The combination of being a member of two highly marginalized groups creates different and harsher experiences of oppression within the country. Therefore, exploring the different landscapes of exclusion can help reveal the diverse experiences and reality of being a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon. Furthermore, utilizing different recent events in Lebanon can help illustrate the impact on minority groups in comparison to the wider population in Lebanon, as there is not enough research that focuses on the queer Syrian community precisely. Therefore, this paper can aid in filling the gap in research and precise areas in which international and local organizations can help improve for the development of rights among queer Syrian refugees.

Therefore, this paper will argue that queer Syrian Refugees in Lebanon are more vulnerable to economic, health, and social challenges due to their intersectional refugee status and queer identity. These challenges may include being excluded from their refugee community due to their queer identity and barriers to education due to the systemic prejudice, which may

impact their ability to attain a job, and subsequently further their income disparities within the host country. Additionally, the intersection of their queer identity and refugee status may contribute to their difficulty accessing healthcare and sexual health services. Hence, this research paper aims to first identify the health, economic, and social challenges that queer Syrian refugees have faced in Lebanon. Subsequently, the study will examine three key events that have shaped these challenges which are as follows: the Lebanese economic crisis in 2019 in combination with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the August 4th explosion. Lastly, this paper will present key recommendations for various stakeholders to best address and effectively manage these challenges and ensure the rights of queer Syrian refugees.

As such, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- i. To what extent has the intersectional identity of queer Syrian refugees impacted their access to social and healthcare services, as well as economic opportunities in Lebanon?
- ii. To what extent did the Lebanese economic crisis in 2019 affect the economic, health, and social challenges faced by queer Syrian refugees?
- iii. How were the economic, health, and social challenges of queer Syrian refugees enhanced by the healthcare crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- iv. In what ways did the August 4th explosion contribute to the worsening of queer Syrian refugees' economic, health, and social challenges?

Key concepts:**i. Economic challenges:**

Economic challenges refer to the specific financial, employment, and socioeconomic obstacles that impact the well-being of individuals in a society. Among queer Syrian refugees in Lebanon these challenges are witnessed through extreme poverty, unemployment, and difficulty accessing essential services.

ii. Health challenges:

Health challenges refer to the obstacles and disparities that impact and limit individuals in a society from accessing health and sexual services. Queer Syrian refugees in Lebanon face these disparities due to their intersectional status and queer identity. Among this group, challenges may cover the lack of access to HIV/STD testing, basic health services such as doctor appointments, and gender affirming care (Diab et al., 2024).

iii. Social Challenges:

Social challenges refer to the dilemmas that influence and impact the social interaction between individuals and communities. Among queer Syrian refugees in Lebanon these dilemmas take on the form of fear of discrimination, hostility, and stigma among the refugee community for being queer, within the queer community for being a refugee, and within the host country for the duality of their identity. The interaction of the social, legal, and cultural underlying forces within the host country creates struggles for the lack of access to supportive communities and social services, and the negative responses from family members (Younes, 2023a).

iv. Refugee:

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention a “refugee is a person with a well-founded fear of persecution based on one of five grounds – race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion – who is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of their country of nationality or, if stateless, country of habitual residence” (UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency, n.d.). However, exceptional cases exist for specific groups such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

v. **Queer individuals:**

The term queer describes the sexual and gender identities of individuals who are not heterosexual and cisgendered. These individuals typically do not conform to cultural standards regarding gender and/ or sexuality (Tuttlec, 2011). It is also used as an umbrella term for the entire LGBTQIA+ community. As such, when this paper refers to “queer individuals” it includes, but is not limited to, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people (On Canada Project, 2022).

Methodology:

This research paper is a qualitative study that utilizes and analyzes secondary sources. These secondary sources are published scholarly articles, reports from international and Lebanese organizations, and journal articles. Additional sources include academic articles published in journals and in partnership with organizations. Such sources include reports from Human Rights Watch, Helem, and Amnesty international. The sources were selected based on

recency of the publication and their relevance to the specific concentration of the research. As such, these articles contain case studies from multiple people illustrating their experiences being a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon with respect to the study conducted. Nevertheless, one of the limitations of this study is the disproportionate number of transgender women and gay men studied in comparison to the rest of the LGBTQ+ community. This is typical in LGBTQIA+ research in the Middle East, perhaps because those two groups are more visible, more willing to be interviewed, or due to the perception of masculinity and masculine gender roles in the Middle East. For a more accurate look on the community, further research should include bisexual, gender non-conforming, or lesbian individuals in their studies.

Theoretical framework:

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, studies “intersecting social identities and systems of oppression, domination, and discrimination” (Miller & Bassett, 2020). Therefore, this theory seeks to examine how various forms of identities, such as gender, religion, race, sexuality, class, age, nationality, and others, interact across different levels with one another. Peter Hopkins (2018) states that when these different forms of identities are merged, they alter the experience of oppression. This study examines how the nationality, gender and sexual orientation, and refugee status form a unique form of oppression for queer Syrian refugees in the context of a Lebanese society. Refugees in Lebanon face multiple forms of oppression and violence from the government, refugee and queer communities, their families,

and the Lebanese population. The fact that they are LGBTQIA+, Syrian, and refugees adds to their discrimination in Lebanon, where all three communities face stigmas.

The 2011 Syrian Conflict and Refugee Crisis:

In March of 2011, the Syrian government issued a suppression of protests within the country following the arrest of two teenagers for anti-government graffiti (Syria Refugee Crisis Explained, 2023). This sparked outrage among the population, and the mass protests that broke out across the country were violently suppressed by government security forces. The conflict escalated into a civil war, forcing Syrians to flee to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan, with Germany serving as the sole non-neighboring host country. Lebanon currently hosts 1.5 million Syrian refugees who fled the civil war in 2011 due to persecution and conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This is the largest number of refugees per capita in the world, with 950,000 registered with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon (Yassin, 2023). However, when the crisis first began in 2011, the Lebanese government refused to create a proper government agency to organize the affairs of the Syrian refugees entering the country (Yassin, 2023). This first step created the many issues regarding the number of Syrian refugees Lebanon hosts today, as the previous open-door policy for Syrian refugees placed in 2012 allowed for the increase in the number refugees in the first place (AUB, 2020).

Despite the fact that Lebanese government is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, they still have a responsibility under other international frameworks to ensure the preservation of rights of the refugee community as well as under the Lebanese legal framework regulating refugee status in the country. While the legal term of “refugee” is present in Lebanon, the restrictive policies make it difficult to obtain resulting in many unregistered Syrian refugees. Furthermore, the government utilizes these policies to avoid the responsibility of granting rights to refugees. Instead, terms such as “temporarily displaced individuals,” “migrant workers,” and “asylum seekers” have been used to identify the unregistered Syrian refugees.

In 2014, a new Lebanese government was formed, and a Crisis Cell was established to manage the refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2015). In June of that year the government released an official document illustrating the goals regarding the crisis which are as follows: firstly, denying access to Syrian refugees entering from countries not bordered with Lebanon; secondly, the review of refugees and subsequently removal of their refugee status if they entered the country due to economic reasons or have travelled back to Syrian since entering Lebanon; and lastly, encouraging the creation of refugee camps in Syrian or in the “no-man’s land” between Syria and Lebanon (UNHCR, 2015, p. 2). Furthermore, the Lebanese government stated that the responsibility regarding the refugees was to be placed onto the UN along with local and international nongovernmental organizations (Yassin, 2023). Thus, the government asked UNHCR to review cases of all registered Syrian refugees who went to Syrian and returned to Lebanon after the 1st of June in 2014. The government provided data regarding 1.5 million cross-border transit of Syrians in June and July to UNHCR to review, resulting in 16,000 cases of 36,000 reviewed cases to be inactivated (UNHCR, 2015).

In October of 2014, the Crisis Cell revealed a new refugee policy to the Lebanese Cabinet with three major goals. Firstly, reducing the number of refugees by preventing them from entering the country, unless in unforeseen and exceptional humanitarian cases, and supporting the return of Syrian refugees back to Syria or to other countries by any means necessary. Secondly, in order to maintain security within the country, municipalities were required to maintain a census of refugees. Thirdly, the government were to prevent unlawful employment of Syrians, ensure their received humanitarian assistance, and secure funding from government institutions through the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) and via programs designed to develop the Lebanese economy. The adoption of these policies led to the restricted flow of refugees into Lebanon. Moreover, the International Crisis Group (2020) revealed that new visa requirements were introduced for Syrians entering the country to enforce the policy announced in October of 2014.

In January 2015, the General Directorate of General Security prohibited the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from registering Syrian refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2023). However, Syrian refugees already registered were still able to renew their residency permit for six months if they paid 200 USD (UNHCR, 2015). These refugees still had additional requirements such as obtaining a valid UNHCR registration card for a minimum of six months, a housing contract signed by a landlord that is also recognized by the *Mukhtar* (village leader), and a signed and notarized document stating the refugee will not work in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2015). This means that Syrian refugees legally can only continue to live their lives through humanitarian assistance (CARE International, 2018). Kikano et al. (2021) revealed that this document is extremely difficult to acquire as majority of Syrian refugees do not have formal rent contracts with their landlord. Even if they had a contract, many municipalities try to prevent

Syrians from registering the rent agreements. Moreover, in some cases refugees may also be required to vow to leave Lebanon once their residency permit expires or if requested by the Lebanese government. This is a violation of customary international law known as non-refoulement, which dictates that countries are not allowed to return or send a refugee to a country where they would face “torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm” (United Nations Network on Migration, 2018). Subsequently, this created an increased number of unregistered Syrian refugees in the country as these restricted policies made it more difficult for Syrians to maintain or even obtain legal residency (International Crisis Group, 2020). As of March 2023, only 17% of Syrian refugees hold legal residency in Lebanon (UNHCR et al., 2023).

This helps to show how Lebanon is a country of temporary displacement awaiting the relocation of refugees through the government’s restrictive migration policies over the years, placing the responsibility of the Syrian refugees solely on UNHCR and local NGOs, and the resistance to any integration of Syrians in Lebanon. Moreover, the government’s implementation of new residency renewal directives in January 2015 has caused approximately 70% of Syrians to lose their legal status (Feinstein International Center & Akram, 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that these policies exist to make the lives of Syrian refugees increasingly more difficult to encourage them to voluntarily going back to Syria (Yasin, 2023). As a result, refugees who enter the country irregularly are considered "illegal" under the law and are subjected to expulsion by Lebanese Security Forces (Yasin, 2023). Therefore, these restrictive policies were a driving force for the lack of legal status for Syrian refugees, subsequently inhibiting their access to social, health, and economic services in Lebanon.

Rights and Vulnerabilities of LGBTQIA+ Communities in Lebanon:

After Lebanon gained independence against the French in 1943, the government established a new penal code which criminalized same-sex relations (Article 534) and gender expression (Article 521). Article 534 prohibits "sexual intercourse against nature" and carries a maximum sentence of one year in prison (Human Dignity Trust, 2023). This quote has been applied to LGBTQIA+ people in legal proceedings. Furthermore, anal examinations were forced to be used as evidence in accordance with this law to prove they had sexual intercourse against nature, despite medical professionals' objections. However, due to widespread opposition, this practice is no longer used by police officers (Human Dignity Trust, 2023). Moreover, Article 521 prohibits gender expression because a man cannot "disguise himself as a woman" and is punishable by up to six months in prison (Younes, 2023a). Furthermore, Younes (2023a) reveals that police forces have often interpreted this law as means to target transgender women as their official documents, stating they are male, and their gender expression (female presenting) do not match one another.

Discrimination against the queer community has been widespread throughout Lebanon, with acts of violence primarily targeting gay men and transgender women. Because of Lebanon's patriarchal society, transgender women are frequently harassed and physically abused. Furthermore, despite numerous court rulings between 2007 and 2017 stating that same-sex sexual activity is not a crime, this has not been extended to the higher courts (Human Dignity Trust, 2023). Although these rulings are encouraging, another added layer of difficulty in decriminalizing same-sex relationships is the absence of a precedent-setting legal framework in

Lebanon. As a result, there is still a risk of being arrested because of one's sexual orientation or gender (Human Dignity Trust, 2023). In March 2018, a right-wing Christian Democratic Kataeb party revealed their plans to decriminalize same-sex acts and in July 2023 nine members of Parliament introduced a bill for the same purpose along with repealing Article 534. However, online harassment campaigns from political and religious leaders have halted the proceedings, especially after a member of Parliament withdrew his signature due to backlash against the bill (Human Dignity Trust, 2023). Still, in August of 2023, a member of parliament and the Caretaker Minister of Culture introduced two different bills that would clearly criminalize same-sex relationships between adults and punish those who “promote sexuality” (Human Dignity Trust, 2023). Furthermore, according to these recent bills individuals promoting homosexuality can be imprisoned for up to three years.

A Breakdown of Lebanon’s 2019 Economic Crisis, Covid-19 Pandemic, and the 2020 Beirut

Port Blast:

In 1997, the Lebanese government fixed the Lebanese pound against the US dollar at the rate of 1,507.5. It is imperative to mention that the Lebanese financial system has been described as a “nationally regulated Ponzi scheme” where fresh money was borrowed to pay current creditors (Blair, 2022). Yet, the government was able to balance its payments through tourism, foreign aid, remittances, and the banking sector. The economic crisis was inevitable considering the

politicians would take out loans from the banks, and soon would borrow more than they were making, thus, creating a deficit (Middle East Eye, 2022).

A report from the World Bank revealed that over the past 30 years the government and Lebanese banks have been misusing a large amount of people's saving (Middle East Eye, 2022). Moreover, Lebanon has a continuous trade deficit and at the end of 2022 created a deficit of 6.48 billion in US dollars (World Bank, n.d.). The culmination of these factors contributed to the eventual economic crisis in October 2019 (Blair, 2022). In 2024, the exchange rate is now 89,700 Lebanese Pounds at 1 US dollar and lost more than 98% of its value since 2019 (Bechara, 2024; Lira Rate App, 2022).

Shortly after the onset of the economic crisis, Lebanon was hit with its first COVID-19 case at the end of February 2020. On March 14th, 2020, the government declared a medical state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Chayya et al., 2021). Subsequently, announced the closing of the only airport in the country, along with seaports and other land entries. Additionally, all non-essential businesses were forced to close, leaving markets and drug stores open. Following this decision, a nation-wide lockdown was declared for the entire population. As later revealed by UNHCR, 2,339 Syrian refugees contracted COVID-19 by the end of 2020 (UNHCR, 2021). Moreover, 22,000 Syrian refugees only had temporary cash support in 2020 to help alleviate the pressure from the economic crisis and pandemic.

Subsequently, the occurrence of the Beirut port explosion on August 4th, 2020, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history, added even more suffering in Lebanon as this event killed at least 220 people, wounded over 7,000, displaced over 300,000 people, and caused extreme property damage (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Additionally, "transport, energy, water

supply and sanitation, and municipal service” infrastructure were exposed to massive destruction (Majzoub, 2023). This incident was later revealed to be due to government negligence and corruption as 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate were improperly stored at a hangar in Beirut’s Port. The World Bank estimated that the blast caused \$3.8-4.6 billion in physical damage (Majzoub, 2023).

Social, Economic and Health Challenges of LGBTQIA+ Syrian Refugees in Lebanon:

Before delving into the social, health and economic challenges, it is important to understand the hierarchy within the refugee community, specifically, refugees who are registered with UNHCR versus those who are not. Registered Syrian refugees have access to services such as health care, which are partially funded by UNHCR (Diab et al., 2024). Meanwhile, those who are not registered have difficulty accessing or paying for services, such as consultations, testing and medication, which causes refugees to neglect their health (European Commission, 2023; as cited in Diab et al., 2024). This is especially evident in present-day Lebanon, where 90% of Syrian refugees are unable to meet their most basic needs (European Commission, 2023). However, both registered and unregistered refugees still face similar levels of social stigma within Lebanon. Furthermore, despite registered Syrian refugees receiving aid from UNHCR they are still unable to afford necessities after they pay their rent (Younes, 2023a). This highlights that even though there is a hierarchy within the refugee community, both unregistered and registered refugees do not have their basic needs met.

Social Challenges: Interactions with Family and Lebanese Authorities:

A study conducted by Human Rights Watch in 2023 revealed that LGBTQIA+ individuals are more likely to be targeted due to their intersecting forms of marginalization such as their class, legal status, lack of government protections, health status, and pressure to conform to the heteronormative social norms in the MENA region. Research illustrates that queer people often experience various forms of stigma and violence, negatively impacting their physical, mental, and social health (Abboud et al., 2023). Queer Syrian refugees in Lebanon also face at least two forms of vulnerability: their queer identity and their refugee status, especially when interacting with Lebanese authorities (Younes, 2023b). A study by Legal Action Worldwide (2024) further supported this, adding that queer Syrian refugees face systemic barriers: accessing employment, healthcare services, education, and even owning property which further excludes and stigmatizes them in Lebanon.

According to a collaborative study by MOSAIC, HELEM and Human Rights Watch in 2023, transgender women in Lebanon face systemic discrimination due to multiple forms of marginalization, including class, sect, regulating of non-normative behavior, heteronormative social values, and government negligence (Younes, 2023a). Discrimination against transgender individuals in Lebanon is a form of structural violence, where legal, economic, political, and medical institutions prevent them from meeting basic needs (Younes, 2023b). Furthermore, queer refugees often face extreme forms of violence as testimonies from LGBTQIA+ refugees have emphasized these experiences ranging from being beaten on the street to being sexually assaulted by groups of people (Amnesty International, 2021; Diab,

2021). Interestingly, Diab (2021) reveals that this type of aggression against queer refugees are committed by other refugees and people of the host country.

A study by Younes (2023a) examining the systemic discrimination against transgender women, revealed that Syrian transgender women face increased arbitrary arrests by Lebanese authorities due to their gender identity and refugee status. As a result, female transgender refugees are susceptible to being mocked, physically abused, face random arrests, and the threat of being deported. This well-founded fear is often due to these women not having legal residency papers to stay in Lebanon, which subsequently leads to them not reporting abuse they face. The cases of Natalie and Carmen reported by Human Rights Watch in 2023, two transgender Syrian women, are indicative of this reality. Natalie was stopped at a checkpoint in the North of Lebanon with her cisgender Syrian friend, and when asked by the soldiers about her gender she stated she was a girl. However, after providing her Syrian ID (stating she was a male) she was forced out of her car, and afterwards was mocked and cursed at for hours. It was not until her friend paid the soldiers that they let her leave. Nevertheless, the xenophobic and transphobic comments still haunt Natalie to this day. In the case of Carmen, her brother beat her for being transgender, but could not report him. She spoke about the past experiences with her friends who were picked up by the police and charged with sodomy. This creates a system of impunity where queer refugees are reluctant to report abuse. As stated in a study by the Heartland Alliance (2014), 56% of queer Syrian refugees reported being physically assaulted in Lebanon. However, only 7% of the participants reported these incidents to the police revealing the lack of trust as well as fear of the police in Lebanon (Heartland Alliance, 2014; as cited in Chaaya, 2021).

This fear is well-demonstrated as in May of 2017 a transgender Syrian woman named Mirna was targeted by military forces, and subsequently physically and mentally abused by them in the army base (Younes, 2023a). The soldiers searched Mirna's bags and phone, and they later called her a "faggot" and beat her multiple times as the soldiers thought she was wearing makeup in a photo. They terrorized her by threatening to shave her hair, electrocute her with a taser, and even forced her to take her clothes off. In another instance, when seven armed men saw a Syrian gay man named Ifran kissing another man they began to record them and subsequently beat Ifran, but not the man he was kissing as he was European. This illustrates a prime example of the xenophobic rhetoric instilled within the Lebanese population. As Ifran described it, he was arrested for being gay, but beaten for being Syrian. A study by the Heartland Alliance in 2014 supports this experience, revealing that 56% of queer Syrians reported being physically assaulted and 29% had been threatened due to their sexuality or gender identity (as cited in Abboud et al., 2023). Abboud et al. discovered that any queer individual, especially if they are Syrian, will face some form of discrimination and stigma based on their sexual orientation (2023).

A study by Tufts University also revealed that many queer Syrian refugees in Beirut have broken all their ties with their families (McKellar, 2020). Consequently, they have reported losing their support system, especially in difficult situations. In a study by the Heartland Alliance (2014) describing the impacts of the Syrian civil war and displacement of the queer population, 29% of the respondents experienced being threatened or blackmailed in Lebanon (as cited in Chayya et al., 2021). This was prompted by prejudice based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Moreover, Human Rights Watch have documented cases in which queer individuals have been outed to their families via online platforms, resulting in them being exposed to violence at the hands of their family members such as threatening to kill, beat, kicking them out, and exposing them to conversion therapy as method to “cure” them (Younes, 2023a). Yaaqoub, an unregistered Syrian gay male refugee, represents a case where his boyfriend weaponized his sexuality and outed him to his family via Facebook. His boyfriend sexually assaulted him on camera at knife point. After Yaaqoub broke up with him, his ex-boyfriend posted the video to Facebook and tagged his brother in retaliation. Resulting in Yaaqoub being on the run as his brother threatened to kill him (Younes, 2023a). A study by Clare (2015) discussing the intersections of sexuality, refugeehood, and nationality among Syrian gay men, revealed that the sexuality of the interviewees continues to provide a source of anxiety in relation to acceptance. For example, Kareem, an interviewee, tied acceptance to social morals and his family’s status. He stated that even if the war in Syria ended, he could never go back, as his neighborhood is extremely religious, and he would not be forgiven for being gay. Therefore, to Kareem acceptance is impossible to achieve, thus, illustrating how social stigma impacts the well-being and mental health of queer Syrian refugees.

Health Challenges: Obstacles in Obtaining healthcare services:

According to Diab et al. (2024, p. 2), the challenges faced by queer Syrian refugees in accessing healthcare or specific services is due to a combination of social, cultural, and gender related stigma. However, when queer individuals do receive gender-specific care it is often

focused on HIV or STI testing rather than more directed health matters such as continued hormone therapy for transgender refugees. Furthermore, in general “gender-sensitive” health services are unsuccessful in understanding the diversity of queer individuals within the refugee community. This results in a gap in targeting queer refugees with tailored programs for them when it comes to these types of services (Nabulsi et al., 2021; as cited in Diab et al., 2024).

According to Feinstein International Center and Akram (2020), at least 10% of the queer community contracted an STD but are unable to seek medical attention or help. Moreover, transgender men and women have various mental health and psychological issues, which is especially true if they are accessing hormone treatments and other types of care and education regarding their transition. Queer Syrian refugees often need substantial psychological care due to years of displacement, cruel treatment by the public, recurrent periods of homelessness, and inability to access employment opportunities leading them to work in sex trade (Feinstein International Center and Akram, 2020). As such, this has taken a toll on the mental health of many queer Syrian refugees, resulting in many of them considering suicide.

Other barriers include the lack of health literacy among refugees, absence of knowledge regarding the healthcare system, and restricted knowledge of gender from healthcare workers that refugees have access to (Cloeters & Osseiran, 2019; as cited in Diab et al., 2024). Along with sociocultural and structural barriers refugees face in obtaining gender-sensitive healthcare, queer refugees are also reluctant to request these types of services or reveal any information regarding their gender. This is partly due to the fear of being discriminated against, but also from the stigma linked to requesting these services such as birth control, STI testing, and gender-based violence or sexual health support. Many queer refugees flee from places such as Akkar and Tripoli to Beirut as it provides them with opportunities to obtain health services and even meet

various members of their communities. Statements made by queer refugees firmly assert the discrimination they have received in Tripoli and Akkar by healthcare workers or institutions such as being denied access through dismissals or workers unwilling to help them due to homophobia, sexism, and fear (Diab, et al., 2024).

Diab et al. (2024) revealed that social and cultural stigma revolving around gender roles is a leading factor for queer refugees being hesitant to obtain health services in Akkar and Tripoli. Interviewees of the study expressed that reporting about their sexual and reproductive health, mental health, forms of sexual assault and gender-based violence present an immense danger for them. Furthermore, queer refugees within the respondents also have a fear of being outed by their healthcare providers resulting in community retribution and rejection. A transgender woman from Akkar indicated that she tries her best to hide her sexuality and gender orientation from her healthcare providers as some in the past have refused to help her. Additionally, she expressed genuine fear and worry over the possibility of her doctor finding out. Queer refugees that participated in the study also revealed that their gender identity has a direct impact in gaining healthcare support. For example, a transgender refugee woman in Tripoli expressed hardship when trying to find organizations to support her healthcare needs as a trans woman. This has not only deprived her from attaining health and mental health services, but also kept her out of the narrative surrounding refugee health. This highlights a flaw within humanitarian programs as there are not enough tailored programs specifically for queer refugees (Diab, 2023).

On another note, a former UNHCR staff worker also revealed that unregistered refugees from the queer community are one of the most “isolated and cut-off refugees in Lebanon” (Diab et al., 2024). Being a registered refugee with UNHCR provides some assistance to the most

vulnerable members of the queer refugee community regarding healthcare services. For instance, when a trans refugee woman was sexually assaulted and informed UNHCR after two weeks she was able to obtain a free examination along with medication. However, unregistered transgender people do not receive such support, and instead have fewer clear processes for support.

Economic Challenges: Impact of Unemployment:

In Lebanon, queer Syrian refugees face extreme poverty and unemployment due to discrimination against their queer and refugee identities (Girardet, 2020). This leads to difficulty accessing essential services such as housing as well as having to rely on exploitative working environments (Younes, 2023a). For example, landlords in Lebanon often discriminate against Syrian refugees through high rent prices. However, when Hasna's landlord discovered her gender identity he beat and evicted her. Additionally, making a group of conservatives call and threaten to kill her if she did not leave the apartment (Younes, 2023a). Despite receiving aid from UNHCR, many registered refugees still cannot afford necessities after paying their rent. This is indicative of Elsa's experience as even if she rented a small bedroom apartment, she could not afford food or her other bills. Therefore, many queer refugees end up in shared households and even then, many transgender Syrians end up leaving due to their roommates harming them. This is exemplified through Randa's experience when she was forced to share an apartment with three straight Syrian men, who later gang raped her after learning of her gender identity (Younes, 2023a). Scared of being deported if she reported the incident, Randa left and found a one-bedroom apartment near a Palestinian refugee camp. She later had to have a

roommate, and one night when her partner was over, her roommate started a fight. Then, he told the entire refugee camp about her identity, and she was forced to leave, or she would have been killed.

Regarding employment, the Lebanese labor system often creates barriers to entry for refugees as they are dependent on Lebanese sponsors to maintain employment. This creates an unequal and exploitative work environment, which is intensified for queer refugees. However, transgender refugees often face obstacles due to their non-adherence to traditional gender roles and expression, leading them to be excluded from the work force as they lack a Lebanese sponsor. Mirna, a 22-year-old transgender Syrian woman, could not apply for labor work because she is an unregistered refugee (Younes, 2023a). However, even if she found someone to hire her without legal documents, they would not accept her due to her being a transgender woman. Moreover, even if transgender refugees have legal documents, they are still marginalized from the work force due to the discrepancies of their outward gender expression and gender listed on their identity documents.

On another note, many queer Syrian refugees are desperate to find employment which leads them to be exploited. This abuse is often in the form of sexual harassment, low wages, unjust working hours, and a lack of benefits. For instance, a Syrian transgender woman named Natalie was sexually harassed by a man when she was seeking a job. He also told her that because of her appearance and nationality no one would hire her. This illustrates the conundrum for queer refugees as it is nearly impossible for them to secure employment under fair and safe conditions. Additionally, queer Syrian refugees are not protected under Lebanese labor laws, which furthers employers' ability to exploit them. For example, a transgender woman named Mirna was

working 12-hour days for only \$132 a month until she quit because her employer refused to pay her (Younes, 2023a).

Furthermore, queer Syrian refugees often face arbitrary dismissals due to their sexuality and gender orientation (Younes, 2023a). Carmen, a transgender Syrian woman exemplifies this occurrence as she was fired due to comments of how she dressed and that it would impact the business' reputation. She was called a "faggot" and had to become a housekeeper for her aunt for 5,000 Lebanese Lira as she could not find another job afterwards. In another instance, a transgender woman named Miriam was also fired because her employer's wife thought she was gay. This illustrates the true reality of how simple gossip or rumors can alter the lives of queer refugees for the worse.

As previously illustrated, many transgender refugees are unable to maintain or even obtain jobs due to discrimination, leading them to work as escorts or sex workers to make a living (Younes, 2023a). Even though Lebanon has a law that regulates sex work, it is not properly enforced as the government no longer issues licenses, leaving sex workers to be arrested as they are not registered with the government (Sala, 2020). Many queer individuals, especially transgender women, practice sex work as a means of employment because "it was their only option" (Younes, 2023a). Additionally, many transgender women also reported being blackmailed by their customers and the police, which deterred them from reporting any violent crime committed against them.

Impact of the Economic Crisis, Covid-19, and the Port Explosion on Queer Syrian Refugees:

Interviews with queer Syrian refugees revealed that consequences of both COVID-19 and the economic crisis in 2019 are still being endured in Akkar where many Syrian refugees reside (Diab et al., 2024). Some include supply shortages, costly services and transportation, and hurdles to receiving exceptional standards of healthcare. Testimonies disclosed that many queer Syrian refugees are often bribed, tortured, and go through exhaustive lengths just to attain healthcare. For instance, a key informant revealed many “horror stories” of transgender refugees being extorted into doing something for a brief checkup (Diab et al., 2024).

The crisis also contributed to the unaffordable costs of services within areas refugees reside in. Additionally, despite the UN covering 75% of healthcare costs for operations, medications and doctor appointments, refugees still need to cover the remaining 25%. As the economic crisis worsened this now equates to over 100% of what the 25% used to be. To add on, registered Syrian refugees are paid for by family by the UNHCR and not by person, which means that they only receive five million Lebanese pounds per family (Diab et al., 2024). However, in 2022 and 2023, the UNHCR cut back \$180 million in cash assistance for refugees in Jordan, Yemen, and Lebanon in favor of Ukrainian refugees following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Medina, 2023). Many queer refugees reported to *Syria Direct* of not receiving any cash assistance. For instance, Loujain, a trans Syrian woman, revealed that her only source of income was from an NGO and her boyfriend’s job. Since then, she has had to pause her hormone treatments to afford necessities such as food and water for the past two years.

The economic crisis also contributed to the brain drain of medical health professionals (Ramadan, 2022; as cited in Diab et al., 2024). According to the World Health Organization, in 2021, almost 40% of doctors in Lebanon and 30% of nurses migrated outside the country since

the start of the crisis in October 2019. This has created an immense shortage of healthcare workers in the country, and disproportionately impacted different regions. In Akkar and Tripoli in particular, the shortage has presented itself through sporadic appointments, excessive waiting periods, and an inability to tackle medical crises such as labor, gender-based violence, and STIs.

Diab et al. (2024), claims that the crisis has increased the “vulnerability, exploitation, and bribery” of queer refugees when seeking healthcare services. For example, a transgender Syrian woman tried to obtain medicine after she had been sexually assaulted by her landlord for not being able to pay rent. However, a female nurse was visibly contentious towards her and refused to give her pain medication or even a bandage. The nurse was clearly homophobic and transphobic as witnessed through the slurs she yelled back at the patient. Furthermore, since she is not a registered refugee this creates another layer of vulnerability since UNHCR cannot help her access needed healthcare such as STI testing.

On a social scale, the economic crisis meant that queer Syrian refugees had to move back in with their families as many individuals lost their jobs, leading them to go back into the closet for their safety. Furthermore, many Syrian refugees became unemployed after the lockdown as they primarily worked in the informal sector in odd jobs such as construction and delivery drivers. The A Project and MOSAIC, local LGBTQIA+ rights organizations, also revealed to have an increased number of calls to their mental health hotlines during the pandemic (Salem & Shaaban, n.d.). This infers the mental stress that many queer individuals faced during the pandemic. Oxfam revealed a testimony of a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon, and he expressed the difficulties he faced due to his identity within the current socioeconomic climate (Abed & Aouad, 2021). He stated that he cannot work, receive any type of support, and no longer has a safe space to even exist.

The Beirut port blast during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic crisis further burdened the healthcare system, with half of the facilities becoming inoperable. The blast heightened the number of COVID-19 cases, and many hospitals were struggling to admit the increased number of patients after the blast first occurred. Considering the healthcare system was overburdened, many queer people and queer refugees naturally found it even more difficult to access services such as hormone treatment or mental health services. However, this was, in part, also due to discrimination, lack of documentation on the issue, and the services being unaffordable (Chayya et al., 2021).

Moreover, research shows that the queer community in Lebanon underwent a housing crisis, as 41% of those surveyed by Oxfam stated they could not afford their rent, 58% indicated their homes were damaged, and 35% were displaced (Jahshan, 2021). Furthermore, following the port explosion, 70% of the community lost their jobs and had to rely on their families for support. Many refugees work in the informal sector of the economy, but queer refugees frequently struggle to find informal employment due to discrimination within the refugee community (Hirschberg, 2020). Nonetheless, the destruction of many neighborhoods, where the informal sector had previously thrived, resulted in many queer refugees becoming unemployed. As a result, many people became drug dealers or criminals to survive the worsening circumstances, with some eventually becoming drug addicts. Damage to queer-friendly neighborhoods such as Gemayze and Mar Mkhayel resulted in a lack of safe spaces for the community (Sewell, 2021). Additionally, areas such as Burj Hammoud were targeted by police following the blast, making it even more dangerous for queer people to live there. This forced queer people to return home with their parents and conceal their sexual and gender identities (Jahshan, 2021). Queer refugees

who could not return to their families, especially trans individuals, became homeless and were more likely to be exploited.

Recommendations:

The following section presents a list of recommendations for the Lebanese government, Lebanese civil society, UNHCR, and the international community to take to start resolving the social, health, and economic issues queer Syrian refugees face.

Lebanese Government:

- Legal reform via repealing Article 534 from the Penal Code that is being used to discriminate against queer individuals. Additionally, Article 521 should be amended to specify that “men cannot dress up as women” for the purpose of targeting other women to stop the targeting of transgender women.
- Pass a comprehensive bill which explicitly prohibits and criminalizes the discrimination, physical and mental harm, or abuse against LGBTQ+ individuals in all private and public locations. These include but are not limited to healthcare, employment, government, education, housing, commercial establishments, and hospitality sectors (Legal Action Worldwide, 2024). The same law should be created for Syrian refugees, whether registered or unregistered with UNHCR. Furthermore, this law should include effective measures to detect and address said discrimination, allowing for an effective solution.
- Repeal Article 523 of the Penal Code to decriminalize prostitution in Lebanon.

- Provide comprehensive training for judiciary members on gender identity and sexuality in partnership with LGBTQIA+ organizations and UNHCR.
- Repeal the decision by Interior Minister Bassam Al-Mawlawi on June 24, 2022, which effectively banned events “promoting sexual perversion” (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This letter specifically referred to upcoming pro-LGBTQIA+ events.
- Start formulating a clear migration policy regarding Syrian refugees by working with UNHCR. Moreover, the government should conduct a census in partnership with UNCHR of the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and continue to allow the registration of refugees with the agency, therefore, helping to manage the needs of queer Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
- Expand the employment sectors in which Syrian refugees are allowed to work in.
- Allow Syrian refugees without legal residency a pathway to obtain legal status.
- Lebanese authorities need to respect the non-refoulement principle and stop committing arbitrary arrests, coercing, and subsequently deporting unregistered or registered Syrian refugees back to Syria.
- Ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.

Civil Society:

- Partner with international actors such as governments and other organizations to change public perception of queer Syrian refugees by “promoting their rights and a narrative that dispel misconceptions, misinformation and prejudiced views” regarding the community (Legal Action Worldwide, 2024). In doing so, members of the civil society should work

on media campaigns depicting accurate representation of life stories of queer Syrian refugees.

- Exert pressure on the government to repeal Article 534 of the Penal Code through advocacy, lobbying, and protesting.
- NGOs should establish programs to increase support systems for queer refugees via social community centers and workshops.
- Ensure access to emergency shelters for transgender refugees who face sexual and gender-based violence.

UNHCR:

- The UNHCR should ensure all staff members practice tolerance and non-discrimination toward the LGBTQIA+ community via a written policy. Subsequently, investigate and actively respond to any accusations against staff members who refuse to assist queer refugees or exhibit bias or discrimination.
- Partner with the Lebanese government to start registering refugees to ensure their protection and access to economic, healthcare and other services.
- Accelerate the resettlement of queer refugees to nations that do not sanction individuals based on their queer identity and is considered openly queer friendly. Additionally, queer refugees should not be sent to a host country for relocation that criminalizes same-sex relationships and transgender individuals.
- Create advocacy campaigns with local NGOs to ban the arrests of queer refugees based on their lack of residency status and queer identity.

International Community and Donors:

- Conduct further research on queer Syrian refugees and identify other challenges, specifically focusing on bisexual, lesbian, and male transgender refugees as they are under-represented in research.
- Fund initiatives led by queer refugees to provide “medical access, financial assistance, legal assistance, and employment” (Younes, 2023a).

Conclusion:

By analyzing the intersectional identity of being a queer Syrian refugee in Lebanon, this study has been able to identify the set of health, economic, and social challenges they have faced. Subsequently, this research paper examines how and to what extent the health, economic, and social challenges were impacted by the economic crisis in 2019, COVID-19 pandemic, and the August 4th explosion. The results of the study show that queer Syrian refugees experience various forms of violence such as sexual and physical abuse. Additionally, queer Syrian refugees face homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, while living in fear of being outed by those in close proximity to them, namely their healthcare providers. Queer Syrian refugees often avoid seeking healthcare due to this fear as being outed by the latter may cause them to be shunned by the refugee community due to discrimination against their sexual and gender orientation. Furthermore, as social and cultural stigmas surrounding the queer community remain rampant in Lebanese society, queer Syrian refugees are hesitant to seek medical attention especially in North Lebanon.

On another note, as the status of refugee is generally looked down upon and discriminated against in Lebanon, most Syrian refugees live in poverty. Queer refugees experience poverty more severely as they are queer on top of being refugees and are thus especially discriminated against. This socioeconomic status makes it difficult for queer Syrian refugees to seek medical attention as they cannot afford it. According to several queer Syrian refugees' employers often use long working hours and low wages with no benefits as means to exploit them. Some have also reported experiencing sexual harassment and unjust dismissals which put them at risk as their unemployment pushes them towards sex work.

On another front, the culmination of the economic crisis, COVID-19, and the Beirut port explosion led to an overburdened healthcare system and the brain drain of many healthcare professionals. This resulted in sporadic appointments, excessive waiting periods, and difficulty for many queer refugees to access hormone treatment or mental health services. Moreover, the economic crisis has increased the vulnerability and exploitation of queer Syrian refugees in the form of bribery in the healthcare setting. The port explosion on August 4th also destroyed many queer friendly locations in Beirut, leading to the loss of safe spaces.

Thus, exemplifying a need for a pathway to start addressing these challenges. As such, this paper recommends various legal reforms in the Lebanese Penal Code such as repealing Article 534. Furthermore, the Lebanese government and UNHCR need to cooperate with one another to conduct a census of the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon to adequately assess their needs. The government should also ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol without any reservations, while still respecting the non-refoulement principle. A simpler and clearer pathway to obtain legal status for refugees needs to be established so that less

refugees are at risk and so that poverty doesn't remain widespread. In parallel, the employment sector should be further developed within the country to allow the newly legal refugees to find jobs and support themselves. The Lebanese civil society, UNHCR, and the international community should also partake in resolving the social, economic, and health challenges. Queer refugees are often outcasts in the humanitarian space, which stresses the importance of applying the recommendations to transform it into a more inclusive and safer space.

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