IMPACTS OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AND DISPLACEMENT ON SOGIESC POPULATIONS

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List of Abbreviations

BBC- *British Broadcasting Corporation*
CEDAW- *The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women*
COVID-19- *Novel Coronavirus (nCoV)*
CRSV – *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence*
FES- *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*
FGD-*Focus Group Discussion*
GBV - *Gender-based Violence*
GCRF- *Global Challenges Research Fund*
IDI - *In-depth Interviews*
IDPs- *Internally Displaced Persons*
KAFA- *KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation*
LGBTIQ+ – *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer and Other*
LSE- *London School of Economics and Political Science*
MENA- *Middle East and North Africa*
MOSAIC MENA- *MOSAIC, the MENA Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration & Capacity Building*
NGO – *Non-Governmental Organisation*
OCHA- *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*
PYD - *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)*
SDF – *Syrian Democratic Forces*
SOGIESC – *Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics*
SVAMB - *Sexual Violence against Men and Boys*
UKRI- *UK Research and Innovation*
UN- *United Nations*
UNHCR - *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*


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Executive Summary

Introduction: There is to date little in-depth research on the impacts of the Syrian Civil War and attendant displacement on persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. Persons of diverse SOGIESC face different continuums of violence, exploitation, abuse, and discrimination in multiple ways; from a spectrum of actors, including family members, other civilians, security forces, militias and extremist groups - but also at times from other persons of diverse SOGIESC. The impacts of war and displacement have been exacerbated by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, economic crises, and in the case of Lebanon, the sustained political crisis and the August 4, 2020, Beirut port explosion.

Purpose: This research project aims to examine the direct and indirect impacts of conflict and displacement in the context of the Syrian Civil War on persons of diverse SOGIESC both in Syria and in neighbouring countries, in particular Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Turkey.

Methodology: Three key methods for data collection were employed: a literature review, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The literature review covered existing literature on persons of diverse SOGIESC in conflict settings and displacement, on gender relations, socioeconomic situation, political and economic crisis in Lebanon and Syria, as well as the Covid-19, Beirut explosion, and their cumulative impact on the diverse SOGIESC community.
Interviews were conducted with 10 key informants; and 6 FGDs were organised.
The interviews and FGDs were conducted in Lebanon (Beirut, Mount Lebanon, Bekaa, and South Lebanon), Syria (Aleppo), and Turkey (Gaziantep). The interviews and FGDs were conducted between September 2019 and September 2020.

Findings: The FGDs in Aleppo, respondents highlighted the risks of being 'disappeared' by militias. The threat of harassment and abuse by state authorities, whether Syrian, Turkish or Lebanese also figured as a constant in the narratives. Respondents stressed the need for men to appear 'hard' and avoid any sign of 'softness' or 'effeminacy', including for example towards children in one's family.
In Lebanon, persons of diverse SOGIESC are discriminated against on a crowded and overpriced housing market, especially if they are refugees. Respondents highlighted the important support they received from NGOs and diverse SOGIESC support organizations, which also allowed them to connect with others. However, a number of respondents also reported harassment and discrimination within the diverse SOGIESC community, being misogynistic, lesbophobic, transphobic, or xenophobic. In Lebanon, the catastrophic economic situation, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the August 2020 Beirut port explosion have compounded these anxieties. The economic crisis has pushed many persons of diverse SOGIESC further into the margins of the economy, and Covid-19 prevention measures have hit them hard, including those dependent on sex work for survival. The increasing socio-economic strain has in part increased anti-refugee and anti-diverse SOGIESC hostility. In all three countries, psychosocial support remains limited.

1.Introduction

The civil war in Syria has now lasted for a decade, and has resulted in over half-a-million deaths, over 5 million refugees and, at its height, close to 8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). At the time of writing, fighting continues especially in the north-western corner of the country in Idlib, which is under the control of Islamist groups. While the government of Bashar al-Assad has largely regained control over much of the country, local level governance varies greatly between different areas, in particular those de facto controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), by Turkish-aligned armed groups, and areas where former rebel groups still unofficially hold sway.

This research project aims to examine the direct and indirect impacts of conflict and displacement in the context of the Syrian Civil War on persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) both in Syria and in neighbouring countries, in particular Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Turkey [1]. The research is a part of the Masculinities and Sexualities research stream of the UKRI-funded GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub coordinated by the LSE Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Centre, running from 2019 to 2024. It builds on previous research carried out by MOSAIC MENA together with International Alert (published in part in Myrttinen et al. 2017) as well as previous co-operation between MOSAIC MENA and the LSE WPS Centre (Laruni et al. 2018). This formative research will inform the following stages of the research project, which will continue until 2022.

This research report is structured as follows. Following an overview of the research methodology, the report gives an overview of the existing literature on impacts of conflict and displacement on persons of diverse SOGIESC, and background to the situation in Lebanon and Syria, with a particular focus on gender dynamics. In the case of Lebanon, also the effects of the on-going economic and political crisis, Covid-19 and the Beirut port explosion on persons of diverse SOGIESC. The following section highlights key emerging issues from the formative research stage. The final section consists of a discussion of what these findings as well as the research dynamics encountered mean for the subsequent phases of this research project.

[1] We use both the terms diverse SOGIESC here as well as LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and others) interchangably

2. Research methodology

This formative phase study examines the impact of conflicts and displacement on individuals of diverse SOGIESC in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey. It highlights the trans-, bi-, lesbo-, and homophobic discrimination and abuse they face, how this intersects with xenophobia and racism, and the challenges faced by migrants and refugees throughout the various displacement phases. It assesses the accessibility to services and also highlights the role of informal support systems and coping mechanisms. Moreover, this formative phase study aims to shed light on the under-investigated regions like Aleppo and Gaziantep in regards to SOGIESC topics. Furthermore, this formative research identifies some of the main topics for the next phase of the research for this project. Our aim is to provide a clearer understanding of the requirements needed to improve the lives of the diverse SOGIESC persons in Lebanon and Syria.

The key research questions focused on the following themes (see Annex for full questionnaires):

1. What impact have conflicts, displacement, as well as other crises cumulatively had on persons of diverse SOGIESC in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, both in terms of those who fled and the 'host' LGBTIQ+ community?
2. What are the key needs of persons of diverse SOGIESC in the three countries and what formal and informal networks/services can they access?
3. What role do different factors such as age, class, location, gender, appearance, education and so on play in affecting the lives of persons of diverse SOGIESC in times of crisis?

Objectives

The objectives of this formative phase are as follows:

- Documentation of the diverse SOGIESC experiences in the various stages and locations of displacement.
- Understanding the needs, family and community relationships of persons of diverse SOGIESC, and the link to their survival.
- Investigating the availability of cross-sectorial services for diverse SOGIESC persons as well as the barriers to accessing them.
- Better understanding informal support networks and other survival and coping mechanisms of persons of diverse SOGIESC in displacement and identifying gaps and future research topics.
- Recognising the LGBTIQ+ political participation in the region, limitations, and obstacles.

Study sites

The study sites were Lebanon (Beirut, Mount Lebanon, Bekaa, and South Lebanon), Syria (Aleppo), and Turkey (Gaziantep).

Methods

Three key methods for data collection were employed. In-country data collection was conducted from September 2019 to September 2020.

- *Literature Review*

  Literature review on LGBTIQ+ in conflict settings was undertaken with a particular attention on Lebanon and Syria highlighting gender relations in Lebanon, socioeconomic situation especially refugees and IDPs, political and economic crisis, Covid-19, Beirut explosion, and their cumulative impact on the LGBTIQ+ community.

The sources for articles analysed in the literature review were informational portals, journals, and websites of local and international non-governmental organizations; in addition to websites of international and local newspapers.

The purpose of a literature review is to understand more about the existing research and debates relevant to diverse SOGIESC in Lebanon and Syria and to present the knowledge in the form of written reports. Conducting a literature review helps build on key documents from Local and International organizations (NGOs & INGOs).

- *In-depth Interviews (IDIs)*

Interviews were held with 10 key informants (One Syrian trans woman, four Syrian gay men, one Syrian trans man, two Lebanese gay men, one Syrian lesbian woman, and one Lebanese Lesbian woman). Key informants were contacted through personal contacts and social media, using snowballing techniques, and selected so as to have a variety of SOGIESC, geographical origin, age and social class.

- *Focus group discussions (FGDs)*

Focus group discussions were gathered to collect data on the impact of conflict on LGBTIQ+ persons in Syria, those who have left Syria, and the Lebanese host community. Topics discussed in the focus groups pertained to sexual orientation, mental health, discrimination, and security. Seven focus groups were held between Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. In Turkey, the group consisted of five gay men. In Aleppo, five different focus groups discussion were held that included a total of seven gay men, one trans woman, and three lesbian women.
In Lebanon, one focus group was held comprising of three trans women, one trans man, and nine gay men. The FGD participants were recruited similarly to the interviewees.

Code number	Date	Type (FGD/IDI)	Location	Number of participants	SOGIESC	Nationalities
FF1	09.09.2019	FGD	Lebanon	13	9 gay men, 3 trans women 1 trans man	Syrian (7), Lebanese (4) Egyptian (1), Iraqi (1)
FF2	23.09.2019	FGD	Aleppo, Syria	3	2 gay men 1 trans woman	Syrian
FF3	23.09.2019	FGD	Aleppo, Syria	3	2 gay men 1 lesbian woman	Syrian
FF4	24.09.2019	FGD	Aleppo, Syria	3	2 lesbian women 1 gay man	Syrian
FF5	24.09.2019	FGD	Aleppo, Syria	2	2 gay men	Syrian
FF6	25.09.2019	FGD	Gaziantep, Turkey	5	5 gay men	Syrian
FI1	23.09.2019	IDI	Gaziantep, Turkey	1	Trans woman	Syrian
FI2	24.09.2019	IDI	Gaziantep, Turkey	1	Gay man	Syrian
FI3	25.09.2019	IDI	Gaziantep, Turkey	1	Gay man	Syrian
FI4	02.08.2020	IDI	Lebanon	1	Gay man	Lebanese
FI5	03.08.2020	IDI	Lebanon	1	Gay man	Lebanese
FI6	24.09.2020	IDI	Lebanon	1	Lesbian woman	Syrian
FI7	25.09.2020	IDI	Lebanon	1	Trans man	Syrian
FI8	26.09.2020	IDI	Lebanon	1	Gay man	Syrian
FI9	26.09.2020	IDI	Lebanon	1	Gay man	Syrian
FI10	27.09.2020	IDI	Lebanon	1	Lesbian woman	Lebanese

The key formative research questions drew on themes that had emerged during the previous research and included open-ended questions around experiences of violence and discrimination, the role of being visibly of diverse SOGIESC, networks of support, and everyday lives.

Data Analysis

All IDIs and FDGs were conducted and transcribed in Arabic, and then translated into English. Thematic analysis was used to identify, categorize, and compare themes. In light of the literature review and key findings, the next steps and future recommendations for the research project were developed.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained verbally in Syria and Turkey and written in Lebanon depending on the field circumstances from all informants and focus group participants. All respondents were anonymised. The UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub Ethics Code and Safeguarding Principle guided the data collection process. Given the extremely sensitive nature of diverse SOGIESC issues and the risks involved, several agreed-to interviews had to be cancelled at short notice in Aleppo and recording and note-taking were not always possible as respondents were not comfortable with it.

3. Background to Syria, Lebanon and the impacts of conflict

3.1. Background on diverse SOGIESC, conflict and displacement

While the body of academic and 'grey' literature [2] on gender and conflict, in particular the experiences of women and girls and impacts of violent conflict on them has grown enormously over the past two decades, research on diverse SOGIESC is comparatively new and relatively limited, both in academia and among the NGOs, as well as in gender, peace and security policies (Hagen 2016). The Syrian Civil War has been an exception to an extent, especially human rights organisations and SOGIESC organisations as well as peacebuilding NGOs have highlighted SOCIESC dimensions as well, far more than in other conflicts (Carreras et al 2019, CTDC 2015, Dietrich Ortega et al. 2020, Human Rights Watch 2020, Khattab & Myrttinen 2017, and UNHCR 2017). It was in particular the violence by Islamic State in Syria and Iraq against persons of diverse SOGIESC which raised the issue onto the international agenda, with the UN Security Council holding its first hearing on the issue in 2015 in response (Davis and Stern 2019). The massive wave of internal and external displacement of Syrians triggered by the civil war has also led to increased research on Syrian refugees of diverse SOGIESC, especially in Turkey and Lebanon (CTDC 2015, Kivilcim 2017, Myrttinen et al.2017, ORAM 2011, and Saleh 2020).

As the wide body of feminist research on gender in conflict and displacement has shown, the massive social, economic and political disruptions caused by conflict and flight both create new opportunities for different gender roles to emerge as well as exacerbating pre-existing gender power imbalances and vulnerabilities. It should be noted that gendered vulnerabilities as discussed here are not innate, but constructed, or as Lewis Turner (2016) puts it: "[u]ltimately, a person is not vulnerable because they are a man or a woman [or of another gender identity], but because of what being a man or a woman [or of another gender identity] means in particular situations. A person is made vulnerable by the circumstances, challenges and threats they face."

Feminist researchers have long argued that the dichotomies public vs. private and peace vs. war are less distinct for those in positions that are subjugated based on gender, race or other factors. This is the case for persons of diverse SOGIESC who can face different 'continuums of violence,' exploitation, abuse, and discrimination in multiple ways (Myrttinen and Daigle 2017, and Serrano-Amaya 2018):

- From a spectrum of actors, including family members, other civilians, security forces, militias and extremist groups - but also at times from other persons of diverse SOGIESC;
- From across the political spectrum, from religious extremists of all major religions to secular right-wing and left-wing groups, as well as apolitical persons and groups;
- Temporally, in pre-conflict times, during and throughout the escalation of armed conflict, and in its aftermath;
- Spatially in private spaces, in semi-private spaces, in spaces hidden from public view (such as places of detention) and in public;
- Geographically, in rural areas, in urban areas, throughout their flight from conflict zones, in refugee camps and areas of re-settlement;
- Various forms of abuse, including every day, mundane micro aggressions, looks and verbal abuse, but also blackmail and extortion, phys ical and sexual assault, and lethal, excessive and sometimes spectacular violence (in the sense of staged, public spectacles of violence); and
- Involving a range of different vectors of discrimination and hatred for different people, including homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia, transphobia, misogyny, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and class-based discrimination (e.g. for 'looking too poor').

[2] This refers to non-academic research publications such as those produced by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN agencies or other international organisations, such as the World Bank

For many persons of diverse SOGIESC these vulnerabilities come in layers. For example, a lesbian Syrian refugee woman may face discrimination in society broadly but also withing the LGBTIQ+ community not only because of her sexual orientation but also for being a woman in a patriarchal society, but also for being a refugee, for being Syrian (given Lebanon's complicated historical relationship), possibly for being from a lower income-bracket, and possibly for her religious background. A further particular risk factor is often that of visibility, as also discussed further below: the degree to which others can 'read' the person as being 'visibly' non-heterosexual, non-gender-conforming or non-cis-gender (even if this does not correspond to their SOGIESC), often acts as a major driver or triggering factor of discrimination, violence and abuse (Myrttinen and Daigle 2017).

As José Fernando Serrano-Amaya (2015, 41–42) points out, there can be a range of motivating factors that shape armed actors' violent targeting of persons of diverse SOGIESC:
- shaming, humiliation, and dehumanisation;
- reinforcing control of territory; achieving support of the wider community;
- policing of gender norms and enforcing heteronormativity;
- maximisation of resources through extortion; and
- Impeding social mobilisation in occupied areas.

However, some of the violence is also non-strategic and motivated by individual perpetrators' desires and impulses, such as subjugating others, financial gain, out of bigotry and hatred or other reasons.

The impacts of displacement on persons of diverse SOGIESC has been researched academically especially in refugee settings, including in Lebanon and Turkey, though not always focused on Syrian refugees (see for example Couldrey and Herson, 2013 and Margalit 2019, CTDC 2015, Dietrich Ortega et al. 2020, Kivilcim 2017, Myrttinen et al.2017, Saleh 2020, Shakshari 2014). There is however little to no research on IDPs of diverse SOGIESC. Some of the research on forced displacement focuses on the life situations of diverse SOGIESC refugees while others are more theoretical in nature, with a focus on politics of categorisation. In addition, numerous NGOs and UN agencies have published reports and guidelines on diverse SOGIESC in displacement, again mostly focusing on refugees rather than IDPs (Heartland Alliance 2014, Myrttinen and Daigle 2017, ORAM 2011, and UNHCR 2015). Much of this research underscores the multiplicities and ubiquity of discrimination and abuse faced by persons of diverse SOGIESC, the difficulties of accessing services (e.g. reporting abuse to the police) and the humiliations of the refugee application process, but also tensions between different refugees and the comparatively privileged processing of diverse SOGIESC refugee claims by the UNHCR (e.g. Shakshari 2014). The issue of visibility and its paradoxes of having to be visibly conforming and visibly non-conforming to different audiences, is summarised by Shakshari (2014:1006) as follows:

"Passing is an ironic reality of queer and trans refugee applicants in Turkey [....] Passing the test of being gay, lesbian, or transgender according to the UNHCR standards, and passing as straight or cisgender at work or in public in Turkey mark forms of policing and surveillance that queer and trans refugees experience on a daily basis."

In spite of the - incrementally - increased interest by various actors in the impacts of conflict and displacement on persons of diverse SOGIESC, the issue nonetheless remains somewhat at the margins of discussions on gender, peace and security, of international humanitarian and refugee law, and of transitional justice (Bueno-Hansen 2018, Fobear 2014, Hagen 2016, Margalit 2019, Muddell 2007).
conducted between September 2019 and September 2020.

3.2. Background on Syria

Gender relations in Syria

Prior to the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, in Syria, similarly to other secular, officially left-leaning authoritarian Arab states had a degree of 'state feminism' and official, but limited promotion of women's equality, coupled with an effectively patriarchal social structure. The forms and degree of patriarchy and of gender relations differed between different geographical areas; rural areas vs. urban areas, between ethnic and religious communities and sects, and between individual families. Conflict and displacement have deeply affected the gender roles and expectations in Syria (Carreras et al 2019, Khattab and Myrttinen 2017, El-Masri et al. 2013). They have impacted traditional or customary gender roles and have created new openings and new needs to be more flexible around gender roles, but also exacerbated social tensions around gender equality and created new vulnerabilities across the broader population. This is especially the case for women, diverse SOGIESC individuals, children/youth, elderly, and people living with disabilities (Carreras et al 2019). These trends have developed unevenly and along different trajectories in different parts of the country, from the more gender egalitarian social experiment of the PYD in Rojava in the north-east of the country (Knapp et al. 2016) to more tribally influenced areas, to areas which have been consistently under government control, to those previously under Islamic State control and ones previously and/or currently under the control of Islamist-oriented groups, especially in the north-west of the country. The situation of Syrian-Palestinians and of IDPs is especially difficult (Carreras et al 2019). In February 2019, 50% of the Syrian population remained displaced, with more than 5.6 million registered as refugees outside of the country and another 6.2 million displaced (World Bank 2019).

Several interviews highlighted the importance of funding provided by the international community for survival and livelihood opportunities within Syria, which help people face daily challenges.

The Syrian uprising and its broader social and community mobilisation has broadened physical space and the social mobility of women to some degree, but in spite of the space that women were and are claiming in light of limited social change, their roles continue to be framed by tradition and many have experienced a backlash intending to reduce these spaces (Carreras et al. 2019, El-Masri et al. 2013). The impact of the war and internal displacement on men and boys has received less attention from a gender perspective. Men's and boys' concerns over forced conscription and recruitment have been prevalent throughout the war as has been the fear of arrest and detention and/or social retaliation upon return to areas where men and boys have fled from. Men also face difficulties in living up to societal expectations of being breadwinners and family decision-makers (Carreras et al. 2019, IRC 2015, Khattab and Myrttinen 2017, Quist 2016, Turner 2016).

Persons of diverse SOGIESC

As in many other countries in the MENA region, Syrian law prohibits same-sex relations. Article 520 of the 1949 penal code criminalises homosexuality with prison sentences of up to three years, and classifies same-sex sexual relations as 'carnal relations against the order of nature'. However, it is not known to which extent this law has been enforced (Carreras et al 2019, West 2016). In pre-war Syria, there was a mixture of official heteronormativity, often highly patriarchal personal, community and family gender norms, but also localised tolerance and at times family acceptance of diverse SOGIESC (Ammon 2012, and Saleh 2020). Areas with a more visible diverse SOGIESC community presence included some parts of Aleppo, Damascus and Latakia. Diverse SOGIESC individuals in pre-war Syria did, by most accounts, risk harassment, violence and repression from official state actors, wider society and also, potentially, family members –

the latter in the name of "family honour" (Austrian Red Cross/Accord, 2009, and Myrttinen et al. 2017). Individuals have been, and are still, potential targets for harassment by Syrian security services. Furthermore, religious and social stigma means that being known as being of diverse SOGIESC has created risks not only for the individual, but also for nuclear and extended family members who might face restrictions on social interaction and professional opportunities (Myrttinen et al. 2017, and West 2016).

Fadi Saleh (2020: 57) summarises that 'a form of implicit tolerance is traded for the readiness not to politicize (sexuality and gender) in ways that challenge the regime's authority and power' and that there was an 'implicit "tolerance" of homosexuality coupled with a structural sense of what one could call homophobia; a complex relation to one's family that is not solely characterized by violence and oppression; a relation to the state that is less defined by sexuality than by silence about politics; and a considerable visibility that is more quotidian than political' in pre-war Syria, at least in particular cities of the country, especially Damascus and Latakia.

Pre-war Syria also hosted diverse SOGIESC refugees, both Iraqi and Palestinian. According to a pre-war op-ed in the Guardian newspaper (Littauer, 2010), the Syrian state security apparatus began cracking down more intensely on Syrian and refugee Iraqi diverse SOGIESC individuals about 6–12 months before the outbreak of the civil war.

Impacts of War

The outbreak of the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war impacted persons of diverse SOGIESC differently in different parts of the country. Saleh (2020) highlights that in the initial stages of the uprising, homophobic verbal assaults and taunts by the government against opposition demonstrators did not lead to homophobic violence. However, upon taking up arms and controlling territory, various armed opposition groups including the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al- Nusra and Daesh/Islamic State started using violence against persons of diverse SOGIESC (Myrttinen et al. 2017). The policing of gender norms and violence committed by Islamic State in Syria and Iraq has been best documented and allegedly included making public spectacles (including internet distributions) of its executions of suspected homosexuals (Human Rights Watch, 2014, 2015, 2020; Outright Action International, 2016; and Secker, 2015). The one opposition group which has taken a more progressive stance towards diverse SOGIESC is the Kurdish PYD, where its forces have allegedly included an openly pro-LGBTIQ+ unit of foreigner volunteer fighters (Ghazzawi 2017).

Syrian state security actors have also used violence and repression against persons of diverse SOGIESC and individual members of the security forces have also extorted money through blackmail and extortion (Myrttinen et al 2017). There has also been more government surveillance of diverse SOGIESC social media sites after the outbreak of the civil war and both state and non-state actors seeking to entrap users through "dummy" accounts (see also Saul, 2015 on Daesh/Islamic State using similar tactics). Some gay men had been forced to regularly provide sexual services to male members of the police and armed forces in return for protection lest they risk "outing" and/or violence (Myrttinen et al. 2017).

As documented by human rights organisations and UN agencies (Human Rights Watch 2020; and UNHCR 2017) and the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (HRC 2018), conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has been used against Syrians of all gender identities in house raids, checkpoints, and in detention centers as a widespread and systematic abuse by state and non-state armed groups, including by pro-government militias. Sexual assault and abuse also has been documented as occurring within the Syrian armed forces (Human Rights Watch 2020), and possibly in other armed groups as well. According to Human Rights Watch (2020, 38), 'although men and boys are

stopped at checkpoints regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, gay and bisexual men and transgender individuals were often sexually and verbally harassed and sexually abused on the basis that they were "soft looking".'

Much of the research on the gendered impacts of the Syrian Civil War has largely focused on gendered needs assessments conducted by NGOs as well as on women, without taking women's diverse SOGIESC into account. In terms of impacts of the conflict on persons of diverse SOGIESC, the focus has been on CRSV, especially sexual violence against men and boys (SVAMB) and to a degree trans women in sites of deprivation of liberty (Human Rights Watch 2020, and UNHCR 2017). Diverse SOGIESC experiences of the war more broadly beyond CRSV and displacement, as well as the experiences of lesbian and bisexual women, and of trans men have been largely absent in the literature. Furthermore, the analyses have seldom used an intersectional lens nor explored if some populations (e.g. Syrian Palestinians or Kurds of diverse SOGIESC) are facing particular risks and vulnerabilities, or possibilities of agency. As human rights and other NGOs tend to focus on needs and threats, there is also a danger of presenting Syrians of diverse SOGIESC as victims only. Fadi Saleh (2020: 51) critiques this tendency as "a systematic investment in reducing queer lives, histories, and subcultures to easily shareable narratives of suffering, invisibility, and oppression that are less about conveying nuanced, personalized, and contextualized accounts of the Syrian queer and trans refugees, and more about producing repetitions without any recognizable difference."

With a view to the future, the main questions for Syria are how long the war will last, what the post-war settlement will look like in different areas of the country, under what conditions displaced populations will be able to return, and what the longer-term implications will be for gender norms and dynamics in different areas of Syria. All of these will also have impacts on persons of diverse SOGIESC: will returning populations have more open and gender-equal attitudes or will there be a more conservative roll-back? Will the fact that Islamist groups were able to govern large areas for several years - and continue to hold sway after their defeat - lead to continued repression of persons of diverse SOGIESC? In what form will the social and political experiment of Rojava with its emphasis on inclusive democracy and gender equality be able to prevail? Will the end of the conflict lead to a re-opening of more diverse SOGIESC areas in some urban areas or will there be a crackdown on 'morality'? In all likelihood, the official peace-time, when it comes, will look different in different parts of the country, and different for people of different backgrounds, but the end of violent conflict may well not mean the end of violence and discrimination for persons of diverse SOGIESC.

Impacts of Covid-19 in Syria

As elsewhere, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Syria and attendant preventive measures has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities (We Exist 2020). Although there is no research directly on the impacts of Covid-19 on persons of diverse SOGIESC in Syria, the often precarious circumstances in which they have been forced to live mean that they have likely been harshly impacted by the pandemic and its aftereffects. Due to the on-going conflict, a lack of access and restrictions on media and civil society, the degree of the impact of these can not be gauged independently, but the effects have been severe and have had many dimensions. At the time of writing, Syria officially had a relatively low confirmed caseload of only around 8 000 cases in total, with 413 fatalities, but this low figure is due to very limited testing and the obstacles on-going fighting have placed on collecting samples (OCHA/WHO 2020). OCHA and WHO (2020) listed the urban areas of Damascus/Rural Damascus, Aleppo and Homs as areas of concern, and have highlighted the increased risks for those "living in IDP camps and informal settlements in North Eastern Syria, collective shelters throughout the country, as well as other areas including Deir-Ez-Zor, and where hostilities may be ongoing." In late 2020, Amnesty International (2020) summarised that "the Syrian government is failing to adequately protect its health workers, still lacks a robust response to the spread of the disease, and is refusing to provide transparent and consistent information about the country's COVID-19 outbreak."

The Covid-19 pandemic in Syria adds to a complex mix of other crises linked to the on-going Civil War, including on-going hostilities in various parts of the country, massive internal and external displacement, contested local governance, external economic sanctions, low levels of service provision, and the fall-out from Lebanon's economic and financial crisis. According to the WFP (2020), the pandemic has also worsened an already-poor food security situation that was already poor since late 2019. The lockdown measures of the government "severely restricted population movement as well as commercial, industrial and agricultural activities," and increased food prices "due to panic buying, hoarding, and lack of controls on prices" (WFP 2020). Even after the end of the lockdown period in late May 2020, however, prices have continued to increase, and food insecurity indicators have continued to worsen, hitting those who are most vulnerable the hardest. The pandemic has also had a negative impact on an already-strained medical system, including on access to sexual and reproductive health services and to what limited psycho-social support services exist (Al Abdeh and Patel 2020). While there are no reliable statistics on the extent of different forms of gender-based violence (GBV) in Syria, humanitarian actors had noted increasing levels already prior to the pandemic, and as in other countries, lockdown measures as well as the increase of GBV-related stress factors such as poor mental health, food insecurity and economic stress have likely led to a further rise (UNFPA 2020).

3.3. Background to Lebanon

Gender relations in Lebanon

Lebanon has contributed to several international efforts concerning legal frameworks for protection of human rights; however, it did not ratify all declarations. Starting from 1948, Lebanon joined efforts in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and then agreed on following the conventions but did not ratify them due to certain reservations on some of their articles: "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Conventions of the International Labor Organizations, and Geneva Conventions and their Protocols." Lebanon adopted the "International Convention against Enforced Disappearance, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" but did not intend to ratify the Refugee Convention and its Protocols, Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Add to that, the Lebanese law dominates the international conventions signed where legal courts rarely tend to refer to articles of the signed conventions and refer to the Lebanese laws even if it contradicts the international conventions. The Lebanese laws still have gaps in many of its articles especially in the penal code. For instance, sexual harassment is not criminalized nor defined by the law. Attempts by a former deputy and the former Minister of State for Women's Affairs to submit draft laws to criminalize sexual harassment; however, the proposed drafts do not protect marginalized groups such as queer community since the concept was explained as a form of gender-based and sexual violence in addition to the necessity of its linkage to both the labor law and the penal code which was also absent. The penal code criminalizes same sex relationships as relations against nature being punished by law up to one year of imprisonment. Marginalized groups experience abuses and harassments when arrested such as forced anal examinations. This was then banned by a decision from the Ministry of Justice and the medical association as being a cruel violation of human rights. However, opinions around this matter are still debatable especially in certain cases of necessities in the pathway of investigation. Moreover, there are no laws that protect queer communities from discrimination, hate crimes, or gender-based violence; and no specified laws for legally protecting transgender men and women (UNFPA, UNDP, and UNwomen, 2018).

Socio-economic situation, especially refugees and IDPs

As a result of the economic situation and the widespread of COVID-19 cases, estimates state that over 55% of the Lebanese people are now in poverty and up to 23% are in extreme poverty. Add to that, there is an immense erosion of the middle class to reach now less than 40% of the entire population as well as the higher class to shrink from 15% to 5% of the population. Moreover, the circumstances have driven people to flee illegally on fishing boats from Tripoli to Cyprus where over 21 boats have left between July and September and have faced many challenges during their travels where many have lost their lives. After the Beirut port explosion, more than 36% increase in legal immigration of youth was also reported (The New Humanitarian, 2020 & ESCWA 2020). Moreover, the existing situation along with the imposed quarantine has produced social tensions, cases of violence, and murders. According to KAFA (enough) violence and exploitation; a local non-govern-

mental organization; the number of reported cases of violence has increased drastically with the beginning of 2020. The number of calls on KAFA's hotline and the number of murders and suicide due to violence within one month was shocking (KAFA, 2020). After two months of the occurrence of the Beirut blast, the UN and humanitarian partners are still delivering various types of assistance to citizens who were affected. More than 36000 people were aided with protection services, approximately 83000 people benefited from food parcels, and water supply tanks and pumps have been installed for around 4000 houses. Moreover, more than 27000 have received cash assistance to compensate for the urgent needs and the gaps in the sectors caused by the economic crisis in addition to the COVID-19 outbreak. Lebanon is in need of long-term support that involves different means of assistance in order to help in recovery and reform. Thus, the UN-coordinated response is aiming to target 300,000 affected citizens which require $355 million that remains less than 29% funded (UNOCHA, 2020). Moreover, due to the large number of women and young girls who were affected by the Beirut blast and who were already victims of violence, UN women dedicated services and programs to provide protection and psychosocial support for those vulnerable people (UN-Women, 2020).

Over the years, Syrian refugees in Lebanon have increasingly become seen as a social and political threat and as economic competitors (Slavova 2015). These fears and stereotypes are gendered, and as Qubaia and Gagné (2014) put it: 'Syrian male refugees are at the bottom of this [social] order, and viewed as dangerously sexual and hyper- masculinised, rapacious, morally bankrupt, and flat out criminal' (cf. Farah 2015, Khattab and Myrttinen 2017) Syrian women, meanwhile, are in part also cast as a danger to Lebanese social mores and morality, based on fears that they will engage in sex work and/or become wives or second wives of Lebanese men – fears which in some of our previous research were especially held by more rural Lebanese women, especially in northern parts of the country (Khattab and Myrttinen, 2014). Syrian refugees of diverse SOGIESC in Lebanon face a wide spectrum of social and economic discrimination and abuse, which mix together class-based prejudices, xenophobia, and misogyny with homo-, lesbo-, bi- and transphobia (Heartland Alliance 2014, Gagné and Qubaia 2013, Laruni et al. 2018, Myrttinen et al. 2017). This includes discrimination in getting jobs and housing; extortion (including for sexual favours) and blackmail by colleagues, employers, officials, taxi drivers, landlords and others; shunning and discrimination, including even within the LGBTIQ+ community; verbal abuse; as well as physical and sexual assaults.

Political and Economic crisis

At the time of writing, Lebanon's situation is deteriorating rapidly in every aspect whether it's economically, socially, or politically. On a political level, the anti-government protests started way before the port explosion and then intensified afterwards rejecting the mismanagement and neglect of the government which led to the resignation of the government of Prime Minister Hassan Diab on August 10, 2020. International interlocutors pressured the Lebanese ruling parties to form a new government that meets the expectations of the people and implements the reforms required to resolve the country's humanitarian and economic crisis which will unlock the financial sanctions imposed on the country. After the repetitive visits of the French president and his proposed timeline

for the formation of the government and conduction of reforms. President Macron urged the political parties to adopt his reform plan within six weeks while criticizing their lack of responsibility towards their people in the conference held on September 27 concerning the Lebanese situation (Security Council Report, 2020). A recent development on the Shi'a behalf upon the reflection of the political situation on the collapsing economic and social circumstances; the president of the parliament Nabih Berri have taken the initiative to lead the negotiation on the Lebanese-Israeli sea borders which was one of the American terms for resolving the financial restrictions on the country (The Independent, 2020). However, the country remains with no ruling government sinking deeper in the economic and social crisis. October 17th marks one year of the mass protests that took place in Lebanon aiming for change in the corrupted system. Until the present, those protests yielded no reform whatsoever as the political figures and government failed to acknowledge the rights of the citizens and also tried several methods including force against peaceful protestors in order to restrain those rights (Amnesty, 2020). On October 21st, Lebanon and Israel negotiated on the disputed maritime border between the two countries intending to produce stability and security for citizens in both countries. Those ground-breaking negotiations were hosted by the United Nations and mediated by the United States in the Lebanese town Naqoura (The Independent. 2020, Middle East Eye. 2020, & UN News, 2020). Though his government had resigned one year ago, Saad Hariri has been chosen by the Lebanese parties to be prime minister on October 22nd. Claims concerning the reasons of having him return back are related mainly to the devastating economic crisis, months of deadlock, inadequacies of the Lebanese social welfare system, and all other factors that have made the country collapse. A French initiative pledged billions of dollars of international aid if the Lebanese politicians work on reform and tackle corruption as soon as possible. Yet, the requested reform remains pending (BBC News, 2020).

Lebanon’s economic system was a fragile one to begin with and was doomed to collapse eventually. However, what started the damages rapidly were the U.S. sanctions due to the involvement of Hezbollah’s money laundry scheme in addition to the financial policies adopted by the central bank that aimed at increasing banks’ profits while neglecting the risk of the exchange rate. The country is now broke and has missed out payments of Eurobond obligations. The only solution available now for Lebanon is outside money on an estimated bail-out of 100$ billion; however, there is no clear consensus on how the losses are to be allocated between different stakeholders in addition to the lack of transparency of government and private entities. Add to that, government officials failed to reach any constructive agreements with the International Monetary Fund. Now with the central bank’s depletion of liquefied reserve and the continuous depletion of the value of the Lebanese lira; the situation is getting much worse. (FDD, 2020) The unemployment rate as claimed by the Lebanese president had reached 46% and the inflation rate has reached 120.03% as of August 2020 (Central Administration of Statistics , 2020, & The World Bank'. 2020). In the light of political tensions, Lebanon continues its recovery journey after the occurrence of the Beirut blast. This journey is not showing any progress in the presence of the current economic and financial crises (ReliefWeb, 2020). The Lebanese economy started deteriorating more than ever since October 2019 where capital inflows stopped leading to precipitated banking and debt, then came the imposed lockdown due to COVID-19, reaching the Beirut blast that occurred on August 4th and severely destroyed residential and commercial places creating an additional burden on the Lebanese people. Statistics predict that the real GDP will decline 19.2% by the end of 2020 and an additional 13.2% in 2021. In addition, the deterioration of the Lebanese currency continues affecting poor and middle class citizens in the absence of proper policy making leadership able to regulate the exchange market pressures (World Bank, 2020). Since last year, the Lebanese pound has lost its value by 80% leaving citizens worried and devastated. Half of the local population is now living under the poverty lines. Besides, the unemployment rate reaches 37% and more resulting in immigration that is reaching 4100 per day (ReliefWeb, 2020).

Covid-19

On 21 February 2020, Lebanon confirmed its first case of COVID-19. Based on the epidemiologic data, the first case of COVID 19 was imported to Lebanon through travelers returning from Iran/Qom (believed to be the epicenter in Iran) and was transferred to a public hospital in Beirut. On 15 March, Lebanon declared a state of medical emergency. The government announced the closure of Beirut Airport, seaports and land entrances. Additionally, it imposed the closure of all businesses and organizations, except for those selling essential goods, such as supermarkets and pharmacies. An inter-ministerial National Emergency Task Force has been established upon the request of the Lebanese Prime Minister, headed by representatives of the PM office. The Task Force is following up on preventive measures and country preparedness activities, its secretariat is assumed by the Disaster Risk Management team in the PM office. As of April 16, the number of confirmed cases increased to 663 people and 21 deaths. The response plan set by the government depends on a single joint health care system supervised by the government to deliver all services without any basis of discrimination (ReliefWeb, 2020). In May, the number of cases continue to increase which could be justified by the improvement of the testing coverage and capacity nation-wide. Cases in refugee camps (Palestinian and Syrian) in Bekaa and South governorates and among migrant workers (Bangladeshi) started to appear at that time; in addition to the cases detected on the incoming flights.(ReliefWebReliefWeb, 2020). The Ministry of Interior and Municipality (MoIM) issued on June 15 a circular that clarifies the operation procedure of administration, management, isolation criteria and measures for isolation centers. 4 of the approved 38 isolation centers were functional and 12 centers were still under preparation. It was agreed upon by the UN agencies and partners along with the Governor's office disaster risk management committees and the concerned municipalities on the establishment of the "COVID-Rapid Response Team for Beirut and Mount Lebanon (ReliefWeb, 2020). The explosion of Beirut port has called for prioritizing an emergency crisis response targeting the basic needs of survivors. The situation of covid-19 was aggravated due to the overcrowding of hospitals and substitute shelters in addition to group funerals and protests. The entire situation was drastic and the protection measures from covid-19 were poorly applied due to the intensified economic, financial and humanitarian crisis (ReliefWeb, 2020). The number of patients testing positive for COVID-19 continued increasing immensely reaching a total of 46,542 cases in October (ReliefWeb, 2020). This rapid increase has contributed to decisions from the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities announcing lockdowns in 111 to 160 villages and towns all over Lebanon to mitigate the risks of the virus (UNICEF, 2020). The movement restrictions and the curfew has necessitated having citizens stay at home where overcrowding among very small apartments especially after the occurrence of Beirut blast did not help in reducing the number of COVID-19 cases (OCHA, 2020). Hospitals are still struggling to admit the increased number of patients as its capacity is decreasing as the health sector is becoming overwhelmed by this increased pressure due to several factors mainly COVID-19 and the damage caused after the Beirut blast. Most of the beds in ICU are fully occupied leaving the MOPH along with the local hospitals worried about not being able to meet the rising needs for more beds (ReliefWeb, 2020).

Beirut Explosion

On August 4, a huge explosion occurred in Beirut's port killing over 191 people, injured more than 6,000, and displaced more than 300,000 people. The explosion occurred within the breakout of covid-19 in the country and the aggravating economic crisis. Due to the overlapping of different calamities and the presence of gender inequalities structured in the system, the emergency response plan was very critical to organize and implement. In a rapid gender analysis done with the people affected by the blast, queer people reported the difficulties they faced in accessing health care services due to either discrimination, affordability, lack of physical access or barriers in documentation. Moreover, LGBTQ community had difficulties in receiving mental health services because of COVID or discrimination. Add to that, many social assembly sites and workplaces that were considered safe public spaces for queer community had been severely damaged by the explosion. The emergency response initiated within the Lebanese community itself has raised initiatives to fund the re-construction of the mentioned sites and to support the LGBTQ community; however, many changes are still required (Gough, 2020 & Assi, et al. 2020).

Impacts on LGBTIQ Community

Within the existing economic and health crisis, many people of the LGBTIQ community were victims of systemic discrimination where they did not have access to NSSF or healthcare services including hormonal treatment or mental health services. Many have lost their jobs as well since they worked in informal economies with no protection from their work contract; in addition to the fact that these types of jobs (retail, industrial services, etc.) cannot be performed remotely amid the lockdown. Moreover, most Lebanese businesses are managed by family members and since LGBTIQ individuals are rejected by their families they remain with no connections to finding jobs in the Lebanese economy. Due to the covid-19 and economic crisis, the Lebanese government distributed financial aid to family units which basically excluded queer people. Due to their loss of jobs, many were forced to move back with their parents where they were previously abused or live with friends which did not contribute to social stability. Extended family members play an important role for social support in times of crisis within the Lebanese society; however, some LGBTIQ people are victims of domestic violence and are often rejected by family members. Thus, queer people lost their social network and grassroots societies and had to handle the discrimination and abuse. This was explained by the increase in calls reporting mental health issues and cases of domestic and partner violence to concerned non-governmental organizations such as MOSAIC. The Lebanese laws do not govern the rights of LGBTIQ people for protection from harassment or structural violence. The revolution of October 17 has given the queer community a public space safe from oppressions to profound their existence as part of the Lebanese society which changed drastically the views of many societal entities about the rights of LGBTIQ individuals after attempting several times to marginalize them (Salem and Shaaban, 2020 & Human Rights Watch, 2020). However, this societal lobbying for LGBTIQ rights that was manifested during the revolution is still not enough if the government still punishes relations of same-sex according to the penal code law (article 534). Add to that, LGBTIQ community's rights of freedom of safe space to practice their activities is still fought by Christian and Islamic institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2020 & Civil Society-Centre', 2018).

4. Formative research findings

This section focuses on the findings of our formative research in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey. We have identified several key thematic areas which came up during the research in all three locations as well as ones which were specific to Syria and Lebanon/Turkey, and used these as a basis for grouping our findings.

In 2014, a study of 60 Syrian refugees of diverse SOGIESC in Lebanon by the Heartland Alliance (2014) showed that:

- 96% of respondents reported being directly threatened in Syria because of their sexual orientation or gender identity;
- 54% reported being sexually abused in Syria, with sexual orientation or gender identity being a leading factor in this abuse;
- 56% reported having been physically assaulted in Lebanon, but only 7% reported the crime to the authorities;
- 29% reported having been threatened, extorted, or blackmailed in Lebanon, motivated by bias based on their sexual orientation or gender identity;
- Only 35% of LGBT Syrian refugees inter viewed are currently working;58% described their mental health status as poor;
- Only 28% stated they would consider remaining in Syria or Lebanon if conditions improved. Most agreed that they cannot imagine living safely as LGBT individuals anywhere in the Middle East.

Our formative research findings both broadly echo some of these findings, especially around everyday discrimination, negative mental health impacts and the wish to leave the Middle East region. Contrary to these findings and our expectations, however, respondents did not give centrality to their experiences of the war, of personal experiences of violence by armed actors or CRSV in their answers. No-one denied the omnipresence of the threat of violence, but much of this threat was seen as emanating from other civilians, including family members, and violence by armed actors was less prominent in the narratives [3]. The notable exception here were the FGDs in Aleppo, where respondents highlighted the risks of being 'disappeared' by militias. The threat of harassment and abuse by state authorities, be they Syrian, Turkish or Lebanese also figured as a constant in the narratives.

As in the Heartland Alliance (2014) research, a recurring opinion among our respondents was that of needing to leave the Arab world as being the only solution for persons of diverse SOGIESC. There was relatively little sense of a possibility of affecting political and social change, even in Lebanon where the 2019 protests did bring pro-LGBTIQ messages to the fore.

[3] FF1, FF2, FF3, FF4, FF6, FI1, FI5, FI6

4.1. Common themes across all settings

Some of the common themes which emerged in all three countries in our research included:

- Visibility and need to adhere to 'accepted' gender appearances and performances,
- Economic precarity,
- Family, friends, support networks,
- Emotional/psychological impacts,
- Particular vulnerabilities of trans women, and
- Micro-geographies of security/insecurity

Visibility and appearance

"I feel like a butterfly that's in its cocoon and afraid to leave, but is afraid at the same time that its life would be over while stuck inside. It feels as if the minute the butterfly decides to show its head, it will be cut off […] I want to love and be loved like a normal person, not spend all my life like a murderous criminal who's waiting for the people to hang him."
(FGD FF4, Aleppo, Syria)

'I feel that in all communities – LGBTIQ or else, we have a tendency to judge a book by its cover. We judge people without knowing them… because we're born in this society we're always judging each other'
(FGD FF1, Beirut, Lebanon)

Based on previous research and on experiences of work with diverse SOGIESC individuals and communities in Lebanon, questions around the importance of appearance and visibility were given a central place in the IDIs and FGDs. All research participants highlighted its centrality to the risk of various kinds of abuse and discrimination: the more visible one was 'not a man' or 'not a woman' based on narrow societal definitions of these gendered expressions and performances, the more likely one was to encounter abuse and discrimination[4]. What was striking was how many respondents, especially in Syria, stressed the need for men to appear 'hard' and avoid any sign of 'softness' or 'effeminacy', including for example towards children in one's family. While gay men adjusted their public gender performances to be 'harder' and 'more masculine', trans women either did the same or, in some cases, dressed as religiously conservative women (e.g. wearing a hijab) to avoid attention, be it in Syria or in Turkey.

Economic precarity

A further common theme for most respondents was their precarious socio-economic status and financial insecurity, especially for those displaced as refugees. In Syria, the war has led to a collapse of the pre-war economy and post-war reconstruction has been slow to start in areas where fighting has ended. Depending on the degree of their 'visibility' as diverse SOGIESC, respondents In Lebanon and in Turkey, they faced job market discrimination both as refugees and as persons of diverse SOGIESC, and often had to resort to exploitative or illegal work, including in some cases sex work. Respondents' economic precarity has been exacerbated in Lebanon by the massive economic crisis that the country is facing since 2019. The importance of economic and financial security was also highlighted by the few interviewees in Syria and Lebanon who were better off and more privileged, who thereby had more possibility of being (slightly) more open about their diverse SOGIESC thanks to being shielded by comparative wealth.

Especially among respondents in Lebanon, and in particular in Beirut, access to housing was an overriding concern for many respondents. Persons of diverse SOGIESC are discriminated against on a crowded and overpriced housing market, especially if they are refugees. Evictions are common as is extortion and exploitation, including of a sexual nature, by landlords. For those living together with other refugees and/or family members to whom they are not 'out' to, violence is a constant risk and fear. Lack of privacy was a common complaint.

In terms of work, some professions and workplaces were more tolerant of diverse SOGIESC than others, such as hairdressing, although even their gendered performances had to be regulated.

[4] FF1, FF2, FF3, FF4, FF6, FI1, FI4, FI5, FI6, FI8, FI9, FI10

Family, friends, support networks

"…my uncle's family considers my blood halal (can be killed) because according to them I have dishonored our family's name."
(FGD FF2, Aleppo, Syria)

"[My sister] said that it would be shameful (haram) for me to inherit anything from my parents because I will spend them on the diabolical acts that I engage in."
(Syrian Trans woman (FI1), Gaziantep, Turkey)

A further common theme was the importance of personal support networks and of supportive families, and the high emotional cost and risk incurred if these are not or no longer present. While many respondents did not receive support from their families and a number had faced violence or been threatened with it, some research participants did also mention acceptance by at least some family members, even if this was at times out of pity.

In Lebanon and Turkey, respondents highlighted the important support they received from NGOs and diverse SOGIESC support organisations, which also allowed them to connect with others. However, a number of respondents also reported of harassment and discrimination within the LGBTIQ+ community, be it misogynistic, transphobic, xenophobic or lesbophobic, such as accusations levelled against lesbian women by trans women that the former were 'not feminine enough.' [5]

Emotional/psychological impacts

"No one who is like us feels safe in Aleppo…we are living 24/7 in anxiety; anxiety from our families finding out, anxiety from the situation, anxiety from losing our self-restraint, anxieties from a million thing… What safety are you asking about?"
(FGD FF2, Aleppo, Syria)

What was visible in the responses but also evident through participant observation was the anxiety and heavy emotional and psychological toll multiple stress factors were taking on the respondents. Simultaneously, they had to confront traumas of conflict and displacement, economic and housing insecurity, being stuck in limbo with their lives, everyday threats of potentially extreme violence and non-stop microaggressions from neighbours, taxi drivers, shop assistants, landlords, officials, and other people around them. Among many respondents there was a heightened sense of not being able to trust others.

In all three countries, psychosocial support remains limited. Some NGOs such MOSAIC MENA have been providing psychosocial support, but their reach is limited to Lebanon mostly due to geographic and resource constraints. It is also observed that other entities supposed to be providing support often hold homo- or transphobic views. In the absence of proper services, mental health support heavily relies on a close circle of friends and the diverse SOCIESC-friendly safe spaces, such as the ones created by NGOs. However, there continues to be a pressing need for professional support as well as access to activities to help relieve mental stress. A number of respondents lacked healthy coping mechanisms or were not addressing issues.

[5] FF1, FF3, FI6, FI10

Particular vulnerabilities of Trans women [6]

"... life here seems like it would be hell for a trans person, but my friends told me to wear the hijab before moving there and this made the process easier."

(Syrian Trans woman (FI1), Gaziantep, Turkey)

A common view among respondents was that trans women are among the most vulnerable persons. This is in part because they are seen as visibly transgressing gender norms, especially ones around male 'hardness' and men not being supposed to be 'effeminate'. The public and media image of the trans woman is one that is highly sexualised, and in part because of this, many are both exposed to sexual extortion and have to resort to precarious sex work for survival. Trans women are more stigmatised than other persons of diverse SOGIESC and often more shunned by families and communities, increasing their vulnerabilities. Furthermore, they often run afoul of authorities as the sex in their official papers does not necessarily correspond with their gender identity and expression. Trans women also had to make decisions on transitioning, weighing their fear of transitioning against the need to transition in order to be less visible. [7]

Micro-geographies of security/insecurity

A further common theme in the responses in all three countries is the need for persons of diverse SOGIESC to know the micro-geographies of security/insecurity in the cities which they inhabit.[8] Even in comparatively more diversity-friendly metropolitan areas such as Beirut and Istanbul, they need to be hyper-vigilant as to when, where, with whom and to what degree they can be more open about their gender identity and expression. While safer areas exist, the degree of security and insecurity may also change depending on the time of day or fluctuate with the shifting political mood, for example if political parties or figures are whipping up anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiment.

6 FF1, FI1, FI7, FI10
7 FF1
8 FF1, FF2, FF66, FI1, FI5, FI8, FI6

4.2. Syria

Within Syria, an underground diverse SOGIESC community life continues but under extremely precarious circumstances. Respondents reported of daily harassment, the need to adjust their behaviour to reduce their visibility as being of diverse SOGIESC, of the danger of disappearances and kidnappings at the hands of militias and of threats of violence from families, including family members reporting them to militias [9]. According to one FGD in Aleppo, the risk of being targeted by a militia group was higher now than during the height of the fighting. One respondent also raised the risk of homophobic violence from gay men; who suffered from internalized homophobia and the attack violently other gay men .For men of diverse SOGIESC, conscription into the Syrian army was a constant fear, be it for political reasons, the risk of being sent to the frontline and/or the high risk of homophobic and sexual violence (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Respondents also related their fear of being detained based on their appearance and of harassment and brutality at checkpoints by security forces and the inability to file complaints or have legal protection [10]. Fear of entrapment over social media sites was also mentioned. The economic situation overall is dire, and persons of diverse SOGIESC have a particularly difficult getting jobs, and may often face sexual or financial blackmail and extortion at work.

Few of the respondents reported getting support from their family members. Most had been ostracized by family members and faced threats and violence from them, as they were seen as bringing 'dishonour' to the family [11]. A number had lost their right to inheritance. According to one FGD, lesbians in some families in Aleppo were kept essentially as 'domestic slaves' and not allowed contact with outsiders [12].

As mentioned above, reducing their visibility as diverse SOGIESC and passing as straight are key protective strategies employed by respondents. For men, this included not showing 'softness' or anything that could be construed as 'unmanly,' including not being harsh to their own children. Some, including Trans women and lesbian women sought protection through conforming to increased religiosity by attending prayer groups or wearing a hijab [13]. Some lesbian women and gay men had married each other for protection.

Lack of services or denial of access to them, including to medical services as well as psycho-social support was a further issue [14]. Given a lack of NGOs working on SOGIESC issues, there is also a lack of resources, information and knowledge on these.

Whether or not there had been a shift in gender norms and attitudes towards more openness to diverse SOGIESC due to conflict and displacement was a matter of debate. While some felt things had shifted slightly for the better, others felt that there was continued lack of acceptance even after displacement [15]. The consensus however was that a safe return to Syria for refugees of diverse SOGIESC was not possible and that it was equal to a death sentence.

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[9] FF1, FF2, FF3, FF4, FI1, FI6
[10] FF1, FF6, FI1, FI4, FI5, FI6, FI9, FI10
[11] FF1, FF3, FF4, FF6, FI1, FI6, FI9
[12] FF3
[13] FF2, FF3, FI1
[14] FF1, FI1
[15] FF1, FF6, FI1, FI9, FI6

4.3. Lebanon/Turkey

'The death ghost is chasing me from Syria to Lebanon' (Gay Syrian refugee (FI8), Lebanon)

"I'd be lying if I told you I am coping. Because I am honestly unable to cope. The desire we have inside us to keep living is what is keeping me going and be better."(FGD FF1, Beirut, Lebanon)

"I try [to cope with my life in Lebanon] but I always end up going back to my same thoughts, I feel like my life hasn't changed… I do nothing, I eat and drink and that is my life. Do I have rights? I have none. Protection? I have none. That's it."(FGD FF1, Beirut, Lebanon)

While the threat of physical and possibly sexual violence dominated the FGDs and interviews in Syria, the tone in the ones in Lebanon and Turkey was perhaps less one of acute danger but more of grinding, on-going uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety. This is caused by multiply stress factors from the tentative nature of their refugee status and length of asylum application procedures in an atmosphere of increasing xenophobia, constant anti-diversity and anti-tolerance messaging by conservative groups in public and social media, everyday homo-/trans-phobic and racist harassment and discrimination (including by security forces), and precarious housing and economic conditions. Respondents also spoke of experiencing discrimination within the LGBTIQ scene. As in Syria, all respondents spoke of having to modify their gender performances and expressions to be more conforming to avoid abuse, harassment and discrimination.

In Lebanon, the catastrophic economic situation, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the August 2020 Beirut port explosion have compounded these anxieties. The economic crisis has pushed many persons of diverse SOGIESC further into the margins of the economy, and Covid-19 prevention measures have hit many hard, incl
uding those dependent on sex work for survival. The increasing socio-economic strain has in part increased anti-refugee and anti-diverse SOGIESC hostility, especially by some party militias. In the newer interviews since August, the Beirut explosion was seen by all respondents as a 'stand-out' event which fundamentally shook their already limited sense of security. [16]

Although there is more of a possibility of living out one's SOGIESC in some areas of Lebanon and Turkey, and also more possibilities of accessing services than in Syria, respondents still felt insecure in many areas and had difficulty accessing services. The lack is perhaps greatest in terms of psycho-social support services. Respondents were often grateful for what support and protection they did receive from UNHCR and NGOs, and the spaces and contacts to others they enabled. To a degree, respondents had been able to create their own spaces of support and were using coping mechanisms such as learning new languages. As in Syria, many struggled with family rejection, lack of privacy and a difficulty of having relationships.

[16] FI4, FI5, FI6, FI10

Less mentioned issues and Silences

There were several issues which we had expected, based on previous research and experience, to either come across or come across more often in the interviews but which either did not receive much of a mention or were not raised. Less-mentioned issues included safety in university and college dormitories for persons of diverse SOGIESC,[17] forced conversion therapies and practices,[18] the use of correct pronouns/terminology,[19] and the transphobia of gay men.[20] What was also absent largely was a comparison between pre- and post-war life in Syria or reminiscing about 'how things used to be.' [21]

Striking in its absence in the responses was the role of faith and religion, apart from visible conformity and public performances of piety as a way of passing and ensuring safety. In Lebanon, there was no mention of the positive impacts of the 2019 protests, perhaps because the impact and memory of these had been crowded out by the new series of crises. Sex work and sexual health issues were also not raised, nor was LGBTQI safety in public transportation.

Lack/Fear of raising children on LGBT+ positive culture

"Even I (a gay man), if one of my kids grows up to love men, I will not be able to be nice or tolerant with him and I will force him to leave the house" (FGD FF2, Aleppo, Syria)

The internalised fear, homophobia, and conformed gender norms are passed along to the younger generation even by LGBT individuals. In cases where gay fathers are afraid to exhibit loving and sensitive traits to their children, they are only confirming the pre-existing gender norms as the right way to be to their children; even if they are only doing it out of fear of being outed or exposed by other family members. Some would go to the extreme of disowning their own children rather than comforting and/or supporting them in case they turn out to be LGBT themselves. Therefore, instead of playing a role in spreading awareness, even LGBT individuals become transgressor agents that aid in propagating the homo-transphobic environment to future generations.

[17] FF6
[18] FF4
[19] FF4
[20] FF6
[21] FF3

4.4. Discussion

The findings of the formative research echoed and reiterated many of the broader issues raised by literature on diverse SOGIESC in situations of conflict and displacement, such as around the multiplicity of forms and perpetrators of violence, abuse and discrimination; the violent controlling of gender norms and expressions by armed actors and civilians; and the importance of support networks. What also came out strongly were the negative mental health impacts of incessant abuse and marginalisation, the discrimination within the LGBTIQ+ community itself, but also personal and communal coping mechanisms, mutual support, and agency. All of these are issues we will be examining closer in the next stage of the research.

The results also highlight again the need to not assume that persons of diverse SOGIESC are the same across different locations and across the gender spectrum. Location is a key determinant in terms of security and insecurity, and factors such as class, social capital, age, and how well one passes need to be examined closely. Throughout, we will thus continue to avoid homogenising experiences and examine the role of class, of gender and of location on the experiences of being of diverse SOGIESC in conflict and displacement. We will also seek to expand our sample to include more lesbian and bi-women's voices, as well as Trans men.

One of the key emerging findings for the second stage will likely be the need for a different set of deeper questions for Syria one the one hand and Lebanon, and possibly Turkey, on the other. In the former, the impacts of the political and security situation are much more acute, and the focus could be more on gendered dynamics of post-war governance by militias and the state, and post-war societal shifts of gender norms from a diverse SOGIESC perspective. A key issue here might be to look more at the (re-)constitution of 'hard' masculinity as the only allowed expression of being a man, and what is driving this, and also what this means for women (is, for example, butch femininity now more acceptable?). Furthermore, we will be seeking to track more closely whether state attitudes to gender norms and expressions are changing, and how shifts are happening differently in different parts of the country. In Lebanon and possibly Turkey, it is more the cumulative impacts of the multiple crises coupled with relentless everyday anxiety, insecurity and microaggressions that were more at the centre of respondent's concerns rather than more meta-level questions of war, peace, and politics. Thus, we will be looking more at these, their negative impacts but also ways in which these can be and are mitigated from within the LGBTIQ+ community. Also, given the constant pressure and need to modify one's gender expression, performance and appearance in all settings, the question arises of how integral their sexual orientation/identity is to who they are as a person, and how much do they identify with it?

Lastly, we will continue to work with our respondents and other members of the LGBTIQ+ community as well as the broader communities at least in Lebanon, and to the degree possible in Syria and Turkey, to use this research to bring about real, tangible, positive change to the lives of persons across the gender spectrum.

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