



FRIEDRICH
EBERT 
STIFTUNG



RESEARCH BRIEF

2024

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

ASSESSING THE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF
THE SYRIAN LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY



CONTENTS

OUT OF THE SHADOWS	2
LGBTQI+ TREATMENT UNDER SYRIAN LAW	3
POLITICALLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBTQI+ PEOPLE	4
REPERCUSSIONS OF PERSECUTION IN EVERYDAY LIFE	5
ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE	6
EDUCATION PROSPECTS	7
SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS	9

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Policy Brief

Motivation:

Syria is an incredibly difficult place for LGBTQI+ people to make a life, yet there is little publicly available information detailing their daily realities, threats, challenges, and personal perspectives.

Objective:

This study aims to raise the visibility of LGBTQI+ individuals in Syria, to describe the challenges faced by this community so that those wishing to support them understand the key issues at play, and to provide tangible recommendations for advocates who can support the community.

Methodology:

We designed this study with a mixed-methods approach, administering both online surveys (136 responses) and semi-structured qualitative interviews (37 responses).

Limitations:

Because there was no way to randomise the survey sample, the results are not numerically representative of the wider population. Nonetheless, results are indicative of the dire challenges facing the LGBTQI+ community in Syria. In fact, the most important biases in the sample are toward more highly educated individuals and individuals from large cities like Damascus, Latakia and Homs. For many of the challenges highlighted, it is likely that they are even more widespread in rural contexts and where there is less education.

LGBTQI+ TREATMENT UNDER SYRIAN LAW

Previous reports have described the treatment of LGBTQI+ people under Syria's legal system, including their rights to freedom and privacy under the 2012 Constitution but also the criminalization of homosexuality under the Penal Code of 1949 and its subsequent amendments (for more detail, see the associated **Legal Guide**). This study aimed to go beyond a legal examination of the law to understand how the LGBTQI+ community is treated in practice, based on individuals' testimony.

Pervasive Legal Persecution of the LGBTQI+ Community:

Over one-third of survey respondents stated that they had faced legal consequences related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Discrimination and Prejudice in the Application of the Law:

More than one-third of respondents have personally experienced discrimination when dealing with judicial and law enforcement authorities. We heard many accounts that spotlighted how legal mechanisms are twisted by social prejudice to incriminate LGBTQI+ people. For example, people suspected of engaging in homosexual acts are sometimes charged under the Anti-Prostitution Law No. 10 of 1961, despite there being no evidence of transactional sex. Judicial authorities equate homosexuality and sex work on a moral basis, and then enact it as a legal determination. The pervasiveness of such prejudices was reiterated by Syrian lawyers, who explained that LGBTQI+ clients are often blackmailed with threats of revealing their sexual identity to prevent them from pressing charges. Accordingly, over 90% of survey respondents expressed distrust in the judiciary, making them hesitant to seek justice even when they are the victim of a crime.

Continued Use of Compulsory Anal Examinations:

Compulsory anal examinations are widely discredited by medical experts and condemned as a form of torture, but they are nonetheless utilized by Syrian judicial entities to determine if criminalized sexual relations have taken place. Systematic data about the prevalence of such practices in Syria is lacking, but one out of six respondents in our survey reported that they or someone they knew personally has been subjected to compulsory anal examination under the supervision of either state or community authorities. While our sample is not representative of the Syrian LGBTQI+ population at large, this finding is suggestive of the scale of the problem and the need for greater international attention. We also identified two academic lectures from forensic medicine curricula in Aleppo and Homs describing these procedures in detail, along with their juridical uses, suggesting that these procedures are still being taught to future practitioners in some institutions.

Lack of Necessary Legal Knowledge among LGBTQI+ Syrians:

A basic understanding of the laws that define or constraining LGBTQI+ rights is fundamental to their safety and a key step toward empowerment. But a mere 12% of our survey respondents described themselves as confident in such knowledge. One-third described themselves as moderately knowledgeable, while the rest reported limited or no knowledge of the relevant legal provisions. Given the skew in our sample toward more highly educated respondents, it is likely that this lack of awareness is even more pervasive among the wider LGBTQI+ community.

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBTQI+ PEOPLE

Since the outbreak of conflict in 2012, international observers have documented numerous instances of targeted violence against LGBTQI+ people in Syria. This includes highly visible and extremely violent public executions of LGBTQI+ civilians by radical Islamist groups such as ISIS. Such violence has often been attributed to the ascendancy of religiously conservative political groups during the conflict. But our research shows that discourse and actions against LGBTQI+ people have also been perpetrated by the Syrian regime and used strategically for political purposes.

Politicized Demonization of the LGBTQI+ Community:

Since at least 2020, there has been a discernible pattern of anti-LGBTQI+ content in media outlets associated with the Syrian government. Leaders – including President Assad – have attempted to create a moral panic around the existence of LGBTQI+ people and to portray the government as the defender of Syrian morality. A majority (83%) of survey participants agreed that the Syrian media, including both government-affiliated and private entities, has conveyed clear anti-LGBTQI+ messaging.

Widespread Violence from Authorities:

Half of our survey respondents reported that either they or someone they know personally has been subject to violence from the authority in their area – including areas controlled by the Syrian regime as well as those held by opposition forces – on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression.

Suppression of Pro-LGBTQI+ Civil Society Organizations:

86% of respondents highlighted a significant lack of services for the LGBTQI+ community – such as psycho-social support and protection for those facing threats of violence – during the conflict.

REPERCUSSIONS OF PERSECUTION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Aside from criminalization and political violence, our study also examined the more mundane forms of discrimination and violence faced by LGBTQI+ people in the course of everyday life. Many face social ostracization within their families as well as in the wider community. We also examine the material consequences of widespread societal prejudices on LGBTQI+ people's livelihoods and economic prospects.

Violence within Families:

According to the survey, 63% of LGBTQI+ respondents have encountered some form of violence from their immediate family members. Of these, about two-thirds have endured both physical and psychological violence, while the rest report only psychological violence.

Migration Despite Economic Stability:

When posed with the scenario of a potential economic stabilization in Syria, an overwhelming 78% of respondents still expressed a willingness to emigrate. This suggests that LGBTQI+ Syrians' motivations to leave Syria extend beyond political and economic instability. Many aspire more broadly to extricate themselves from Syria's constraining socio-political environment, which limits general freedoms but especially restricts the rights of the LGBTQI+ community.

Religious Incitement to Violence:

Almost all respondents reported that their religious institutions reject the LGBTQI+ community, and moreover, about two thirds reported that these institutions sometimes go as far as inciting violence against them.

Widespread Sexual Violence:

54% of participants reported being subjected to some form of sexual violence during the conflict, including rape, sexual assault, physical harassment, sexual extortion, and invasive procedures like forced virginity tests.

Lack of Safe Spaces: About two-thirds of respondents lacked LGBTQI+ friendly gathering spots in their vicinity. Of those who do have gathering spaces, most feel they are nonetheless at substantial risk of police raids.

ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

The Syrian healthcare sector has been gravely impacted by the protracted conflict, which has caused widespread destruction of infrastructure, emigration of medical professionals, disruption of supply chains for medicines and supplies, and an economic recession that has eroded people's ability to afford health services. Beyond these general problems, our study identified additional health-seeking challenges faced by LGBTQI+ Syrians.

Lack of (Access to) STI Testing:

Nearly three-fifths of respondents had never been tested for STIs, and two-fifths could not identify a health facility in their vicinity where they could receive such services. Alarming, only 17% of participants claimed comprehensive knowledge of STIs and their prevention and treatment.

Lack of Access to Mental Health Services:

A significant 59% of survey respondents identified an urgent requirement for mental health services. Yet such services are unavailable in many areas; our research revealed that there are fewer than 45 psychiatrists in all of Syria. Moreover, many have faced prejudice when seeking help from existing mental health service providers.

Subjection to "Conversion Therapy":

More than half of respondents reported that they or someone they know personally has been subjected to Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Change Efforts (SOGICE) within a formal healthcare setting.

Lack of Access to Gender-Affirming Therapy:

Syria's penal and personal status laws prohibit gender-affirming surgeries and services, allowing interventions solely for "correction" of intersex anatomy. Consequently, numerous transgender individuals resort to unregulated facilities, often without reliable supervision and advice from a health care expert.

EDUCATION PROSPECTS

As with the health care system, Syria's education system has been starved of both human and material resources since the start of the conflict. While the Syrian population at large has been affected negatively, our study examined barriers and challenges specific to LGBTQI+ learners.

Exclusion and Mistreatment in Schools:

More than half of respondents reported a complete absence of LGBTQI+ acceptance in schools. A similar proportion reported experiencing mistreatment themselves as a result of their sexual orientation or gender expression, including bullying, physical assault, exclusion from activities by peers or educators, and other forms of discrimination. Nearly three out of four respondents had witnessed faculty members at their schools displaying prejudice against LGBTQI+ learners.

Lack of Safeguarding:

Safeguarding protocols are paramount for establishing a safe and inclusive educational environment, protecting students from harassment and potential maltreatment. In our survey, 87% of respondents reported a lack of such mechanisms to deter or address harassment in their schools.

SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Advocacy for Legal Reforms:

LGBTQI+ people will remain vulnerable to legal persecution so long as the instruments used to criminalize them are in place.

2. Foster Economic Solidarity Networks:

LGBTQI+ communities in particular locations can explore the feasibility of establishing economic solidarity networks to provide financial assistance, job referrals, training, and mentorship programs, ensuring that community members have access to resources and opportunities that promote economic stability and independence. However, such groups should be organized in such a way that they do not put participants at risk of being identified or arrested.

3. Provide Protection:

Many LGBTQI+ Syrians who share their identity to their families – as well as those whose identity is revealed against their will – face the risk of violence and intimidation. Many have nowhere to turn and so are forced to remain in homes where they face abuse. That is a need for safe shelters or accommodation centers for LGBTQI+ individuals who flee from their homes or who face eviction due to their sexuality or gender identity. Such assistance could also be sought from other members of the LGBTQI+ community if solidarity networks like those proposed in point #2 are put in place.

4. Promote Digital Hygiene:

Many of those who faced punitive actions from authorities had been exposed by content on their phones or on social media. There is a need for education on “digital hygiene”, focusing on principles and methods to protect one’s own identity as well as the identities of fellow LGBTQI+ people. Such trainings would educate attendees about the dangers of storing incriminating content such as photos and chats on their phones as well as disseminating explicit images with identifiable faces or other physical features.

5. Safe-Guarding in Schools:

The data in this report underscores an urgent need for comprehensive safeguarding policies that are both proactive, in terms of awareness campaigns, and reactive, in offering protection and redressal mechanisms. Spearhead advocacy initiatives that press for policy reforms in educational institutions. Aim for the inclusion of clear non-discrimination policies addressing sexual orientation and gender identity. Additionally, champion the development and rigorous enforcement of protective measures that guard students against harassment, discrimination, and all forms of harm.

6. Targeted Awareness for Parents, Educators and Professionals:

Roll out awareness programs that promote tolerance among and discourage discriminatory and overtly damaging practices. These programs should underscore the unique challenges faced by LGBTQI+ students, emphasizing the importance of creating inclusive and safe educational environments. In the field of health care, this includes building consensus against the use of invasive and coercive strategies like “conversion therapy”. However, there is a risk that such interventions could be delegitimized by opponents who cast them as “Western meddling”. As such, it is crucial to work alongside and through local partners who themselves develop the goals and trajectories for change.

Author

Cory Rodgers

Acknowledgments:

This research brief was produced through collaboration between Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and SEEN for Gender & Sexual Equity (SGSE). The perspectives presented here are those of the authors of the Out of the Shadows study and do not necessarily reflect the stance of FES.



SEEN

GENDER & SEXUAL EQUITY

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT 
STIFTUNG**