

PROJECT PROFILE

Changing SOGIE in Conflict, Peace and Displacement in the MENA Region

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About the Project

Persons of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) face heightened levels of discrimination and violence in conflict and crisis-affected contexts. This important area of research and policymaking remains underexamined, particularly as it relates to the Syrian Civil War.

In response, this project examines the impact of the Syrian War and attendant displacement on diverse SOGIE individuals and communities in Lebanon, Turkey, and Syria. Furthermore, this research looks at how the compounding impacts of war and displacement have been exacerbated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, the Beirut port explosion and the increased gender backlash in all three countries.

Through a combination of desk research, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions in all three countries, this project aims to examine the cumulative direct and indirect impacts of conflict, displacement and other crises on individuals of diverse SOGIESC in these contexts. In doing so, the project highlights the experiences and voices of these individuals including their diverse needs, access to resources and support, as well as the ways different aspects of their intersectional identities impact their lives in times of conflict and crisis.

Key Findings

- **Appearance and visibility matter.** Individuals in all three contexts consistently report the importance of appearance and visibility in relation to their SOGIESC, emphasising societal expectations of 'accepted' gender presentations. Trans women in particular are highlighted as being exceptionally vulnerable due to visible gender norm transgressions.
- **Constant harassment from state authorities pervades all three countries.** In Lebanon, in particular, the political attacks are now much more visible and there is state harassment of organisations working on and providing services to the LGBTIQ+ community. There is increased support for the introduction of a bill that would criminalise supporters of all NGOs that promote LGBTIQ+ rights. Furthermore, vulnerable communities are being targeted to divert attention away from politics, and feminist groups are being silenced.
- **Daily fears force persons with diverse SOGIESC into concealment.** In Syria, respondents depict a clandestine diverse SOGIESC community life filled with daily challenges, including the fear of conscription into the Syrian army and harassment at checkpoints. They often adjust their behaviour to conceal their identity, with some even resorting to outward displays of religiosity for protection.
- **Economic struggles and job discrimination are common and exacerbated by the pandemic and ongoing economic crises.** Economic struggles, particularly for refugees and those visibly non-conforming, were prevalent in all three countries. Specifically, many individuals face various forms of job discrimination. In Lebanon, 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.



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DR CHARBEL MAYDAA



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. "

DR CHARBEL MAYDAA

- **Everyday threats in the context of conflict.** Respondents in all three contexts place less significant emphasis on war experiences in their narratives. Instead, threats from civilians, including family, are more prominent.
- **Family dynamics for individuals with diverse SOGIESC are complex.** While some found acceptance, many reported threats or violence from family members. There are also instances of forced marriage and 'corrective' rape.
- **Psychosocial support is sparse in Lebanon, Turkey, and Syria.** Persons with diverse SOGIESC have limited access to either acute or long-term psychosocial support, although the situation in Lebanon is better than in Turkey and Syria. However, there are increasing rates of suicide in the Syrian diaspora in Lebanon as well as Turkey.
- **External violence and discrimination combine with pressures from within.** In Lebanon and Turkey, internalised fear and homophobia are surprisingly present, even within the LGBTIQ+ community. Some individuals confess they would ostracise their own children if they identified as LGBTIQ+.
- **The desire to leave is strong in all three nations.** The cumulative impacts of discrimination, violence, and mental health issues resulted in a desire for individuals to consider leaving the Middle East region.
- **Micro-geographies shape lived experiences.** All respondents emphasise the need to be knowledgeable about "micro-geographies" of safety in their cities, understanding where and when they can be more open about their gender identity.

Additional Findings Focused on Lebanon

- **Transnational activism between Lebanon, Egypt, and Sudan provides key support.** Activists and organisations in Lebanon are adapting their strategies and learning from organisations in Egypt and Sudan. Meeting with activists and organisations from these contexts, they learn from their tactics of continued organisation under repressive regimes.
- **There is a lack of integration of displaced Syrians.** Programmes lack culturally sensitive approaches and service providers trained in refugee contexts.
- **There are high levels of gender discrimination against LGBTIQ+ persons, especially undocumented Syrian refugees.** The conditions that they find in Lebanon are perceived as far better than those they fled from in Syria. However, Lebanon is not the country of freedom and tolerance in relation to LGBTIQ+ rights that they were looking for. Lebanon is often considered as just a stop along their migration journey.
- **Lebanon's triple crisis compounds discrimination against persons of diverse SOGIESC.** The triple crisis has compounded the ostracisation, harassment and discrimination of persons of diverse SOGIESC, who have experienced misogynistic, lesbophobic, homophobic, transphobic, or xenophobic behaviour. The economic crisis has pushed many persons of diverse SOGIESC further into the margins of the economy, and COVID-19 prevention measures have hit hard, especially people dependent on sex work for survival. The increasing socio-economic strain is also connected to increased anti-refugee and anti-diverse SOGIESC sentiments.



96% faced threats in Syria due to their SOGIESC, over half reported sexual abuse, and a significant number experienced physical assault in Lebanon. //

HEARTLAND ALLIANCE STUDY, 2014



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. //

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION PARTICIPANT, ALEPPO, SYRIA

Recommendations

Lebanese, Syrian, and Turkish Policymakers and NGOs

- Recognise diversity and use an intersectional approach. Both NGOs and policymakers should recognise that people of diverse SOGIESC are not the same across different locations and across the gender spectrum. Location is a key determinant of (in)security, and factors such as class, social capital, and age have different impacts and should be accounted for.
- More sustainable core funding is needed to support people of diverse SOGIESC. Specifically, more funding is needed for service provisions and psychological support and care.

International NGOs

- Move beyond simplistic and homogenised understandings of LGBTIQ+ needs. Have an inclusive and holistic approach when it comes to humanitarian response, taking into consideration LGBTIQ+ needs.

Government of Lebanon

- Legal reform is urgently needed. Abolish article 534 in the penal code, which criminalises homosexual acts, and abolish all laws that criminalise sex workers.



To learn more about this research project and read its publications visit: <https://thegenderhub.com/stories/changing-sogie-in-conflict-peace-and-displacement-in-the-mena/>

This Project Profile was first published in the Hub's final report, *Gender, Justice and Security: Structural Challenges, Feminist Innovations and Radical Futures*. Go to www.TheGenderHub.com to read the full report and to learn more about all 38 research projects in the Hub.



This research is part of the UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub. The Hub is an interdisciplinary, transnational research network working with local and global civil society, practitioners, governments and international organisations to advance the delivery of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

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Design: Claire Harrison and West9 Design. Illustrations: Hayfaa Chalabi.