



HIDDEN
IDENTITIES,
BROKEN LIVES

— AND —

NO ACCESS
TO JUSTICE:



Voices from
LGBTQI+ People
in Lebanon



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Acknowledgments

Legal Action Worldwide wishes to thank all LGBTQI+ individuals who participated in the research. We thank you for your openness, your candor and your courage in sharing your experiences and reflections.

We also extend out thanks to Helem and SIDC Lebanon which facilitated the planning of the focus group discussions for the research.



Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
KII	Key Informant Interview
LAW	Legal Action Worldwide
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex. The '+' symbol is used as an umbrella term to include all people who have a non-normative gender identity or sexual orientation.
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNCAT	United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment



Executive Summary

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals in Lebanon remain one of the most marginalized and excluded groups from society. They are the targets of systemic discrimination, stigma, and abuse at home and across public settings, ranging from housing, healthcare and employment to education, hospitality, and shops.

Lebanon is often regarded as the “exception” to the Middle East, which is well known to have highly repressive regimes that restrict LGBTQI+ rights and condemn same-sex relations. Yet, Lebanon has a highly conservative and patriarchal society that is dominated by role of religion in politics and the media. These forces perpetuate stereotypes and false assumptions about LGBTQI+ people and propagates a culture of intolerance towards those perceived as non-conforming to tradition. Ongoing and relentless advocacy by LGBTQI+ groups and campaigners have led to progressive changes but it has come at a price with an increasing number of repressive acts against the LGBTQI+ community by Lebanon’s government.

The country’s legal and security framework institutionalizes discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals by criminalizing same-sex acts and non-conforming gender identities and expressions, continuing to perpetuate societal exclusion, marginalization, persecution, and “othering” of what society perceives to be “non-normative” sexualities and gender identities. The result is a chronic lack of access to justice, impairing LGBTQI+ individuals’ ability to challenge discrimination and abuse.

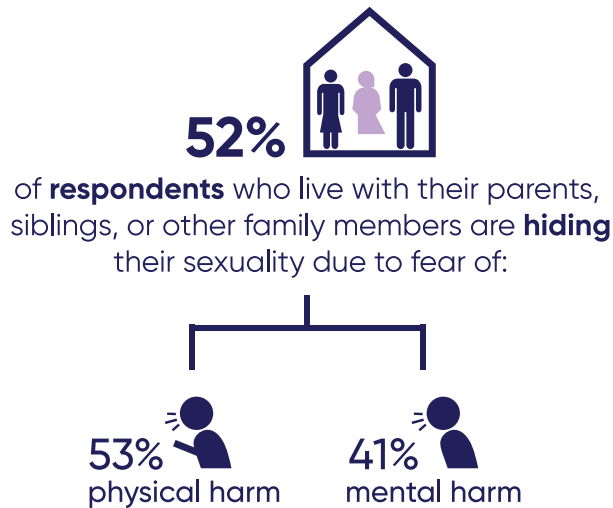
This report is based on research carried out by Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) in Lebanon. Through focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs) and an online survey, LAW gathered LGBTQI+ individuals’ experiences, views, and opinions on the discrimination and abuse they experience in private and public settings, and the significant challenges they face in accessing support and legal help for the harm and discrimination they have been subjected to. The research considered how COVID-19 and the Beirut Port explosion have further exacerbated LGBTQI+ individuals’ existing vulnerabilities, marginalization, and discrimination. Lebanese, permanent resident, refugees and undocumented/people with other status were included in the research.

LAW’s research reveals an alarming and shocking picture of lives that are virtually erased by constant discrimination and abuse at home and in public settings. LGBTQI+ individuals are deprived from their most basic rights, including the right to be treated with dignity, humanity, and respect. We also found that non-Lebanese LGBTQI+ individuals, especially refugees, suffer from double discrimination on the basis on their immigration status and their gender identity, amplifying their risks and experience of discrimination and abuse. Our research also revealed that systemic discrimination and abuse have created a mental health crisis for LGBTQI+ individuals who face high levels of isolation, lack confidence and empowerment. They live in constant fear and suffer from chronic anxiety, and have no choice but to negate their true selves to avoid being targeted and marginalized for who they are and who they love. Some see no choice but contemplating suicide due to overwhelming feelings of hopelessness.



Survey's Key Findings

DISCRIMINATION AT HOME



Of the **48%** respondents who said that **some of their family members knew** about their sexuality,

30% said that they rejected them.

Of the **48%** respondents whose families know of their sexuality,

27% said that they physically and verbally hurt them.

DISCRIMINATION IN PUBLIC SETTINGS

Only **10%** of respondents said they have not been discriminated against.

41% of respondents have not accessed services such as healthcare to avoid experiencing discrimination or harassment.

Nearly **35%** of the survey respondents are facing or have faced discrimination accessing housing.

25% of respondents have been discriminated in the shops/hospitality sector, including pharmacies and restaurants.


Nearly **23%** of the survey respondents were discriminated at school.

18% have faced discrimination by the police.

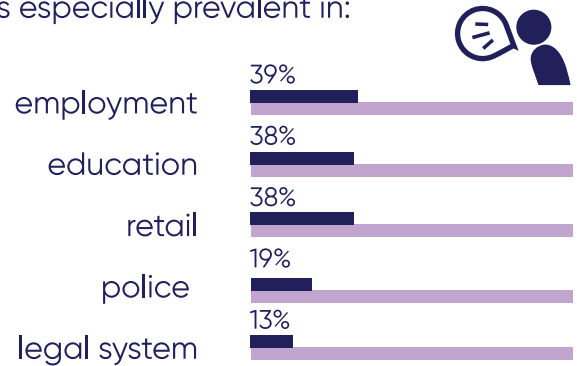
13% have been discriminated against by legal system institutions.



VIOLENCE

45%  of **respondents** said that they experienced **physical violence** very often; **21%** or often **24%**.

Verbal violence is equally widespread but is especially prevalent in:



MENTAL HEALTH

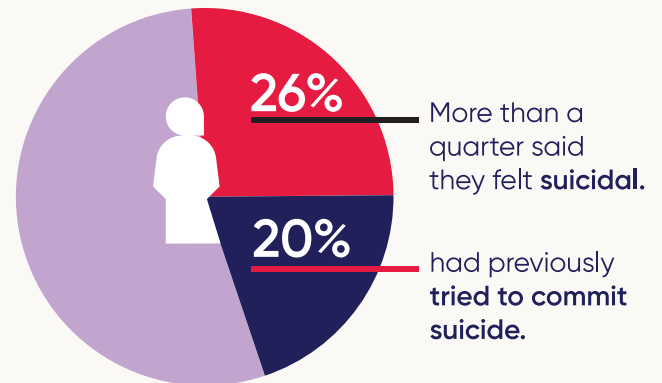
67%  of **respondents** said they have no money.

71%  said they felt anxious/stressed,


- ▼ **53%** felt depressed,
- ▼ **52%** felt isolated and
- ▼ **44%** felt hopeless

due to being discriminated and/or abused.

92%  of **respondents** have at some point **hidden a personal relationship** to avoid experiencing discrimination or harassment, while **71%** said they **avoided public places**.



ACCESS TO JUSTICE

80%  of **respondents** said they had not sought **legal help** for discrimination and/or abuse.

The main reasons for not seeking legal help are:

- ✘ **psychological** (45% felt too depressed and not mentally ready)
- ✘ **lack of information** (44% did not know who to ask)
- ✘ **financial** (42% did not have the money)
- ✘ **fear of repercussions** (38% were worried about the consequences)



Recommendations

LEGAL REFORM

The Government of Lebanon should:

- Repeal all legislation that institutionalize and perpetuate discrimination and abuse against LGBTQI+ individuals including – as a matter of priority – Article 534 from the Penal Code that is being used to discriminate against LGBTQI+ individuals.
- Explicitly prohibit and make it a punishable offence to discriminate against and to harm and physically and mentally abuse LGBTQI+ across all private (home) and public settings – including healthcare, housing, employment, education, shops and hospitality sector.
- Ensure LGBTQI+ activists and organizations can continue advocating for and promoting the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals including through mass events, without fear of being arrested or threats because of their work on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.

LEGAL SUPPORT AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

LGBTQI+ organizations, with human rights organizations and legal professional bodies and judiciary actors, should:

- Increase the awareness of judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and police officers on discrimination against and abuse of LGBTQI+ and create referral pathways between detention centers and organizations through capacity building training and the formation of a coordination group that improves communication and ways of working to ensure that LGBTQI+ individuals are provided with the support and assistance they require.

- Create legal aid helplines/online platforms where LGBTQI+ individuals can access information and useful contact details.
- Create a “charter” committing lawyers to treating all individuals in need of legal help equally, to conducting pro bono legal cases, and ensuring equal access to legal aid that is publicly available.
- Document state and societal discrimination and violence against LGBTQI+ people.
- Use collected evidence to hold the authorities accountable for their actions and push for advocacy and legal reform.

PUBLIC AWARENESS AND MOBILISATION

Human Rights actors should work with the government, media, religious leaders and LGBTQI+ organizations to change the public discourse on LGBTQI+, promoting their rights and a narrative that dispel misconceptions, misinformation, and prejudiced views on the community. This includes:

- Using the media to disseminate positive and accurate messaging and life stories, including by inviting LGBTQI+ to speak out.

Engaging with the media and religious and community leaders and LGBTQI+ organizations to agree on collective actions to raise public awareness on LGBTQI+ rights including through campaigns and increased representation of LGBTQI+ individuals in the public sphere.



Introduction

Lebanon has a highly traditional and patriarchal society that translates into restrictive and discriminatory legislation, the absence of an empowering and enabling legal and policy framework, and widespread discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals across society. This lack of societal acceptance is deeply anchored in, and reinforced by religious authorities whose influence permeates politics¹, and a large portion of Lebanese printed media that perpetuates misconceptions and a derogatory narrative towards some of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups. There has been some positive developments led by activists and promising changes secured through ground-breaking legal outcomes but LGBTQI+ individuals continue to face systemic discrimination and abuse at home and in public settings, which severely affect their ability to access basic services, employment, education and most of all, that profoundly impact their mental health and well-being. Whilst formal and informal networks, including support from dedicated organizations, often serve as a lifeline for LGBTQI+ individuals, both the Beirut port explosion and COVID-19 have severely compounded their economic and social marginalization and exacerbated their exposure to discrimination, violence and abuse.

Within this context, LAW undertook research which aims to better understand LGBTQI+ individuals' experiences of discrimination and abuse within Lebanon, and the challenges they face in accessing support, in particular legal information, assistance and representation to seek justice. The research had four objectives:

1. To provide an overview of the legal frameworks pertaining to discrimination and human rights abuses against LGBTQI+ individuals and relevant case law.
2. To present a snapshot of the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals in relation to discrimination and abuses across key societal settings including housing, employment and healthcare – in particular experiences of discrimination and barriers to accessing legal help and support and the impact of the Beirut port explosion and COVID-19.
3. To amplify the voices of LGBTQI+ individuals to decision makers and advocacy influencers.
4. To set out key recommendations to move the agenda forward.



BOX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, LIMITATIONS, AND TERMINOLOGY

The research was qualitative in nature and based around four focus group discussions (FGD) with LGBTQI+ individuals, nine key informant interviews (KIIs), and an online survey targeting:


 **117 LGBTQI+ individuals.**

The research was conducted in April 2022 and was supplemented with a literature review of:

 **45 public resources**

on the issues considered in this report.

 **4 FGDs** were conducted with **40 participants:**

-  **20 Syrian** refugees
-  **17 Lebanese**
-  **2 Palestinian** refugees
-  **1 Iraqi** refugee

 **117 people** completed the online survey:

-  **86 Lebanese**
-  **26 refugees**
-  **2 permanent** residents
-  **1 undocumented**
-  **2 other** statuses

9 KIIs with representatives from the legal sector and NGOs.

Altogether, LAW's research gathered the views and experiences of **157 LGBTQI+ individuals**. While the research sample is relatively small, it provides a snapshot of the level of socio-economic deprivation, isolation and psychosocial and mental distress experienced by LGBTQI+ individuals gained from listening to their experiences first-hand, and gathering their views and reflections.

The first section of this report provides a contextual analysis of the political, social and economic environment as well as national and international legal frameworks as they pertain to LGBTQI+ rights in Lebanon. It highlights the key drivers of inequalities and discrimination that affect LGBTQI+ individuals in Lebanon. It also considers the implications of Lebanon's weak and discriminatory legal frameworks on LGBTQI+ issues.

The second section focuses on the key findings from the research, emphasizing the scale of the discrimination and abuse experienced by LGBTQI+ people in Lebanon, and the impact of exclusion, deprivation and marginalization on their well-being and mental health. It also considers the challenges they

face in accessing legal aid and securing justice, highlighting the lack of support and assistance that perpetuate systemic discrimination and experiences of abuse.

In the last section of the report, LAW sets out key recommendations targeted at all relevant actors, calling for a whole of society approach to secure meaningful, tangible and life-changing actions to ensure that LGBTQI+ individuals can be who they are and be free from discrimination and abuse.



Section 1

Lebanon: The Political, Social and Economic Context

The Middle East has some of the world's most restrictive legislation, policies and practices for LGBTQI+ people.²

Lebanon has been hailed as “the exception” in the region, due to the collective mobilization and relentlessness of activists and human rights defenders that has led to a – relatively – more tolerant country than its neighbors, with the most important progress achieved over the past decade.³ In 2013, the Lebanese Psychiatric Society declared that homosexuality is not a mental disorder and does not need to be treated⁴, and in 2016, Lebanon recognized the existence of a transgender man and allowed him to legally and formally change his gender.⁵ LGBTQI+ specific civil society organizations have also been allowed to register and openly conduct their work, providing a lifeline support to the community and voicing the need for critical change.

While positive developments in the country have undoubtedly been achieved, the growing visibility of advocacy and public campaigning by fearless and courageous groups has inevitably come with an increased vulnerability to resistance from the authorities, with daily arrests, sanctions, repression, abuse, torture, and violence.⁶ Over the recent years, both politicians and law enforcement have cracked down on LGBTQI+ events in Lebanon.

Beirut held its first gay pride week in 2017 but the subsequent festival in 2018 was cancelled after security forces shut down an initial event and arrested the organizer.⁷ Since then, authorities have cancelled LGBTQI+ campaigning activities, mainly due to pressure from radical religious groups' threats of violence,⁸ reflecting the co-existence of religion and politics,⁹ and the influence and power of religion in society that help perpetuate a sectarian system that seeks to suppress the representation of diversity, including gender and sexual identities. This was most recently illustrated by a letter issued in June 2022 by the Minister of Interior to the General Directorates of the Internal Security Forces and General Security which requested all “Pride Month” gatherings and events to be banned. The communication, which argued that such events promote “sexual perversions” and violate “customs and traditions” was sent after calls from religious entities and figures to cancel them.¹⁰ As a



result, events and gatherings were cancelled, including peaceful marches against the ban due to high-risk, threats, and fear of not being protected by state authorities.

“ *Religion bans homosexual relationships whether in Christianity or in the Muslim religion, this is what leads people to reject individuals of LGBTQI+ individuals thinking that they are against nature, abnormal and against God's will. The media also plays a role by giving a false image about LGBTQI+ individuals.”*

FGD Participant

“ *Religion allows discrimination to happen.”*

FGD Participant

Negative societal perceptions of LGBTQI+ individuals are compounded by mainstream and social media¹¹ – often closely associated with political elite and religious influencers, and which perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misinformation about LGBTQI+ individuals and their community in general. LGBTQI+ issues are now more present in political agendas but remains highly divisive.

When it comes to the media, our research highlighted that most mainstream Lebanese print media which are affiliated with established political parties and religious institutions continue to be hostile against LGBTQI+ people¹² and exclude them from sharing their stories and experiences and from promoting awareness and accurate information about their community.¹³

“ *Society is sometimes influenced by public figures and what they might say on TV or social media.... one person might convey incorrect stereotypes which confuse the public. Such figures do so much harm to the LGBTQI community. A couple of minutes on TV/social media can cause a lot of harm that might take years to counter and reverse.”*

FGD Participant



“The media also plays a role, in my opinion, where they call them in Arabic “shouzouz” meaning abnormal or eccentric because under the Lebanese law, being from the LGBTQI+ is punishable. In general, the **culture** in Lebanon is the main problem in my opinion and this is solved by raising awareness.”

KI respondent

The impact of those influencers – whether they are from the political, religious or media sphere – on the public’s views and perceptions of LGBTQI+ people and their actual actions against individuals is overwhelming. In 2019, the Pew Research Centre conducted a major survey of 38,426 people in 34 countries and found that 85% of the surveyed population of Lebanon said homosexuality should not be accepted by society.¹⁴ Similarly, in the same year, a study for BBC News Arabic which interviewed more than 25,000 people across 10 countries in Middle East and North Africa on some societal issues, found that in Lebanon only 6% of the people surveyed said that they thought “homosexuality” was acceptable.¹⁵

“Society does not see [LGBTQI+ individuals] for their abilities, talents, and capacities but rather focuses on discrimination and judging them. Maybe society does not even see [LGBTQI+ individuals] as normal people and instead focuses on their sexuality. [LGBTQI+ individuals] are normal people. Society must see them as **human beings** only without being called mentally sick, perverted, or even responsible for infesting society.”

FGD Participant

Aside from a hostile and repressive political environment, Lebanon’s chronic and long-standing economic and financial crises have been further aggravated by the August 2020 Beirut port explosion and COVID-19 – amplifying vulnerabilities and inequalities amongst the most marginalized groups. In 2021, Lebanon’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) plummeted from around US\$55 billion in 2018 to around US\$20.5 billion in 2021 while real GDP per capita fell by 37.1% – a type of economic contraction usually associated with the onset of war and conflict.¹⁶ Poverty and unemployment continue to rise, and there has been a dramatic reduction in basic service provision and a shortage of food, fuel, and medication.¹⁷ Although the repercussions of the explosion and the pandemic have affected everyone, they have disproportionately impacted the most marginalized and already poor populations, including refugees¹⁸ and LGBTQI+.¹⁹



Section 2

National and International Legal Frameworks on LGBTQI+ People in Lebanon

1. NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

The legal context as it pertains to the LGBTQI+ community in Lebanon is largely dictated by the long-outdated 1943 Lebanese Penal Code which prohibits “any sexual intercourse against nature” under Article 534. Although the Penal Code does not criminalize homosexuality, the ambiguity²⁰ and vagueness of Article 534 terminology has been used to penalize some sexual acts and to violate the rights of other individuals, particularly gay men and transwomen. Transwomen, who often do not have the legal documentation to match their gender identity²¹, are especially at risk of being arrested and fined, or sentenced of up to one year in prison.²² Article 521 has also been used to suppress the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals as it makes it illegal for “every man who masquerades as a woman to enter women’s spaces” with a sentence of up to six months in prison if convicted. The Article has been regularly enforced to arrest transgender women who are misidentified as “gay men”,²³ although one of the organizations that took part in the research noted that it has been less used recently.

Several other so-called “morality” laws and laws criminalizing sex work – which trans-women are most susceptible to be targeted, due to discriminatory assumptions that directly associate them with sex work- have also been used to discriminate against LGBTQI+ individuals²⁴ and to perpetuate societal intolerant and conservative perceptions.

Over the last decade, an increasing number of judges in courts have however adopted a progressive attitude towards the interpretation of the Penal Code, starting in 2009 when a judge first acquitted a defendant charged under Article 534. This was followed by three progressive judgments, including in 2018, when one of the acquittals was upheld by a district criminal court of appeal that ruled that consensual same-sex conduct is not illegal.²⁵ This landmark judgment marked a significant milestone for LGBTQI+ rights and opened positive prospects for subsequent decisions. In 2019, a military prosecutor in Beirut followed suit and acquitted four military personnel accused of ‘sodomy’, clearing the group of charges of committing



sexual acts under Article 534 as the penal code does not specify what kind of sexual intercourse can be considered “contrary to nature.”²⁶

“Gender identity is not only defined by the legal papers.”

Judge El Dahdah – 2014 (Trial of transgender woman sued under Article 534)

“The primary role of the court is the protection of the individual and of his personal liberties within the community where he exercises his rights and duties without any discrimination between citizens.” Judge Rabih Maalouf (2015) *(Trial of two lesbians and seven gay men accused of sexual acts against nature and prostitution)*

“The interpretation of Article 534 should be compatible with covenants and treaties ratified by Lebanon and incorporated in the Lebanese Constitution.” Judge El Kontar (2016)

These changes have not happened in a vacuum but through the relentless advocacy and documentation of human rights violations and abuses from LGBTQI+ organizations and supportive and committed legal professionals. But much remains to be done, with the absence of a strict system of judicial precedent in Lebanon, putting the fate of LGBTQI+ individuals at the mercy of conservative judges.²⁷ What is more, there are still no all-encompassing anti-discrimination laws to protect LGBTQI+ people, with same-sex couples still facing prison sentences in the country²⁸ and the number of arrests under Article 534 increasing – even in the aftermath of the 2018 court of appeal ruling. That same year, a LGBTQI+ organization monitored the arrests and trials of 27 transwomen and eight gay men, five of whom were in the military.²⁹

“ I believe that the issue of LGBTQI is still taboo in our culture. This is due to a lack of understanding among the public at large. The Lebanese law also plays a major role in the systemic discrimination against LGBTQI+, because it does not guarantee equal human rights to all individuals, notably with article 534 of the Lebanese penal code, which is deemed extremely discriminatory against LGBTQI people.”

KII respondent



BOX – RELEVANT ARTICLES FROM THE LEBANESE PENAL CODE

Article 534	punishes “any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature” with up to one year in prison
Article 521	criminalizes “every man who masquerades as a woman to enter women’s spaces” with a sentence of up to six months in prison
Articles 531, 532, and 533	on “threatening public morality and ethics” – punish the “violation of public morality with imprisonment from one month to one year and a fine.
Article 526	on “incitement to debauchery” – punishes any “person who facilitates, for the purpose of gain, the incitement of the public to commit debauchery with others” with imprisonment from one month to a year and a fine.
Article 523	punishes “any person who practices secret prostitution or facilitates it” with a prison sentence ranging from one month to one year.
Article 530	stipulates that refugees and migrants in Lebanon who are charged with “incitement to debauchery” can be deported.

2. INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

Lebanon is a party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT). Yet, Lebanon’s systemic failure to meet its obligations under international human rights law – including in the context of LGBTQI+ rights – is well acknowledged and evidenced.

In its April 2018 review of Lebanon, the Human Rights Committee recommended that Lebanon should “explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity and ensure that LGBTI individuals are afforded, both in law and in practice, adequate and effective protection against all forms of discrimination, hate speech or violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity.”³⁰ Importantly, it also expressed concerns that despite court rulings asserting the inapplicability of Article 534 to them, LGBTQI+ individuals continue to face discrimination, abuse and multiple forms of violence and to have their rights denied and remain unprotected under the law.³¹



BOX: LEBANON'S OBLIGATIONS UNDER INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

Although the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals are not explicitly stated in existing human rights laws that Lebanon is a party to, United Nations (UN) human rights treaty bodies have confirmed that sexual orientation and gender identity are included among prohibited grounds of discrimination under international human rights law. This position has been confirmed repeatedly in decisions and general guidance issued by several treaty bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council,³² the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,³³ the Committee against Torture, and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.³⁴

Under the treaties it has adopted and ratified, Lebanon has an obligation:

- XXXX To protect individuals from discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity (as well as immigration status) – which would extend to discrimination in public settings/sectors such as housing, employment, healthcare, education, and hospitality.
- XXXX To protect the right to life, liberty, and security of persons irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity – including prohibiting arbitrary arrest and detention of LGBTQI+ individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity (assumed or real).
- XXXX To prevent torture and other cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity³⁵ – including by prohibiting beating and kicking victims during police interrogation to get them to confess about their sexual orientation; and examinations to “prove” homosexuality.
- XXXX To protect the right to privacy and against arbitrary detention on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity – including someone being arrested for the way they look.
- XXXX To protect the right to freedom of expression, association, and assembly in a non-discriminatory manner – for example arbitrary cancellation of events such as Beirut Pride, conferences, and banning attendance from guests to events.



CASE STUDY

LAW IN ACTION: LGBTQI+ DISCRIMINATION IN THE MILITARY

In March 2022, LAW successfully won a case of discrimination against an LGBTQI+ person, showcasing another important legal victory for LGBTQI+ rights. The client, a Lebanese 29-year-old male who was previously enlisted in the Lebanese Army, was charged under Article 534 after another male military officer confessed to his sexual orientation and having a sexual relationship (oral sex) with the client during service.

The informant's admission resulted in summoning and questioning of the client and in finding incriminating evidence on the client's phone after a warranted search. The client then confessed to being sexually involved with the informant. He was then charged under a criminal case before the Military Court.

Using legal precedents under Article 534 and international human rights law provisions, the single military judge sentenced the client to a month of imprisonment. Following LAW's appeal to the Military Court, the prison sentence was annulled and the defendant was issued with a fine of 300,000 LBP (US\$ 195).



Section 3

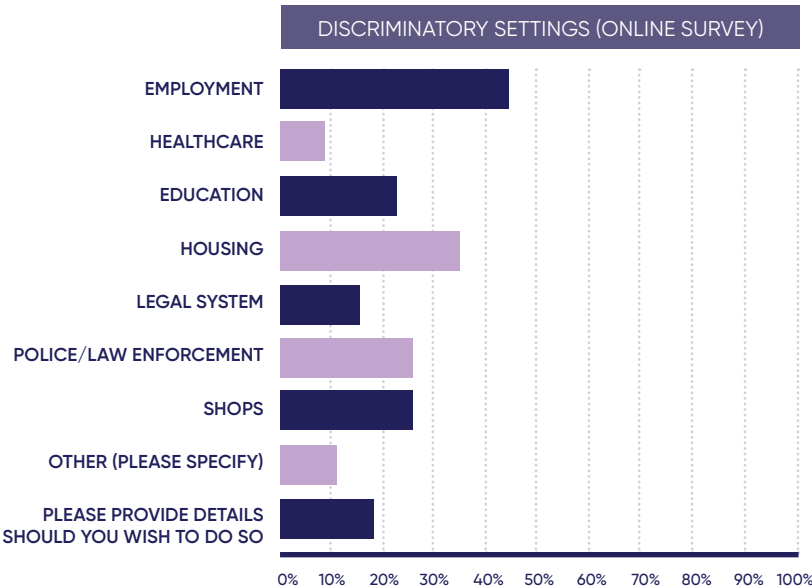
Key Research Findings

1. LGBTQI+ INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCE SYSTEMIC AND WIDESPREAD DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSE AT HOME AND IN THEIR DAY-TO-DAY LIVES

“ Even if people are not explicitly discriminated, LGBTQI+ individuals are always suffering emotionally. One look is enough to be discriminated against.”

Displaced FGD participant

The research found that **LGBTQI+ people face discrimination and abuse across all public and private settings with the top three discriminatory settings being: home, employment, and housing.** Although a few FGD participants felt that the level of social acceptance towards LGBTQI+ individuals has positively shifted over the past few years, the overall findings of our research show that these optimistic perceptions do not reflect the widespread and collective reflection of people we spoke to or who answered our survey.



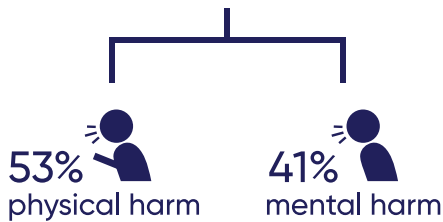



Discrimination and abuse start within the home.

As highlighted across the research (online survey, FGDs and KIIs), discrimination and abuse of LGBTQI+ people often begins within the home, and in many cases, goes unpunished.





of **respondents** who live with their parents, siblings, or other family members are **hiding** their sexuality due to fear of:



Of the **48%**  **respondents** who said that **some of their family members knew** about their sexuality,

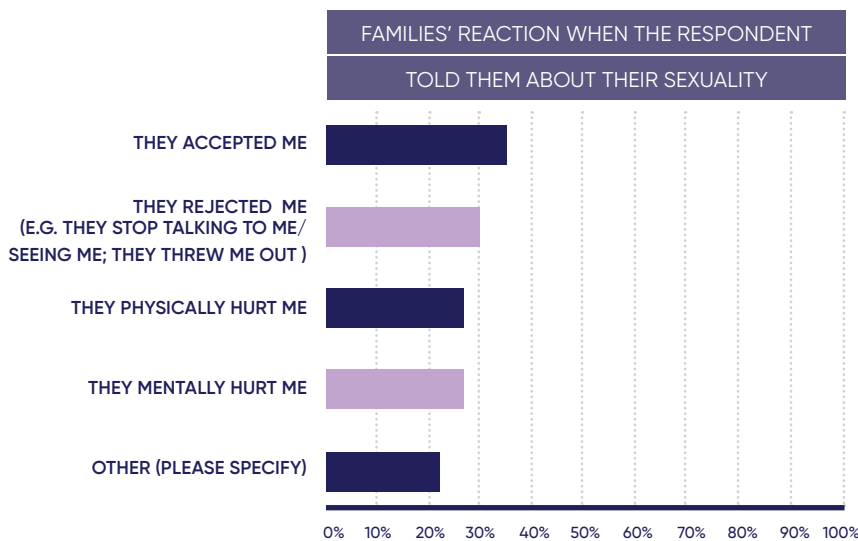
 **30%** said that they rejected them.

- including by throwing them out of the house, or ceasing to talk to them or see them. This reflects Lebanon's geographically small and close-knit society, which limits the scope for anonymity and underscores the need to conform so as not to shame the family and/or compromise their reputation.³⁷

Of the **48%**  **respondents** whose families know of their sexuality,  **27%** said that they physically and verbally hurt them.

This domestic abuse often pushes LGBTQI+ people out of their homes and communities, kickstarting a cycle of oppression, discrimination, and social exclusion.

Our survey's findings echo a Human Rights Watch's 2019 research³⁸ on discrimination and abuse against trans women in Lebanon which found that a staggering **38 out of 50** interviewed trans women reported experiencing extreme violence by a male relative for their gender expression, including being locked in a room for extended periods, being denied food and water, being burnt, beaten, stabbed, raped, and attacked at gunpoint.



Unfortunately, violence and abuse at home is often done in private, and the fear of repercussions in the wider community often leads victims to stay quiet and endure harm without support.



“ It is surprising how much I am working on cases where family members are the perpetrators. There is still a lot of conservative people in Lebanon. A lot of my patients are being abused at home, even by their siblings.”

KII respondent

“ I should emphasize that the family and home are the foundation of many of the barriers that LGBTQI people face in their lives. Abuse and discrimination start at home. I received numerous cases involving individuals whose lives were threatened due to the reactions of their families. This barrier also affects them at school and universities, where they are subjected to a greater deal of discrimination and abuse.”

KII respondent

“ I don't want to make broad generalization, but villages (rural areas) and some areas in Lebanon not only discriminate against LGBTQI persons, but even threaten to kill them.”

KII respondent

“ When my parents know that I was gay they beat me. I spent all my childhood being beaten by my father until I was 21; then he couldn't beat me anymore.”

FGD Participant

“ I know someone who is gay, his parents forced him to marry his female cousin to stop being gay.”

FGD Participant



Discrimination in public settings is widespread and common.

“One of the transmen asked for the presence of female nurses only when undergoing a medical procedure because he does not feel comfortable to undergo the procedure in the presence of male nurses. He made his wish clear before the date of the procedure. Unfortunately, while he was on the operating table, he saw male nurses. He objected and clearly said he did not want male nurses. He was injected with anesthesia straightaway to shut him up and start the procedure.”

FGD participant

Our research found that discrimination or harassment in public settings is widespread, and frequent.

21% on the online survey respondents reported experiencing discrimination **“very often”**

22% **“often”**

29% **“sometimes”**

Only **10%** of respondents reported not being discriminated against.

The lack of employment opportunities and discrimination at work, which has been severely worsened by the sinking economy and COVID-19, was identified as key challenge for LGBTQI+ people in a public setting.

- Almost half (**44%**) of surveyed respondents reported being unemployed, and 45% of respondents said they had faced discrimination in the sector of employment.
- **All focus group discussion participants unanimously highlighted employment as one of the discriminatory settings**, emphasizing their difficulties in finding or keeping jobs. One participant told us that they struggled with employment having been expelled from school for being transgender, while another explained that when a potential employer checks their identify card it is often suspected that they are committing

identity theft. Participants also mentioned that employers discriminate against them on grounds of security or “protection”, reflecting public and particularly religious perceptions of LGBTQI+ individuals as “threats” to society.

In addition to a hostile labor market, LGBTQI+ people are being denied work because of their sexuality, with transgender people and refugees and migrants facing additional factors of exclusion due to lack of identification papers that reflect their gender expression, and absence of legal residency which limits their ability to work.³⁹



Although not specifically reported by the people we spoke to, it has been reported that difficulty in accessing formal employment led many transwomen to sex work, which is criminalized in the country, making them at an increased risk of abuse due to the barriers they face in exercising basic rights. They include access to essential health and legal services and protection from violence despite feeling they must engage in sex work as a necessary last resort.⁴⁰

LGBTQI+ people in Lebanon also face significant barriers in accessing the essential services that they need.

- **41% of survey respondents said they have not accessed services** (e.g., healthcare) to avoid experiencing discrimination or harassment. Access to safe and suitable housing was highlighted as being the main challenge, followed by shops, education, police, the legal system, and access to healthcare. What is most striking is that LGBTQI+ people are facing discrimination and exclusion across the “spectrum of life”, leaving them isolated and extremely vulnerable to abuse and mental health issues.

“Because of discriminatory regulations, most private and public institutions have refused to hire LGBTQI people, even if they have qualifications and talents. This is also due to the lack of awareness and inclusivity by HRs and Managers.”

Kll respondent

“You must go through many rejections until you find anything. You don’t get to choose an industry or preference because you are lucky if you find any job to start with.”

FGD participant

“They always make fun of me and my voice because it is feminine, so I am afraid to speak because I have a feminine voice, and at school it was the same.”

Online survey respondent

“No one wanted to be friends with me while I was at school and even the jokes used to bother me. I grew up in solitude. Every time I search for a job I get rejected because I am a Syrian Refugee and because of my sexual orientation and I don’t have legal documents. I was subject to discrimination by the police because of how I look and because I am a refugee without legal documents.”

Online survey respondent



“ Because the employer harasses me, I have to leave the job, so the situation frightens me – Because of excessive harassment in school, I quit education.”

Online survey respondent

Nearly
35% 

of the survey **respondents** are facing or have faced discrimination accessing housing.

Only **12%** of those surveyed said they had their own home, while **14%** do not have a permanent address, and more than half live at home where they are exposed to abuse by family members.



A quarter of the survey **respondents** **25%** reported being discriminated in the shops/hospitality sector, including pharmacies and restaurants.

Nearly
23% 

of the survey **respondents** were discriminated at school.

18% 

have faced discrimination by the police.

13% 

have been discriminated against by legal system institutions.

Around
8.5% 

of surveyed **respondents** said they had faced discrimination or harassment in a healthcare setting, leading to them not accessing medical treatment.⁴¹

“ Even in the healthcare system, some healthcare providers would discriminate against clients based on their sexual or gender identity. This causes some sort of hesitancy from the LGBTQI+ to approach healthcare facilities and providers – even if they did not face discrimination themselves, just by hearing experiences of other members of the community.”

KII respondent

“ While working at the detention centers and at police stations, individuals were being detained based on their sexual and gender identity and not based on crimes they have or have not committed. They were treated in an inhumane way.”

KII respondent



“ When I say that I lost my job because of my sexual orientation, they tell me that this is God punishing you, this is what you deserve.”

Online survey respondent

BOX: THE COMPOUNDING EFFECTS OF THE BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSION AND COVID-19 ON LGBTQI+ INDIVIDUALS

The Beirut port explosion of 4 August 2020 and the pandemic have hit the most marginalized and vulnerable the hardest, with research finding that some LGBTQI+ groups, particularly trans individuals, non-binary, and queer refugees, were disproportionately affected by the socio-economic impacts of the explosion.⁴²

In addition to the obvious financial and health crises caused by COVID-19, lockdown measures have been especially harmful for LGBTQI+ people, amplifying existing challenges including lack of access to livelihoods opportunities, due to their high representation in the informal sector – and even more so for refugees and undocumented migrants.⁴³

The pandemic restrictions have also aggravated violence behind closed doors. Lockdowns led many LGBTQI+ individuals to either quarantine or move

back in with intolerant and potentially abusive family members, while also being unable to seek support through their social networks or in their safe community spaces.⁴⁴ **18% of surveyed respondents reported that the level of discrimination and/or abuse that they had experienced had increased due to spending more time with family during lockdown.**

The Beirut port explosion – which happened during the pandemic – further exacerbated LGBTQI+ individuals' socio-economic deprivation. The explosion caused over 200 deaths, 7,000 injuries and extreme destruction across the city, with thousands of people losing their homes.⁴⁵ LGBTQI+ individuals found it harder to access basic services, including healthcare, and were left without a roof over their heads and no support.

“ After the Beirut port explosion, they refused to admit me in one of the hospitals because of my sexual orientation and they bullied me.”

Online survey respondent

The explosion has had a particularly strong impact on LGBTQI+ individuals' housing situation. The most severely affected areas by the explosion – particularly the neighborhoods of Mar Mkhayel, Gemmayze and Geitawi – were known for their reputation as the most “queer-friendly neighborhoods” in Beirut.⁴⁶ In addition to residential homes, these areas were the location of queer-friendly restaurants, bars, clubs, and community centers – offering a safe space for Beirut's LGBTQI+ community. Similar inclusive spaces elsewhere in Lebanon are now hard to find.⁴⁷

A 2021 Oxfam research indicates that 40% of LGBTQI+ respondents' living situations had been negatively impacted by the blast. Of those 40%, 58% reported that their residence suffered damages, 35%



had to relocate or change their living arrangements, 11% reported moving back with their families and 10% not having a permanent living space.⁴⁸

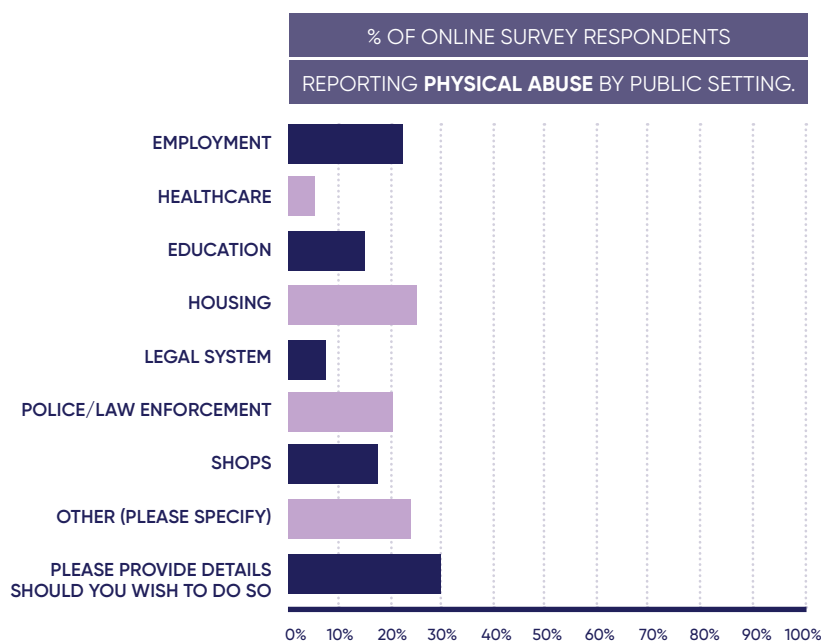
Heightened police and army presence in Beirut after the explosion also contributed to LGBTQI+ individuals' fear of discrimination, harassment, and potential detention. Some opted to leave their neighborhoods and communities which they were relatively used to and comfortable in, while others left Beirut in search of more affordable housing following the explosion, moving to more affordable areas outside of the city in less tolerant communities where their sexual orientation and gender identity could put them at risk of violence and discrimination. Some relocated to live with groups of rents to be able to afford rent, resulting in living in more overcrowded spaces, which - while undoubtedly provided some level of shelter and social support - increasing stress from lack of personal space and risk of contracting COVID-19.⁴⁹

Our research found that 20% of surveyed respondents reported experiencing an increased level of discrimination and abuse since the Beirut explosion. Those who did reported reasons such as "restricting access to safe spaces", "damage to housing", "adding to the multi-layered crisis and lack of access to financial/humanitarian aid and official compensation because of their sexual orientation."

“My house was completely destroyed, and because of my sexual orientation, I did not get financial aid. They think I am a sexual harasser, and I did not receive official compensation from the state as well, despite all the harm.”

Online survey respondent

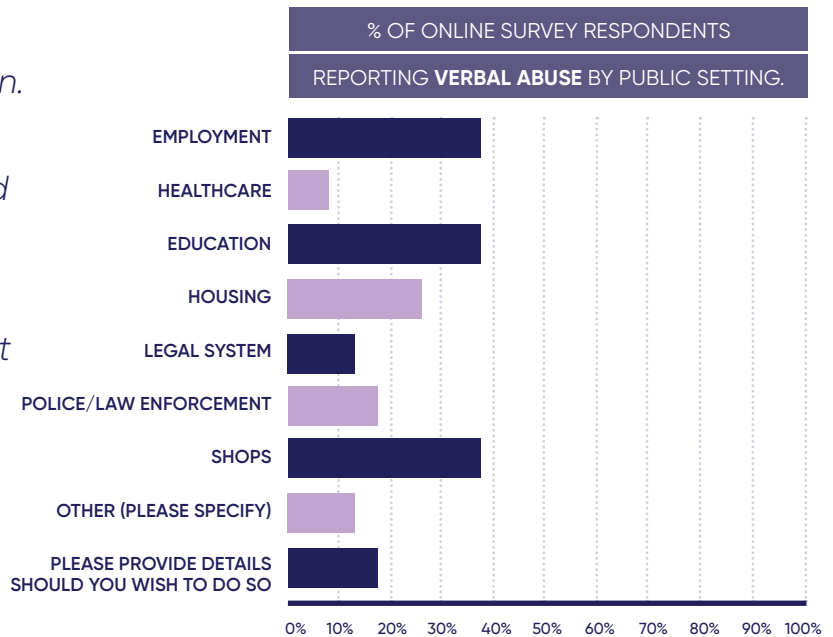
LGBTQI+ individuals face high level of violence and abuse across public settings.





“ We received a case of gay man. He was referred to us several times before. He was subjected to sexual assault. The workers tried to delegate the case to each other because they didn't want to work with him.”

— Kll participant



• **Physical violence has been experienced by respondents across all public settings**, with a prevalence of incidents in employment (22%), housing (23%), and police/law enforcement (20%). Other settings where respondents reported physical violence (listed as “other”) including in social settings and the military. When asked how often they had been the victim of physical violence because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identify, **45% of respondents said that they experienced physical violence very often (21%) or often (24%).**

• **Verbal violence is equally widespread but is especially prevalent in employment (39%), education (38%), and retail (38%),** followed by police (19%), and legal system (13%).

“ At detention, community members were subjected to violence and bullying, as well as sexual harassment. As a result, no one in the community is willing to take legal action in order to prevent being imprisoned due to their sexual orientation or physical appearance (gender expression).”

— Kll participant

“ I was in a relationship with someone from the military and he was called for questioning, and he dragged me with him. They questioned me and I was detained for 13 days – the most 13 insulting days of my life. They asked me personal questions and they talked to me like I was a woman and asked me how large my penis was, and they told me I was going to hell.”

— Online survey respondent



2. TRANSGENDER PEOPLE AND LGBTQI+ REFUGEES ARE AT HEIGHTENED RISK OF DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSE

The LGBTQI+ community is not a homogeneous group. Instead, it is made up of distinct groups from across a broad spectrum of identities and factors including migrant status.

“A transgender person who is educated, has family support, and has money, for example, does not face the same obstacles as other LGBTQI+ people. Most of the transgenders I work with, however, are sex workers since they come from a low social class with little education.”

Kll respondent

The research identified two factors of increased vulnerability to discrimination and abuse: transgender identity and the intersectionality of sexual identity and refugee status.

LAW's research found that transgender individuals are at heightened risk of discrimination and violence. For transgender individuals in Lebanon, discrimination in accessing education, employment, housing, and health-care is particularly acute when they lack official identification documents that match their gender expression.

While it is possible to legally change your name and gender in Lebanon, each case is decided individually through a court ruling, and requires proof of a “physical, social and psychological nature” and “proof of the irrevocability of the sex/gender conversion and of psychological and social necessities justifying the need of legal recognition”.⁵⁰ This normally means evidence of a gender reassignment or affirming surgery, a hormonal treatment and a psychiatric report of a “diagnosed transgender condition”.⁵¹ Transgender individuals face challenges to obtain the necessary official identification documents, that are exacerbated by a lack of resources and services tailored to trans people's needs, including legal support.⁵²

However, in January 2016, a Court of Appeal in Lebanon made a ruling allowing a transgender man to officially change his name and gender on identification documents, overruling a lower court and finding that surgery should not be a prerequisite to gender identity recognition.⁵³ This means that a person can choose to identify as trans without going through gender reassignment.



“ The community thinks that every trans-person is a sex worker.”

FGD participant

“ Trans-people are often perceived as sex workers and sex objects.”

FGD participant

Transgender people also face increased risk of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse in Lebanon, including arbitrary arrest – which is often accompanied by physical and sexual violence by police and law enforcement officials.⁵⁴ The perpetration of this abuse is however not restricted to the security forces. Research conducted by International Alert in 2017 found that many trans women have been sexually exploited and black mailed by their landlord as a demand in exchange for their housing services.⁵⁵

“ Because of the discrepancy between their gender identification and how they are legally recognized on official documents, I believe transgender people are more vulnerable to prejudice and abuse than other LGBTQI+ people.”

KII respondent

LGBTQI+ refugees suffer from intersectional forms of discrimination due to their refugee status and their gender identity. Previous research⁵⁶ has found that LGBTQI+ Syrian refugees – who make up the largest proportion of refugees in Lebanon – are among the most vulnerable refugees in Lebanon, facing integration and acceptance challenges, including due to their Syrian origin. Many refugees cannot seek legal protection for discrimination and violence because they lack legal residency and documentation. They also face systemic barriers accessing work, health care, education and right to own property due to both their sexual identity and their immigration status, leading them to be further excluded and stigmatized based on being outsiders and not Lebanese nationals.⁵⁷

Our research also found that LGBTQI+ refugees do not fit into the current heterosexually orientated selection criteria for support and integration programs. Relationship and family composition are often an important selection criterion for support services which means that LGBTQI+ refugees – who face rejection and stigma from their families – are not prioritized for assistance and support.⁵⁸ This came out strongly in our FGDs. Two refugees said that being both members of the LGBTQI+ community and their refugee status contributed to them facing double discrimination exacerbating further their inability to accessing support services and finding jobs.



“ We must never forget that many LGBTQI individuals are Syrian refugees, which leads to discrimination and abuse because they are first and foremost refugees and then LGBTQI people. As a result, discrimination is common for a variety of reasons.”

Kll respondent

3. LOSING ONESELVES: LGBTQI+ INDIVIDUALS MAKE THEMSELVES “INVISIBLE” AND SUFFER HIGH LEVEL OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

LGBTQI+ individuals face high levels of deprivation due to discrimination and violence. They are forced to survive on insufficient incomes, manage unpredictable lifestyles in the face of inaccessible or insecure housing and have unequal access to services. This is a result of higher rates of unemployment, discrimination, and a lack of inclusive government protection and humanitarian assistance schemes.⁵⁹



• **67% of survey respondents said they have no money; 28%** said they could not work; **27%** said they could not leave their house and **13%** said that could not attend school/university.

But one of the most important findings of our research is on the impact of discrimination, abuse and socio-economic deprivation on LGBTQI+ individuals’ mental health and well-being and sense of self.

Fear of being discriminated against and physically and verbally abused lead to LGBTQI+ individuals hiding who they are and practicing self-censorship both in the private and public spheres to protect themselves. This includes adjusting how they wish to dress, talk, act and hiding a personal relationship.⁶⁰



• Of the surveyed respondents, **an overwhelming 92% reported that they had at some point hidden a personal relationship to avoid experiencing discrimination or harassment, while 71% said they had avoided public places.**

The denial of self – of who they are – their experience of discrimination and abuse have a devastating impact on the well-being and mental health of LGBTQI+ individuals.



“ I have trust issues.
I tend to think that
I am not capable and
not qualified because
I am never employed
or hired.”

Online survey respondent



• An **overwhelming 71%** said they felt **anxious/stressed**, **53%** felt **depressed**, **52%** felt **isolated** and **44%** felt **hopeless** due to being discriminated and/or abused. **Over a quarter of respondents (26%)** said they felt **suicidal**, and **20%** of respondents had previously tried to **commit suicide**.

“ I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I live in a state of isolation. I have a strong desire to end my life, but unfortunately, I did not find a method that is guaranteed results and does not cause pain.”

Online survey respondent

“ My only fear is that I will fail to commit suicide and the health consequences that may result may make me need the help of others. If I find a guaranteed method other than the method of taking a large amount of medicine, I will do it without hesitation.”

Online survey respondent

This mental health crisis faced by the LGBTQI+ community is exacerbated by the fact that LGBTQI+ individuals have historically had challenges accessing mental health services and support due to discrimination, mobility restrictions and financial difficulties, in a context where there is a general pre-existing stigma around mental health services.⁶¹ Research also found that the Beirut port explosion and COVID-19 have further exacerbated LGBTQI+ individuals' access to mental health services, despite the trauma and well-evidenced mental health needs that skyrocketed due to the pandemic's restrictions,⁶² especially for the groups already marginalized and stigmatized that found themselves even more isolated and without a support system.⁶³



4. LGBTQI+ FACE MULTIPLE BARRIERS TO SEEK HELP AND LEGAL SUPPORT

Against this background of systemic and widespread discrimination and abuse that infiltrate their lives, LGBTQI+ individuals face significant financial emotional and practical challenges to access legal support and help they need.

“Because members of the LGBTQI+ community are unable to get job or a source of income, they are unable to afford legal representation.”

KII respondent

“Some of individuals are not “out of the closet” so they avoid seeking legal help related to their situation because they do not want anyone to know yet.”

KII respondent

“Seeking help from LGBTQI organizations is not easy and has challenges.”

FGD Participant

• **A staggering 80% of online survey respondents said they had not sought legal help for discrimination and/or abuse.** The main reasons were psychological (**45% felt too depressed and not mentally ready**), lack of information (**44%** did not know who to ask), financial (**42%** did not have the money), and fear of repercussions (**38%** were worried about the consequences). KII also told us that lack of money and the fear of being “found out” were some of the key barriers preventing LGBTQI+ individuals from seeking legal help.

A further challenge was identified in FGDs with several participants telling us they do not seek help from LGBTQI+ organizations as they do not trust or have confidence in them, with one participant suggesting that they are taking advantage of the LGBTQI+ cause for other benefits and gains. On the other hand, of the **20%** who said they had sought help, **a large majority (80%) reported requesting support from an LGBTQI+ organization**, followed by another advocacy or civil society group (20%); and a lawyer (16%).



“Many of the cases I deal with involve people who have been blackmailed or extorted by members of the LGBTQI+ community and are hesitant to submit a complaint because they fear that their sexual orientation will be exposed to authorities by the perpetrator.”

KII respondent

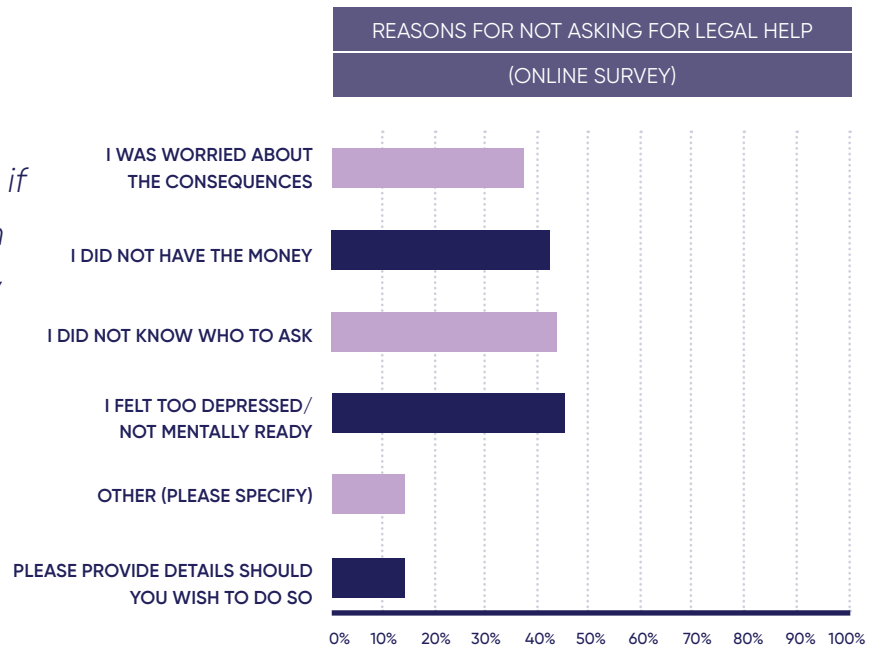


“ Fear is the most significant obstacle to seeking legal support among LGBTQI+ people. They are afraid that if they go to the police station to register a complaint, they will be detained.”

— KII respondent

“ The most obvious barrier is that there are no laws that protect the LGBTQI+ community so why would they seek legal help? Not all lawyers agree to take such cases because they are afraid for their reputation as law firms. Additionally, I do think that LGBTQI+ individuals do not seek legal help, because they cannot afford it.”

— KII respondent



The KIIs provided further insightful reflections on some of the key barriers to access legal help, especially in relation to reaching out to law enforcement and judicial actors. Challenges highlighted by the legal professionals interviewed included fear of being detained if they go to the police station; outright discrimination from lawyers refusing to take on the case for fear of the impact on their reputation; and lack of understanding of the issue by the judiciary.

Increased access to legal help and support provides a lifeline for those severely affected by discrimination and abuse and who found themselves at breaking point and hopeless. Although very scarce, the people we spoke to who accessed legal aid felt like they were safe again and in control of their lives. A transwoman told us that she sought legal help to stop the daily violence and abuse she was subjected to by her parents and brother. Her parents had to sign a pledge before a judge not to harm her anymore, which put an end to the abuse, while she also initiated legal proceedings against her brother who was the perpetrator of a large portion of the mental and physical abuse that she was exposed to.

However, prosecutions for discrimination and abuses remain woefully inadequate and the gap between LGBTQI+ individuals' needs and options available for support is alarming. For most, access to legal help remains out of reach for several reasons that are largely driven by the impact of discrimination and abuse they face across private and public settings.



Conclusion and Recommendations

At a time when LGBTQI+ communities are facing increased repression in the region, this report sounds the alarm on Lebanon's culture of discrimination and abuse that continues to dominate the country's treatment of LGBTQI+ individuals, leaving no place, even home, safe. Home is one of the main environments where LGBTQI+ individuals face harassment, rejection and violence, while access to the most basic services and entitlements such as healthcare, housing and employment is being denied on the basis of someone's gender identity. COVID-19 and the Beirut port explosion have had a devastating impact on LGBTQI+ individuals, exacerbating their socio-economic deprivation, including poverty and lack of access to healthcare and jobs, and further exposing them to violence and abuse at home when they have been left with no roof over their heads.

But one of the most striking findings of this new research is the alarming level of mental health needs amongst LGBTQI+ individuals. Isolation, deprivation, fear and stress have catastrophic consequences for those who have nothing, who are being rejected, abused, excluded and for whom suicide becomes the only option. This mental health crisis is further amplified by the fact that a large majority of LGBTQI+ people choose not to seek legal help and support, especially from the police and judiciary actors, but also from organizations whose purpose should be to protect them and provide them with the support they need.

LAW is calling on relevant national actors to stand up for the rights of the LGBTQI+ individuals, ensuring that their unique yet diverse needs and heightened risks to discrimination and abuse are considered and addressed as a matter of priority.

LAW has identified three priority advocacy areas for action:

LEGAL REFORM

The Government of Lebanon should:

- Repeal all legislation that institutionalize and perpetuate discrimination and abuse against LGBTQI+ individuals including – as a matter of priority – Article 534 from the Penal Code that is being used to discriminate against LGBTQI+ individuals.
- Explicitly prohibit and make it a punishable offence to discriminate against and to harm and physically and mentally abuse LGBTQI+ across all private (home) and public settings – including healthcare, housing, employment, education, shops and hospitality sector.
- Ensure LGBTQI+ activists and organizations can continue advocating for and promoting the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals including through mass events, without fear of being arrested or threats because of their work on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.



LEGAL SUPPORT AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

LGBTQI+ organizations, with human rights organizations and legal professional bodies and judiciary actors, should:

- Increase the awareness of judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and police officers on discrimination against and abuse of LGBTQI+ and create referral pathways between detention centers and organizations through capacity building training and the formation of a coordination group that improves communication and ways of working to ensure that LGBTQI+ individuals are provided with the support and assistance they require.
- Create legal aid helplines/online platforms where LGBTQI+ individuals can access information and useful contact details.
- Create a “charter” committing lawyers to treating all individuals in need of legal help equally, to conducting pro bono legal cases, and ensuring equal access to legal aid that is publicly available.
- Document state and societal discrimination and violence against LGBTQI+ people.
- Use collected evidence to hold the authorities accountable for their actions and push for advocacy and legal reform.

PUBLIC AWARENESS AND MOBILISATION

Human Rights actors should work with the government, media, religious leaders and LGBTQI+ organizations to change the public discourse on LGBTQI+, promoting their rights and a narrative that dispel misconceptions, misinformation, and prejudiced views on the community. This includes:

- Using the media to disseminate positive and accurate messaging and life stories, including by inviting LGBTQI+ to speak out.
- Engaging with the media and religious and community leaders and LGBTQI+ organizations to agree on collective actions to raise public awareness on LGBTQI+ rights including through campaigns and increased representation of LGBTQI+ individuals in the public sphere.



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