Queers in Quarantine:
Between Pandemics and Social Violence in Lebanon
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Introduction

Under the umbrella of an exclusionary system, non-heteronormative bodies are regularly faced with additional struggles and pressures than their heteronormative counterparts. Now, caught in the eye of the COVID storm are the minorities within the minorities, in a society that reinforces a patriarchal consociational hierarchy to survive. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis has further exposed all that is broken in Lebanese infrastructure and systems, accentuating the structural inequality that pervades the country.

Within the queer community, trans[1] folk face heightened life-threatening risks because of their inevitable visibility. Self-harm, suicidal thoughts, increased exposure to domestic violence are, while present, surprisingly not the most pressing concerns for trans folk, as many find themselves struggling to sustain the mere basics of livelihood in a collapsing economy from which they are systematically excluded. It is perhaps capitalism's most pervasive tactic, to attack the vulnerable at their most basic physiological needs (S.K, personal communication, May 2nd, 2020).

Lebanon's consociational system has further aggravated intolerable conditions of its minorities amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the cumulated national crises. This paper will assess the structural violence and barriers that sexual minorities face in their everyday life and how it has been impacted in times of quarantine.

Methodology

A 20-year review parameter for articles was adopted starting from 2000 to 2020. Overall, 31 articles were extracted, from books, academic journals, technical reports, and gray literature. After the duplication and cleaning for relevancy phases, 24 articles were meticulously analyzed to better assess LGBTQ[2] status in Lebanon.

Moreover, two key interviews with activists within the queer community in Lebanon were conducted to better understand the social violence experienced under the capitalist, sectarian, and consociational system. Our first interviewee is S.K, the Sexuality Hotline Coordinator at The A Project[3], and our second interviewee, P.D, is a senior social worker at MOSAIC[4]. This method allows us to contribute to the literature as well as ground the paper with grassroots understandings that better

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[1] 'Trans' is used throughout this paper as an umbrella term, including people whose gender identity is the opposite of their assigned sex, non-binary or genderqueer, bigender, pangender, genderfluid, or agender.

[2] 'LGBTQ', acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Questioning/Queer is used in this paper as an umbrella term referring to all non-heterosexual, non-cisgender individuals across the gender and sexuality spectra.

[3] The A Project is a local feminist collective, focused on advancing issues of sexual reproductive health, gender, abortion, and sexuality. https://www.theaproject.org/

[4] MOSAIC, standing for MENA Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration, and Capacity Building, is a holistic program committed to improving the health and wellness of marginalized groups in Lebanon and beyond, and engaging the societies in the fight against human rights violations. https://www.mosaicmena.org/

accentuate and articulate Lebanon's sexual minority struggles. We intended to conduct interviews with members of the trans community in Lebanon who had previously been willing to speak anonymously about their circumstances during this pandemic. However, it is regretful that our intended respondents did not feel able to speak further at this time, given the intensity of the circumstances they are currently facing.

Structural Erasure of Non-Heteronormative People

Lebanon's political system of governance, consociational democracy, is embedded entirely in a corporate understanding that fixes, predetermines, and defines practices and orders exclusively through confessionalism (Makdisi, Marktanner, 2009). Therefore, in such a power-sharing equation, the classification of fixed sect-based identities consequently omits multiple non-sect-based minorities, such as sexual minorities. Sectarian subjects don't have individual rights, as the state guarantees and only maintains communal rights, especially since it governs personal relations by different personal status laws (Nagle, 2018A).

In theory, a consociational democracy should permit space for sexual minorities, as its philosophical basis is about minority protection. Pragmatically, however, the state cannot recognize sexual minorities because its only way to view the populace is by sects, making it harder to meet their needs and sustain their rights as they challenge the socio-cultural basis and logic of the sectarian system (Human Rights Watch, 2019). That is, the continuation of such a patriarchal system inherently relies on compulsory heterosexuality and the systemic erasure of non-heteronormative people and communities (Rosenfeld, 2009; Naber, Zaatari, 2014). Bodies whose existence threaten this system are then naturally reduced to a taboo subject by sectarian, political, and religious leaders, who use Arab and religious normative culture to justify gender oppression (Nagle, 2018B; Mikdashi, 2012)

This framework results in different kinds of systemic violence initiated by the socio-political structure. Legal obscurity relating to morality clauses[5] allows further persecution of people within the community, based solely on their perceived behaviors (Merabet, 2014). Additionally, Lebanese societal conduct is pivotal to the continuation of the system and cannot be disregarded, as it is largely influenced by a monistic, sectarian, and patriarchal worldview. Challenging this perspective, the rejection of masculinity, which is exemplified as the least common denominator between effeminate gay men and trans women, incites particular and increased aggression (S.K, P.D personal communication, May 2nd-7th 2020). This leaves sexual minorities without any form of support, as Lebanon's geographical, legal, political, and socio-cultural landscape is based on a confessional division, embedded in a sectarian and essentialist belonging (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Constitutional invisibility of sexual minorities, compounded with an economically unequal landscape, results in their exclusion from socio-economic opportunities and state services. For example, queer alternative family models are unrecognized by the state, and so, do not subscribe to any of its

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[5] Articles referred to as morality clauses in the penal code, include, but are not limited to: Article 534 (punishing unnatural sex, sentence up to 1 year), Article 521 (man masquerading as a woman, sentence up to 6 months), Article 531, 532 and 533 (threatening public morality and ethics, sentences range from one month to one year), Article 526 (incitement to debauchery, sentences range from one month to one year), Article 523 (practicing or facilitating secret prostitution, sentences range from one month to one year), Article 530 (refugees and migrants in Lebanon who are charged with "incitement to debauchery" can be deported)

benefits, nor indeed are they are permitted to build families traditionally. Even hotlines for reporting domestic violence, both the ones operated by the state and civil society organizations, have proven to be incompetent when it comes to queer bodies (S.K, personal communication, May 2nd, 2020). As such, efforts to create emergency workflows in response to the increase in domestic violence during the COVID pandemic hit a short circuit when a non-normative family or person tries to benefit from these efforts. This blind spot is one that needs immediate attention, as cases of violence against queer bodies increase proportionally with the days of confinement.

Non-heteronormative people who already struggle to sustain themselves have been impacted more than most during quarantine, as a lot of NGOs who support them with services and stipends have lost their funding (S.K, personal communication, May 2nd, 2020). This hits trans folk hardest. Systematically targeted since birth, trans folk are either expelled from school or drop out because of abuse, complicating their chances for job opportunities further. They are essentially shut out of the economy from the very beginning (P.D, personal communication, May 7th, 2020, Human Rights Watch, 2019). Severely reduced access to the formal job market means a lack of access to proper healthcare, which many trans folk need critically for their hormonal or surgical treatment (S.K, personal communication. May 2nd, 2020). Maintaining jobs they do find becomes hard, due to their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse within the workspace, pushing them to informal economies to make ends meet. This is in large part because a trans person's identification papers do not match their gender expression, and one cannot legally change their gender marker without going through several legal loopholes. They can file a lawsuit requesting its correction, claiming that it was originally a spelling mistake, but they would have to go through years of hormonal therapy and gender reassignment surgery[6], as well as go through all the legal proceedings, all of which is inaccessibly expensive to many within the community (Mikdashi, 2014). The discrepancy between their gender and the gender marker on their identification then becomes their main hindrance to getting a job and contributing to the economy.

This lack of economic opportunity also creates issues with finding and maintaining suitable housing. Trans people in Lebanon often find themselves needing to rent with other flatmates, exposing them to more potential abuse. S.K gives an example of a trans woman who lived with multiple male flatmates, who were exceedingly and repeatedly violent with her. The landlord during that time paid lip service to protect her rights, while exploitatively asking for sexual favors. For this reason, whenever possible, trans people prefer living alone and try their best to be accompanied by someone when meeting the landlord for the first time, as their visibility poses a risk to their safety.

Intersectional Exemptions

The LGBTQ community, far from being a homogeneous group, contains a rainbow (pun intended) of experiences that varies greatly according to different intersectional privileges. One major privilege is that of socio-economic class, as those who are recognized within the system are those with connections and money (Nagle, 2018B; S.K, personal communication, May 2nd, 2020). Internally, the community also reproduces the same classist and exclusionary rhetoric (Moussawi, 2018). Therefore,

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[6] Not all trans folk want to go through full, or even partial, physical transition. The mandated hormonal therapy and gender reassignment surgeries to petition to change their identification becomes an unwelcome and expensive imposition for many trans folk.

when unprotected by their economic capital, non-normative bodies are at a higher risk of harassment, as well as internal and external ostracism.

For example, Syrian and Iraqi trans and queer folk who face imminent threats to their life seek asylum in Lebanon under the protection of the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2016), so a lot of them come without legal papers, leading to violence at checkpoints. They also struggle financially for the same reason and end up going to 'safe' working-class queer spaces, which are the places that get raided often by Lebanese security services under the auspices of morality clauses (S.K, personal communication, May 2nd, 2020). Because of the quarantine, many queer refugees whose asylum request has been accepted are now in limbo, as they wait to be admitted into Lebanon in tremendously violent atmospheres (P.D, personal communication, May 7th, 2020). Interestingly, Lebanese and Syrian trans women harbor resentment caused by the difference in aid available in Lebanon. Similar to overall aid dynamics in the country, regarding the LGBTQ community, there is more funding available for LGBTQ refugees, while Lebanese trans women find themselves without any support. However, non-Lebanese trans women face particular multi-layered structural discrimination, depending on their identity (such as migrant, refugee, or stateless queer women). They are subject to racism, deportation risks, and the general struggles that come with being a refugee in Lebanon (Fleifel, 2018).

LGBTQ individuals employed by organizations that accept them enjoy more privileges, in that they have better access to knowledge and resources than those on the receiving end of such organizations' services. However, NGOs in the developmental field can reproduce the same patriarchal systems governed by the state (Abbani, 2012). While queer folk employed by LGBTQ positive organizations gain socio-economic capital, senior positions are often majorly occupied by cis gay men, and many within the community noted that the funding dedicated to pro-LGBTQ programs are unevenly distributed amongst the different subgroups within the community (Younes, Hammam Radio, 2020). So, we find disproportionality in opportunity, even within the LGBTQ community. For this reason, S.K explains that many have lost faith in the NGO model and moved towards an economic cooperative of working, in the establishment of places such as Dammeh Coop (Salameh, 2019).

Visibility is a fundamentally important deciding factor for queer peoples' acceptance in Lebanese society. The ability of cis folk to control their visibility makes them more privileged than their trans counterparts, although this choice does burden individuals with a lifestyle of constantly walking a tightrope between conformity and resistance. Even trans people who can hide their gender expressions from the public are still faced with the impossible choice between social and familial violence and severe gender dysphoria. Excluding trans folk, and particularly trans women, queer folk's selective invisibility is utilized as needed for their survival in Lebanon (Bekhsoos, 2014; Moussawi, 2015).

The confessional geographic division means that Lebanon's aesthetic is embedded in a sectarian division, one accentuated by heteronormativity. This is reinforced infrastructurally, even in the lack of proper public transport systems that disallow different peoples from easily interacting with each other, creating inclusion and exclusion spaces. For queer folk, this means that *"family rejection can spiral outward to a sense of rejection by extended families, an entire neighborhood, or even an entire town"* (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This has pushed many people within the queer community to

overlook their visibility when integrating themselves in unsafe spaces that do not welcome them, as they navigate the chessboard of an economic and sectarian cold war (Younes, Hammam Radio, 2020).

This kind of visibility politics plays a great role in slightly softening the edges of the lockdown, which differs in Lebanon than in much of North America and Western Europe, where "coming out" is central in the LGBTQ movement. While this discourse is not essential to Lebanese queer change discourse, as there are things that are much more basic that need to be addressed, relating to the livelihood of people, it is still where the funding goes (Meem, 2010). And since much of the funding is coming with such agendas in mind, a lot of local NGOs are focusing on explicit visibility, which many have considered it harmful to the overall movement in Lebanon. Partly resulting from this prematurely forced visibility is an emerging tectonic tactical strategy aimed at the closure of queer-welcoming spaces in Lebanon (Younes, Hammam Radio, 2020). A well-known seminar on gender and sexuality by Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality (AFE) was banned in Lebanon, its panel members barred from entering the premises (Ministry of Interior, 2019), Mashrou' Leila was banned from playing in the Byblos festival for heavily charged homophobic sentiments (The Guardian, 2019), are a few recent examples. So much so, that P.D explained that in strategizing for advocacy campaigns, they make it a point not to bring up the 543 law, the law used for criminalizing homosexuality (Lebanese Penal Code, 1943), for fear that the law will be amended to become stricter in practice against members of the LGBTQ community. A lot of NGOs also have campaigns that involve whitewashing right-wing political parties (The A Project, 2018) based on which deputy is gay-friendly, and who supports the removal of the 543 law, which many queer people find problematic and dangerous as rhetoric (S.K, personal communication, May 2nd, 2020).

Between Social and Institutional Violence

Amid the lockdown, many queer people have found themselves on the frontlines of systemic discrimination, with COVID-19 proving to be an ideal environment for breeding social violence. As a result of their targeted economic exclusion, many queer folks do not have access to healthcare and/or NSSF. People who rely on mental health and hormonal treatment have lost access to those services. Those who do have jobs within the informal economies are unprotected from employee contract violations and arbitrary suspensions. Many have lost their jobs and have resorted to moving back to their parents' house despite being potentially subject to abuse. Others who cannot have rallied together and quarantined with each other. And some are left with couch-surfing from one friend's house to the next, inadvertently going against social distancing practices (Ammar, 2020). Unfortunately, for most trans women, returning to their parents is not an option, as many have fled them as a result of extreme violence and torture (Human Rights Watch, 2019). A lot of crowdfunding is taking place for people who can't sustain themselves financially, and many other similar underground resistance networks are forming and taking place, S.K told us, but the question of how sustainable initiatives like this are in the medium and long term remains up for debate.

Many LGBTQ people have also lost their solidarity networks and grassroots communities, by decree of the general mobilization. The A Project is now trying to launch remote solidarity networks to help fill this gap (S.K, personal communication, May 2nd, 2020). Confined in their houses, queers, who went back to their families or live with closed-minded flatmates, have to deal with microaggressions towards behaviors or beliefs that do not conform with hegemonic heteronormativity. This pressure

can be very damaging to mental health, and both the A Project and MOSAIC's hotlines have noted a substantial increase in calls amid the pandemic. According to S.K, they received many calls in April 2020 about cases of domestic violence, partner violence, rape, and suicide ideation. P.D noted that they are also reaching an entirely new demographic, from people who were financially stable and suddenly aren't, to people who are experiencing many questioning thoughts as a result of the ample time they had to address their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

Structural violence manifests itself in parallel to domestic violence. The violence on queer bodies is arbitrary but consistent, a combination of coercion and consent used as a systemic tactic (Younes, Hammam Radio, 2020). It is presently inconceivable for the queer community in Lebanon to call on state actors to protect them when the state's instruments have historically and systematically degraded, and even abused, non-heteronormative people. P.D and S.K both mention telling incidents: after queer people resolved to report being attacked, they were faced with harassment and comments like "It would have been better if they killed you." The fact that no laws exist within the Lebanese system to protect them from the institutional and societal harassment they might be exposed to, allows individuals to get away with such transgressions without being accounted for. The Hammam Al-Agha raid in 2014, and the Dekwaneh queer club raid in 2012, are two examples of state action that inherently threatened the safety of LGBTQ individuals (Wansa, 2014; CSBR, 2015).

Grassroots efforts to crowdfund and create housing coops are also thwarted by near-impossible bureaucratic mechanisms, such as obtaining a signed lease for the property in question from a municipality that is constructed on a sectarian basis. Moreover, there is a very serious security risk to the safety of the trans women inhabiting the space, as they would be vulnerable to sporadic crackdowns from state security actors under the guise of the same morality clauses used to persecute queer bodies, such as the shelter being misconstrued as a brothel, a common stereotype on the involvement of transwomen with sex work[7] (Younes, Hammam Radio, 2020).

The October Revolution has allowed the LGBTQ community to organically reclaim some public space, without having to worry about the consequent oppression they usually face for public existence, "*The goal is to show that we exist*" (Human Rights Watch, 2020). "*For the trans women, we'll fill the squares,*" "*We want to topple transphobia, it needs to go,*" "*Justice for everyone, this is our main demand,*" chants that surprisingly reverberated across the protests, giving the queer community back some political power in collective solidarity, where the rights and identities of marginalized groups have become "*part and parcel of the protests*" (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This is a major change in societal acceptance, contrasted with the 2015 protests, where trans women were asked to leave the protest sites (Younes, Hammam Radio, 2020). The revolution was viewed by many as the only chance to change the status quo as radically as possible. However, with lockdown restrictions that were imposed to keep everyone safe, much of the LGBTQ community retreated from the streets as they faced multi-layered difficulties that put both their safety and livelihood at risk.

Conclusion

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[7] This paper does not delve into what the authors consider to be problematic criminalization of sex work, and the societal devaluation of the sex workers.

Lobbying international organizations to recognize the now multi-layered danger that queer and non-heteronormative people are facing is an urgent first step to releasing earmarked emergency funding to immediately protect at-risk individuals. Furthermore, funding dedicated to already established projects that are now on hold because of the pandemic, as well as funding for projects that have not been hindered but are not acutely needed for the survival of the community, should all be funneled into urgent support to fill the service gaps left by the state. This funding should be dedicated to addressing the community's most urgent needs: cash-based assistance for housing, food parcels, mental health, hormonal treatment, and dedicated hotlines for domestic violence support.

On the longer term, and as long as the presence of a state that deliberately subjugates people who don't fit the ascribed hetero-patriarchal praxis persists, a pragmatic plan needs to be put in place to ensure that any future social security nets meet the needs of the LGBTQ community. For example, methodologies can be drawn from housing cooperatives in other countries, and those experiences shared with trans and queer folk living in Lebanon (S.K, personal communication, May 2nd, 2020). With an LGBTQ community disenchanted with the state and its security actors, it seems unlikely that such a dynamic can be repaired without serious legal and structural reform. However, training and empowering security state actors and working with Ministries of Justice and Social affairs can potentially lead to better state-citizen partnerships and functional relations. Additionally, deconstructing transgenerational homophobia and transphobia in culturally sensitive campaigns should remain a primary long-term focus of LGBTQ positive organizations and activists. Any legal policy change, no matter how drastic, won't take effect without being an echo of substantial societal change, one that does not consider non-normative bodies a threat to its very existence.

"*Equality begins with a dis-composition of the dividing line between the sensible and the insensible*" (Ranciere, 2011), between the 'normal' and the queer. Until this dichotomy is dissolved, populist sectarian hegemony will remain challenged by grassroots resistance.

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