

# No Rainbow, No Integration: LGBTQI+ Refugees in Hiding

Beirut, Lebanon

*A Case Study of Refugees in Towns*

Akram

# Contents

---

Location ..... 3

Introduction ..... 4

Mapping the Refugee Population..... 6

Methods ..... 8

Refugee Experience ..... 8

Refugee Education ..... 9

Security ..... 10

Health Care ..... 10

LGBTQ+ Refugees’ Experiences ..... 12

Conclusion..... 20

References..... 22

Appendix A: Country Background: Refugees in Lebanon ..... 24

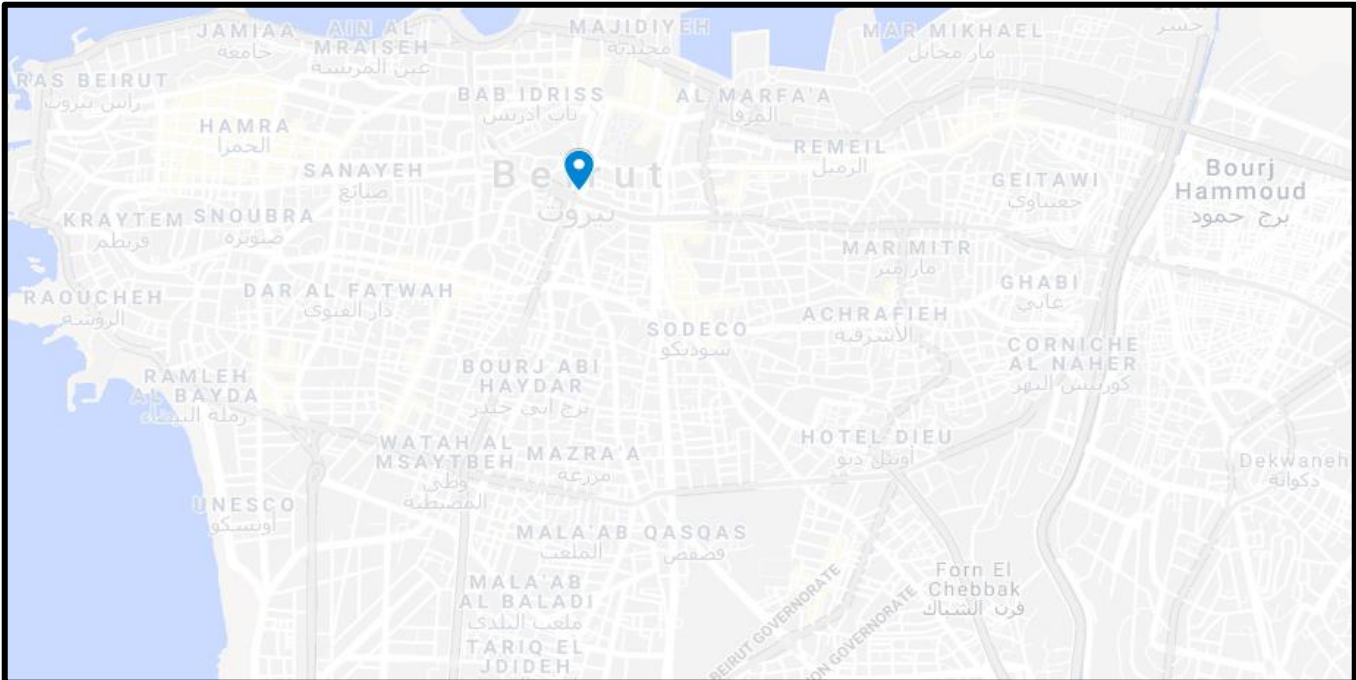
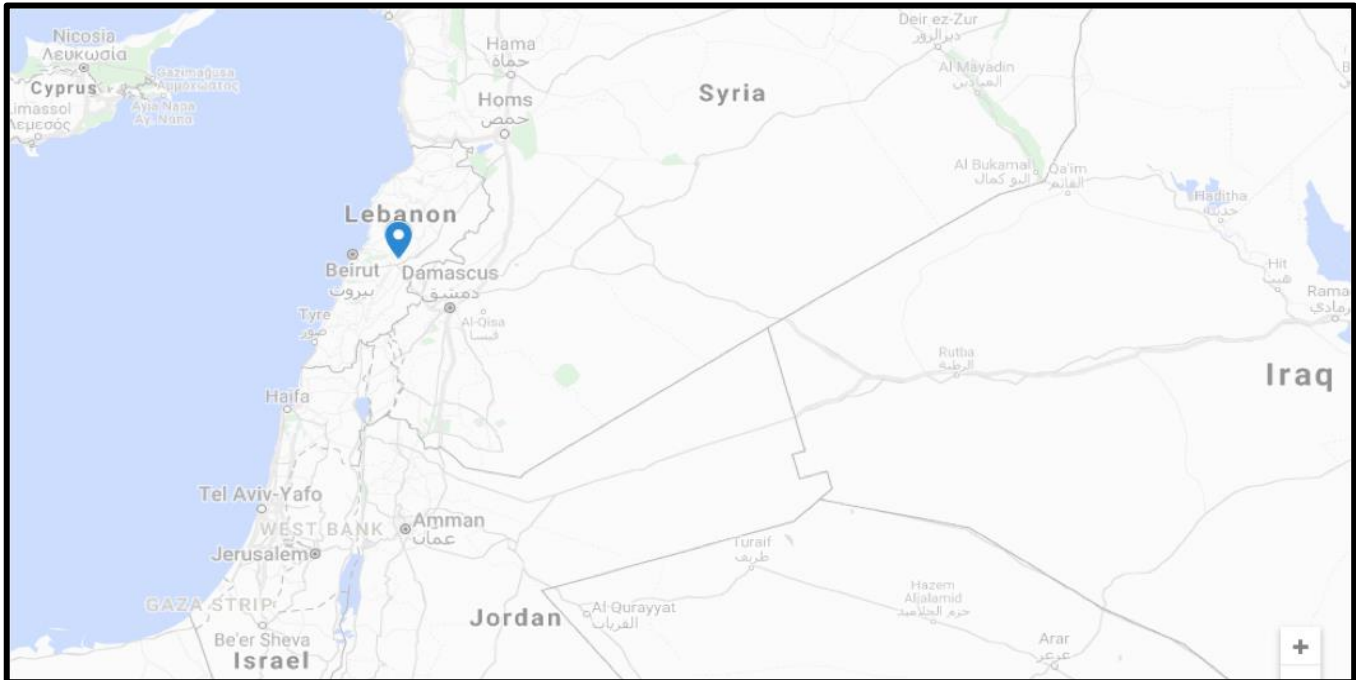
Appendix B: City Background: Refugees in Beirut ..... 25

About the RIT Project ..... 26

About the Author ..... 27

# Location

## Beirut, Lebanon



Imagery © Google 2019.

For more background on migration in Lebanon and Beirut, continue to the appendices.



# Introduction

---

The LGBTQI+ community<sup>1</sup> within the Syrian refugee population are among the most vulnerable refugees in Lebanon. They face challenges with integration and acceptance, not only within Syrian culture, but also from anti-Syrian sentiment among the Lebanese LGBTQI+ community, and from the homophobic culture of Lebanon. Almost daily there are local news reports in Beirut of Syrian refugee abuse, particularly among the LGBTQI+ community.<sup>2</sup>

In Beirut, most people in the LGBTQI+ community do not easily talk about their experiences; they choose privacy and security. No one wants to be publicly identified as a member of the LGBTQI+ community as no law protects them from being attacked, or from going to jail under the Lebanese Law #534<sup>3</sup> that allows imprisonment for sexual behavior that “contradicts the laws of nature.” This law, referring to LGBTQI+ identity, is rarely applied to Lebanese citizens but is used to harass Syrian refugees, trans women, and sex workers during police investigations. Thus, the community finds safety in places that are hidden away and unknown to the general public. Because LGBTQI+ refugees live in hiding, they have not significantly changed the city, so unlike other RIT reports, this report focuses on refugee experiences, not on mapping or the urban impact.

Globally, people are often oppressed for expressions of their gender identity or sexuality. However, Syrian refugees in Lebanon face additional economic oppression, challenges finding work opportunities, and a lack of dignity or respect. While this report focuses on Syrian LGBTQI+ refugees in Lebanon, it is important to recognize that Lebanese LGBTQI+ also suffer from homophobia, domestic violence, discrimination, and abuse from security services in their own country of Syria.



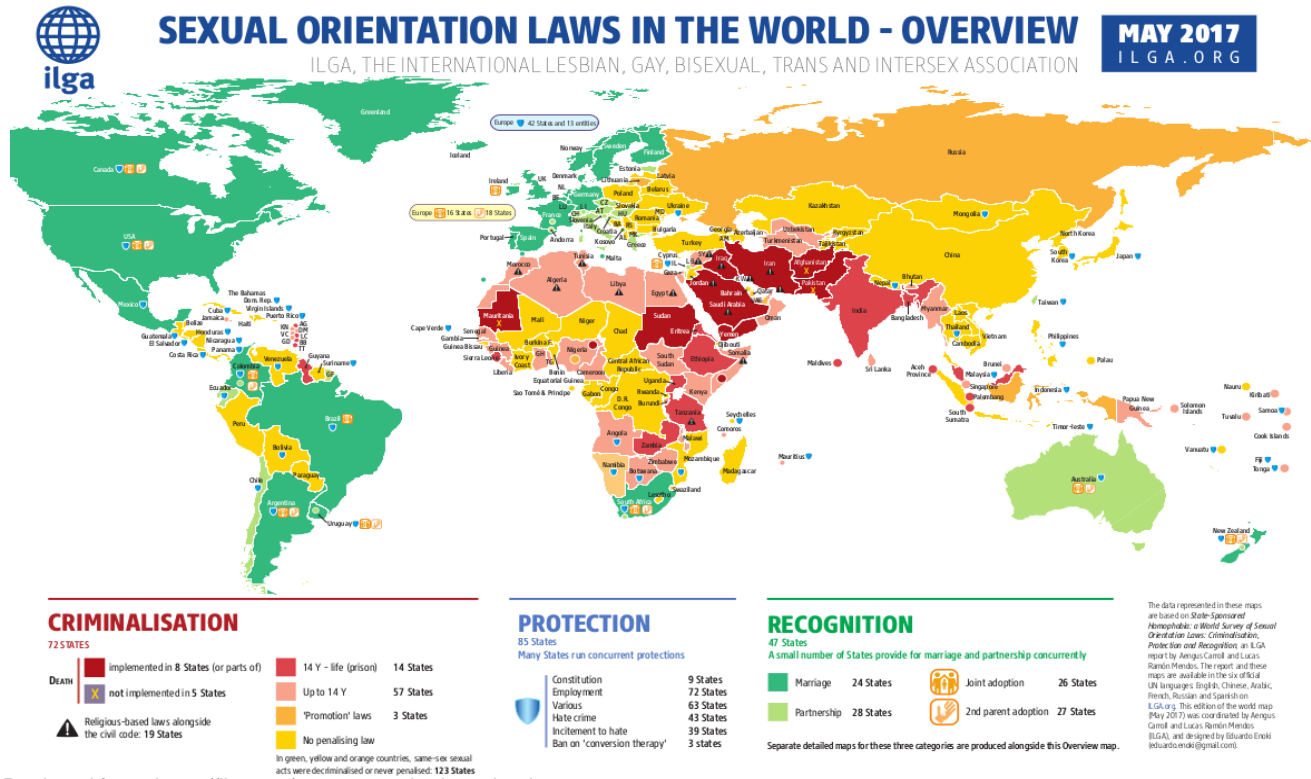
Figure 1: Bourj Hammoud

<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex and other sexual and gender minorities.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, BBC articles: “The nightclub where the women are locked up.” (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-39403276/the-syrian-refugees-selling-sex-to-survive-in-lebanon>. “The Syrian refugees selling sex to survive in Lebanon.” (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-43206517/syrian-women-sexually-exploited-by-aid-workers>. Whole of Syria. (2017). “Voice from Syria 2018.” Retrieved from [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2017-12\\_voices\\_from\\_syria\\_2nd\\_edition.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2017-12_voices_from_syria_2nd_edition.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Laws of nature. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2014/03/14/laws-of-nature>

Figure 2: Overview of Global Sexual Orientation Laws



Retrieved from: <https://ilga.org/maps-sexual-orientation-laws>

## A Note on Terminology

In Lebanon, the LGBTQI+ community I associate with do not use terms like “gay” or “lesbian,” and just say “Jo,” which in Arabic slang simply means “one of us.” However, terminology varies across sect, gender identity, and class lines.

“Refugee” is a legal category in Lebanon, however around 22%, or 400,000 forcibly displaced Syrians living there are not registered.<sup>4</sup> The Lebanese state refers to these unregistered Syrian refugees in a variety of ways including “temporarily displaced individuals” (to avoid the contentious notion that they might stay and become permanently integrated),<sup>5</sup> “asylum seekers,” “de facto refugees,” “newcomers,” “mixed-nationality families,” and “Syrians who have attempted to register with UNHCR

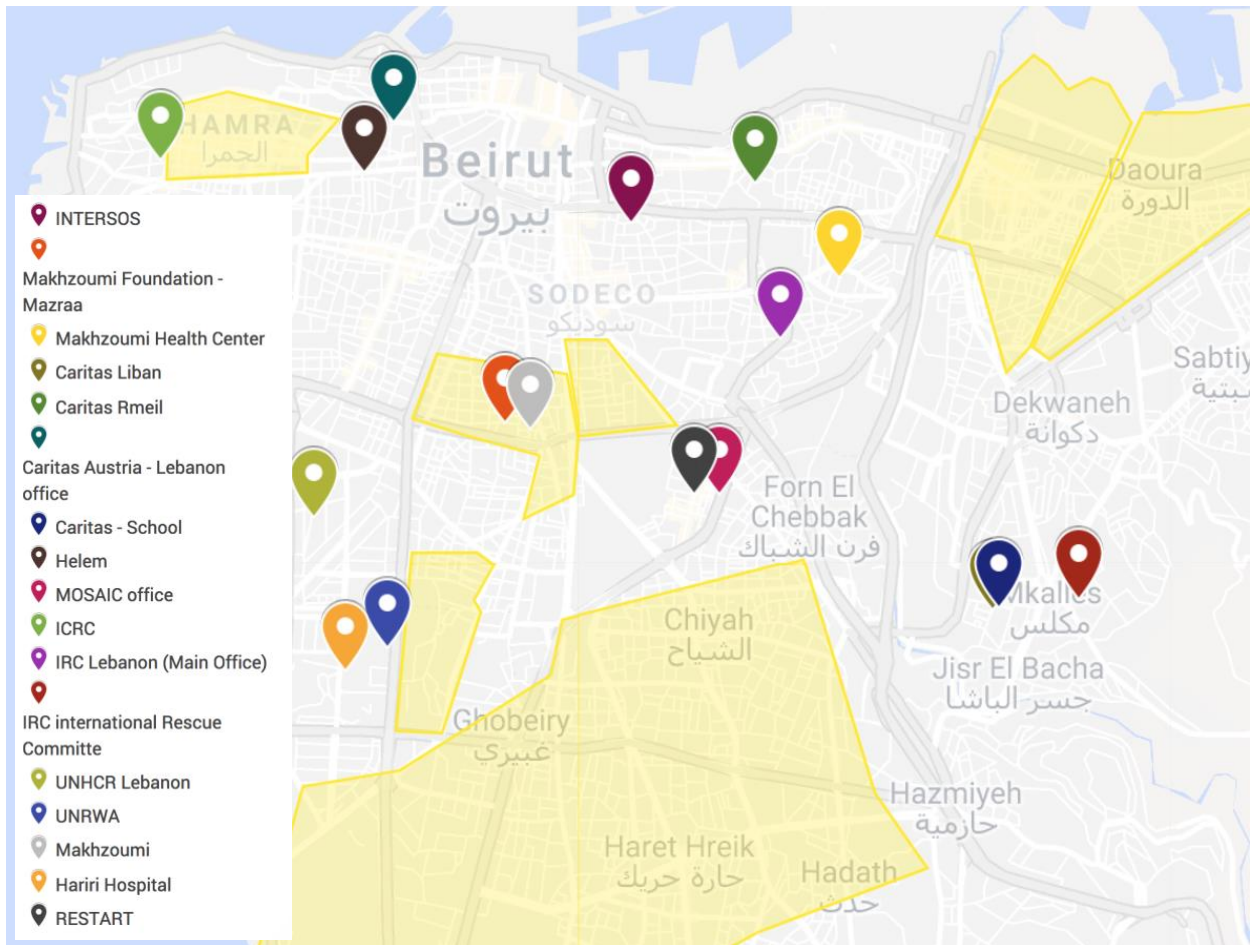
<sup>4</sup> Union of Relief and Development. (2017). “Number of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.” Available at: <http://urda.org.lb/en/details.aspx?ID=1426>

<sup>5</sup> Khawaja, B. (2017). “The Gaps in Lebanon’s New Refugee Policy.” *Human Rights Watch*. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/14/gaps-lebanons-new-refugee-policy>

but have been denied registration.”<sup>6</sup> In this case report, I note a refugee’s registration status only when it has direct repercussions on that individual’s experiences.

# Mapping the Refugee Population

Figure 3: Map of Syrian refugee residential areas (yellow tiles) and LGBTQI+ aid organizations (blue points) in Beirut. Map imagery © Google 2019.



Beirut does not have UNHCR-managed camps like in northern Jordan or southeastern Turkey, and in Beirut refugees are dispersed across the city. The map shows the general areas around Beirut where Syrian refugees are settling (yellow tiles), primarily because of the low cost of living and the relative tolerance for informal or cash-based labor in these areas. These are also usually socially progressive neighborhoods, such as the “Mar Mikhael” district and Shi’a neighborhood. Services for refugees are also clustered in these areas (colored points). For security reasons, we have not indicated the specific areas where the LGBTQI+ community finds sanctuary.

<sup>6</sup> Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum. (2014). “Background Paper on Unregistered Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.” Available at: [http://hif.org/uploaded/News/d92fe3a1b1dd46f2a281254fa551bd09LHIF%20Background%20Paper%20on%20Unregistered%20Syrian%20refugees%20\(FINAL\).pdf](http://hif.org/uploaded/News/d92fe3a1b1dd46f2a281254fa551bd09LHIF%20Background%20Paper%20on%20Unregistered%20Syrian%20refugees%20(FINAL).pdf)

# The Author's Position in the City and Experience Researching this Case

---

I am a member of the LGBTQI+ refugee community and have lived in Beirut for several years. When I first arrived in Lebanon, I was just another refugee, but gradually, I made connections with others in the LGBTQI+ community and with aid organizations. I began volunteering for many of these organizations and supporting my community here. For many months in the beginning, I did not walk freely on the street unless I was with a foreign aid worker who could walk with me.

For this case report, it was easy for me to access the LGBTQI+ community in Beirut and talk to them freely because they trust me. I work with them as a volunteer, come from the same refugee background, and understand their fears. I understand how they think, what their needs are, and what the topics are that they want to talk about. The community is a diverse group, but I have a sense about what people want to keep secret, and what they want the world to know.

Native language ability is the most important thing for communication when speaking about such sensitive topics. As a native speaker of Arabic, I have assisted foreign researchers and seen that sometimes just one wrong word can lead to a sentence with different meaning. Also, because most of these people have suffered discrimination, until they become close to people, they won't talk to anyone who they think may misunderstand them.

I had lengthy conversations with LGBTQI+ people that already trusted me. I explained the purpose of the Refugees in Towns (RIT) Project and informed them that none of their identifiable information would be shared, and they agreed to contribute their stories, trusting RIT to help us show the world what it's like to be both LGBTQI+ and a refugee in Lebanon. I choose to share my own name and work publicly with researchers because this is the right social and political time for someone to do something about these issues, and I felt the RIT project was an opportunity to share these stories in a safe, ethical, and responsible manner.

# Methods

---

I spoke with 25 members of the LGBTQI+ community in Beirut: 10 gay men, 6 transgender men, 1 transgender woman, 2 lesbians, 1 queer, 1 bisexual person, and 4 others who do not define themselves by traditional gender categories. All ranged in age from 19 to 57. I conducted key informant interviews, observed the work of, attended meetings at, or volunteered directly with the following organizations involved in refugee issues in Lebanon: Intersos, IRC, Helem, Mosaic, RESTART, UNHCR, and Nawaya. I also drew from my own experiences as a refugee. The biggest challenge I faced in writing this case report is that the Lebanese government recently began increasing its efforts to catch LGBTQI+ members and put them in jail, which increased the risks to this community and made it difficult for me to move about freely.

## Obstacles to Integration

---

Before going into detail on LGBTQI+ Syrian refugee experiences, it is important to understand the other obstacles to integration that most Syrian refugees experience in Lebanon regardless of their sexual or gender identities.

### Legal Obstacles

---

Since 2011, more than a million Syrian refugees have come to Lebanon. Beirut, with a population estimated between 1-2 million people, has around 250,000 of these refugees according to UNHCR.<sup>7</sup> In Beirut, the government was barely able to provide basic services to Lebanese residents before the arrival of refugees, and services from garbage collection to housing have been further burdened by refugees' arrival. The government introduced new residency policies in January 2015 to reduce the burden on state services, causing an estimated 70% of Syrians to lose legal status. These individuals are now restricted in their movement and cannot work, access healthcare or send their children to school.<sup>8</sup> Further, Lebanon now allows registered refugees to work only in certain low-skilled sectors (e.g. construction and agriculture), and forbids them from working in high-skilled professions like engineering or medicine.



**Figure 4: Syrian LGBT Flag**

Image from Shutterstock

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR. (2018). "Operational Portal: Syria Regional Refugee Response." Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2016). "Lebanon: Residency Rules Put Syrians at Risk." Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/12/lebanon-residency-rules-put-syrians-risk>



## **Background on the Vulnerabilities of LGBTQI+ in Conflict and Displacement**

---

There are a range of sociocultural, economic, political, and health risks that LGBTQI+ face living in conflict zones and during every stage of displacement. First, armed conflict disrupts access to essential services and distribution of health care. Prolonged emergencies can weaken health systems, with long-lasting effects on LGBTQI+ health: for example, there are some LGBTQI+ individuals that have sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) and need long-term treatment. Further, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a disproportionately high risk for LGBTQI+ people,<sup>9</sup> and carries the hazard of STDs and the need for psychological help. One must recognize that vulnerability to a disaster is a social dynamic rooted in the interaction between class, culture, nationality, age, and other power relations, including sexual orientation and gender identity. In the Syrian conflict, gender, violence, and expectations about what genders work in what labor roles all create special vulnerabilities to the LGBTQI+ community.

Social connections are one of the best resources for individuals to manage this risk, but social bonds may be broken as LGBTQI+ isolate themselves or are isolated by their families and communities because of shame and stigma surrounding their identity. This isolation can contribute to higher incidences of violence against them as they have no social support or sources of personal security. Often without adequate financial resources for rent, LGBTQI+ risk sexual exploitation by landlords. Many Syrian LGBTQI+ in Lebanon are involved in sex work to obtain necessary financial resources. In particular, transgenders and gay men find it nearly impossible to find a job, and typically are forced to live on their own with no family and no support. Out of need they turn to sex work. Some are able to find licit work and avoid these outcomes, but still often develop mental health problems.<sup>10</sup>

---

## **Challenges Accessing Education**

---

Approximately 250,000 school-age Syrian children were not in school during the 2015-2016 school year, largely due to parents' inability to pay for transport, child labor, school directors imposing challenging enrollment requirements, and lack of language support because some Syrian Arabic dialects are significantly different than the Lebanese dialect.<sup>11</sup> Secondary-school age children and

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Campaign. (2018). "Sexual Assault and the LGBTQ Community." Available at: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>

<sup>10</sup> For more, readers are referred to Daigle, M & Myrntinen, H., "When Merely Existing Is a Risk: Sexual and Gender Minorities in Conflict, Displacement, and Peace building," 2017; Heartland Alliance International, "No Place for People Like You: An Analysis of the Needs, Vulnerabilities, and Experiences of LGBT Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," 2014; and Kinght, K. & Rumbach, J., "Sexual and Gender Minorities in Humanitarian Emergencies," 2017. Full citations in References section.

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2018). "World Report 2017: Rights Trends in Lebanon." Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/lebanon>

children with disabilities face particular barriers. Only 45% of Syrian school-aged children were enrolled in secondary schools in 2017, according to UNHCR.<sup>12</sup>

## Security Issues

---

Security concerns became a significant obstruction to integration after eight suicide bombings in Al-Qaa in June and July 2016, especially since one of the bombers was identified as Syrian. Lebanese people and the government became more afraid of Syrian refugees, believing that any refugee could be a member of ISIS or Jabhat Al Nusra “al Qaeda” groups and carry out attacks against Lebanese citizens.

Following these attacks, the government restricted Syrians from entering the country. Additionally, hate crimes against Syrians already in Lebanon have increased,<sup>13</sup> including violent attacks, some by paramilitary or government-affiliated groups.<sup>14</sup> Individual municipalities have imposed curfews on Syrian refugees, and security services have arrested hundreds of Syrians for lack of residency documents. These issues are especially hazardous for LGBTQI+ refugees, for example, one of the refugees I spoke with was attacked because he was Syrian; the security services found out he was gay when they took away his phone and looked through his photos and conversations, then they took him to jail.<sup>15</sup> In response to these incidents, many politicians and Lebanese celebrities started a campaign to stop this behavior. So far, it has worked in some parts of the country, but failed in others.<sup>16</sup>

## Health Care Opportunities & Limitations

---

Uninsured Lebanese citizens obtain care in public hospitals: the Ministry of Health covers up to 85% of hospital care costs and 100% of medication costs for high-risk diseases.<sup>17</sup> The Syrian refugee crisis has led to lags in payments to hospitals, a 50% increase in the patient caseload at health clinics, and an increase in ambulance wait times because of heavy demands on transportation resources.<sup>18</sup>

Lebanon’s Crisis Response Plan for 2017-2020 includes reforms to support health centers and hospitals around the country that cater to both Lebanese and the Syrian refugee population.<sup>19</sup> UNHCR

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR. (2018). “UNHCR Lebanon: Education.” Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/lb/education>

<sup>13</sup> See for example: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/lebanon>

<sup>14</sup> See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/28/suicide-bombings-hit-lebanon-village-near-syria>

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Wansa, S. (2014). “Torture at Every Stage: The Unofficial Narrative of the Hammam al-Agha Raid.” *The Legal Agenda*. Available at: <http://legal-agenda.com/en/article.php?id=3043>

<sup>16</sup> Benoist, C. (2014). “Lebanese security forces raid gay-friendly establishment, arrest 27.” *Al Akhbar*. Available at: <http://alakhbaren.spiru.la/node/21131/>

<sup>17</sup> Reid-Smith, T. (2014). “Police raid Lebanon bathhouse, arrest 27 men on gay sex claims.” *Gay Star News*. Available at: <https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/police-raid-lebanon-bathhouse-arrest-27-men-gay-sex-claims130814/#gs.l71pE6M>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/lebanon-racism-problem-171019075823036.html>

<sup>19</sup> UNHCR. (2017). “Health access and utilization survey among Syrian refugees in Lebanon - November 2017.” Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/health-access-and-utilization-survey-among-syrian-refugees-lebanon-november-2017>

<sup>18</sup> Samari, G. (2018). The Response to Syrian Refugee Women’s Health Needs in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan and Recommendations for Improved Practice by Goleen Samari | Humanity in Action. Retrieved from <https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledgebase/583-the-response-to-syrian-refugee-women-s-health-needs-in-lebanon-turkey-and-jordan-and-recommendations-for-improved-practice>

<sup>19</sup> Government of Lebanon. (2018). “Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020 (2018 update).” Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-crisis-response-plan-2017-2020-2018-update>

coordinates support with relevant ministries and non-governmental organizations and covers up to 75% of the cost of refugee care.<sup>20</sup>

Despite these efforts however, refugees generally don't feel there is any plan for dealing with their healthcare needs. Because Lebanon does not allow formal refugee camps or field hospitals run by humanitarian organizations, all refugee medical needs must be met by the Lebanese healthcare system, and there are only three medical centers in Beirut that provide healthcare for Syrian refugees. The Makhzoumi Foundation is the most helpful center for refugee healthcare, and care there is free for some cases. Hariri Hospital only helps refugees in certain situations. It is overburdened and usually does not have enough capacity to meet refugees' needs. Some NGOs such as Marsa, Mosaic, Helem, Intersos, and Makhzoumi are gay friendly and try to find someone to provide medical care but cannot meet the demand. Allowing NGOs and UNHCR to provide health services or establish field hospitals that can help refugees would relieve stress on Lebanon's existing healthcare infrastructures.

LGBTQI+ refugees face even more challenges in accessing healthcare and have particular needs that are different from the general refugee population. From my experience working with this community, at least 10% of the LGBTQI+ community now have a sexually transmitted disease (STD) but cannot go to a hospital or ask for help. Syrian women and LGBTQI+ frequently experience sexual harassment, rape, violence, forced marriages, early age pregnancy, and complications during pregnancy.<sup>21</sup> Transgender women and men also have many psychological and mental health issues, especially if they are taking hormone treatments and require care to help them understand their changing bodies.

Syrian LGBTQI+ refugees also need significant psychological care as a result of seven years of displacement, in which we deal with regular misunderstandings of who we are by the general public, inhumane treatment, frequent periods of homelessness, inability to work and the loss of dignity that comes with unemployment, and forced work in in the LGBTQI+ sex trade.<sup>22</sup> Many Syrian LGBTQI+ refugees have considered or attempted suicide. RESTART is the largest and the best center for psychiatric care, and they have cooperated with UNHCR to offer help for everyone, Syrians and other nationalities alike. Their services are free for Syrian refugees, and they even pay for transportation to the center. RESTART has helped many people: one recipient of psychiatric care at RESTART had started to take drugs and tried to kill himself twice, but after six months with RESTART he became involved with aid organizations that support others in the LGBTQI+ community. He was eventually resettled in Europe.

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR. (2017). "Health access and utilization survey among Syrian refugees in Lebanon - November 2017." Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/health-access-and-utilization-survey-among-syrian-refugees-lebanon-november-2017>

<sup>21</sup> Human Right Watch. (2017). World Report 2017: Rights Trends in Lebanon. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/lebanon>

<sup>22</sup> In depth description of the sex trafficking industry in Lebanon goes beyond the scope of this report. However, readers interested in this topic are referred to: Broge, C. (2018). "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon misses help dealing with psychological trauma." Danish Refugee Council. Available at: <https://stoptorture.today/blog/syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-misses-help-dealing-with-psychological-trauma/>

# LGBTQ+ Refugees' Experiences

---

As the above obstacles illustrate, to be a refugee is hard enough, but to be a LGBTQI+ refugee with no family support is even harder and more dangerous. I share these experiences for you to hear and see the heroism in their lives. I would like to note that these are only a few individual cases: each LGBTQI+ person experiences discrimination and violence differently. For example, trans people are persecuted more often than other groups because their gender identity is easily seen and considered unacceptable by much of the Lebanese public. By comparison, gay and lesbian Syrians can hide their sexual identity, which makes them less likely to face harassment. All of the following stories have had personally identifiable information removed and use pseudonyms to protect people's identity. I translated the quotes from Arabic.

"I am not different, I am simply more unique. I am the light that they are afraid to see, I am the love for those who are full of hate, I am proud I am who I am."

- Akram, a gay Syrian refugee

## A Transgender Male's Experience: Nor

---

Nor is a transgender man, who looks like a man but identifies as, talks like, and dresses like a woman. "I left my country to live," she said. "I am 32 years old. I have a B.S. degree, almost had a master's degree but I couldn't [complete it] because of the war. I have medical issues: kidney failure, back pain, high blood pressure, and a fast heartbeat." Nor has lived in Lebanon for a year now. She crossed the border legally but is now living illegally here: "My visa expired and now I live in daily fear that the authorities will imprison me for not having residency papers," she said.

Nor is originally from Homs, where many people think that being gay brings shame on the whole family. The only way to clear the shame is to kill the gay family member. When the war started everything fell apart for Nor. She was a recent graduate from university with a boyfriend. She supported the government for one reason: "the government can put us in jail, but Islamic religion will kill us for sure. My ex-boyfriend tried to kill me—it was the first stone in my grave. He told my brother that I am gay and showed him pictures of me." Nor paused while sharing the painful memories. "He tried to kill me. My own brother. God helped me, and I escaped from there forever. The war was killing every beautiful memory, everything was black and smelled of death."

Nor held an ID card that belonged to an opposition-associated family, so she couldn't live anywhere in Syria safely. She left and came to Beirut.

In Lebanon, it was not that easy. I spent the first month sleeping in the streets till I met a guy who saved my life. He took me to his home...[and] took me to UNHCR. They helped me with money to rent a room and I started looking for a job. He helped me as much as he could, but in the end, he is a refugee just like me, so I had to count on myself and continue on my own way.



I started to work with someone as an air conditioner maintenance [worker]; after two weeks I asked for my money and he said he didn't have it. He knew I couldn't do anything: I couldn't go to the police because they would send me to jail or worse. I tried to look for another job.

I met this guy who was gay too. He offered me a job, but after a while he started to talk sexually with me. After I told him I was not interested, he insisted, and I had no recourse or protection. I gave him my body, he raped me time after time after time. I felt this would never end. I asked him to please stop, and he said, 'you can go to the street again.' I knew that I would lose UNHCR support in three months [because of time restrictions on service provision], so I had no option but to stay with him. He started to ask me to have sex with other men. It was a very hard time in my life. I felt like I should kill myself and end it there. After one month, I had no option but to leave again. I went to the streets: it is easier to die than to be raped every day.

I went to Bourj Hammoud. It is a good place for Syrians, and also good for gays. It is safe.

For LGBTQI+, the local authorities and the residents of Bourj Hammoud are friendlier to refugees compared to other areas. Also, the cost of living there is cheap. Further, in this area there are Armenian refugees who by now have Lebanese nationality (and therefore protection from the state), who are generally more welcoming to refugees than other groups in Lebanon because of their historical experiences with displacement.

During this time [in Bourj Hammoud], I met new friends, gay friends, and they told me about a place where you can work as an escort. Escorts have to pay the establishment 7,000 LBP [USD 5] to work there. I went to this place, 'The College,' we call it,<sup>23</sup> with a gay friend; it was dark and smelled bad. My friend introduced me to a man, 47 years old or more, sitting there, and he asked, 'how much?' I did not understand at the beginning, but soon I understood he meant 'how much do you want to have sex?' I said, 'I don't know,' and he offered me 20,000 LBP (USD 13). I said okay: I had to pay the place 7,000 LBP [USD 5] and kept the rest to buy food. It was disgusting, he started to kiss me like crazy. I felt like he raped me, and I started to cry and throw up. I felt ashamed, it was my first time. I told the guy who paid me: 'I just cannot handle this.' He sat with me and asked me what my story is. He showed me compassion and gave me 50,000 LBP [USD 33], then said 'don't come back here, it'll kill your spirits.' Go to Helem. They can help you.

<sup>23</sup> The place Nor refers to is an old place used by gay people to have sex and is well hidden. Only gay people know about it and the location is not familiar for most people.



**Figure 5: Bourj Hammoud**

I went out and straight to Helem [an NGO that serves as an LGBTQI+ community center]. It was so comfortable to go there, they opened the door very nicely and let me in. It was a food day [an event that happens once a week] and we ate and had a coffee. It was all free. After this, the manager wanted to ask me a few questions, about my name, my sexual orientation. He said I was welcome to come anytime. I asked him if I could sleep there that night and he said, 'unfortunately, we cannot let you sleep here,' as Helem is open only from 12pm until 7pm from Monday to Friday. I left, and it became darker. I spent the night on the street again with cold weather and police checkpoints. I did not know what to do, so I started walking and walking until the morning. I went to UNHCR again, but they did not help.

I decided then to work as an escort: sex for money. It is not easy, but I didn't want to die, not yet, not now. I lived like this for the next few months. During this time, I started to go regularly to RESTART, a psychological care center connected to UNHCR. They help people to understand themselves and to be more able to face the world. They helped me a lot and they sent a report to the UN that I need help, and then the UNHCR started to help me with a place to stay, where I still stay today. I stopped working as an escort, and I started to build my new life.

I met with a foreign journalist. He was very nice, so I told him my whole story. He promised me to try to help. He put information about me and my picture on the web and identified me as a gay refugee who needed help. It was the worst moment when he told me what he did. I asked the website to remove my picture but [they only did so] after two days of hell. He gave me a very hard lesson not to share any information with any one; this was the worst experience I ever had in Lebanon.

Currently, Nor is waiting for her resettlement with UNHCR to another country, hoping to start a new life.

## **A Queer Syrian Refugee's Experience: Koki**

---

Koki is 25 years old.

I am a lesbian. I prefer to say I am queer, but with the little knowledge [the general public has] about queers and to avoid being misunderstood, I say lesbian.

I came from Damascus after my father died and we lost my brothers [and] I became the eldest in my family. I came to Lebanon in 2012 with my mother and two siblings. I escaped from death in Syria and wanted to find a new life for myself. I thought I would live how I wanted to live in Lebanon: we knew Lebanon has more freedom than Syria.

When I arrived here, I started to receive help from UNHCR [food and rent money], [but] after one year they cut it off. I had to find a job. I used to live in the mountains, but after they cut the money off, I had to come to Beirut hoping to find a job to feed my family. I have no degree, I can barely read Arabic. I found a job cleaning, but the salary was not enough: they can hire an Indian or Filipino [who] can speak Arabic, work full time, [and] speak English. I cannot stay all day [because] I have to go home and take care of my mother and my brothers, and I can't speak English or French. I had to work two shifts and still I couldn't afford the money to send my brothers back in Syria, or to purchase medicine for my mother.

Then I chose to marry someone from Lebanon to help us: he wanted a wife and I wanted a home. After three months of marriage he said he didn't want me anymore. He said, 'I feel like you are not sexually active with me.' He wanted a woman [who was] more like a 'real' one [i.e. not trans], [and] I couldn't do more than let him rape me all the time. After this, he sent me and my family to the streets again. I had enough money to rent a room for the month, but I couldn't find any kind of work.

I started to meet with a lesbian lady, and she introduced me to a new community I did not know before. They helped me a lot and they, of course, asked for sexual services. I spent one year like this, more than one year, but I had hepatitis, my body was so sick, and my liver was not well. UNHCR started to help me again, and now I am waiting for them to send me for resettlement to Belgium. They help with the medicine and rent and food, and the Makhzoumi foundation also helped me a lot financially. My brother quit school, and he works at the market. This helps us too.

## **A Transgender Syrian Refugee's Experience: Dodi**

---

I am from Syria, Tartous, and my family came to Lebanon seven years ago. I was only 12 years old when we came here, me and my brother who is older than me. We stayed in Tripoli until two years ago, when I came to Beirut. My parents divorced because of how impoverished we were, [and] my step-mother couldn't tolerate me, so she asked me to leave the house. My father did not defend me: I went to the streets and I went to my mother [but] she did not want me either, [so] I came to Beirut hoping I could find a good life here.

I came here to stay with a friend who I used to talk to on a gay app [online community]; he offered me a place and money. Everything was good for the first month, [but] after this he wanted me to be a slave, literally, and to start to work for sex. When I said no, he took my ID and started to take advantage of me as a Syrian. With no family, I went to this organization Intersos, and UNHCR, but because I am not registered as a refugee they did not help. After a long time, I met someone working in a high government job, and he used his power to get my ID back and gave me a room to stay in. He helped me a lot [even though] he was not gay.

I started to work in pop and nightclubs from time to time. I live in Bourj Hammoud and have moved from place to place since then. I am waiting for an interview with UNHCR so I can register. I had a medical issue, [and] I took hormones to become a woman. Now I am starting to look like a woman, and this makes me so stressed all the time and makes my life even worse...I tried to kill myself two time since I came here. The first time the Red Cross helped me and saved my life, and the second time [I tried to kill myself because] the guy [my former partner] who helped me gave up on me.

I hope that I will soon be able to receive help and legal protection through UNHCR, in case something happens to me. Helem helps me a lot with meeting people and talking to them makes me understand myself more, and they show me there is nothing wrong with being who you are and living like you want.

My friend's transgender friends really helped me, and I move from one house to another. I am afraid to walk in the street so I only go out at night and I do my best to avoid any places that could be risky [to trans people]. I go to Dawra, Bourj Hammoud, Hamra: those places are friendlier because there are usually so many foreign people there, the police are more careful when they want to arrest someone.

## **A Gay Iraqi Refugee's Experience: Marya**

---

I am originally from Iraq. I come from the Najaf area from a very religious family. I fled to Lebanon after I received a student visa four years ago to study IT. After my visa ended, they wanted to send me back [but] I could not go back...my family started to pressure me. They even sent someone to threaten me...my brother wanted to kill me after he found out I am gay. I felt I could not go back, and I suddenly found becoming a refugee was my only



solution. I went to UNHCR and they helped me to stay here and find legal protection. They helped me to pay the rent for three months, [but] after that I was on my own.

It is so hard to find a job here in Lebanon, and I started to work as an escort with people randomly. It is very bad to live in this way, but I have no other way. All of my future fell apart. I lost everything. I tried to move to Turkey but there was too much fraud [referring to smugglers]. After some time living this way and having unprotected sex with strangers, I did a blood test and [found out] I have a sexual illness. Because of this, UNHCR started my resettlement to Europe. I will go...in a few months. Now UNHCR pays all my needs [housing, food], Makhzoumi helps me with medicine for free, and the [STD] test. RESTART helped me so much to accept myself again after I wanted to kill myself. They showed me there is always a future and I can have a life if I keep taking my medicine. Now I live waiting to move away from here and have new medical care. They told me that in Europe there is more advanced medicine for this kind of sickness, care is more available, and I may have a chance to live normally again.

## A Gay Syrian Refugee's Experience: Bob

---

I am a Syrian refugee from north Syria. I came to Lebanon five years ago. I worked in construction and heavy labor. After two years the owner asked me to get a work permit, [but] it was very hard to get one with the new law. One of the new conditions was that I had to leave Lebanon and could come back after I got sponsor. I couldn't go back to Syria for many reasons, so I stayed and registered my name with UNHCR [under the current



Figure 6: Tareek Jadeeda

law this meant that Bob could no longer work legally]. After this my life became worse. After a year and a half, I started to work as an escort [Refugees always describe sex work as a choice only after they have tried everything else and need money to pay for food and rent, and to survive].

I went to this place—we call it *Jama'a*—where we can work as escorts. One day the police saw me walking on the street close to a checkpoint for the Lebanese Army, so they put me in jail. When they took my phone, they saw a gay picture...I did not do anything wrong. My only crime was to be Syrian with no residency paper and gay. This put me to jail for 27 days. I saw all kinds of torture, from bad words and insults to physical assault that hurt me a lot. After a few days Naseem and Helem, the NGOs, sent me a lawyer, and when UNHCR heard what happened to me, they sent me help. Then the police stopped hurting me. It took 27 days of suffering, for what? Only for a few pictures on my phone that show I am a gay man. They started to call randomly some numbers on my phone asking if I have performed sex for money, and one of the people they called was my brother. He now knows that I am gay. After I left prison, I had nowhere to go, nothing at all. My whole life was destroyed.

I went to UNHCR a few days after I got out of jail, and they started to do the paperwork to send me to a safe country. The second time I went to UNHCR, a policeman attacked me right in front of the building. The lawyer came out and did not allow the policeman to take me to the prison again. After this, UNHCR gave me money to pay the rent and stay in a safe area. Two months later UNHCR sent my papers to Holland and now I am waiting for my flight...So many things happened to me here but going to jail was the worst experience I have ever had. I am diabetic now after I went to jail, and some of my teeth fell out. I am receiving psychological therapy regularly, which the doctor said will help me improve [my wellbeing]. In my dreams, I still see the time that a policeman came and shaved my hair and I could see how much he hated me. I still can hear him screaming about how I like to be fucked. I still can feel the pain when he asked me how many people got laid by me. One [positive] thing is that I am going to a safe country soon. This makes me feel more comfortable about the future.

## **A Gay Syrian Refugee's Experience: Mohamed**

---

Mohamed is a middle-aged male who holds a university degree from northern Syria. "I came to Lebanon because of my sexual orientation. I am gay...During the war I was working with humanitarian organizations. But when they discovered my sexual orientation, they fired me. My life has become very difficult. I received threats, including from my family after they found out that I am a gay man."

Mohamed fled to Lebanon and tried to work with humanitarian organizations, but he could not find a job. Initially, "I could not register with the United Nations. They gave me an appointment for registration after seven months. After spending about ten days moving from place to place, I no longer had enough money to live. I had no other solution; I had to work as a sex worker." At that time, "I did not know what I should do. I lost all control of myself. [Drug dealers] gave me some little things to take. I did not know

it at the time, but they were drugs. Eventually, I could not stop myself. I lost everything. I had no one. I was without work, without a future.”

[After seven months] it was time to sign my name as a refugee with the UN. They took me to RESTART, the specialized center for psychotherapy. I wanted to restore my previous life, so I went there with the hope of healing. Within six months I was able to get off drugs, but I remained a sex worker. [One of the men I worked for] let me live with him at his home, and [helped me find] food.

I spent some time with him [but] then he started to have sex parties with so many gays like they did before. I did not want to go back to this, so I started to tell him I did not want to stay there with him. He refused to let me leave, and when I insisted [that] he used his influence to get me put in jail for illegal entry [to Lebanon]. There was an extensive investigation through which they discovered that I am homosexual. Then the Helem Association intervened and took me out [of jail]. But the intervention came after I was emotionally flooded. I went back to work in prostitution and started using marijuana again. After about a month I went back to RESTART.

I want to live, but it is not easy. Lebanon has no way for us to work. I began gradually to come back to life. The United Nations did not help me, but an Italian-French humanitarian association helped me and now they will take me to France. I live well hiding these days, [but] I am afraid that guy [referring to the exploitive man who employed him as a sex worker] or someone from my family will see me again.

Mohamed remains afraid that if his family finds him, they will kill him.

## **A Bisexual Syrian Refugee’s Experience: Zen**

---

Zen a bisexual woman. She is from Syria and is 22 years old. Zen was a student before all this happened to her.

I am from the city of Tartus. I fled to Lebanon because of the circumstances of the war... After a while [living in Lebanon] I got married and I have a two-year-old boy. After coming to Beirut, my husband discovered my bisexuality when [he] saw me with another woman. She was Lebanese and older than me. He filmed a video of me with my girlfriend and started blackmailing me. I began sex work [because she lost the support of her husband].

It is now three years [later], and I have a small child. I cannot return to Syria and I cannot stay with my husband. He prevented me from keeping our child with me, and he threatened to send the video to my family if I return to Syria.

After a while, I met a gay friend who offered help. I am not registered as a refugee, but I have learned that there are human rights groups that help people like me who have dual sexual orientations. I went to one of these associations and they gave me some legal advice, but no one could help me beyond that. During that time, I met someone who was

working with a U.S. gay [civil society] organization in Lebanon. They offered actual help and moved me to Turkey after I got the papers to do so. I left my son and my house and ran away at night after [my husband] threatened to kill me if I continued a relationship with anyone else.

## Common Themes of LGBTQ+ Refugees

---

While these stories are about individuals, they demonstrate several common experiences among LGBTQI+ refugees in Beirut.

First, Syrian refugees are easy to take advantage of because they lack legal protection and face discrimination from average people, police, and politicians. Many people in Beirut try to take advantage of the vulnerability of Syrian refugees. It is a problem if you are heterosexual, but a greater problem if you are gay, lesbian, transsexual, bisexual, or just a single mother: there is always someone ready to take advantage. Without any protection from UNHCR or Lebanese law, these issues will continue, and there can be no integration for LGBTQI+ refugees in Lebanon.



Figure 7: UN LGBT Flag

Second, each of those in the LGBTQI+ community I have spoken with have lost all of their connections with their families and relatives. Pushed away, they find themselves facing very challenging situations without any social support system.

Finally, all of the LGBTQI+ refugees I have spoken with focus on their gender and sexual identity as a barrier to wellbeing and integration, and no one had a positive, sustainable solution in Lebanon. These refugees are often pushed into the negative practice of sex work to survive, developing physical and psychosocial health risks. Other more positive solutions like being awarded temporary protection and finding work with INGOs, relieve some of the stresses of living in Beirut, but are not real long-term solutions for LGBTQI+ refugees and do not open up opportunities for true integration. and eventually resettlement. The only sanctuary in Beirut comes from NGOs, and the small, socially progressive, and relatively welcoming low-income neighborhoods where LGBTQI+ refugees can live and hide until they are resettled.

## Conclusion

---

From my perspective, and those I spoke with for this report, we have lost hope in our country, lost hope that one day soon the war will end, and lost hope that we can have a normal life in Beirut. The war in Syria has lasted seven years. It was already difficult to live as an LGBTQI+ person before the war, and it has only been made worse during the war when so many people have been displaced into more vulnerable situations.



Today, Syria's neighbors are exhausted with the number of refugees they are housing, which has increased xenophobia in these countries of first asylum. As an easy target, the LGBTQI+ community is particularly susceptible to humiliation and persecution, and to becoming scapegoats for scarcity in all sectors—healthcare, security, work opportunities, housing. I believe that the discrimination against LGBTQI+ people specifically, and Syrian refugees generally in Beirut is based on the fatigue and frustration of people in Lebanon who are already at risk and have no hope of economic progress. I feel that this attitude is very understandable for a small country like Lebanon, with limited resources and a huge number of refugees. Despite these limitations however, the root of the problem remains homophobia, xenophobia, sectarianism, and resentment based on the history of the Syrian presence in Lebanon. For all of these reasons, this means that there is very little sympathy for the most vulnerable refugees.

There are some organizations working to help. The most supportive NGOs are American, Canadian, and European, but there are also a few local organizations: Helem, Marsa, Mosaic, Makhzoumi, Intersos, and RESTART were consistently mentioned as changing lives for the better among those I spoke with for this report. Despite these glimpses of light, and even though the Syrian crisis is the worst humanitarian disaster since WW2, there are few resources for Syrian refugees as a whole, and even fewer for the LGBTQI+ population. As the war has dragged on, people are no longer shocked with the atrocities, and there are fewer and fewer groups willing to help Lebanese LGBTQI+ refugees. Standing in the middle of all of this, I only see a small group of individuals and NGOs, with limited money and influence offering support. They simply cannot help or protect everyone.

Fortunately, there are a few world leaders who still respect the humanitarian crisis. People such as Justin Trudeau are speaking up amidst this turmoil, and some leaders in Europe is still helping refugees. Therefore, I still see hope in our world, and it is not all devastation and gloom for the LGBTQI+ refugee community. Everyone I know in this community hopes for one thing: resettlement.<sup>24</sup> One of the people I interviewed for this report was resettled to Europe while I was drafting it. He shared his experience:

A few days after arriving in a small town in Europe, something happened to me that I would love to share. The police walked up to me and asked me where my papers were. I didn't have any of my papers with me as I had left them at home. I started to think that they would take me to jail, and I forgot for a second where I was. I told him in English in a very strange Arabic accent that I didn't have any of my papers, and they were all at my home. He simply replied that he wanted me to produce something as proof. Fortunately, I had a picture on my phone of my visa: I showed it to him, and he took my phone, went to his car, and came back after a long, long few minutes. Having heard so many horror stories of police [in Lebanon] searching through refugees' phones, discovering they were gay, and taking them away, I thought he would check my phone and I would go to jail for sure.

<sup>24</sup> Resettlement goes far beyond the scope of this report. Some want to return home. I mention resettlement here to give my perspective, that integration is a long, ongoing process without a clear start and end date, or a clear final destination.

Instead, he walked back to me with a friendly smile saying, ‘welcome.’ Here, they respect our humanity.<sup>25</sup>

## References

---

1. Benoist, C. (2014). “Lebanese security forces raid gay-friendly establishment, arrest 27.” Al Akhbar. Available at: <http://alakhbaren.spiru.la/node/21131/>
2. Broge, C. (2018). “Syrian Refugees in Lebanon misses help dealing with psychological trauma.” Danish Refugee Council. Available at: <https://stoptorture.today/blog/syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-misses-help-dealing-with-psychological-trauma/>
3. Daigle, M. and Myrntinen, H. (2017). “When Merely Existing Is a Risk: Sexual and Gender Minorities in Conflict, Displacement, and Peace building.” International Alert. Available at: [http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender\\_SexualGenderMinorities\\_2017.pdf](http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender_SexualGenderMinorities_2017.pdf)
4. Government of Lebanon. (2018). “Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020 (2018 update).” Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-crisis-response-plan-2017-2020-2018-update>
5. Human Rights Campaign. (2018). “Sexual Assault and the LGBTQ Community.” Available at: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>
6. Human Rights Watch. (2018). “World Report 2017: Rights Trends in Lebanon.” Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/lebanon>
7. Human Rights Watch. (2016). “Lebanon: Residency Rules Put Syrians at Risk.” Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/12/lebanon-residency-rules-put-syrians-risk>
8. Heartland Alliance International, “No Place for People Like You: An Analysis of the Needs, Vulnerabilities, and Experiences of LGBT Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” Heartland Alliance International, December 2014, [https://www.heartlandalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/02/no-place-for-people-like-you\\_hai\\_2014.pdf](https://www.heartlandalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/02/no-place-for-people-like-you_hai_2014.pdf) .
9. Human Right Watch. (2017). World Report 2017: Rights Trends in Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/lebanon>
10. Khawaja, B. (2017). “The Gaps in Lebanon’s New Refugee Policy.” *Human Rights Watch*. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/14/gaps-lebanons-new-refugee-policy>
11. Knight, K. and Rumbach, J. “Sexual and Gender Minorities in Humanitarian Emergencies,” in *Issues of Gender and Sexual Orientation in Humanitarian Emergencies* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2014), 33-74, [http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-319-05882-5\\_3](http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-319-05882-5_3), accessed 25 November 2017.
12. ‘Laws of nature.’ (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2014/03/14/laws-of-nature>
13. Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum. (2014). “Background Paper on Unregistered Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.” Available at: [http://lhif.org/uploaded/News/d92fe3a1b1dd46f2a281254fa551bd09LHIF%20Background%20Paper%20n%20Unregistered%20Syrian%20Refugees%20\(FINAL\).pdf](http://lhif.org/uploaded/News/d92fe3a1b1dd46f2a281254fa551bd09LHIF%20Background%20Paper%20n%20Unregistered%20Syrian%20Refugees%20(FINAL).pdf)

<sup>25</sup> This has been my experience, and the experience of all of the resettled LGBTIQ+ people I know have been positive and happy. But of course, refugees in resettlement have a wide range of experiences with integration. For other perspectives, readers are referred to other European case reports of the RIT Project including Hamburg, Germany; Belgrade, Serbia; Athens and Thessaloniki Greece; and Aarhus, Denmark.

14. Mandic, D. & Simpson, C. (2017). "Refugees and Shifted Risk." *International Migration* 55(6).
15. Murad, D. (2018). *Lebanese Army Magazine* Number 368.
16. Reid-Smith, T. (2014). "Police raid Lebanon bathhouse, arrest 27 men on gay sex claims." *Gay Star News*. Available at: <https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/police-raid-lebanon-bathhouse-arrest-27-men-gay-sex-claims130814/#gs.l71pE6M>
17. Saliba, I. (2016). *Refugee Law and Policy: Lebanon*. Library Of Congress Law Library. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/lebanon.php>
18. Samari, G. (2018). *The Response to Syrian Refugee Women's Health Needs in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan and Recommendations for Improved Practice*. Humanity in Action. Retrieved from <https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledgebase/583-the-response-to-syrian-refugee-women-s-health-needs-in-lebanon-turkey-and-jordan-and-recommendations-for-improved-practice>
19. Mijatovic, Aleksander. "Waving Flag of Syria and LGBT – Illustration." *Shutterstock*. Illustration ID 262619894. Online. Available at: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/waving-flag-syria-lgbt-262619894>
20. 'The nightclub where the women are locked up.' (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-39403276/the-syrian-refugees-selling-sex-to-survive-in-lebanon>
21. 'The Syrian refugees selling sex to survive in Lebanon.' (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-43206517/syrian-women-sexually-exploited-by-aid-workers>
22. 'They withheld aid for sex'. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-43206517/syrian-women-sexually-exploited-by-aid-workers>
23. Transparency International. (2017). "COLLECTIVE COMMITMENT TO ENHANCE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY IN EMERGENCIES: LEBANON REPORT." Available at: [https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/create\\_lebanon](https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/create_lebanon)
24. UNHCR. (2018). *UN Inter-Agency Response for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, March 29 - April 5, 2013*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/51627d349>
25. UNHCR. (2018). "UNHCR Lebanon: Education." Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/lb/education>
26. UNHCR. (2018). "Operational Portal: Syria Regional Refugee Response." Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>
27. UNHCR. (2017). "Health access and utilization survey among Syrian refugees in Lebanon - November 2017." Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/health-access-and-utilization-survey-among-syrian-refugees-lebanon-november-2017>
28. Union of Relief and Development. (2017). "Number of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." Available at: <http://urda.org.lb/en/details.aspx?ID=1426>
29. Wansa, S. (2014). "Torture at Every Stage: The Unofficial Narrative of the Hammam al-Agha Raid." *The Legal Agenda*. Available at: <http://legal-agenda.com/en/article.php?id=3043>
30. Whole of Syria. (2017). "Voice from Syria 2018." Retrieved from: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2017-12\\_voices\\_from\\_syria\\_2nd\\_edition.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2017-12_voices_from_syria_2nd_edition.pdf)

# Appendix A: Country Background: Refugees in Lebanon

---

It is not the first time for Lebanon to house refugees: they welcomed Armenians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and Syrians, among others. The weather is comfortable for people from a warm climate, and the culture allows more freedoms than the home countries of many refugees.

## A Brief History of Refugee Migration to Lebanon

---

**Armenians from 1915 to 1940:** These forced migrants merged into Lebanese society and later became Lebanese citizens. Currently, there are an estimated 234,000 Armenians in Lebanon, and Burj Hammoud hosts the largest Armenian population.

**Palestinians from 1948 to 1970:** The first wave of refugees arrived after the events of 1948, estimated at 100,000 people, the second after the 1967 war, and the last wave coming from Yarmouk camp in Syria after the recent insecurity there. The current number of Palestinian refugees according to UNRWA sources are 450,000, but there are other estimates that put the number at more than 500,000 people.<sup>26</sup> Palestinians face many restrictions, including not having the right to work.

**Iraqis from 2003 to 2008:** Iraqis entered Lebanon after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the following insurgency. The number of Iraqis in Lebanon reached 50,000 and then gradually decreased to about 10,000 due to resettlement, returns, and onward migration.<sup>27</sup>

**Syrians from 2011 to Present:** The Syrian crisis led to Lebanon receiving a larger number of refugees at a faster rate of arrival than any refugees wave ever before. It brought millions of refugees to Lebanon and made it the largest and most protracted displacements into Lebanon's history.

Seven years since the outbreak of the conflict has left more than 10.5 million people displaced,<sup>28</sup> and Lebanon is struggling to host around 991,917 of these Syrians, according to UNHCR survey data. This data also suggests the majority of the Syrian refugee population are clustering in Tripoli (357,310, or 36%), North Lebanon (253,147, or 25.5%), South Lebanon (118,993, or 12%), and Beirut (262,460, or 26.5%), but this data does not include unregistered Syrian refugees, believed to be about 250,000 more by Lebanese authorities.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Lebanese Army Magazine Number 368 – Feb. 2016 Lieutenant Colonel Dhafer Murad

<sup>27</sup> Lebanese Army Magazine Number 368 – Feb 2016 Lieutenant Colonel Dhafer Murad

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR report of February 28, 2018

<sup>29</sup> Lebanese Army Magazine Number 368 – Feb 2016 Lieutenant Colonel Dhafer Murad

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Protocol, and it has no legislation to govern its response to the specific needs of refugees and asylum-seekers.<sup>30</sup> Refugees who enter the country without prior permission or who exceed their visas are considered illegal residents and are fined or imprisoned for long periods of time and then deported. In the absence of permission to stay and wait for a long-term solution, refugees face major hardships, including the inability to work, which in turn means that they cannot meet their families' basic needs.

## Appendix B: City Background: Refugees in Beirut

---

In my experience, and based on interviews with residents and refugee service providers, Syrian refugees in Beirut are mostly located in the following areas: Dawra, Bourj Hammoud, Hamra, Barbir, Tarik El Jdide, Nabaa, Ouzai, Dahye, and the mountain areas Aramon Bishamon, Jounieh, Byblos, and Choueifat.<sup>31</sup> They primarily choose to live where they can rent affordable homes and apartments, and in areas that are perceived to be safer for refugees. Certain areas of the city have checkpoints and curfews where refugees cannot go out after certain hours, making these locations less desirable places to live. Decisions about where to settle are also based on work opportunities. Those who are legally able to work must look for employment in particular sectors, such as farming, construction, cleaning, and garbage collection. These are sectors that were traditionally filled by Syrian workers from across the border long before the war started. Those who are not permitted to work, must settle in places where they can make ends meet through the informal cash-based economy.

<sup>30</sup> Saliba, I. (2016). Refugee Law and Policy: Lebanon. Library Of Congress Law Library. Retrieved from: <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/lebanon.php>

<sup>31</sup> Registration data with geolocation are difficult to access, highly political, and often incorrect as refugees do not spend their limited time and resources to update UNHCR databases, and in some cases benefit from safety staying hidden in the city.



# About the RIT Project

---

The [Refugees in Towns \(RIT\)](#) project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

## Our goals are twofold

---

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

## Why now?

---

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

## For more on RIT

---

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

[www.refugeesintowns.org](http://www.refugeesintowns.org)

# About the Author

---

**Akram** lived in Beirut for more than a year, working with NGOs, teaching English to refugees, and supporting the LGBTQI+ community in an advocacy and organizational role before being recently resettled in Europe. He has a college degree from Syria. He is interested in sharing the experiences of Syrian refugees struggling with integration in Lebanon's capital city. He believes RIT is a new, major step in giving people a new understanding of refugees' experiences and suffering, particularly one of the most vulnerable groups, the LGBTQI+ community.

Email: [Akramakram.RIT@gmail.com](mailto:Akramakram.RIT@gmail.com)

---

Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

Twitter: @FeinsteinIntCen

[fic.tufts.edu](http://fic.tufts.edu)