

STUDY PAPER

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OUT OF THE SHADOWS



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ABBREVIATIONS

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.
CCTV	Closed-Circuit Television.
GBV	Gender-Based Violence.
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.
HPV	Human Papillomavirus.
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.
IVF-C	In Vitro Fertilization with Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection.
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and others.
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations.
PrEP	Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis
PYD	Democratic Union Party.
SIG	Syrian Interim Government.
SSG	Syrian Salvation Government.
SOGICE	Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Change Efforts.
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection.
SV	Sexual Violence

DEFINITIONS

Abu Amara Battalions	A militant group active during the Syrian conflict.
Ahrar al-Sham	An Islamist rebel group involved in the Syrian conflict.
Al-Julani	Leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).
Baluni Prison	A military prison in Homs, is one of the most notorious prisons in Syria.
Cisgender	A term used to describe individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.
Conversion Therapy	A discredited practice attempting to change one's sexual orientation or gender identity.
Forced Anal Tests	An invasive, unscientific procedure used in some countries to allege homosexual conduct.
Gender Affirming Needs	Requirements or actions that recognize and support an individual's self-identified gender.
Gender Affirming Procedures	Medical or surgical procedures that individuals might pursue to align their physical bodies with their gender identity.
Gender binary	The classification of gender into two distinct, opposite forms of masculine and feminine.
Gender Disorder	An outdated term once used for those whose gender identity didn't align with their assigned sex. Now, "gender dysphoria" is used to describe the related distress.
Gender Expression	The external presentation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut, voice, or body characteristics. This can be feminine, masculine, both, neither, or a combination.
Gender Identity	An individual's internal and personal sense of their gender, which can be woman, man, a blend of both, neither, or something else. It may or may not correspond with their biological or assigned sex at birth.
Gender Norms	Social expectations dictating behavior and roles based on gender.
Intersex	A condition where a person's reproductive or sexual anatomy doesn't fit typical male or female definitions.
Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front)	A former jihadist group in Syria, later renamed Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) after breaking away from al-Qaeda.
Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam)	A Salafist militarized rebel faction from Eastern Ghouta that was active in the Syrian conflict. Its influence waned by ٢٠١٨ after multiple defeats.
Jinn	Supernatural beings or spirits in Arab mythology and belief.
Legal Gender Recognition	The official process by which an individual can change their gender marker on official documents, such as birth certificates or identification cards, to match their gender identity.
Non-Binary	A gender identity that doesn't conform to the conventional man-and-woman dichotomy.
Queer	An umbrella term for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities.
Sexual Orientation	A term that describes a person's enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, or sexual attractions to men, women, both genders, or neither. Common terms used to describe sexual orientation include gay, lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual.
Shabiha	A term referring to state-sponsored militias that support the Syrian government and Bashar al-Assad.
Transgender	People whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

INTRODUCTION

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. Most activists within Syria are forced by their circumstances to operate clandestinely, and while those living as refugees in neighboring countries - like many of us at SGSE - receive regular information about the situation back in Syria, this rarely makes it to LGBTQI+ allies outside the country.

The persecution of LGBTQI+ people in Syria is entrenched in social norms and customs and also enshrined in law. Though homophobia/transphobia and the targeting of LGBTQI+ individuals with discrimination and violence were common before 2011, the conflict intensified the pressure on the community. The rise of ISIS saw the deadliest attacks against LGBTQI+ people in the country's history. The conflict was also characterized by an absence of supportive interventions from Syrian civil society, thus resulting in a gap in relief and support to LGBTQI+ people with special vulnerabilities. It was this lack of support, understanding, and data about the reality of the LGBTQI+ community in Syria that inspired this study.

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.

Since the emergence of protests against the Syrian regime in 2011 and the ensuing outbreak of armed conflict, there has been a substantial rise in the activities of Syrian feminist and human rights movements. Previously, Movements such as the General Women's Union had been subsumed within or closely linked to Ba'ath Party. But new groups emerged that offered an alternative to those that had been monopolized by the Syrian regime.

Nonetheless, there is a lack of prior research and studies on the LGBTQI+ community within Syria. In fact, comprehensive studies and reports detailing the realities and challenges faced by any segment of Syrian society are scarce. Social repression and risks of persecution make it difficult to access target segments of the LGBTQI+ community within Syria. Most existing studies on the LGBTQI+ community in this region focus on individuals in neighboring countries like Lebanon.

The contemporary challenges faced by the Syrian LGBTQI+ community emerge from the long history of legal and societal constraints imposed on this demographic. Same-sex and transgender people have been criminalized since 1949, forcing many to keep their identities hidden. Arrests have been common, especially during intermittent campaigns against the LGBTQI+ community, such as those that occurred in 2009 and 2010 (1). The conflict has significantly intensified the risks for all marginalized and unprotected groups, yet there is no representation of LGBTQI+ individuals in the political settlement process or in the process of drafting the new constitution, despite the representation of various other special interest groups, such as families of victims, associations of the forcibly disappeared and detainees, and those of unknown fate, as well as women, among others.

Research on this topic is necessary to inform the design of regional relief, developmental, and political programs and ensure that LGBTQI+ individuals are not excluded from them. This study aims to bridge the gap in information about the challenges and needs of the LGBTQI+ community in Syria. The report consists of eight sections detailing different aspects of the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQI+ Syrians and the contexts in which they live, as follows.

The first chapter describes the **Legal Context** that provides the most fundamental determinant of LGBTQI+ rights in Syria. We consider the constitutional and other legal mechanisms that can variously protect and incriminate people based on their sexual orientation and gender, as well as the more insidious processes by which legal mechanisms can be manipulated, corrupted or bypassed in practice. We also consider the complicated multiplicity of legal contexts that has arisen in light of the conflict, with various authorities implementing their own judicial systems in the territories where they claim control.

The second chapter delves into the **Political Context** that shapes the current realities and possible futures for LGBTQI+ rights in Syria. It considers the ways that homophobic and otherwise discriminatory sentiments have been exploited by political actors seeking to position themselves favorably within a 'moral crisis' of their own making, sometimes with dire consequences for LGBTQI+ people. More positively, it considers some of the ways that the LGBTQI+ community might become better positioned to improve their situation through political representation, constitutional reform and civil society activity.

1 Littauer, D. (2010). Syria's attack on gay people must end. The Guardian.

The third chapter describes the **Socio-Cultural Contexts** that shape Syrian society's perspectives toward and treatment of LGBTQI+ people. It examines multiple scales, from the close familial relations that define everyday life at home to the broader associations and networks through which moral norms about sex and gender are reproduced and imposed. While much of the beginning of the chapter discusses the sources heteronormative and homophobic sentiments - including religious institutions as well as popular media - the latter sections consider the degree to which LGBTQI+ communities have been able to carve out safe spaces, both in cities and online.

The fourth chapter moves on to the **Economic Contexts** of LGBTQI Syrians lives, with a focus on the effects of the conflict. The general population faces immense economic challenges in light of the disruptions caused by the conflict as well as sanctions imposed on Syria during this period. As we discuss here, LGBTQI+ people face additional hardship due to the systemic biases discussed above, and these biases have material consequences. LGBTQI+ people are often discriminated against in employment processes, and those who are rejected by their families are sometimes removed from inheritance.

The last two chapters consider **Access to Health Care** and **Education** for the LGBTQI+ community in Syria. From systematic neglect of the problems and concerns of LGBTQI+ people to overt persecution and abuse, LGBTQI+ people report barriers to inclusion that reduce their uptake of both medical services and education. In health care facilities, LGBTQI+ patients lack access to gender-affirming care and are instead pathologised with diagnoses of mental disorders. In schools, there is discrimination both in the general treatment of LGBTQI+ people by teachers and peers as well as in the curriculum itself, most notably regarding sexual health and STI awareness. These sections highlight the need for advocacy to end discrimination by professionals as well as greater awareness of LGBTQI+ concerns and implementation of formal safe-guarding mechanisms.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research with LGBTQI+ people is incredibly difficult in Syria. Fear of stigma, harassment and violence keeps many LGBTQI+ Syrians in the shadows, unwilling to make their sexual orientation or gender identity known. And even when people are known and available, many are reluctant to speak openly with an unfamiliar researcher due to fears that it could result in exposure, even if unintentionally.

Nonetheless, researchers from Seen for Gender and Sexual Equity (SGSE) were able to draw on a range of existing informal networks - both organizational and personal - to reach LGBTQI+ Syrians across the country and from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. As an LGBTQI+ advocacy organization, our identity and reputation provided a foundation of trust when reaching out to study participants. And because many of us are ourselves part of the LGBTQI+ community, we understand the context in which potential participants are living, such that we can approach them sensitively and with clear regard for their protection.

We designed this study with a mixed-methods approach, administering both online surveys and semi-structured qualitative interviews. The two were administered to different samples, although there were some participants who were included in both.

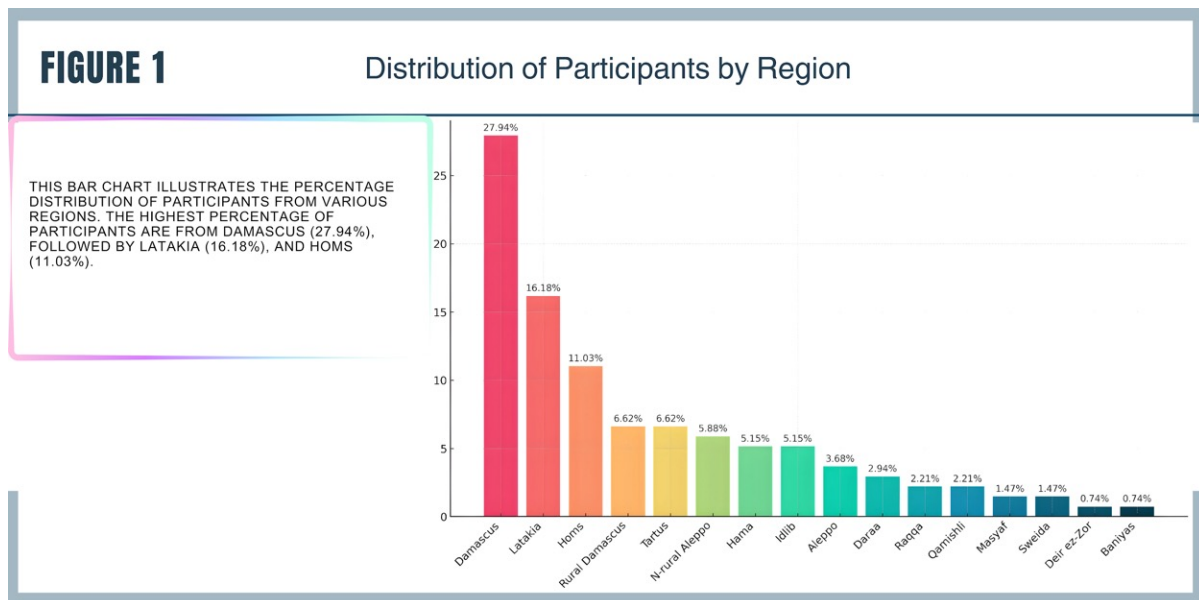
The survey questionnaire was constructed to discuss participants' experiences and perspectives in regard to the eight themes described above. 72 items were constructed based on our literature review, all drafted to be administered in an online survey in the Arabic language. The full questionnaire takes 15 to 20 minutes for an individual to complete.

There was no sampling frame through which to randomly select participants. Instead, we posted a call for participants and posted it with a link to the survey on various social media channels that cater to the LGBTQI+ community in Syria. This included the social media channels of nation-wide LGBTQI+ advocacy organizations - including SGSE itself - as well as smaller communities organized around particular sex and gender identities in particular cities. We decided against recruitment of individuals using email or other messenger systems, as they might feel threatened if approached in such a manner. However, we did supplement the online call for participants by recruiting four LGBTQI+ volunteers who were active in the SGSE community; these volunteers took a snowball approach to recruitment by reaching out to people in their social networks with information about the survey.

Participants in the qualitative interviews were recruited through a different method. Rather than just LGBTQI+ identity, we sought people who had experienced particular forms of harassment, violence or other kinds of violations based on their identity. To find them, we started with 12 beneficiaries of SGSE, and then reached out to additional participants who met the criteria through their personal networks. We were also put into contact with potential interviewees through lawyers and activist leaders associated with SGSE. The research team, with support from external specialists in law and mental health, ensured the interview process was informative but also supportive for the participants.

In total, we received 136 complete responses to the online survey and conducted 37 semi-structured interviews. The interviews with LGBTQI+ community members were supplemented by key informant interviews with experts in the fields of law, mental health and civil activism.

As seen in the figures below, the survey included participants from all 14 governorates in Syria. The vast majority of respondents came from three cities: Damascus, Latakia, and Homs. Because Aleppo is a major city lying at the border between two territorial powers, we distinguished between regime-controlled urban Aleppo and the contested areas of North Rural Aleppo.



LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

1. Education Bias: Despite the challenges faced by the LGBTQI+ community in Syria, a significant percentage of the study’s participants have pursued higher education. However, this study does not represent the entire community, especially those marginalized by the ongoing conflict and deteriorating educational infrastructure. Participants were primarily those with access to the internet.

2. Recentness of Terminology: The recent introduction of legal and rights-related topics concerning the LGBTQI+ community in Syria, along with the use of localized terms for gender identity and sexual orientation, posed a barrier to broader access.

3. Trust and Security Concerns: Trust issues, fear of information leaks, and reluctance to detail security incidents due to fear of arrest limited the number of testimonies collected also the legal and cultural environment in Syria, which may be hostile to LGBTQI+ individuals, could have influenced participants' willingness to share their experiences fully and honestly.

4. Technical Challenges: The ban on some secure communication methods in Syria caused delays. Security protocols had to be implemented for individuals in Syria before interviews to ensure safe communication, using more secure and encrypted communication methods. Additionally, poor internet connectivity in Syria extended the duration of some interviews.

5. Social Conformity and Stigma: Social conformity and the pressure to adhere to societal norms were significant barriers in reaching individuals in various regions, particularly in northwest and northeast Syria. The LGBTQI+ community in these areas formed a closed-off society due to fear of stigma, making it difficult to access participants. Additionally, the inability to mobilize active volunteers to distribute the survey and reach a larger number of individuals in these regions further limited the study.

Emphasis was placed on the utmost confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and personal identifiers in the data were saved separate from participants' survey responses and audio recordings. Data was stored in a secure external repository beyond Syrian borders. This was important due to the sensitive nature of the data and potential security issues within Syrian territory.

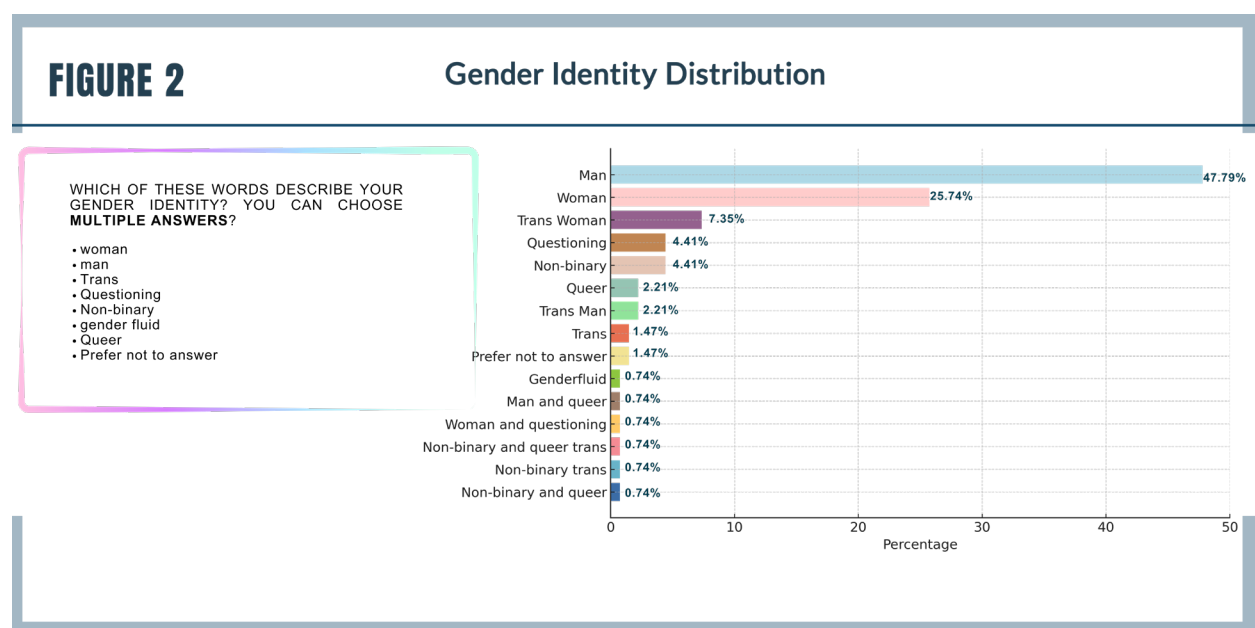


FIGURE 3

Sexual Orientation Distribution of Participants

WHICH OF THESE WORDS DESCRIBE YOUR SEXUAL AND/OR ROMANTIC ORIENTATION? YOU CAN CHOOSE MULTIPLE ANSWERS?

- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Asexual
- Aromantic
- Questioning
- Heterosexual
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

* The choices are surveying sexual and romantic orientation and are not linked to gender or sex identity.

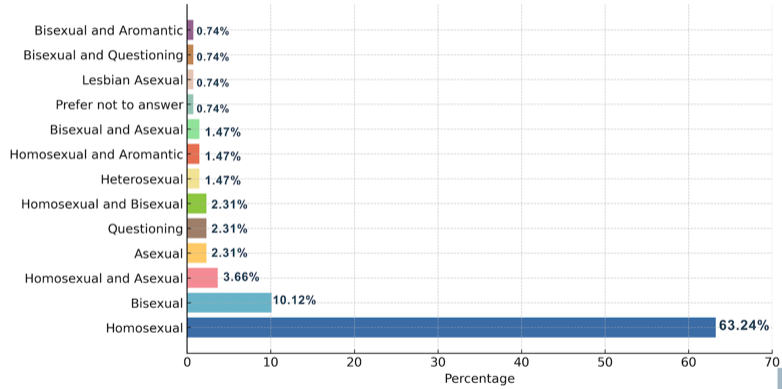
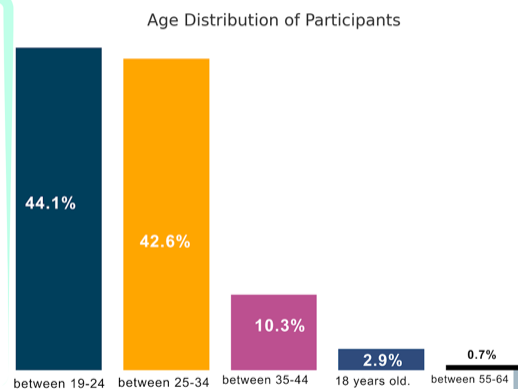


FIGURE 4

Age Distribution of Participants

THIS BAR CHART ILLUSTRATES THE AGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE SURVEY. THE MAJORITY OF THE PARTICIPANTS FALL WITHIN THE YOUNGER AGE GROUPS, INDICATING A PREDOMINANT INVOLVEMENT OF YOUTH IN THE SURVEY:

- between 19-24
- between 25-34
- between 35-44
- 18 years old.
- between 55-64



LEGAL CONTEXT



The Syrian Constitution of 2012 includes provisions that guarantee the right to freedom and privacy (2). Nonetheless, there is a marked contradiction between these constitutional clauses and the actions of judicial authorities and the police, who frequently violate the right to privacy. Violations are especially frequent when individuals are suspected of sexual orientations and gender identities that are deemed “deviant”. Many in the LGBTQI+ community have faced random arrest campaigns due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression.

The Syrian government’s treatment of LGBTQI+ people is governed by the Syrian Penal Code of 1949 and its subsequent amendments (3). Within this code, 8 articles have been used to criminalize members of the LGBTQI+ community, especially Articles 517, 518, and 520 which define public decency and moral violations. Moreover, the Anti-Prostitution Law No. 10 of 1961 (4) is often used to prosecute members of the LGBTQI+ community. Across all amnesty decrees issued by the Syrian regime since 1963, legal provisions criminalizing members of the LGBTQI+ community have consistently been excluded (5).

DIFFERENT SYSTEMS UNDER DIFFERENT AUTHORITIES

Understanding the legal context in Syria is complicated by the presence of multiple political entities exerting authority over contested territories. The rapidly shifting lines of control power dynamics during the conflict - and especially between 2012 and 2017 - made it difficult to identify unified, consistent and stable judicial institutions, which were constantly in a state of flux and often operating in an ad hoc manner rather than according to an established policy. Nonetheless, as the boundaries between areas of political control became more stable around 2018, the prevailing authorities in each area were able to define their legal processes by establishing judicial bodies.

In areas under the control of the Syrian Regime, authority is represented by governmental, police, and security agencies, alongside the Syrian Army and its allied and auxiliary militias (6). But there are three other political entities with control over significant swaths of Syrian territory: 1) the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), 2) the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), and 3) the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Despite the crystallization of these areas of control, the identification of clear judicial frameworks within these territories remains complicated by ongoing conflict, the emergent and evolving nature of these systems as well as ongoing fighting in Syria.

2 - Syrian Arab Republic. (2012, February). Amended Syrian Constitution.

3 - Syrian Arab Republic. (1949). General Penal Code 148.

4 - Syrian Arab Republic. (1961). Law 10 of 1961 Anti-Prostitution Law.

5 - Syrian Arab Republic. (2022). Legislative Decree No. 24.

6 - ecoinet. (n.d.). Syrian Arab Republic - Country Briefing.

THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA (AANES):

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) operates under a provisional constitution known as the Charter of the Social Contract. As per Articles 20 and 21 (7), AANES commits to upholding human rights in line with international treaties and covenants, endorsing the principles of human rights and recognizing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, among others (8). While some interpret these provisions as implicitly extending rights to the LGBTQI+ community by not criminalizing them, AANES's adherence to international treaties and conventions remains a subject of debate, especially given cases of overreach such as child conscription (9) and restrictions on freedom of expression (10). Additionally, AANES continues to enforce Syrian penal laws (11), except when they conflict with the provisions of the Social Contract, as stated in Article 88 (12). This situation creates uncertainties about the enforcement of laws that might criminalize LGBTQI+ individuals.

While the AANES-controlled regions lack laws that explicitly criminalize LGBTQI+ people, this absence does not automatically translate to rights, particularly due to the lack of protective laws (13). One study has indicated that homosexual acts are still handled by authorities as an offence. Homosexuals have at times been arrested on the pretext of alleged public interest (i.e., on the basis of social customs and traditions) (14).

Foza Yusuf, a Leadership Council member of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) (15) and an architect of the Social Contract, has articulated the difficulties of applying concepts within the Social Charter. She underscored the need to negotiate between the 'moral and human changes precipitated by the revolution' and the 'social reality' inherent in the local context. Yusuf highlighted the necessity of striking a balance between 'global rights and norms' and 'our societal reality' (Medya TV, 17 April) (16). Such remarks instigate queries regarding AANES's future policies concerning sexual and gender freedoms, particularly as the Administration is on the cusp of implementing a new penal code (17).

7 - PYD Rojava. (n.d.). Contract of the Social Charter.

8- Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR Global LTD). (2021, June). LGBTQ+ Syria: Experiences, Challenges, and Priorities for the Aid Sector.

9 - Al-Bashir, A. (2023). Recruiting children in the "Autonomous Administration" areas in Syria: another face of the brutality of war. Alaraby.

10 - Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ). (2022, October 3). Northeast Syria: Increased Restrictions and Violations against Journalists and the Freedom of Expression.

11 - Omran Center for Strategic Studies. (2021). "Autonomous administration": A judicial approach to understanding the model and experiment (A field study of the reality of the judicial system in northeastern Syria).

12 - PYD Rojava. (n.d.). Contract of the Social Charter.

13 - Ghazzawi, R. (2017, August 5). Decolonising Syria's so-called 'queer liberation': Interview with Syrian Kurdish queer trans woman, Ziya Gorani. (Interview).

14 - Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR Global LTD). (2021, June). LGBTQ+ Syria: Experiences, Challenges, and Priorities for the Aid Sector.

15 - Wikipedia. (n.d.). The Democratic Union Party (PYD).

16 - Tank, P. (2021). Rebel governance and gender in northeast Syria: transformative ideology as a challenge to negotiating power. Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal.

17 - AANES MEDIA. (2023, April 12). "96 articles of the Penal Code are approved by the General Council of the Autonomous Administration during its regular session".

THE SYRIAN SALVATION GOVERNMENT (SSG) :

The Syrian Salvation Government (18)—which serves as the political wing of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra—incorporates Islamic Sharia into its judicial system. In these areas, judiciaries are often formed by individual judges and their personal interpretations of religious law (19), which make it difficult to identify consistently characteristics of a formal system when examining different rulings. Activists have expressed concerns that judgments pertaining to the LGBTQI+ community could potentially result in executions (20) (21). Additionally, in 2018, the SSG’s Ministry of Interior detained six individuals at separate incidents (22)(23)(24)(25)(26), subsequently transferring them to the Sharia judiciary; the outcomes of these cases remain undisclosed. Notably, HTS leader al-Julani recently underscored a commitment to implementing ‘God’s law’ in the territories controlled by the SSG, albeit without a public proclamation (27).

THE SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT (SIG):

In areas controlled by the Syrian Interim Government, which is supported by Turkey (28), the Syrian Penal Code of 1949 remains in force. This suggests that provisions criminalizing LGBTQI+ community members are still in place . As with the Syrian regime, amnesty decrees in these regions exclude the LGBTQI+ community (29).

18 - ecoi.net. (n.d.). Syrian Arab Republic - Country Briefing.

19 - al Jumhuriya. (2018). The judiciary in Idlib: factionalism and multiple authorities.

20 - Personal communication with activist from northern Syria, 2023-08-012.

21 - ecoi.net. (2020, April 3). Anfragebeantwortung zu Syrien: Lage von LGBT-Personen, insbesondere in den kurdischen Gebieten, Lage von transidenten Personen (a-11244).

22 - Ministry of Interior in the Syrian Salvation Government. (2018, July 17). (Official Facebook Page).

23 - Ministry of Interior in the Syrian Salvation Government. (2018, June 12). Activities of the Police Department over the week. (Official Facebook Page).

24 - Ministry of Interior in the Syrian Salvation Government. (2018, July 19). Highlighted activities of the “Police Department” over the week. (Official Facebook Page).

25 - Ministry of Interior in the Syrian Salvation Government. (2018, July 26). Activities of the “Police Department” over the week. (Official Facebook Page).

26 - Ministry of Interior in the Syrian Salvation Government. (2018, February 9). Activities of the “Police Department” over the week. (Official Facebook Page).

27 - Amjad Media Foundation. (2023). Greetings from the leadership to the notables and cadres.

28 - ecoi.net. (n.d.). Syrian Arab Republic - Country Briefing.

The following table provides key information about the judicial and governing authorities and their legal stance on the LGBTQI+ community in the four main regions controlled by different factions in Syria:

REGION	GOVERNING AUTHORITY	PENAL SYSTEM	LEGAL STANCE ON LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY	NOTES
SYRIAN REGIME	various internal security forces.(30)	Syrian Penal Code 1949	Imprisonment up to 3 years	Excludes incarcerated LGBTQI+ individuals from amnesty decrees(31) (32) (33)
SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT	National Army Factions	Syrian Penal Code 1949	Imprisonment up to 3 years	Arrest of 4 individuals on homosexuality charges(34). Excludes incarcerated LGBTQI+ individuals from amnesty decrees.
NATIONAL SALVATION GOVERNMENT	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)	Islamic Sharia	Criminalizes LGBTQI+ Community, Possible execution for LGBTQI+ members	Arrest of 6 individuals on charges of homosexuality at different periods in 2018.
AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA	People's Protection Units (YPG)(35)	Syrian Penal Code of 1949, based on the Social Contract Charter.	Unclear, claims of gender equality, lacks protective laws for LGBTQI+	Difficulty in verifying arrests; Preparation of a new penal code; Questions raised about future approach towards LGBTQI+ rights.

30 - ecoinet.net. (n.d.). Syrian Arab Republic - Country Briefing.

31 - Syrian Arab Republic. (2021). Legislative Decree No. 13.

32 - Syrian Arab Republic. (2020). Legislative Decree No. 6.

33 - Syrian Arab Republic. (2019). Legislative Decree No. 20.

34 - The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2021). On charges of practicing "homosexuality." Military police arrest 4 members of the Hamza Division in the Aleppo countryside.

35 - Reuters. (2022). The People's Protection Units (YPG).

LEGAL AMBIGUITY AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS FOR THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

Previous research on the legal situation of LGBTQI+ people in Syria has focused on statutes that explicitly criminalize them, like Articles 520 and 507 of the Syrian Penal Code of 1949, described above (36)(37). But there has been limited examination of the ambiguity and adaptation of certain legal provisions that - while not directly criminalizing LGBTQI+ identities - are frequently used to target this community. This more insidious form of criminalization is the primary focus of our investigation. While many studies have touched upon the issue of legal gender recognition in Syria, the civil and military legal nuances associated with it remain largely under-discussed (38).

Laws mediate relations between the individual and the state, as well as interpersonal relationships between citizens. But for marginalized communities, laws are often manipulated in order to support mainstream views against that group, rather than providing protection. Law No. 10 of 1961(39) - the so-called "Anti-Prostitution Law" - is often invoked against LGBTQI+ individuals, along with articles 507, 509, 512, 516, 517, 518, 519, and 520 of the Penal Code (40). Furthermore, all amnesty decrees from April 1963 up to 2022 pointedly ignore provisions that criminalize LGBTQI+ individuals (41).

Knowledge of these legal instruments is crucial to understanding their implications for the LGBTQI+ community, insofar as they perpetuate oppression but also insofar as they point to potential avenues for change. Within our sample, a mere 12% describe themselves as knowledgeable about the laws governing LGBTQI+ people and their relationships. 33% believed they had a moderate understanding, while 41% considered their knowledge limited and 14% admitted to having no awareness of such legal provisions. 36% of respondents stated that they had faced legal consequences related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. In contrast, 63% hadn't experienced such encounters.

36 - ILGA World. (2020). State Sponsored Homophobia report - Global Legislation Overview update.

37 - Coar. (2021). LGBTQI+ Syria: Experiences, Challenges, and Priorities for the Aid Sector.

38 - Saleh, F. A. R. (2003). Surgery of effeminacy and sex change in Syrian law. Damascus University Journal for Economic & Legal Sciences

39 - Syrian Government. (1961). Law No. 10 on Combating Prostitution.

40 - Syrian Government. (1949). General Penal Code No. 148.

41 - "Legislative Decree No. (24) of 2022 granting a general amnesty."

Rawad, a 52-year-old gay man, described an incident in which he was apprehended by a police patrol and found in possession of a magazine—intended for his personal use—that contained images of shirtless men. He was subsequently referred to public prosecution and criminalized under Article 518 of the Penal Code:

“I denied before the judge that I was trading in such magazines and informed him that this was the first time I had come into possession of such an item. However, the judge was not convinced and convicted me on charges of offending public morals through the circulation of pornographic magazines, sentencing me to six months.” (42)

Bassam, a 37-year-old gay man, described a judicial ruling against him under one of the provisions of the Anti-Prostitution Law No. 10 of 1961. He had been arrested in a public bathhouse commonly frequented by members of the LGBTQI+ community:

“The judge made a decision, convicting me on charges of committing indecency and sentencing me to six months. After serving the prison term, I was transferred to the Hospital for Mental Health for a duration that was determined by the doctors, based on an evaluation of my mental state.” (43)

Noor, a 34-year-old transgender woman, shares her experience of criminalization, wherein she was arrested due to her gender expression and charged under Article 509 of the Penal Code:

“I was referred to the public prosecution, presented before a judge, and sentenced to three months on charges of facilitating prostitution. I served my three-month sentence and was released.”(44)

Mahyar, a 33-year-old gay man, described how he was arrested following the inspection of his mobile phone at a checkpoint in the Damascus countryside:

“The trial lasted less than fifteen minutes. As soon as the judge saw the evidence and the photos on my mobile phone, he sentenced me to 3 months imprisonment under Article 518 of the Penal Code. I was accused of violating public decency and distributing materials offensive to public decency online. The judge asked me, ‘Why have you done this?’ and then immediately pronounced the sentence without a lawyer or anything. After that, I was transferred to Adra prison and stayed there for 3 months. During this period, an order of amnesty was issued, and they released various drug dealers. But I was prohibited from being released.”(45)

42 - Interview with Rowad (Pseudonym), 2023-08-11.

43 - Interview with Bassam (Pseudonym), 2023-06-25.

44 - Interview with Nour (Pseudonym), 2023-06-22.

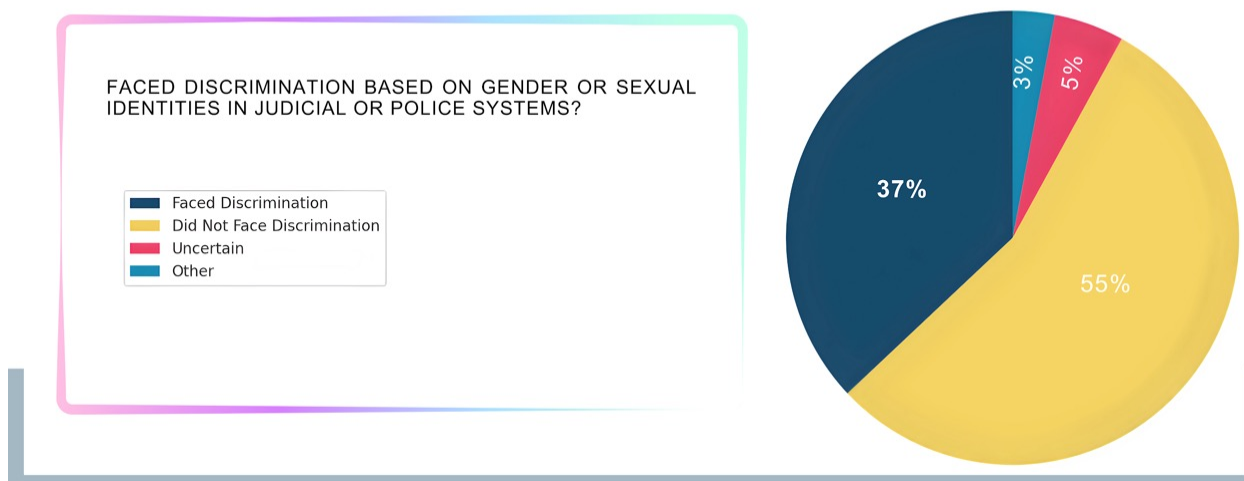
45 - Interview with Mahyar (Pseudonym), 2023-06-14.

DISCRIMINATION AND INTIMIDATION TACTICS:

In Syria, the LGBTQI+ community faces stark discrimination and mistreatment from judicial, police, and law enforcement entities. This discrimination comes in various forms, from unjustified arrests to abuse during detention (46). Furthermore, there's a clear bias against LGBTQI+ individuals, often exacerbated by the denial of legal representation. Our research indicates that 37% of respondents have faced such discrimination by legal entities in Syria.

FIGURE 5

Discrimination in Legal Entities



Mayada, a transgender woman forced into military service despite seeking exemption, was arrested in a public square in Latakia. She faced abuse by law enforcement and was deprived of fair legal representation, resulting in her incarceration in Baluni, one of the most notorious military prisons in the country:

“After they took me to the army, I left my family and decided not to return. One of my cousins reported me, and the military security raided my house. Due to my external appearance, a charge was fabricated against me alleging that I had engaged in sexual relations while in the army. Consequently, a case was opened against me in the military court in 2014. Four lawyers refused to defend me and take on my case. When the judge saw the medical reports, he began to laugh and mock me, ‘What is this? Why are you not a virgin?’ and sentenced me to three months in prison. The one and a half months I had already spent in Baluni prison were counted towards the sentence.”(47)

46 - Human Rights Watch. (2020). “They Treated Us in Monstrous Ways” Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and Transgender Women in the Syrian Conflict.
47 - Interview with Maiada (Pseudonym), 2023-06-05.

Another instance of discrimination was shared by Hamza, a gay man who was detained along with some friends following the inspection of his mobile phone:

“I spent two weeks with the Criminal Security department. Before they transferred us to court, they investigated me. They began asking me about the people who were in my fake Facebook account and made me fingerprint a completely blank paper. In court, there was no lawyer or anything; the judge just asked me whether my confession was genuine or not. Ultimately, however, the judge decided to release me.”(48)

Jamal, a gay man, shares his account of arrest and trial, along with two friends who were serving in the military with him. After being reported for their sexual orientation, they faced a trial by the military justice. After 6 months in detention, they were sentenced under Articles 520 and 518, which criminalize LGBTQI+ individuals in Syria:

“In court, the judge asked all female lawyers and women to vacate the room, declaring a private session. He directly asked me why I am a homosexual. I responded, ‘God created me this way.’ His answer was, ‘As long as you are in the army, your body is not yours. If you wish to donate your kidney to your mother, it cannot be done without our permission.’” (49)

Violations and stigmatization extended beyond Jamal to anyone trying to advocate for him. Jamal elaborates:

“My lawyer experienced considerable pressure to cease defending me, with fellow lawyers telling her, ‘You are defending a homosexual.’ He eventually withdrew, and I was sentenced to 6 months in prison... Under the emergency law, the duration of detention and investigation is not counted towards the sentenced period.” (50)

Farah, a 35-year-old transgender woman, shared an incident that occurred during an investigation at the police station, wherein she was pressured to confess. She states:

“The Major, or perhaps Lieutenant — I do not recall the rank — summoned me and said he would discuss something for my benefit. He presented me with a choice: either confess to the sexual relationship that you had with this individual or be charged with labor and communication with foreign entities.”(51)

48 - Interview with Hamza (Pseudonym), 2023-06-12.

49 - Interview with Jamal (Pseudonym), 2023-06-06.

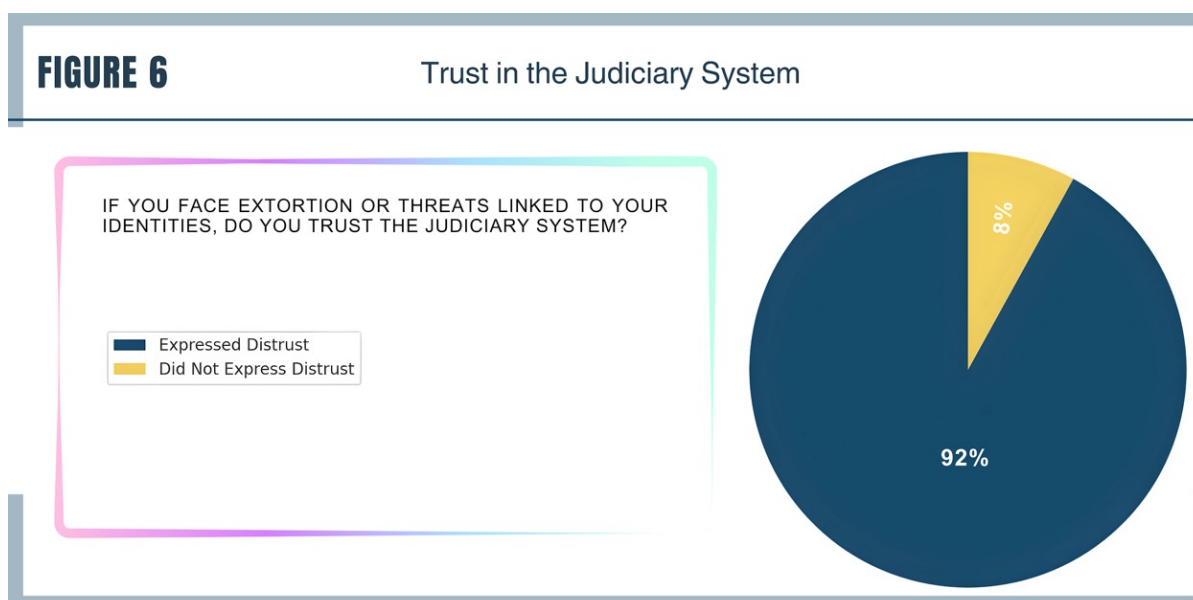
50 - Ibid.

51 - Interview with Farah (Pseudonym), 2023-07-19.

LEGAL LOOPHOLES AND SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION:

In Syria, the LGBTQI+ community's distrust of the judicial system is intensified by laws that criminalize their identities, making them hesitant to seek justice for fear of further persecution.

A staggering 92% of the LGBTQI+ community expressed distrust in the Syrian judiciary, especially when handling cases of extortion or threats linked to their identities. This widespread distrust likely stems from multiple factors, including the threat of legal punishment, societal prejudice, discrimination, and deep-rooted corruption within the legal system.



Furaf, a 33-year-old gay man, tells us how he was entrapped through a friend's phone after a raid on a private LGBTQI+ community party in 2018:

"I arrived at a 'Syriatel center', and a security car approached. Two men got out from the back, handcuffed me and put me in the car. They took me to a police station and put me in the cell inside. And there I found six people who had been at the party. The police had come to the party after I had left, but when they searched my friend's phone, they saw me in the photos. They extracted confessions from them, one by one. Among the six, one was a minor - he wasn't even 18 years old." ()

Violence, torture, and executions were perpetrated by all sides throughout the the Syrian war and served as mechanisms for conflict actors to assert power and dominance (53). High levels of brutality, including gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual violence (SV), have been reported in testimony from Syrians (54), especially those detained in government prisons (55). The severity of the violence notably surged when perpetrators identified victims as members of the LGBTQI+ community (56).

MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE:

In Syria, individuals assigned male at birth between the ages of 18 and 42 are obligated to undergo compulsory military service, which is deemed a 'sacred duty' (57). The duration of obligatory service was previously 18 to 24 months but was then extended due to the conflict; it is now about 7.5 years. While the criteria for conscription emphasize physical and psychological readiness (58), certain LGBTQI+ individuals may be exempted based on a "Gender Identity Disorder" (59) diagnosis during military medical assessments, as per confidential military regulations. While such a diagnosis prevents many people from being conscripted, it is not necessarily safe for LGBTQI+ individuals. The diagnostic process may expose them to substantial psychological risks and pressures from those overseeing the procedure.

Prolonging education is used by many individuals (60) as a tactic to strategically defer conscription, and in many cases, the threat of forced military service becomes a reason for many individuals to emigrate from the country. In the survey, 79% of participants indicated that they did not undergo compulsory military service. Reasons related to their unwillingness to engage in military conflict, the burden and extended duration of mandatory service, moral aversion to participate in crimes against civilians, and evasion of what many Syrian youth call "free death," among others. The masculinist orientation of the military makes it a stifling - and even dangerous - environment for those who do not express themselves as men, such as transgender women. Notably, Syria does not legally recognize the right to conscientious objection (61), nor does it provide for substitute or alternative service.

53 - "No End in Sight": Torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023. (2023). Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

54 - Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2018). "I lost my dignity": Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/37/CRP.3).

55 - The Day After. (2020). Sexual and gender-based violence: Shared experiences among Syrian detainees. An overview.

56 - Human Rights Watch. (2020). "They Treated Us in Monstrous Ways" Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and Transgender Women in the Syrian Conflict.

57 - Syrian Arab Republic. (2012). Constitution of 2012 Decree 94.

58 - Syrian Ministry of Defence. (2007). Legislative Decree No. 30 dated 5/3/2007 AD containing the military Service Law.

59 - Gender identity Disorder An outdated term once used for those whose gender identity didn't align with their assigned sex. Now, "gender dysphoria" is used to describe the related distress.

60 - al-Zarier, B., & Nelson, M. (2017, April 20). Damascus student to pay 8 months of salary in bribe to avoid military service.

61 - European Asylum Support Office. (2021). Syria Military service Country of Origin Information Report.

INSIGHTS FROM LAWYERS:

To gain a comprehensive perspective on the legal challenges facing LGBTQI+ Syrians and the legislative tools employed in their criminalization, we engaged with lawyers actively practicing or having prior experience in the Syrian legal system.

Mrs. Maha emphasized the profound bias and legal hurdles faced by Syria's LGBTQI+ community. She shared an incident in which a trans woman was falsely accused of harassing a taxi driver, and was unjustly criminalized and imprisoned.

"I defended a trans woman who was harassed by a taxi driver. When she refused to have sex with him and argued, he dragged her to the police, alleging that she had harassed him. As soon as the police saw her appearance, they considered her the harasser and accused her of debauchery. She was imprisoned for a month until she was judicially released. Although a forensic examination found no traces of sexual activity, this fact was ignored, and she was convicted anyway."(62)

Mr. Ahmed highlights the limited legal recourse available to LGBTQI+ clients in Syria due to systemic biases, emphasizing the challenges lawyers face in both defending their clients and confronting prejudices within the judicial and security forces.

"In many cases, our support to LGBTQI+ clients is constrained to legal advice and mitigating punishment rather than securing justice, particularly in instances of blackmail where we must enact protective measures without confronting the core issues. This may involve filing a police report or reconciling with the accused outside of court to shield the client from further potential legal complications. Moreover, it is imperative to highlight that the judicial and security forces in Syria exhibit a clear bias not only against the LGBTQI+ community, but also against the lawyers who defend them."(63)

Mr. Saeed described how the LGBTQI+ community must cope with threats and blackmail aimed at exposing individuals' sexual orientations. He emphasizes the challenging legal landscape in which laws meant to protect can inadvertently victimize the community, trapping them in a cycle of criminalization, particularly regarding "sodomy" laws.

"I have provided several consultations to individuals from the LGBTQI+ community, many of which pertained to threats and blackmail cases aimed at exposing them by people from previous relationships or acquaintances from social media due to the existence of conversations proving the relationship or revealing the sexual orientations of the consultees. I consistently advised them not to succumb to fear from threats, as the person issuing threats would also be incriminating themselves.

62 - Interview with Lawyer Miss Maha (Pseudonym), 2023-08-17.

63 - Interview with Lawyer Mr. Ahmad (Pseudonym), 2023-08-20.

The safest solution for the client often is to inform the other party that they will not yield to the threats, and occasionally, to counter-threaten them with exposure as well, then block them and cease all communication. The law, which is supposed to protect vulnerable individuals, paradoxically acts as a weapon that harms gay people. Instead of individuals invoking the law to shield them from aggressors, they find themselves ensnared in a trap, being criminalized for the act of sodomy, wherein the victim becomes the accused.”(64)

Mr. Akram highlights the substantial challenges faced when defending LGBTQI+ individuals in a legal context, noting societal ostracization, judicial bias, and the complex legal and ethical nuances involved, with imprisonment as a potential consequence for admissions of criminalized practices,

“I have not advocated for cases of this nature. There is significant difficulty in defending individuals from the LGBTQI+ community since these cases are often socially ostracized. Judges frequently view the accused with a demeaning gaze, perceiving them as deviant, and regard the attorney essentially as an enabler. Typically, basic defense procedures include denying the crime attributed to the accused and adhering to the principle of presumed innocence. It might be argued that the accused was unaware or unconscious, as there is a need to negate an element of the crime’s constituents, considering that homosexuality and its practices are criminalized under the cited articles. If admitted before the court, imprisonment is the consequent penalty.”(65)

COMPULSORY ANAL EXAMINATIONS:

Compulsory anal examinations are utilized by Syrian judicial entities as a tool to deduce if consensual sexual conduct has taken place. While the conclusions drawn from these invasive procedures lack validation, they are nonetheless used within a legal framework that penalizes LGBTQI+ people. Data is lacking about the prevalence of these practices in Syria, perhaps because authorities are aware that international observers recognize them as cruel, inhumane, and degrading, or even a form of torture (66).

64 - Interview with Lawyer Mr. Saeed (Pseudonym), 2023-07-11.

65 - Interview with Lawyer Mr. Akram (Pseudonym), 2023-07-11.

66 - Independent Forensic Expert Group Statement on Anal Examinations in Cases of Alleged Homosexuality Independent Forensic Expert Group UN Human Rights Council. Report of the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, 5 January 2016. UN doc A/HRC/31/57

Nonetheless, there is indirect evidence of their use. Two academic lectures from forensic medicine curricula in Aleppo and Homs describe the steps involved in such examinations as well as their juridical context, suggesting that these procedures are being taught to future practitioners (67)(68).

And according to the study's findings, a notable 16% of respondents have - or know someone personally who has - been subjected to these practices under the supervision of either state or community entities. Jamal, a 34-year-old gay man, was examined collectively with four other individuals after being forcibly abducted during an investigation at a security branch:

"They took me from the branch to the Military Hospital for examinations. There, they kept me for two days. On the first day, I was presented to the psychiatric committee to affirm my homosexuality. Then, the psychiatrist referred me to the forensic committee. I waited for two days until the forensic committee was ready and was then introduced to the doctor, and his two assistants. There were four others in the same room awaiting examination. They examined all of us together. We were made to kneel on our hands and feet, and the doctor conducted the examination, which lasted only a few seconds for each individual."(69)

Miada, 29 years old, a transgender woman, recounts her experience during an investigation and trial into her sexuality:

"A case was opened against me in the military court, charging me with homosexuality and defaming the reputation of the army. I was referred to a psychiatrist at Government Hospital in Latakia, and later, to the forensic department where the situation was considerably more harrowing. The doctor conducted the examination extremely roughly, frequently coupled with verbal abuse. The doctor was alone with a military security officer whose name I can't recall. I was never provided with a copy of the report he issued."(70)

67 - University of Aleppo. Chapter five in Forensic Medicine. Publications of the Faculty of Medicine.

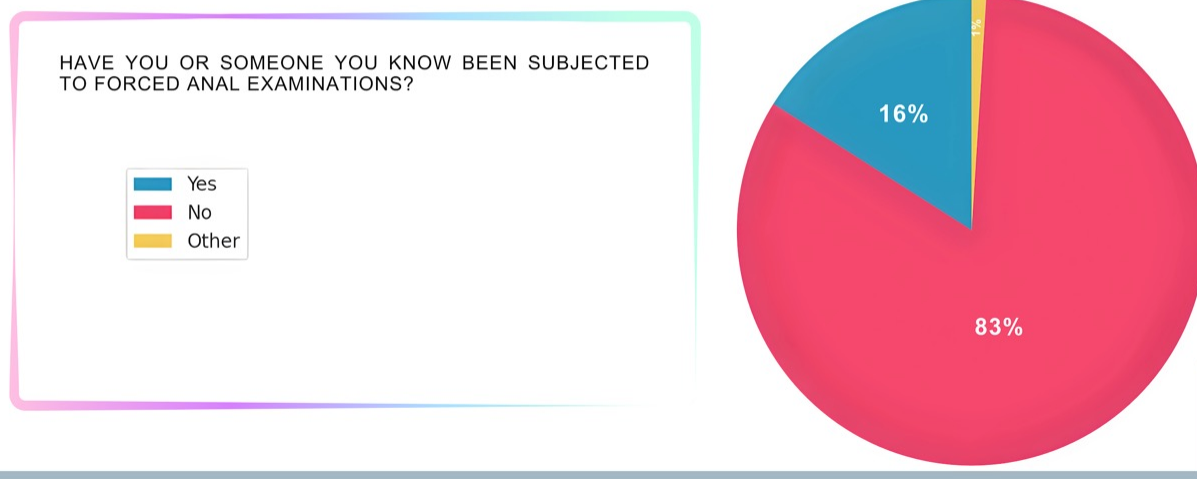
68 - Al-Baath University. Forensic Medicine. Publications of the Faculty of Medicine.

69 - Interview with Jamal (Pseudonym), 2023-06-06.

70 - Interview with Maiada (Pseudonym), 2023-06-05.

FIGURE 7

Incidents of Forced Anal Examinations



GENDER-AFFIRMING PROCEDURES IN SYRIAN LAW

In Syria, there is no specific legislation governing the affairs of intersex individuals, nor are there specific laws that sanction gender-affirming surgeries. However, Syrian law does acknowledge and legalize what it terms “sexual correction” procedures. These are permitted only for intersex persons. The law also recognizes all physiological bodily changes that occur to an individual’s state, provided they occur without medical interventions. Such individuals are entitled to file lawsuits before the competent courts to request gender correction in personal status documents. This is contingent upon obtaining a final judgment from these courts, as stipulated by Article 44 of Law No. 113 of 2021 (71). In such cases, courts rely on medical expertise, primarily chromosomal analysis performed by the Syrian Atomic Energy Commission (72), as well as clinical examination. In certain special medical cases, where a decisively male or female chromosomal pattern has not been proven, reliance is placed on the social adjustment factor (73).

Moreover, Syrian law does not recognize gender-affirming surgeries, often termed “sex change” operations, which individuals might undergo either in Syria or abroad. Transgender individuals who have undergone gender-affirming processes risk legal accountability under Article 146 of the Military Penal Code (74) on charges of “intentionally rendering oneself unfit for service in order to evade military duties.” Furthermore, doctors who perform gender transition processes may risk losing their membership in the Medical Association Registry as per Law No. 16 of 2012 (75) on the grounds of “practicing the profession in violation of effective regulations and laws.

71 - “New Civil Status Law No. 13 of 20

72 - Saleh, F. A. R. (2003). Surgery of effeminacy and sex change in Syrian law. *Damascus University Journal for Economic & Legal Sciences*.

73 - “A female transformed into a male. How does Syrian law allow that?” *Syria Tv* (2022).

74 - “Syrian Military Penal Code.”

75 - “Law No. 16 of 2012, the Doctors’ Syndicate Law.”

In this context, Lawyer Mr. Saeed speaks about the processes of gender-affirming surgeries within Syrian law and the procedures followed:

“The law does not recognize gender-affirming surgeries but instead requires numerous conditions. It necessitates a psychological evaluation, as well as a medical report illustrating the presence of mixed genitalia, as in the case of intersex individuals. Consequently, it demands physical evidence to substantiate individuals’ claims about their gender identity. If the applicant can prove this, a procedure to change the gender on the identity document commences, ultimately concluding at the Public Registry once the physical ambiguity has been verified. However, the process is not devoid of obstacles and the hatred that individuals encounter at all stages of these steps.”(76)

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Incorporate LGBTQI+ considerations comprehensively within legal studies and discourses.
2. Ensure the integration of the LGBTQI+ community in initiatives geared towards legal protection and advocacy.
3. Intensify research endeavors to meticulously document both historic and ongoing violations perpetuated by all factions during the Syrian conflict. Special emphasis should be directed towards transgressions affecting the LGBTQI+ populace.

PRIORITIZING LEGAL REFORMS:

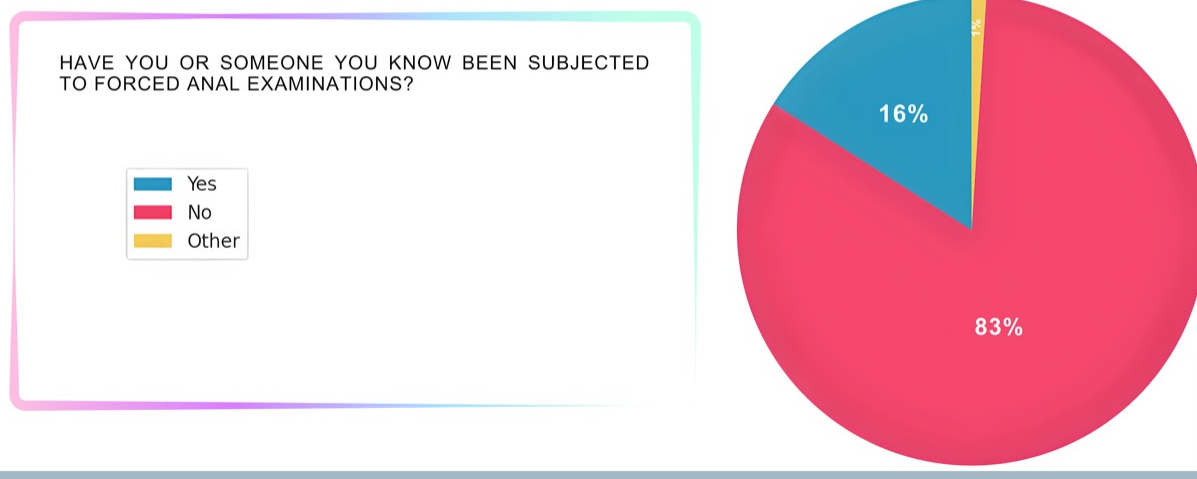
The data collated from the study underscore the exigency for substantial legal amendments, aiming to secure an equitable judicial environment for members of the LGBTQI+ community in Syria. Key areas of suggested modifications include:

- 1. Abrogation of Discriminatory Laws:** A pressing requirement is the annulment of legislative provisions that categorically criminalize members of the LGBTQI+ community.
- 2. Introduction of Protective Statutes:** Concurrently, there is a call for the establishment and promulgation of robust protective legal mechanisms that cater to the unique vulnerabilities of the LGBTQI+ populace.
- 3. Streamlining Administrative Proceedings:** Emphasis has also been placed on refining administrative protocols, especially those concerning alterations in civil status documentation pertinent to transgender individuals.

76 - Interview with Lawyer Mr. Saeed (Pseudonym), 2023-07-11.

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76 - Interview with Lawyer Mr. Saeed (Pseudonym), 2023-07-11.

FROM THE STUDY:

- 46% of the respondents advocate for the comprehensive implementation of the aforementioned legal reforms.
- A substantial 28% prioritize the immediate nullification of laws that criminalize LGBTQI+ individuals.
- An additional 19% highlight the primacy of instituting laws that proactively safeguard the rights and dignities of the LGBTQI+ community.

THE RESEARCH TEAM DEVELOPED A LEGAL GUIDE FOR THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY IN SYRIA ENCOMPASSING:

- Awareness Segment: A comprehensive overview of the current legal framework, offering foundational knowledge on the statutes and their implications.
- Procedural Blueprint: Detailed guidance on navigating the legal apparatus in Syria, informed by real-world scenarios and potential challenges.

The formulation of this resource was facilitated through rigorous consultations with seasoned legal practitioners operating within Syria. Their invaluable insights and first-hand experiences were instrumental in discerning proceed.

GUIDELINES FOR LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN SYRIA

PERSONAL SAFETY & DIGITAL HYGIENE:

1. Adhere rigorously to digital protection protocols. Avoid storing incriminating content, including photographs, chats, or messages on mobile devices.
 2. Refrain from disseminating explicit images that can identify faces or other distinguishing features.
 3. Exercise caution when interacting with unfamiliar individuals. Always notify a trusted confidante about your plans, sharing as much information as possible about the person you're meeting.
 4. Opt for public venues over secluded locations for initial meetings to bolster personal safety.
 5. Secure a connection with a reputable lawyer, or at the very least, maintain the contact details of one for emergency consultations.
- you.

LEGAL PROCEEDINGS & INTERACTION WITH AUTHORITIES

6. When faced with accusations, it's imperative to abstain from admitting guilt, particularly in a judicial setting.
7. In instances where a confession is coerced, limit admissions strictly to the charge at hand, avoiding any supplementary details that might be manipulated against you.
8. A denial, when made, should be explicit and unequivocal. Ambiguity or silence could potentially be misconstrued as an implicit admission, giving rise to legal complications.

POLITICAL CONTEXT



There is no discussion - let alone recognition - of the human rights of LGBTQI+ people in the dialogue sessions of either the traditional or the new Syrian political parties*. The exclusion of queer discourse from the Syrian Revolution's narratives, despite the LGBTQI+ community's active involvement, suggests deliberate marginalization due to the prevailing mores and values of the leadership. As explained below, the political exclusion of the LGBTQI+ community from political participation is not only disempowering - it also fosters the spread of misconceptions and misleading information by entities opposed to feminist and queer liberatory discourse (77).

SCAPE-GOATING & PROPAGANDA

Since 2020, there has been a discernible pattern of anti-LGBTQI+ content in media outlets associated with the government. Leaders have attempted to create a moral panic around the existence of LGBTQI+ people, using "dog whistle" tactics to invoke fear of the supposed threat that such people present to "family values" and associating them with the loosely defined "threat of neoliberalism" (78)(79). Such tactics have been used by prominent figures including the Syrian president (80) and have been amplified across official media channels. These tactics - combined with campaigns against LGBTQI+ symbols like rainbow-themed kites (81) and multi-colored staircases (82) - are intended to cast the government as a moral defender of the Syrian people against perceived threats to the nation's cultural identity. This, in turn, casts non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities as something "external" or "foreign" to Syria, and therefore as invasive.

35% of respondents indicated that warring factions in Syria have exploited the LGBTQI+ community for their own political propaganda. For instance, organized media campaigns launched in 2011 by certain media outlets and public figures accused opponents from political, military, and religious backgrounds of homosexuality. This trend has continued in recent media campaigns sponsored by the Syrian regime, which attempt to link LGBTQI+ issues with neoliberalism and the west, suggesting that these campaigns target "Eastern societies" (83) (84) (85) (86) (87). The use of moral norms about sexuality as a weaponized tool in political and media campaigns underscores the stigmatized status of LGBTQI+ people within most segments of Syrian society.

77 - Yousef, Lel. (n.d.). Strategies of Rebellion: A Queer Reading of the Syrian Revolution. SyrianUntold.

78 - Snacksyrian. (2021). The government media warns of the conspiracy of modern liberalism and the marriage of aliens.

79 - Al-Hajji, R. (2021, January 3). Modern liberalism ... and the poisoned taste [Video]. YouTube.

80 - Bashar Al Asad. (2020). Modern liberalism is the enemy (Video).

81 - Shaam Times. (Date not provided). Syria.. Confiscation of children's toys bearing a logo suggesting homosexuality.

82 - Hawa al Sham. (2021). درج المهاجرين يصبح على قائمة "ترندات" السوريين المزدحمة بالمسلسلات الرمضانية، ومحافطة دمشق ترد! (Video).

83 - Al-Suriyya Channel. (2020). Modern liberalism and the destruction of humanity (Video).

84 - Al Ekhbarieh El Surya. (2021). Modern liberalism and poisoned taste (Video).

85 - Bashar Al Asad. (2020). Modern liberalism is the enemy (Video).

86 - Ahmad, Abdel Rahman. (2021). Perpetuating perversion. Al-Thawra Newspaper. Published on SANA's official Facebook page.

87 - Asmaa Al Asad. (2023). (Speech at the foreign language university, China) (Video).

There was much ambivalence and uncertainty on this issue, with about two-thirds of respondents indicating that they lacked information on this topic or could not determine if the LGBTQI+ community had been attacked by propaganda for political purposes. Such ambivalence could be due to a number of factors, including the absence of accessible and trustworthy information sources, as well as social stigmatization that squashes open discussions on LGBTQI+ issues.

However, the representation of the LGBTQI+ community is influenced not only by the propaganda of political parties, but by the broader media landscape in Syria. Syrian television drama stands out as the most pervasive and popular media genre and resonates with diverse viewer demographics. The widespread popularity of television-based entertainment in Syria, and in other Arab countries as well, means that the portrayal of queer characters invariably impacts the Syrian audience's perception of the LGBTQ+ community. Indeed, some comedic scenes from renowned series have inadvertently legitimized mockery of various spectrums of the LGBTQ+ community, especially individuals identifying with non-normative or queer gender identities (88)(89). Approximately 83% of study participants observed that the Syrian media, including both government-affiliated and private entities, engages in provocative campaigns against the LGBTQI+ community.

WAR-TIME POLITICAL PERSECUTION

Throughout the war, the LGBTQI+ community were the targets of especially high rates of GBV and SV, including forced nudity, rape, and mandatory vaginal and anal examinations (90). Numerous political and military groups were responsible for a range of transgressions against the LGBTQI+ community, including executions.

والتي تعد اول عمل مسرحي سوري قدم شخصية كوبرية وهي شخصية عطيات و المبنية على شخصية من الواقع في سوريا وهي زوزو المعروف بين ابناء الوسط المثلي في(1979) - 88 . مسلسل أهل(2008) . مسلسل الخط الأحمر (2007) 20 و 19 . مسلسل سيرة الحب الحلقتين (2005). مسلسل خلف القضبان (2004) A Lesbian Tale فترتها - فيلم قصة سحاقية . مسلسل(2010) . مسلسل صبايا 2 (2010) . مسلسل ما ملكت أيمانكم (2009) . مسلسل عن الخوف والعزلة (2009) . مسلسل شتاء ساخن (2008)القرام . الجزء الثاني طلة "علموني" . مسلسل(2010) . مسلسل صبايا 2 (2010) . مسلسل ما ملكت أيمانكم (2009) . مسلسل عن الخوف والعزلة (2009) . مسلسل شتاء ساخن (2008)القرام . الجزء الثاني طلة "علموني" (2020) - شارع شيكاغو (2019) -حرمك (2016) طلة "زبيدة خانم" 12 . مسلسل بقعة ضوء الجزء 16 (2013) . مسلسل . ناظرين الحلقة (2012)رقة عين 89 - COAR. (2022). The Future of LGBTQ+ Syria and the Aid Response: Case Studies in Regional Programming.
90 - Margalit, A. (2018). Still a blind spot: The protection of LGBT persons during armed conflict and other situations of violence. International Review of the Red Cross.

EXECUTIONS

ISIS used the execution of individuals accused of homosexuality as a means of terror and intimidation to impose their ideological mandate on people living under their control (91). Between 2015 and 2016, ISIS executed least 16 individuals in Syria on charges related to homosexuality (92). The methods of execution including stoning and being thrown from heights. Other sources report that 25 individuals were executed by the organization.(93)

Between 2014 and 2017, Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam) (94) executed four individuals on charges related to homosexuality in Eastern Ghouta, in the countryside of Damascus (95) (96) (97) (98).

In 2015, the Court of Justice in Hreitan in the countryside of Aleppo (99), which is affiliated with the group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra and now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (99), executed four individuals on charges of homosexuality in the northern countryside of Aleppo (100).

In 2015, an individual was executed on charges of homosexuality in Khan al-Sheih, located in Western Ghouta in the countryside of Damascus. The order came from the Sharia Authority in Western Ghouta, affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra. The execution method was by throwing the individual from a height (101).

In 2015, an individual was executed on charges of homosexuality issued by the Sharia Court in Aleppo, which was constituted by a group of affiliated factions involved in the war. The Abu Amara Battalions carried out the execution by throwing the individual from a height (102).

In 2015, seven individuals were executed on charges of homosexuality in the northern countryside of Homs (103). The order was issued by the Supreme Judicial Court of Homs and its countryside, which was constituted by a group of factions including Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra (104).

91 - Counter Extremism Project (CEP). (2017). ISIS's Persecution of Gay People.

92 - Outright International. Timelines of Publicized Executions for Alleged Sodomy by the Islamic State Militias.

93 - Human Rights Watch. (2017). Syria Events of 2016.

94 - Jaysh al-Islam (The Islam Army, The Islam Brigade) is a Syrian opposition group that targets the Assad Regime, the Islamic State, and select Kurdish forces.

95 - Judicial Council of Eastern Ghouta. (2015). Statement from the Judicial Council of Eastern Ghouta, Order Number 2099.

96 - Almodon. (2015). The "legend" Abu Ali Khabiyeh was crucified.

97 - Violations Documentation Center in Syria. (Website)

98 - Violations Documentation Center in Syria. (Website)

99 - Wikipedia. (n.d.). Hreitan is a town in northern Syria.

100 - Enabbaladi. (2015). The judiciary of free Syria: Three references that warn of the division of the country. (In Arabic).

101 - Al-Tamimi, A. J. (2015). Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Dar al-Qada Documents.

102 - Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2015). The Sharia Commission in Western Ghouta throws a young man from a high rise on charges of "practicing the act of the people of sodomy". (In Arabic).

103 - Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2015). A young man was executed by throwing him off a hospital building, and 5 men were executed on charges of being "regime cells" in the city of Aleppo. (In Arabic).

countryside of Homs (104). The order was issued by the Supreme Judicial Court of Homs and its countryside, which was constituted by a group of factions including Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra (105).

Based on testimonies and sources that the research team could not independently verify, two individuals were executed by Jabhat al-Nusra in Salqin, a town in the Idlib countryside. The team accessed a video of the execution, but the video did not specify the reason for the execution (106). In a separate account of the same testimony, there are claims that the Syrian Army executed and desecrated a man's body on charges of homosexuality in the Damascus countryside in 2012 (107).

FIGURE 8 Number of Executions by Issuing Authorities

THIS GRAPH ILLUSTRATES THE NUMBER OF EXECUTIONS CARRIED OUT BY VARIOUS ISSUING AUTHORITIES IN SYRIA.

- SUPREME JUDICIAL COUNCIL: 4
- COURT OF JUSTICE IN HREITAN: 4
- SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT IN HOMS AND ITS COUNTRYSIDE: 7
- ISIS: 16
- SHARIA COURT IN ALEPPO: 1
- SHARIA AUTHORITY IN WESTERN GHOUTA: 1

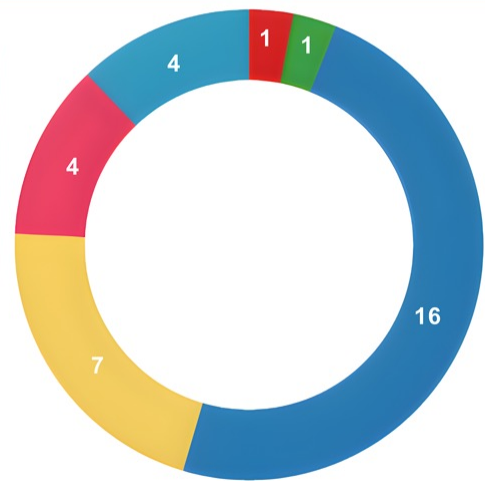
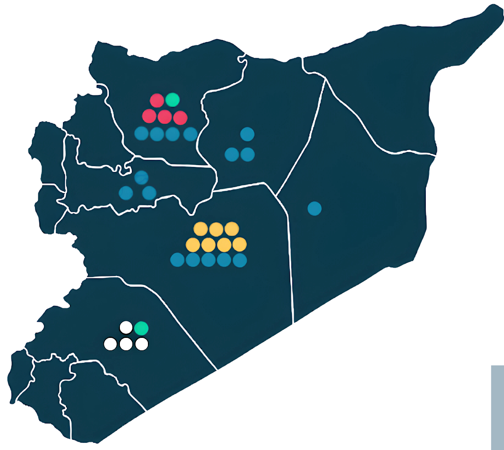


FIGURE 9 Number of Executions by Province

THIS GRAPH SHOWS THE NUMBER OF EXECUTIONS REPORTED IN VARIOUS PROVINCES ACROSS SYRIA, BASED ON GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES. THE TOTAL NUMBER OF EXECUTIONS IS 33,

- DAMASCUS AND ITS COUNTRYSIDE: 5
- HOMS AND ITS COUNTRYSIDE: 12
- DEIR EZZOR: 1
- RAQQA: 3
- ALEPPO AND ITS COUNTRYSIDE: 9
- HAMA: 3



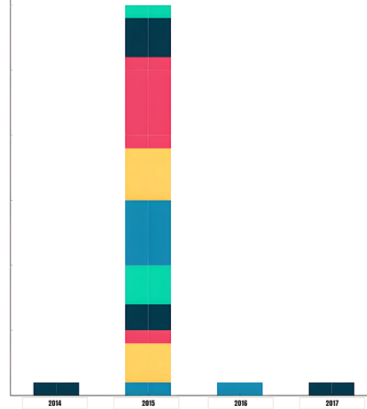
104 - Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2015). "Video and audio" The execution of 10 people, including a child, on charges of "performing an indecent act with males". (In Arabic).
 105 - Almodon. (2016). The "Sharia Court" in Homs: tyranny continues. (In Arabic).
 106 - (2014). (Video). Facebook. Page: عاجل من حلب الشهباء,
 107 - Anonymous Reporter. (2023). (Personal communication).

FIGURE 10

Number of Executions by Year

THIS GRAPH SHOWS THE NUMBER OF EXECUTIONS REPORTED EACH YEAR FROM 2014 TO 2017. THE TOTAL NUMBER OF EXECUTIONS IS 33, WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OCCURRING IN 2015.

- 2014: 1
- 2015: 30
- 2016: 1
- 2017: 1



The following table summarizes the details of documented cases in which individuals were executed due to charges related to their sexual orientation:

YEAR	LOCATION	NUMBER EXECUTED	ISSUING AUTHORITY	EXECUTIONER	METHOD	REASON	REFERENCES
2014	Eastern Ghouta, Damascus	1	Supreme Judicial Council	Jaysh al-Islam	Public execution (unverified)	Homosexuality and adultery	(108)
	Northern Countryside of Aleppo	4	Court of Justice in Hreitan	Jabhat al-Nusra	Public execution (stoning and shooting)	Homosexuality	(109) (110)
	Eastern Ghouta, Damascus	2	Supreme Judicial Council	Jaysh al-Islam	Public execution (shooting)	Various charges including Homosexuality	(111) (112)
	Western Ghouta, Damascus	1	Sharia Authority in Western Ghouta	Sharia Authority in Western Ghouta	Thrown from a height	Homosexuality	(113)
	Aleppo	1	Sharia Court in Aleppo	Abu Amara Brigades	Thrown from a height	Homosexuality	(114)
	Northern Countryside of Homs	1	Supreme Judicial Court in Homs and its countryside	Unknown	Public execution (shooting)	Homosexuality	(115) (116)

108 - Violations Documentation Center in Syria. (n.d.). (Website).

109 - Al-Tamimi, A. J. (2015). Archive of Jabhat al-Nusra Dar al-Qada Documents.

110 - ibid.

111 - Judicial Council of Eastern Ghouta. (2015). Statement from the Judicial Council of Eastern Ghouta, Order Number 2099.

112 - Almodon. (2015). The "legend" Abu Ali Khabiyeh was crucified.

113 - Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2015). The Sharia Commission in Western Ghouta throws a young man from a high rise on charges of "practicing the act of the people of sodomy". (In Arabic).

114 - Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2015). A young man was executed by throwing him off a hospital building, and 5 men were executed on charges of being "regime cells" in the city of Aleppo. (In Arabic).

115 - Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2015). "Video and audio" The execution of 10 people, including a child, on charges of "performing an indecent act with males". (In Arabic).

116 - (2015). (Video). Facebook. Page: shabaket akhbar al wa'er.

2015			Supreme Judicial Court in Homs and its countryside				
	Raqqa Province	3	ISIS	ISIS	Thrown from a height	Homosexuality	(117)
	Homs Province	5	ISIS	ISIS	Thrown from a height and stoning	Homosexuality	(118)
	Deir al-Zour	1	ISIS	ISIS	Thrown from a height	Homosexuality	(119)
	Hama Province	3	ISIS	ISIS	Public execution (shooting)	Homosexuality and for "promoting this act among Muslims."	(120)
	Aleppo Province	3	ISIS	ISIS	Stoning	Homosexuality	(121)
2016	northeast of Aleppo (Manbij)	1	ISIS	ISIS	Thrown from a height	Homosexuality	(122)
2017	Eastern Ghouta, Damascus	1	Supreme Judicial Council	(Jaysh al-Islam)	Public execution (shooting)	Homosexuality and adultery	(123)

NON-LETHAL PHYSICAL AND VERBAL VIOLENCE DURING THE CONFLICT:

In addition to executions, the various powers in control of Syria's territories have also perpetrated various forms of violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals. Such violence includes sexual and financial extortion, threats of assault, forced nudity, verbal abuse, and physical harassment. . About 49% of our survey respondents reported that either they or someone they know have been subject to some kind of violence from the authority in their area that was directly due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression.

The high incidence underscores the profound systemic abuse directed towards the LGBTIQ+ community. Conversely, the 35% non-violation reports may not reflect genuine safety. Rather, it might indicate coerced conformity, spotlighting an underlying atmosphere of fear and restrained self-expression.

117 - Outright International. (n.d.). Timelines of Publicized Executions for Alleged Sodomy by the Islamic State Militias.

118 - *ibid.*

119 - *ibid.*

120 - *ibid.*

121 - *ibid.*

122 - *ibid.*

123 - Violations Documentation Center in Syria. (n.d.). (Website).

Lawand, a 22-year-old trans man, recounts a harrowing experience of physical assault at a checkpoint in Damascus run by militias affiliated with the Syrian government, where an officer accused him of being a man impersonating a woman.

“The checkpoint official pushed me, drew his weapon on us, and started cursing and hitting us. When I tried to move his hand away, two other men from the same checkpoint joined in the assault. They held my arms while the checkpoint leader hit me on my chest and abdomen. Every time I lifted my head, I felt like I was taking my last breath, seeing blood everywhere on the ground. While he kept hitting me, he was saying, ‘Pretending to be a girl, pretending to be a girl.’ Everyone was watching. He then slammed my head against the wall, and I could feel my face cracking.”(124)

Despite the presence of CCTV footage and hospital reports confirming the severity of the assault, Lawand was extorted by the police station to drop his case. He recounts,

“They threatened to send me to a women’s prison, because I couldn’t stay at the station. They asked me to sign a pledge not to complain about them if I suffered any permanent damage. They drafted a report and made me sign it without reading it. They said I had to wait until morning for the public prosecutor to come and approve my release.

At 10 a.m., they released me and removed my handcuffs. One police officer told me, ‘Take care of yourself. I consider you my daughter, but grow your hair, shave your arms, and put on some makeup. What kind of appearance is this?’”(125)

Rimaz, a 28-year-old transgender woman from Raqqa city, recounts her experience of being detained at a checkpoint in Damascus in 2015. She was initially detained due to her area of residence, but the nature of the violence that she encountered shifted from physical to sexual after her gender identity was discovered.

“They took me to the brigadier’s office, and the investigator opened my phone. He started reading messages on WhatsApp and saw that my friends were referring to me with feminine pronouns. He stood up and said, ‘What’s wrong with you, you whore?’ They beat me while I was standing against the wall, I didn’t even know what they were hitting me with. The last thing I remember before losing consciousness was that they started inserting things into my anus. I could feel the blood dripping down my legs. Eventually I fell, and when I woke up, I found myself in a cell.”(126)

Diaa, a non-binary 32-year-old described the verbal and physical violence he/she endured during his/her arrest by the Military Security Branch in Hama.

124 - Interview with Lawand (Pseudonym), 2023-07-15.

125 - Ibid.

126 - Interview with Rimaz (Pseudonym), 2023-07-06.

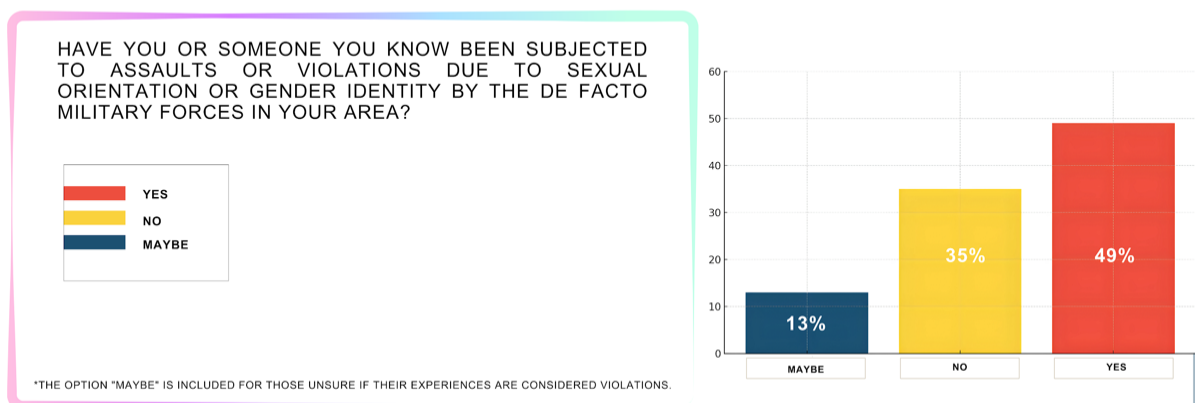
“In the detention center, they saw my appearance and hairstyle and started insulting me, hitting me on the head, and asking me about my connection to homosexuality. They made it clear that they perceived me as a ‘faggot’.”(127)

In the context of the Syrian conflict, checkpoints were frequently the venue for physical assault of LGBTQI+ individuals. Mihyar, a 33-year-old gay man, states,

“They searched my phone at a checkpoint in the Damascus countryside, and they found videos of me and my partner. They gathered around me and started spitting on me and hitting me. They ordered me to put a military boot on my head and stand by the gate of the station. When the boot fell off, I had to pick it up with my teeth. I stood in that position for three hours while the mini bus was coming and going.”(128)

FIGURE 11

Non-Lethal Physical and Verbal Violence



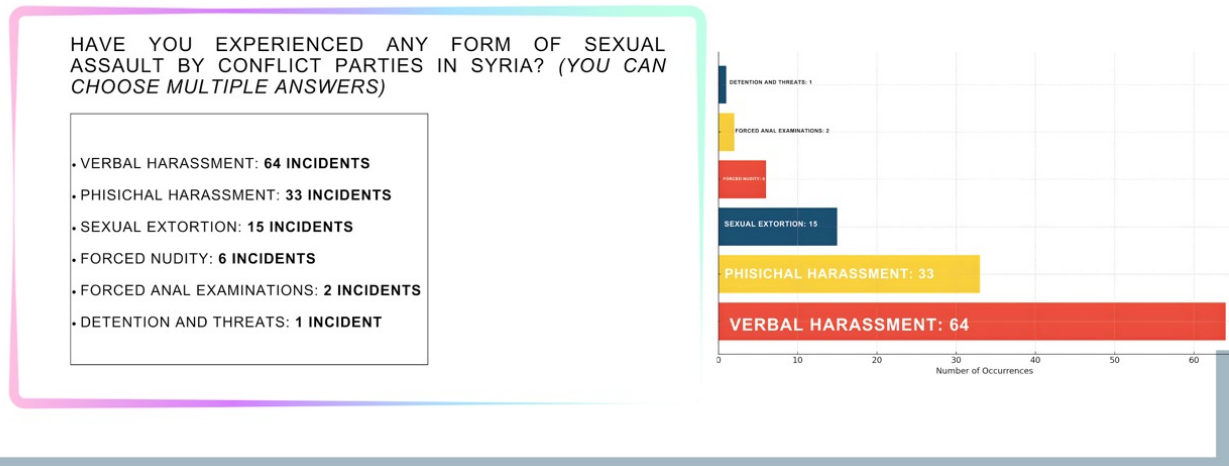
SEXUAL VIOLENCE DURING THE CONFLICT:

In a broader scope of inquiry, we asked participants about any experiences of sexual violence, without focusing on the underlying cause or motive. Alarming, 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.

127 - Interview with Diaan (Pseudonym), 2023-06-18.

128 - Interview with Mihyar (Pseudonym), 2023-06-14.

FIGURE 12 Incidents of Sexual Violations by Conflict Parties in Syria



Methods of violence often change and intensify upon discovery that an individual is not straight and/or cis. Hamza, a 26-year-old gay man, speaks about the circumstances in which he and his friend were once detained by the Student Union. His sexual orientation was discovered through a search of his mobile phone.

“They put us in the car, blindfolded us. When we arrived at the Criminal Security branch, they made us strip off our clothes and stand against the wall in the dean’s room. He asked me if there was any sexual relationship between us. They took me to a cell, and my friend was put in solitary confinement while they put me with other people. As soon as the guard opened the door, he told the people inside that they had a ‘whore’. They never took me for questioning.” (129)

Hamza became a victim of sex trafficking and was repeatedly sexually assaulted by other inmates in the detention facility.

“The place they put me in is a special place for people accused of rape, harassment, and other crimes. For two whole weeks, the warden took money to let someone sleep with me.”(130)

Amir, a 42-year-old gay man, narrates his experience of being kidnapped by an anti-regime Islamic faction in Homs.

129 - Interview with Hamza (Pseudonym), 2023-06-12.

130 - Ibid.

"They forced me to strip naked and started hurling derogatory insults at me, calling me names like 'faggot' and 'whore,' claiming that all Alawites engage in sexual acts. They began touching my genitals in a very provocative and disturbing manner. One of the kidnappers even suggested bringing a mop handle to see what he could do with it. They frequently threatened to rape me when they contacted my family for ransom, once they confirmed that I was a civilian and had no ties to the regime. They informed my brother that I was a 'faggot'."(131)

Sam, a 23-year-old gay man, recounts the verbal harassment and forced nudity he and his friend experienced at a security checkpoint near the President's Bridge in Damascus.

"The soldier told me we were 'faggots'. They started beating us and touching our bodies in a gruesome and painful manner. I couldn't resist because any action would have had negative repercussions. They threatened to rape me to test my sexual skills. They forced my friend to undress, leaving him only in his underwear, saying it was to confirm his manhood. After making us wait for over two hours, they told us they didn't want to see us there again, warning us that if we did, they would handle us differently - in a way that we wouldn't like."(132)

Faten, a 26-year-old transgender woman, talks about her experience at the same checkpoint near the President's Bridge. She was forced to get off a bus due to her feminine appearance, which the authorities felt contradicted her identification as male on her documents. She was compelled to undress and expose her chest in freezing cold weather. She was then coerced into performing oral sex on one of the officers.

"His companion took me aside, told me to dress up, and took me to the garden under the bridge. He forced me to perform oral sex on him. It was an extremely humiliating and oppressive moment in every sense."(133)

Jamal, a 34-year-old gay man who was forcibly disappeared and imprisoned in the Intelligence Branch in Damascus, speaks about the physical violence he endured:

"The officer was taking me to the cell. He called me a 'faggot'. During the interrogation, they started beating me with a hard plastic stick, causing me intense pain. After each beating, they would pour cold water on me and make me calm down. They would force me to kneel on my knees and then start hitting my back."(134)

131 - Interview with Amir (Pseudonym), 2023-06-22.

132 - Interview with Sam (Pseudonym), 2023-06-18.

133 - Interview with Faten (Pseudonym), 2023-06-20.

134 - Interview with Jamal (Pseudonym), 2023-06-06.

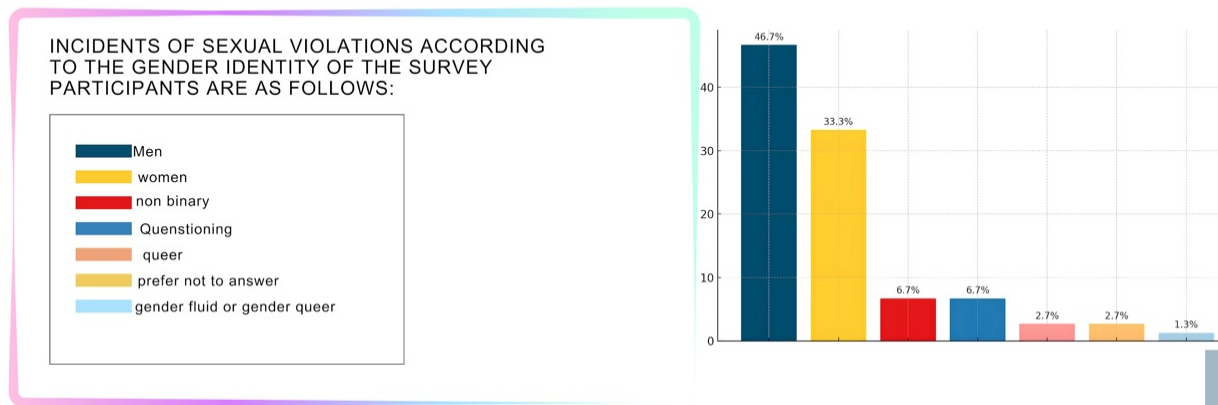
Jamal was also subjected to sexual violence:

“The officer took me to the cell and asked me why I was a ‘faggot.’ He asked me what I needed. I requested salt. He brought me a grain of salt and then took off his pants and asked me to perform oral sex. And every time he came to my cell, he would bring a pinch of salt on a coffee spoon and do the same thing.”(135)

Militias also played a role in sexual and physical assault. Salam is a gay man who was sexually assaulted by members of armed military factions.

“I was talking to someone on a fake account. When he sent me his picture, I recognized that he was from a military faction here in northern Aleppo. I got scared and deleted my profile and stopped talking to him. After a while, a military vehicle stopped next to me and they put me in it. They took me to an underground cellar, and the same person started threatening me, saying he would expose me and harm my mother and sister. The ones who had arrested me were standing there, and he started telling them to take turns assaulting me”(136)

FIGURE 13 Sexual Violations Incidents by Gender Identity of Respondants



135 - Ibid.

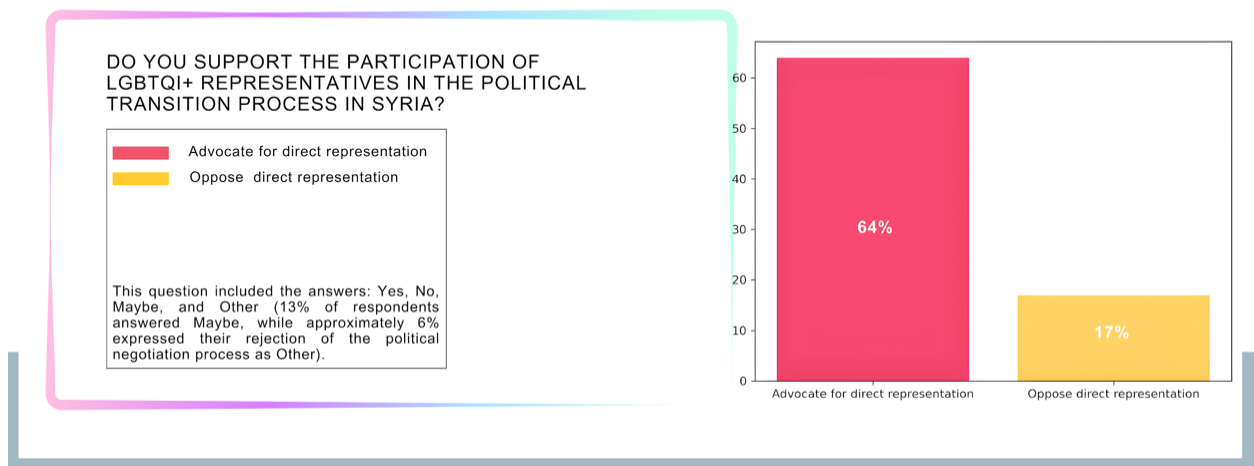
136 - Interview with Salam (Pseudonym), 2023-07-10.

EMPOWERMENT AND CHANGE

This study provided clear evidence of the experience of political marginalization among LGBTQI+ Syrians. A significant majority of respondents in our survey (81%) indicated that there is an absence of active political entities championing the concerns of the LGBTQI+ community. The rest of respondents reported that they were unaware of whether the community was represented politically. These results demonstrate the sense of political exclusion among LGBTQI+ people in Syria.

Moreover, a majority (64%) of the survey participants advocate for direct LGBTQI+ representation in the political transition process in Syria. This reflects a widespread belief within the LGBTQI+ community that greater political representation could bring about tangible societal change, including greater social acceptance of LGBTQI+ community members and stronger recognition of their rights.

FIGURE 14 Attitude Towards Representation in the political transition process in Syria.



SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT



Syria is made up of a diversity of cultural and linguistic communities with deep historical heritage. The intricate tapestry of influences that constitute Syrian identity include an astonishing array of ideas and philosophies, sourced from diverse Eastern and Western influences. This multiplicity engenders a dynamic interplay, fostering receptivity and the zeal to nurture and develop intellectual and aesthetic perspectives. Not only has this enriched the broader Arab cultural sphere, but it has also ceaselessly infused it with innovative thoughts.

Nonetheless, the prevailing social context permits a range of violations against LGBTQI+ individuals, including physical and verbal abuse (142). This was exacerbated after the onset of the conflict. As described above, extremist religious groups came into positions of authority in some areas, implementing forms of law that were hostile to the LGBTQI+ community. The Syrian regime also adopted inflammatory rhetoric against the LGBTQI+ community, which was ostensibly intended to garner support from conservative and religious demographics. Furthermore, in almost all areas, the conflict eroded the systems that maintain rule of law. This left vigilante and criminal activities go unpunished, including violent acts against LGBTQI+ people. Almost half (45%) of participants noted an increased intensity of social violence against them with the onset of the conflict in Syria.

This context is influenced by the stances of religious institutions, which wield significant influence over the ways families deal with LGBTQI+ relatives. Previous studies and reports on the LGBTQI+ community in Syria have documented the general state of hostility toward queer individuals. As noted above, this hostility is characterized by brutal violations from various factions, including the army, security forces, Shabiha (143), armed militias, and extremist and terrorist groups. However, there has been a notable absence of research exploring the social context that nurtures these practices, establishing and legitimizing discriminatory and often violent acts against LGBTQI+ people.

In this section, we discuss the social and cultural context in which LGBTQ+ Syrians live and the socio-cultural spaces they occupy. We consider the familial context within which people are raised as well as the broader community contexts which norms about the (mis)treatment of LGBTQI+ people are shaped and imposed on people. We also consider the few safe spaces that are available to them in Syria (144). We employ lenses that allow us to examine the matter within the context of general social relational culture and the context specific to literary production, given its representation as symbolic capital and a tool of creative and analytical expression.

142 - Human Rights Watch. (2020). They Treated Us in Monstrous Ways: Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and Transgender Women in the Syrian Conflict.

143 - Wikipedia. (n.d.). Shabiha.refers to pro-government militias that supported the Syrian government and Bashar al-Assad.

144 - Saleh, F. (2021, October 7). Refugeeeness, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Writing Syrian Queer and Trans* Histories.

SOCIAL CONTEXT WITHIN THE FAMILY

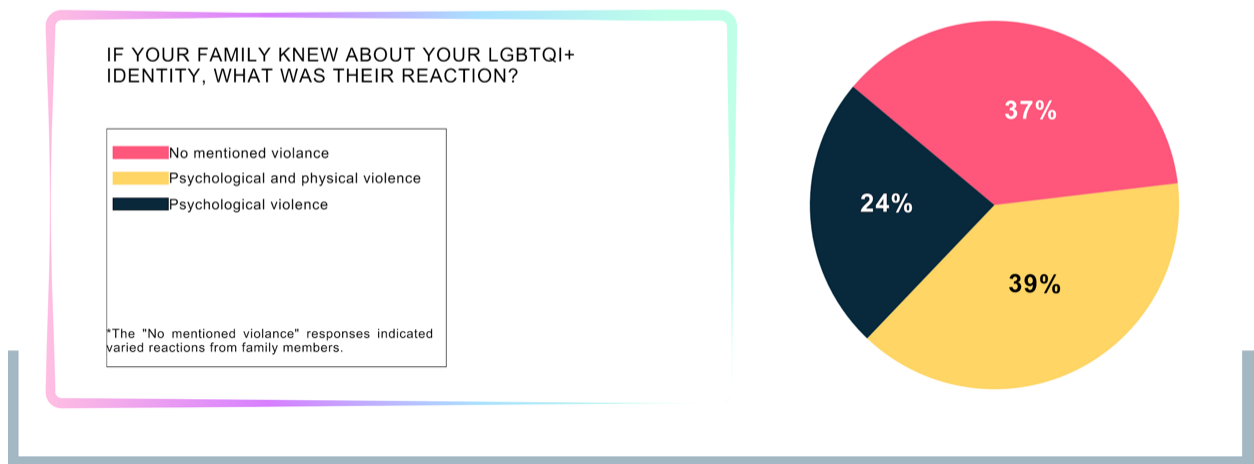
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The testimonies of LGBTQI+ individuals reveal that experiences of physical, psychological, and cultural violence are pervasive within families. Such practices are reinforced by religion as well as general cultural norms. The threat of violence from close family members is a big concern among LGBTQI+ individuals because many are in some way dependent on their families for economic and social needs, making it difficult to put protective distance between themselves and potentially abusive relatives.

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. Around 16% of study participants remain unaware of their parents' perspectives towards them, mainly due to non-disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

FIGURE 16

Domestic Violence



135 - Ibid.

136 - Interview with Salam (Pseudonym), 2023-07-10.

Rita, a 38-year-old lesbian woman, speaks about the psychological violence that she experienced from her mother. She states,

“When my mother discovered my sexual orientation, she began to exert control over my friendship choices and persistently threatened me with revealing the information to my father. She subjected me to harsh verbal abuse, culminating in preventing me from continuing my university studies.” (145)

Jamal, a 34-year-old gay man, experienced familial abandonment after his family learned of his identity following his arrest and conviction under Article 520 of the Syrian Penal Code. He states,

“Upon my release from prison, I had no place to go. When I called my family to assure them of my well-being, my sister informed me that our father had disowned me. He went from house to house in the village, proclaiming his disownment, and transferred all his property into my brother’s name to exclude me from the inheritance.”(146)

Laila, a 46-year-old intersex woman, shared a harrowing testimony of the extreme abuse that she endured, including physical mutilation and being urged to consume poison, all supposedly for the sake of preserving her family’s honor.

“The cruelest experience of my life, from which I continue to suffer, occurred in 2008 when my father and brother burned my genitals, face, and chest with nitric acid. They refused to take me to the hospital, and I remained in excruciating pain for more than a week, feeling my soul escape me with each passing moment.”(147)

Sama, a lesbian woman, recounts her ordeal after a schoolmate informed her mother about suspected emotional intimacy between Sama and another woman. She says:

“The girl called my mother and disclosed my relationship with my friend, leading my family to lose their composure. They removed me from school and mandated that I cease all communication with her. Upon my refusal, they physically abused me, restricted my contact with friends, and forced me to miss school for a period. During this time, my family, including my younger brother, all engaged in assault against me.”(148)

145 - Interview with Rita (Pseudonym), 2023-07-10..

146 - Interview with Jamal (Pseudonym), 2023-06-06.

147 - Interview with Layla (Pseudonym), 2023-07-10.

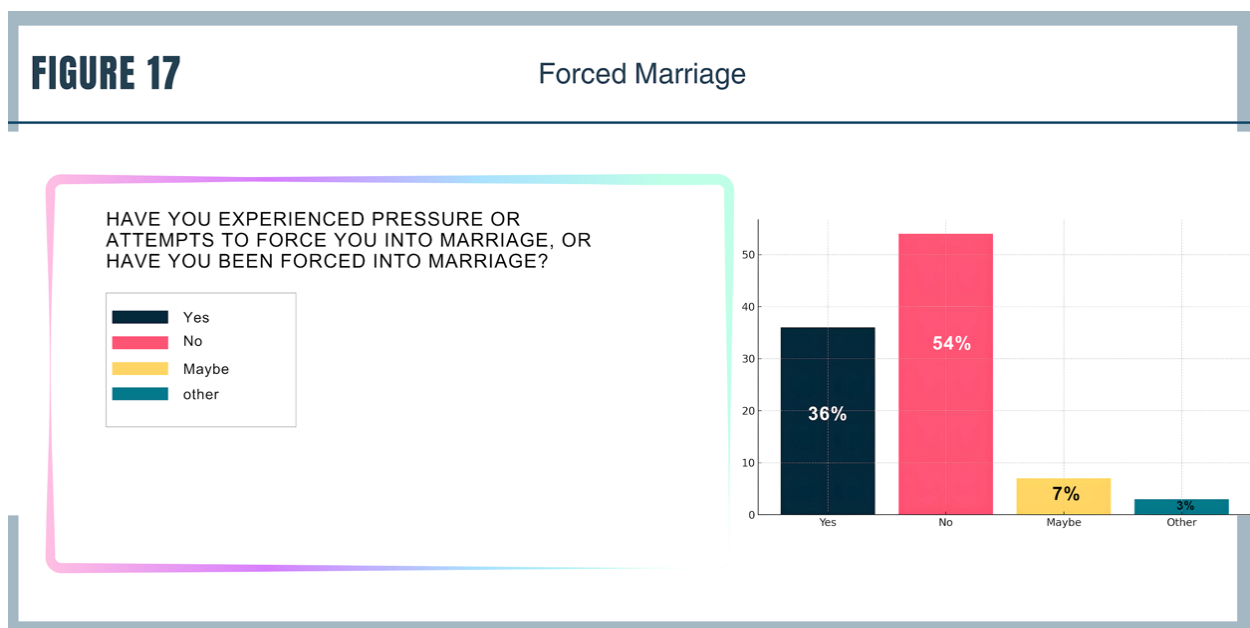
148 - Interview with Sama (Pseudonym), 2023-06-01.

FORCED MARRIAGE

There is intense pressure to marry for many people in Syria, especially those from religious families and conservative communities. Forced marriage has also been used as a means to attempt to change the sexual orientations and gender identities of individuals in the LGBTQI+ community.

The study revealed that 36% of participants experienced pressure from family or attempts to force them into marriages with individuals of the opposite sex. There were different ways for families to exert such pressure. For example, 26-year-old lesbian woman Yara explained, “My family forced me to marry a man in exchange for allowing me to continue my studies” (149).

Of those pressured or subjected to attempted forced marriage, 56% identify as men and 33% as women.



Rita, a 38 -year -old lesbian woman narrates her testimony about being forced into marriage by her mother after discovering her sexual orientation:

“An older guy, eight years older than me, proposed to me, and I didn’t have the option to say no. I got married against my will, even though I wasn’t attracted to men. The wedding night felt like rape to me.”(150)

149 - Interview with Yara (Pseudonym), 2023-07-08.

150 - Interview with Rita (Pseudonym), 2023-07-10.

Fadia, a 31 -year-old transgender woman, says,

“My mother found a girl for me to marry, and the engagement was within a week. I refused, so my father slapped me in the face, cursed at me, and gave me two choices: either get married or leave the house. I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so I agreed to get married.”(151)

Kareem nonbinary individual tells us their story:

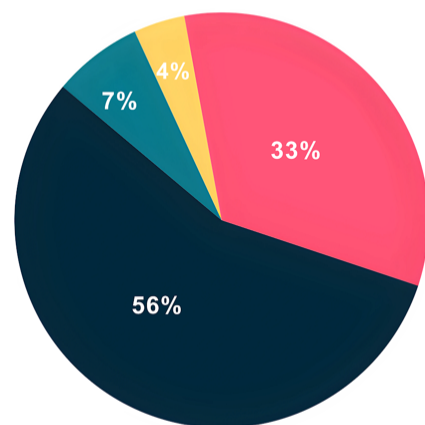
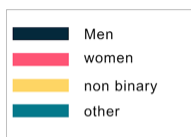
“In 2018, my family attempted to force me to marry my cousin, so I fled from my family’s home for six months. But then I returned because I was unable to stay in the other place. They confined me at home for a year and a half, depriving me of education and attending university to complete my master’s degree. During this period, I experienced physical abuse and violence from my brother and threats from my aunt.”(152)

Hayat, a 26-year-old transgender woman, shares her testimony about experiencing attempts at forced marriage after her teenage years:

“My family forced me to get married, of course. I endured beatings and mistreatment. I tried to hide myself and not do anything during the marriage, but later on, I started feeling pressured, and I couldn’t bear it anymore because I felt trapped in my own body.”(153)

FIGURE 18 Distribution of Forced Marriage Attempts by Gender Identity of Respondents

THIS FIGURE SHOWS THE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE FACED ATTEMPTS OF FORCED MARRIAGE, CATEGORIZED BY THEIR GENDER IDENTITY:



151 - Interview with Fadia (Pseudonym), 2023-07-16.
152 - Interview with Kareem (Pseudonym), 2023-06-15.
153 - Interview with Hayat (Pseudonym), 2023-06-09

SOCIAL CONTEXT BEYOND THE FAMILY

Beyond the family, the social environment encompasses relationships and networks with a broader array of individuals encountered in schools, workplaces, public spaces, recreational areas, places of worship, etc. This broader milieu determines how LGBTQI+ people can behave and express themselves outside the homeplace. Being surrounded by homophobic people can force LGBTQI+ people to suppress themselves and hide their identity, as they will be treated poorly or ostracized if they don't abide by the social norms of their community. The extra-familial social context is also where some LGBTQI+ people find safe spaces, where they can express themselves more naturally and find respite from an otherwise oppressive environment.

Although being different is criticized in general, LGBTQI+ Syrians face harsher treatment and greater risks of exclusion than straight and cis people. Laws, religious beliefs, and traditions make it normal to treat the queer community unfairly. Individuals who do not exhibit gender-normative conformity, who openly express non-conforming gender identities, or who disclose their sexual orientation—whether cisgender, transgender, or non-binary—face a heightened risk of abuse in public spaces.

When asked about their broader social environment—encompassing extended family members and relatives as well as neighbors and other acquaintances—the vast majority of respondents (83%) felt that they were living in a community that largely rejects the LGBTQI+ community. Laila, a 46-year-old intersex woman, expressed her feeling of ostracisation in her community:

"I got used to not having any rights or dignity and being vulnerable to everyone. My dream is to feel any kind of mercy from people. When I walk down the street, I say, 'Oh God, I only want the mercy of these people.'"(154)

The social rejection experienced by members of the LGBTQI+ community limits their ability to express their true selves safely within their societies, with a mere 5% of participants feeling safe to express themselves authentically. The vast majority of respondents (89%) reported a complete lack of security in regard to expressing themselves as LGBTQI+ individuals. Faten, a 26-year-old transgender woman, described what happened when her identity was exposed:

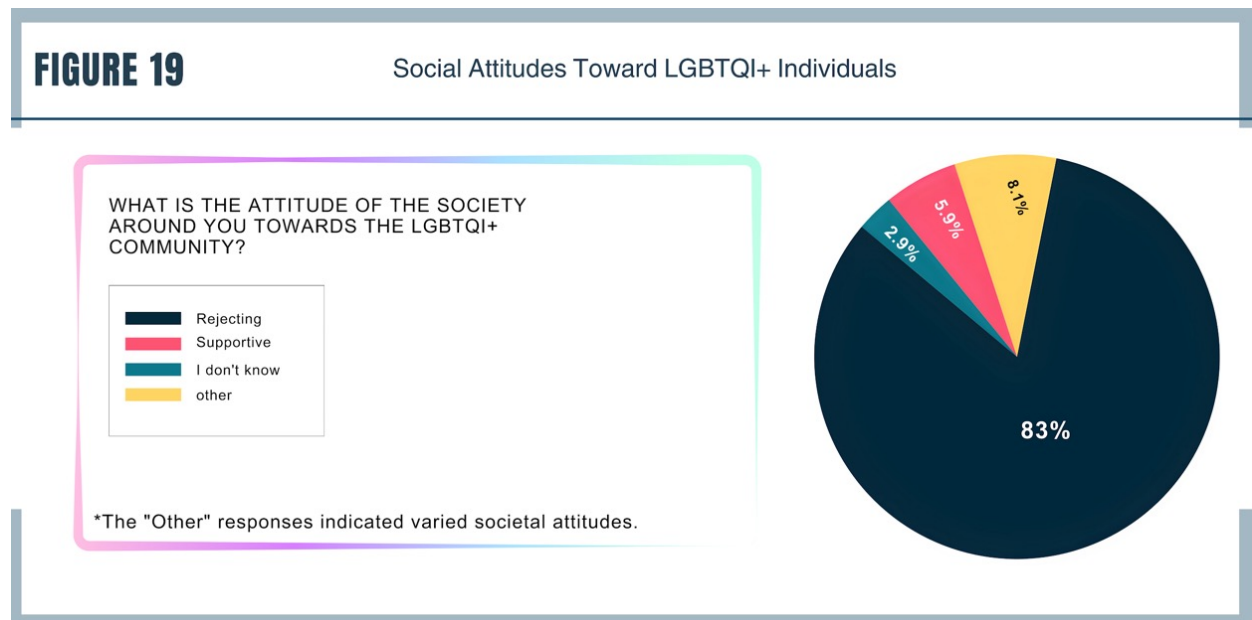
"After undergoing a procedure to affirm my gender identity, the landlord, from whom I rented, assaulted me, evicted me from the home, threw my belongings into the street, and threatened to lodge a complaint against me on the pretext that I was engaging in sex work.'"(155)

154 - Interview with Laila (Pseudonym), 2023-07-10.
155 - Interview with Faten (Pseudonym), 2023-06-20.

Despite these adversities, individuals within the LGBTQI+ community have managed to form acquaintanceships and friendships within their areas. In fact, 81% of the participants affirmed that they have a network of friends and acquaintances from the LGBTQI+ community. Kareem, a non-binary individual, described the importance of having access to a supportive group of friends, which allowed him to escape domestic violence and confinement at home:

“In October 2020, I escaped from home with the assistance of my sister and the financial support from my ‘chosen family’ within my circle of friends. Subsequently, I managed to enter Lebanon illegally.”(156)

Unfortunately, 15% of participants were unable to find and establish such relationships.



156 - Interview with Kareem (Pseudonym), 2023-06-15.

LGBTQI+ PEOPLE IN MEDIA: MISREPRESENTATION, INVISIBILITY & CENSORSHIP

While the LGBTQI+ Syrians have made important contributions to literature, film and the arts, 73% of respondents haven't engaged with the such materials, underscoring a significant gap in cultural representation. This could be due to limited accessibility or the cultural silencing of LGBTQI+ issues in everyday interactions. Such materials were familiar to 21% of participants.

Most of the respondents (88%) reported that the censorship of materials stemming from cultural production plays a detrimental role in addressing issues pertinent to the LGBTQI+ community and broader matters of sexual and gender liberties. The act of censoring these themes carries profound implications for societal advancement and inclusivity. Such measures inhibit open discourse, curtail educational avenues, and diminish the potential for genuine empathy and comprehension. Furthermore, those who work in theater, film, literature, music and other creative arts are often compelled to obfuscate representations of the LGBTQI+ community in their work, thereby providing a more nebulous interpretation to circumvent censorship constraints (157).

56% of the participants believe that the production of cultural materials or the expression of opinions by public figures, intellectuals, or celebrities discussing the LGBTQI+ community in a positive light aids in societal acceptance. But 10% of participants believe that even positive cultural portrayals of the LGBTQI+ community will fail to bring about greater social acceptance, and 34% were uncertain of the effect. These doubts reflect the pessimism of a significant portion of the LGBTQI+ community regarding the potential for positive societal change related to individual rights and issues.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

In Syria, religious beliefs and societal norms together affect public views about gender and sex, with many Syrians holding conservative attitudes influenced by traditional notions of morality. Despite Syria's considerable religious diversity, Islam remains the most widespread religion and - insofar as it has influenced legislation - contributes a largely conservative stance (158). Our study asked about LGBTQI+ individuals' experiences with their respective religious institutions. 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. This study didn't explore the particular positions that different religious groups have taken on the issue of gender and sexual orientation.

مسلسل أشواك ناعمة (2005)، مسلسل سنعود بعد قليل (2013) ، مسلسل قلم حمرة (2014) - 157
158 - Syrian Arab Republic. (n.d.). Amended Syrian Constitution 2012.

Tarek, a 31-year-old gay man, shares his testimony about being pressured by his father to attend religious sessions aimed at changing his sexual orientation and gender identity in a mosque in Damascus:

“He told us that one of the students had been slaughtered by his father because he did not seek treatment, and the teacher started saying that this is the solution for people who are not improving. He began threatening us that he would inform our families about our situation if we are ‘not improving’. There was severe verbal abuse, with us being called ‘monkey’ and ‘pig’ instead of our names.”(159)

Yara, a 26 -years -old lesbian woman, attempted to seek support from a priest but was then outed to her family:

“I secretly confessed to the priest of the church in the area where I live and told him about the struggle I am going through because of my sexual orientation. Despite the church’s strict rules about not disclosing confessions, he violated this confidentiality and informed my father, who assaulted me and broke my hand.”(160)

GATHERINGS AND SAFE SPACES

While a complete sense of security entails the ability to present one’s self authentically in public without fear of reprisal, hidden gatherings in private locations provide some semblance of safety in contexts where widespread acceptance of LGBTQI+ is still some inaccessible.

In Syria, LGBTQI+ individuals struggle to find spaces where they feel relatively secure. They have even developed a unique language - a coded register that LGBTQI+ Syrians use to avoid exposing their identity and to recognize each other as part of the community. This language typically derives from Arabic, with a suffix added either at the beginning or end of each word depending on the development of the language variants they use (161). In Damascus, there are some well-known gathering places in parks, cafes, and nightclubs(162). These venues welcome all, including LGBTQI+ individuals, although no place is entirely without risk (163).

Most respondents (68%) lacked LGBTQI+ friendly gathering spots in their vicinity, possibly due to concerns about legal repercussions or societal judgment. Only 21% were aware of a specific LGBTQI+ gathering location. Half of those familiar with such places reside in Damascus, whereas 22% are in Lattakia and 13% in Tartous.

159 - Interview with Tarek (Pseudonym), 2023-06-27.

160 - Interview with Yara (Pseudonym), 2023-07-08.

161 - Midani, A. (2021). Sifuna, Dota, Matmatshit: Terminology and secrets of the LGBTQI+ community in Syria.

162 - Ahmed, H. (2022). The war in Syria did not stop the LGBTQI+ community from celebrating life.

163 - Kabawat, N. (2015). In times of trouble.

There are some private spaces where people can meet that are kept secret, but there are still risks because such gathering places may eventually come to the knowledge of authorities. Nour, a 34-year-old transgender woman, described how she was abducted from one of the gathering places of the LGBTQI+ community:

“I was kidnapped for three days by two men who took me and my friend to a farm in Rural Damascus. We were subjected to regular and daily rape by several individuals. After three days, they dumped us in an area near Damascus. Of course, we couldn’t file a complaint because we couldn’t inform the police that we were part of the LGBTQI+ community.”(164)

The large-scale migration into urban areas over the past decade has given more LGBTQI+ Syrians greater access to gathering places. Big cities are generally considered safer for LGBTQ+ individuals because large populations allow for greater anonymity. Moreover, mixing of people from different places allowed them to share lessons about staying safe and avoiding exposure.

The survey shows 62% find their gathering places unsafe due to the risk of raids and arrests. Bassam, a 37-year-old gay man, recounts a raid on a bathhouse well-known for hosting LGBTQI+ members:

“The police caught us, and there was no way to escape. They took us to the police station in Damascus, where we were subjected to ridicule and abuse by the officers. They beat and threatened us until they forced me to confess that I engaged in paid same-sex encounters. After that, they transferred me to the judiciary.”(165)

About a third of respondents (32%) lack knowledge about these issues. Almost half (45%) have faced discrimination or attacks in public spaces, while a comparable proportion (46%) reported no discrimination.

Many people hide their LGBTQI+ identity to avoid harassment. Hayat, a 26-year-old transgender woman speaks about experiencing various forms of violence in public spaces and transportation when her gender identity was discovered:

“When I was on the microbus, someone heard my voice and suspected that I was a male, not female. They started beating me inside the microbus and threw me out of the window, which resulted in injuries all over my body. Afterward, my pictures started circulating on Facebook and everyone started threatening and harassing me.”(166)

164 - Interview with Nour (Pseudonym), 2023-06-22.

165 - Interview with Bassam (Pseudonym), 2023-06-25.

166 - Interview with Hayat (Pseudonym), 2023-06-09.

FIGURE 20

Availability of LGBTQI+ Gathering Spaces

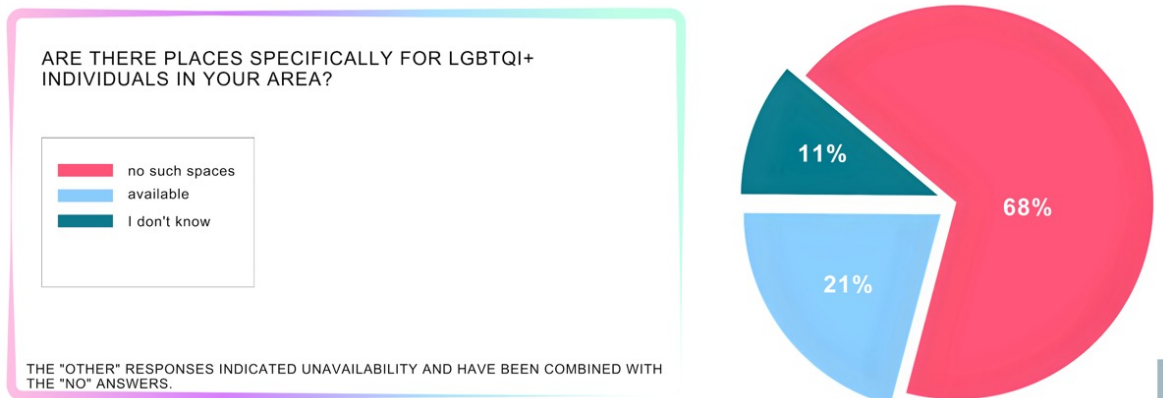
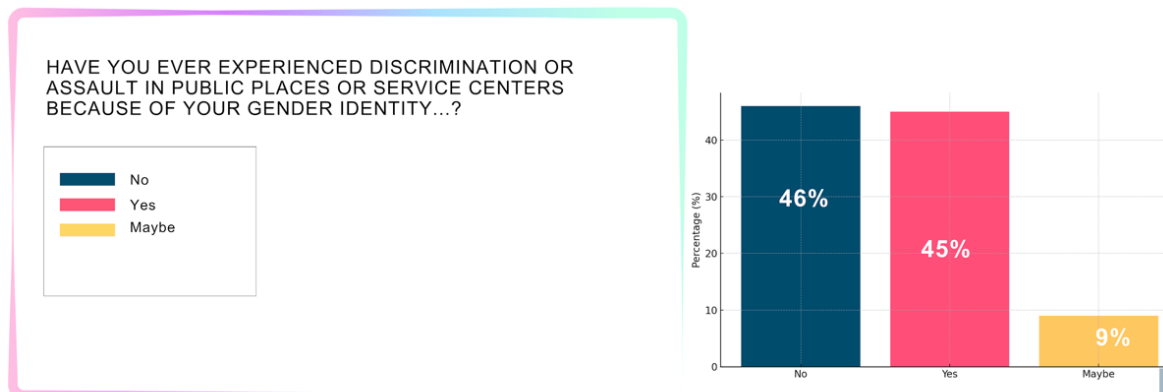


FIGURE 21 A

Discrimination in Public Spaces



DIGITAL SPACE

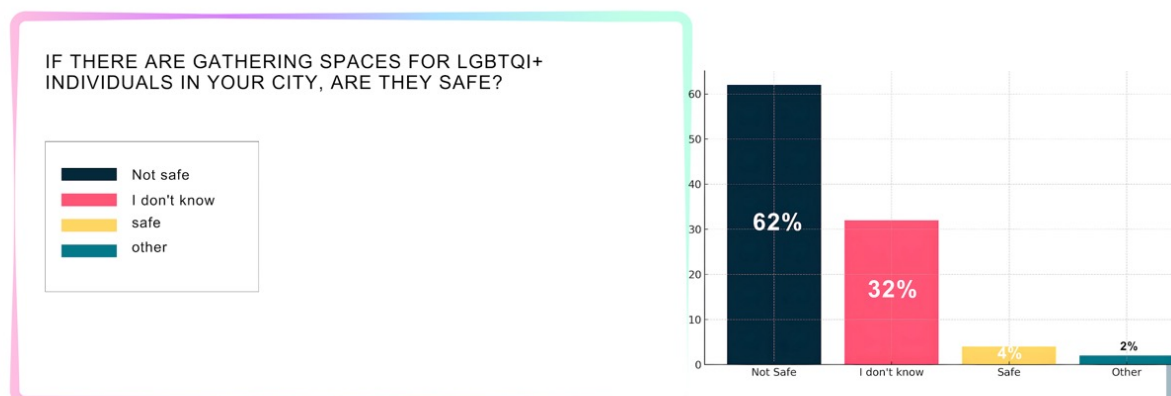
Online platforms are crucial to the LGBTQI+ community’s communication and alliance-building capacities (167), although risks of infiltration remain. 51% of respondents perceive social media as a non-safe space for LGBTQI+ individuals. This perception could stem from experiences of online harassment, doxing, or the prevalence of hate speech on these platforms.

The role of digital surveillance, state monitoring, and anti-LGBTQI+ legislations in Syria might further impact these perceptions.

167 - "Ian Alkadi: Translating LGBT information into Arabic" <https://cutt.us/ODYoF>

FIGURE 21

Safety of LGBTQI+ Gathering Spaces



The remaining participants are nearly evenly divided: 24% consider social media to be a safe environment for these individuals, while 25% believe that such safe spaces can exist within certain social media channels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

- 1. Research-Based Support Programs:** Prioritize the development of support programs grounded in field research and studies, aiming to enhance the social well-being of the LGBTQI+ community.
- 2. Safe Shelters:** Establish safe shelters or accommodation centers for LGBTQI+ individuals who flee from their homes or who face eviction due to their sexuality or gender identity.
- 3. Holistic Support:** Offer psychological and financial assistance to LGBTQI+ individuals who have suffered from domestic and societal violence.
- 4. Skill Development:** Conduct regular training sessions for the LGBTQI+ community on non-violent communication and essential self-defense techniques.
- 5. Public Awareness:** Initiate campaigns to raise public awareness about the risks facing LGBTQI+ people and advocate for their rights.

FOR THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

1. Community Bonding: Foster friendships with fellow LGBTQI+ members within safe and affirming spaces.

2. Support for Victims/Survivors: Extend every possible form of support to friends and community members who are victims or survivors of domestic and societal violence.

3. Empowerment Workshops: Organize capacity-building workshops to bolster knowledge about rights and recommended actions in situations like detainment.

4. Secure Communication: Establish a secure communication platform to offer real-time legal guidance and emotional assistance to those in urgent need.

159 - Interview with Tarek (Pseudonym), 2023-06-27.

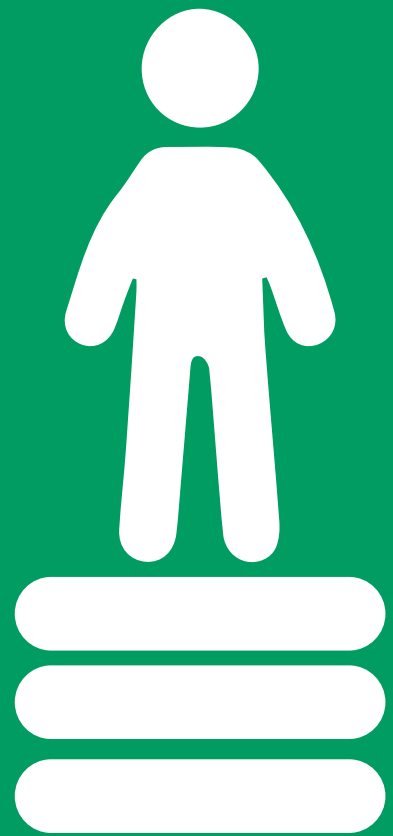
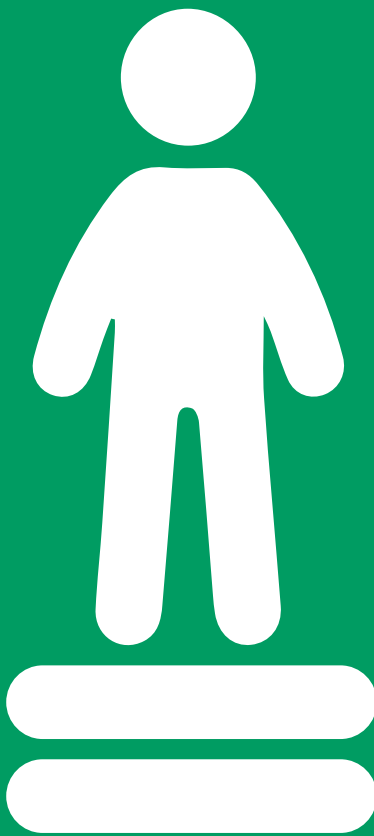
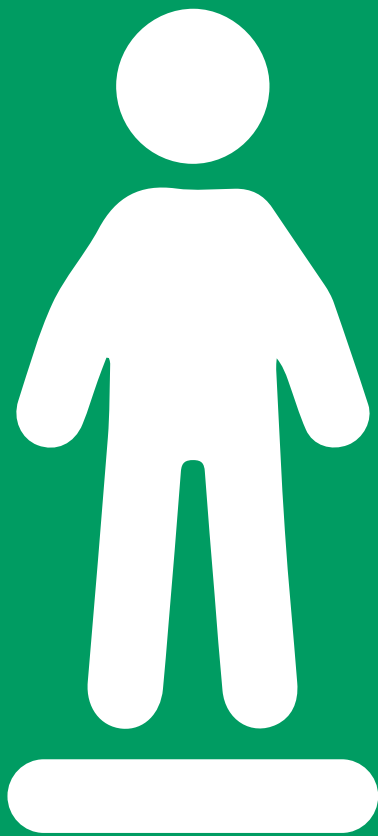
160 - Interview with Yara (Pseudonym), 2023-07-08.

161 - Midani, A. (2021). *Sifuna, Dota, Matmatshit: Terminology and secrets of the LGBTQI+ community in Syria.*

162 - Ahmed, H. (2022). *The war in Syria did not stop the LGBTQI+ community from celebrating life.*

163 - Kabawat, N. (2015). *In times of trouble.*

ECONOMIC CONTEXT



After over a decade of conflict and with the continued imposition of international sanctions, the Syrian economy is in a state of protracted crisis. The political landscape has forced the Syrian economy to adapt, and different sectors and geographical locations have done so in different ways and at various rates. Economic practices diverge widely between areas controlled by different parties. In many places, multiple currencies are in use, such as the dollar, the Turkish lira, and the Syrian lira, depending on the ruling regimes and their supporting countries. The nature of the import market also differs: while the Syrian regime continues to adopt a policy of import regulation, other areas open up to take on a more free-market economy. What these various areas share is that they all suffer from the national currency's staggering loss of approximately 99 percent of its value since the start of the conflict. Furthermore, the inflation rate soared to 55.71% in the first half of 2022, compared to the previous year (168).

In addition to the challenges facing the general population (169), LGBTQI+ individuals in Syria are grappling with additional difficulties that stem from biases against their sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity. Being on the queer spectrum amplifies the risk of being denied job opportunities, experiencing arbitrary job terminations, enduring workplace discrimination, and becoming victims of blackmail. Because LGBTQI+ people have been criminalized in Syria, obstructions of their economic rights often go unaddressed and unresolved.

In the midst of the conflict, an economic model informally termed the "crisis economy," has emerged in Syria. This model relies on resources provided by international actors and civil society organizations, including humanitarian aid. Yet, there has been a persistent gap in support for the LGBTQI+ community. A report from January 2022 underscores that the difficulty of financing support initiatives is deeply entwined with overarching challenges like legal restrictions (170), entrenched stigma, and lack of social protection. These layers of complexity make it difficult to design and implement programs specifically tailored for the LGBTQI+ community.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The current economic landscape in Syria poses considerable challenges for LGBTQI+ citizens. Our data indicates that a staggering 72% of LGBTQI+ participants stated they do not have the ability to achieve economic independence under the current circumstances, with a mere 23% claiming that they have. Furthermore, 71% believe that their affiliation with the LGBTQI+ community exacerbates their economic insecurities, highlighting the additional vulnerabilities they confront.

168 - Syrian Center for Policy Research. (n.d.). Guide to Consumer Prices in Syria for the period (October 2020-June 2022).

169 - Barrett, A., & Ahlam. (2021, February 18). Syria's Economic Collapse and Its Impact on the Most Vulnerable.

170 - COAR. (2022). The Future of LGBTQI+ Syria and the Aid Response: Case Studies in Regional Programming

On the brighter side, some participants (14%) acknowledged benefiting from grassroots assistance mechanisms, often focused on LGBTQI+ individuals with business holdings who can provide or influence employment. Unfortunately, most respondents were unaware of such support mechanisms for LGBTQI+ people. This statistic underscores the need for greater networking within the LGBTQI+ community to provide financial support and foster more inclusive, safe employment opportunities.

FIGURE 22

Achieving Economic Independence

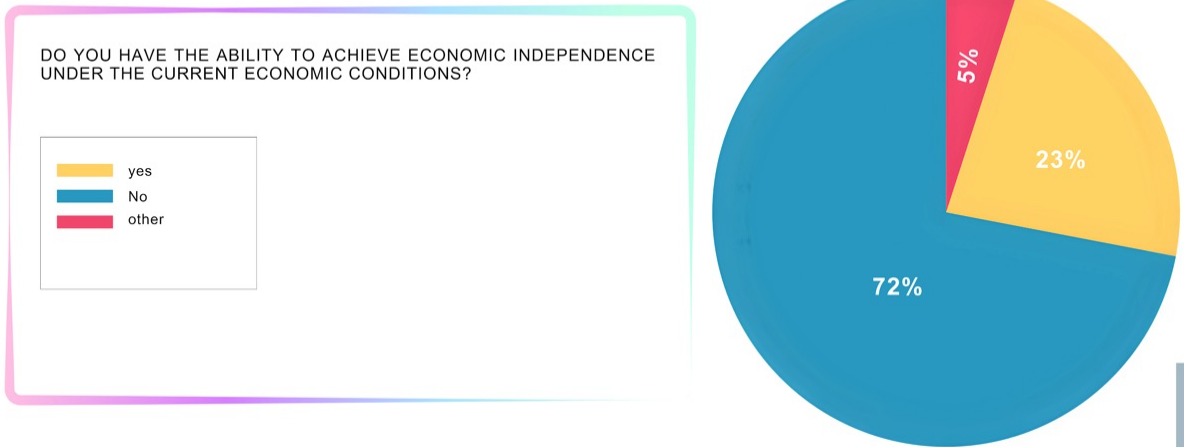
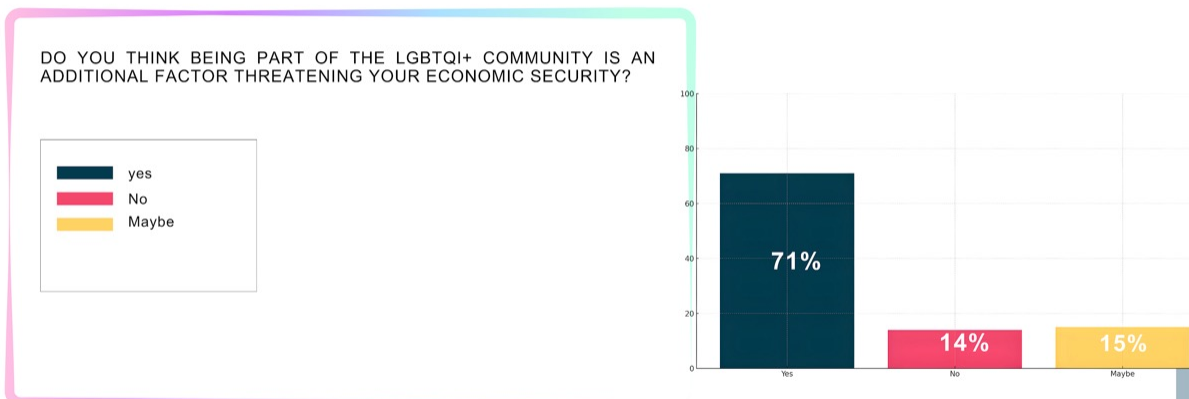


FIGURE 23

LGBTQI+ Identity as a Factor in Economic Security



GENDER-BASED EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION

Members of the LGBTQI+ face many barriers to employment. Social prejudices and discrimination significantly curtail their access to fair opportunities in education, empowerment, and work. The “crisis economy,” coupled with the ongoing conflict, has caused widespread unemployment, especially given the significant setbacks seen in both the public and the private economic sectors over the past decade.

An overwhelming 91% of survey participants stated that the work environment in Syria is hostile and exclusionary towards LGBTQI+ individuals. This underscores the lack of backing for the LGBTQI+ community by such businesses and the dearth of representation in unions. The broader Syrian context accentuates this predicament, with the regime stringently prohibiting and quashing any union gatherings beyond its officially sanctioned institutions.

Of the survey respondents, 24% reported being denied job opportunities because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Meanwhile, 8% surmised that their job rejections could be related to gender expression, even if it wasn't directly mentioned as a factor. Conversely, 48% stated they haven't encountered such prejudice. This latter figure might reflect adaptive measures undertaken by some individuals to conceal their identities, thus increasing their chances of obtaining or keeping a job.

Syrian workplaces, across their diverse forms, present obstacles for LGBTQI+ individuals aiming to express their genuine identities and orientations. At the root of these challenges is the lack of formal protections against gender-based or sexual discrimination, hate speech, and unwarranted termination of employment. Prevailing societal norms, especially those governing style, dress and gender expression, further shape professional interactions.

From our survey, 43% of respondents indicated they hadn't faced discrimination at work, while 33% reported otherwise. The overarching influence of heteronormativity, prevailing societal views on the LGBTQI+ community, and gendered ideas about who can or should perform certain jobs all significantly impact these experiences.

The study revealed that approximately 14% of participants had experienced arbitrary dismissal from work and were deprived of their job entitlements due to their gender identity or gender expression, while 61% of the participants had never faced such a situation. Although Labor Law 17 of 2010 (171) does not specify any

171 - Labor Law Number 17. (2010).

right of employers to terminate employees based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, there are exceptions for cases where there is a court decision related to criminal or misdemeanor charges of violating public morals and ethics—charges often directed at individuals in the LGBTQI+ community. Yet, if individuals from the LGBTQI+ community file a complaint alleging arbitrary dismissal outside the reasons justified by Article 64 of the Labor Law (172), the law permits the employer to reject the court’s decision and terminate the employee.

Jamal, a 24-year-old gay man, shared his experience about losing economic rights after facing criminal charges in the military due to his sexual orientation and gender identity:

“After I completed my sentence and was discharged from the military, they gave me a document stating the reasons for my dismissal. Every time I apply for a job, they see the reasons for my dismissal or that my record isn’t ‘clean’, they say I am not allowed to work with them. Additionally, I am deprived of social benefits, not to mention the humiliation and the way they treat me when they find out.”(173)

The lack of viable pathways for economic employment within the LGBTQI+ community is driving increasing vulnerability, which in turn heightens exposure to risks such as eviction, exploitation, potential imprisonment, and the dangers associated with irregular migration.

DISINHERITANCE

Families in Syria sometimes use inheritance as leverage against relatives who don’t align with their beliefs or cultural practices. The practice of disinheritance is used not only against members of the LGBTQI+ community, but as a means to punish anyone who deviates from social and familial norms, such as those who attempt interfaith marriages. Disinheritance is a common practice in many regions and social environments, and is used particularly frequently against women (174).

Some families elect to withhold inheritance as a way of expressing their disapproval of LGBTQI+ people’s lifestyles or accusations that they have brought shame on the family. Layla, a 46-year-old intersex woman, describes being denied her mother’s inheritance:

172 - ibid.

173 - Interview with Jamal (Pseudonym), 2023-06-06.

174 - Mousalli, M. (2022). توريث المرأة في سورية ما بين القانون والتقاليد والواقع. [Inheritance of Women in Syria Between Law, Traditions, and Reality]. Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies.

“My share of the inheritance was under the guardianship of my father because I was a minor. When I turned 18, my father took my share and deprived me of it, claiming that someone like me wouldn’t live for long”(175)

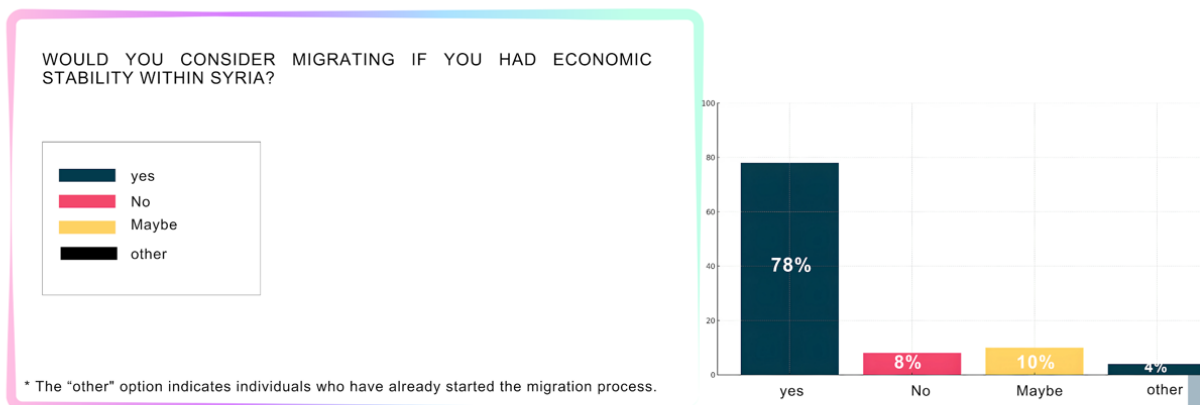
Withholding inheritance therefore becomes a tool to coerce LGBTQI+ relatives to align with societal norms. Tala, a 35-year-old lesbian, shared her testimony about being denied her inheritance:

“My brother came to the house and asked me to grant him legal power of attorney to settle our father’s inheritance. Of course, I was naive and believed him, so I granted him the power of attorney. Later, my mother told me that he transferred our father’s inheritance to his name. When I confronted him about it, he frankly said, ‘Our father doesn’t want to pass on his inheritance to a depraved deviant girl like you.’”(176)

Additionally, certain religious interpretations that view non-heterosexual orientations and non-cisgender identities negatively might influence a family’s decisions regarding inheritance. According to our study, about 11% of participants mentioned they were excluded from inheritance because of their LGBTQI+ identity. Yet, this can be linked to individual family dynamics and the nature of family relationships.

FIGURE 24

Consideration of Migration with Economic Stability in Syria



175 - Interview with Layla (Pseudonym), 2023-07-10.

176 - Interview with Tala (Pseudonym), 2023-07-23.

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 pronounced inclination suggests that motivations to leave Syria extend beyond just economic stability, underscoring the broader quest for safety and security. Several factors contribute to this prevailing sentiment. Many aspire to extricate themselves from Syria's constraining socio-political environment, which limits general freedoms but especially restricts the rights of the LGBTQI+ community. Others are driven by the allure of better job prospects, the pursuit of personal growth and education, or the desire to distance themselves from the scars of militarization and conflict. On the other hand, a minority, constituting roughly 8% of respondents, indicated a preference to remain in Syria should its economic fortunes take a turn for the better.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the LGBTQI+ Community

- 1. Promote Inclusive Employment:** Those who own or are well connected to businesses should promote policies that ensure equal employment opportunities for qualified LGBTQI+ individuals. This includes creating a more inclusive workplace environment that is sensitive to the unique challenges faced by LGBTQI+ individuals and offers appropriate support.
- 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.

172 - ibid.

173 - Interview with Jamal (Pseudonym), 2023-06-06.

174 - Mousalli, M. (2022). توريث المرأة في سورية ما بين القانون والتقاليد والواقع. [Inheritance of Women in Syria Between Law, Traditions, and Reality]. Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

- 1. Mentorship Programs:** Connect younger or less experienced LGBTQI+ individuals with mentors in their desired field of work. This helps in transferring skills, knowledge, and perhaps even job opportunities.
- 2. Collaboration with Allies:** Engage with allies outside the LGBTQI+ community, especially in the business world, to expand opportunities and ensure the community has broad support.
- 3. Scholarships and Grants:** If feasible, collaborate with educational institutions or NGOs to offer scholarships or grants specifically for LGBTQI+ individuals, furthering their education and career opportunities.
- 4. Research and analysis:** undertake research and studies about the economic challenges faced by the LGBTQI+ community, especially in the context of their interplay with other social, legal, and political challenges
- 5. Protection Measures:** In societies with legal shortcomings that render specific groups vulnerable to rights violations, mere economic security might not suffice. Nonetheless, the implementation of emergency protection measures can act as safeguards, reducing or preventing harm stemming from events like evictions, arrests, incarcerations, medical crises, and other adverse situations.

ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE



The Syrian healthcare sector has been gravely impacted by the protracted conflict, characterized by the deterioration of infrastructure, emigration of medical professionals, economic recession, and its consequent influence on medical services (177). A startling statistic indicates the limited presence of fewer than 45 psychiatrists in the entire country (178), compounded by prevailing stigmatizing attitudes that could further deter accessibility to essential sexual health services (179).

Beyond the health care shortfalls affecting the Syrian population at large, LGBT-QI+ Syrians face additional obstacles when seeking healthcare services. Rooted in societal prejudices, these impediments encompass issues like the erosion of trust (180), the biased perspectives and behaviors of healthcare practitioners towards LGBTQI+ people, and the general lack of awareness about LGBTQI+ health issues in healthcare facilities. This restricts their entry into and utilization of mental health facilities (181). Furthermore, comprehensive scholarly research on the mental health of LGBTQI+ people has been limited. Such research would address not only gaps in mental health services, but also the harmful impact of certain psychiatric interventions that target LGBTQI+ individuals, such as attempts to alter their sexual orientation and gender identities.

The pedagogical approaches adopted by the Ministry of Education to raise awareness of sexually transmitted diseases in secondary school curricula exhibit marked deficiencies (182). The focus of such education is usually centered on HIV, neglecting other viruses. Education is delivered using the term AIDS, which is the final stage of the disease, leaving students ignorant about what it means to live with HIV. People are given incomplete and insufficient information about prevention, using terms related to religious principles or moral values, such as “forbidden relationships”, instead of providing evidence-based information about preventive measures like condoms, washing, testing, etc. This creates stigma around LGBTQI+ sexualities due to the link between STI and their identity, with repercussions for LGBTQI+ students’ psychological and societal well-being (183).

177 - Syrian Trade, Health and Industry in Conflict Time (2011-2021): A study on the impact of war, public policies, and sanctions.

178 - Yaqoub, Z. (2023). Images from the reality of mental health in Damascus. Aljumhuriya.net

179 - She Pays the Highest Price: The Toll of Conflict on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Northwest Syria.

180 - Hassan, G., Ventevogel, P., Jefee-Bahloul, H., Barkil-Oteo, A., & Kirmayer, L. J. (2016, February 1). Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians affected by armed conflict.

181 - Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR Global LTD). (2021, June). LGBTQ+ Syria: Experiences, Challenges, and Priorities for the Aid Sector.

182 - *ibid.*

183 - *ibid.*

There is a need for greater attention to both the preventative and the therapeutic health needs of the LGBTQI+ community. The health concerns of transgender and gender non-conforming populations are particularly marginalized due to the limitations of the Syrian healthcare infrastructure and restrictions imposed by prevailing legislative frameworks. These regulations curtail access to services that are crucial for the well-being of LGBTQI+ people, including gender-affirming care and gender-affirming surgeries (184).

This section offers an analytical review of the myriad impediments confronting the Syrian LGBTQI+ populace within the national healthcare structures. We focused in particular on access to sexual and mental health services for the LGBTQI+ community. To augment the depth and breadth of our understanding, we solicited the expertise of professionals to procure nuanced perspectives regarding medical institutions' treatment of the LGBTQI+ community.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES:

SERVICE ACCESSIBILITY:

According to our research, 57% of those surveyed have access to health services to treat sexually transmitted infections (STIs)(). Most of these respondents were from Damascus and Latakia. In contrast, 23% reported a lack of access to these protective measures, with 18% uninformed about their existence.

Seeking tests for STIs at diagnostic facilities is fraught with challenges for LGBTQI+ individuals. An alarming 56% reported that they have never undergone STI testing. This reticence to seek testing is partially due to fear of discrimination or apprehension about a lack of confidentiality. A quarter (26%) of respondents expressed reservations about whether staff would show discretion and respect their privacy. Other barriers include prohibitive expenses in private healthcare entities, fear of unauthorized dissemination of one's medical data, concerns about subpar treatment, and the simple unavailability of diagnostic tests.

HEALTHCARE FACILITY AWARENESS AND DISTRIBUTION

A substantial number of participants (43%) could not identify a health facility where they could seek out STI-related care. This awareness gap can be ascribed to a suboptimal collaboration between health institutions and public agencies

184 - *ibid.*

185 - Sexually Transmitted Infections Treatment Guidelines.

responsible for communicating this information. This gap is further exacerbated by the paucity of comprehensive support mechanisms for the Syrian LGBTQI+ community, especially given the nation's punitive legal posture and repressive governmental actions targeting this demographic. 37% of our survey cohort claimed that there were no such medical center in their vicinity. For the 20% who verified the presence of a functioning facility within their reach, a remarkable 93% were in Damascus, Latakia, and Homs. Respondents in Idlib, Northern Aleppo, Raqqa, and Qamishli reported the highest absence of such facilities.

Those who were able to access sexual health services sometimes found themselves exposed to poor treatment as a result of their sexual practices and gender identities. Ahmed, a 32-year-old gay man, recounts the mistreatment he encountered from his doctor in Latakia after being diagnosed with human papillomavirus (HPV). The doctor's demeanor turned hostile following a few questions that revealed Ahmed was unmarried and sexually active:

"He told me I had HPV and needed to use an ointment. When I asked for instructions, he shouted at me, saying I should figure it out myself. Without clear guidance, I misapplied it, resulting in severe burns and enduring pain for weeks. The doctor was dismissive when I sought help, suggesting surgery as an option. Fortunately, another doctor guided me with the right treatment, leading to my recovery." (186)

Fadia, a 26-year-old trans woman, recounts how her doctor violated her privacy:

"I went with my father to a doctor in Damascus. The doctor recommended a rectal endoscopy to examine internal hemorrhoids. After the procedure, at home, my father confronted me violently, demanding, 'Who are you involved with? Are you engaging in homosexual acts?' Confused, I denied it. He then revealed, 'The doctor told me you are "open" and accustomed to such activities. Who are you doing this with?'" (187).

About 36% of respondents use STI preventative measures such as condoms and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), whereas 35% abstain, and 25% use them inconsistently. Lack of consistent usage is usually linked to factors like prohibitory costs, limited access, concerns about stigma, and fear of side effects.

Many respondents do not feel confident about their knowledge of sexually transmitted infections. This can be attributed to broader deficiencies in public health education, especially in sexual health. Based on self-assessment, 17% of participants claimed comprehensive STI knowledge, 28% indicated good awareness, 19% assessed themselves as average, 22% as having limited knowledge, and 13% acknowledged being uninformed.

186 - Interview with Ahmed (Pseudonym), 2023-06-22.

187 - Interview with Fadia (Pseudonym), 2023-07-16.

FIGURE 25

Availability of STI-Related Care in Your Area

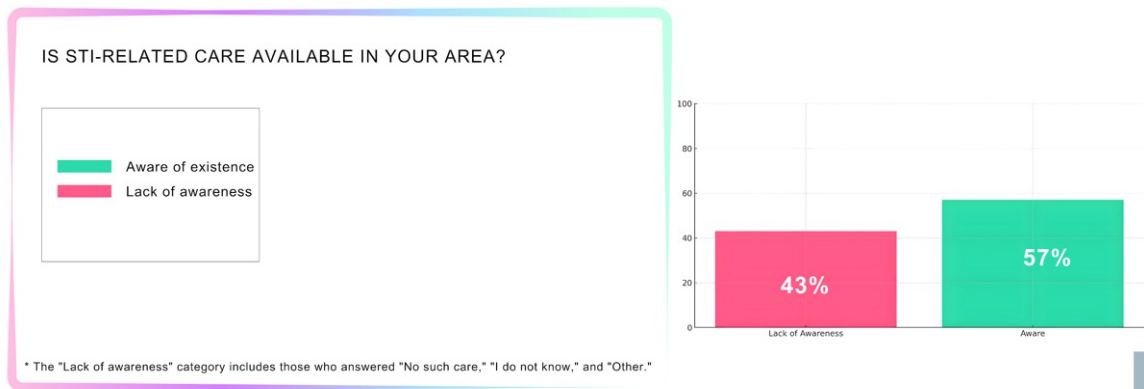


FIGURE 26

Availability of STI Treatment Centers in vicinities

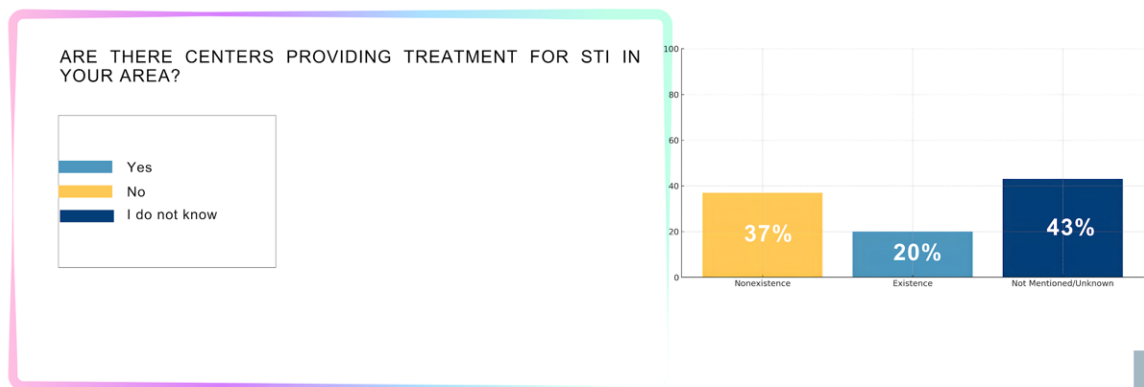
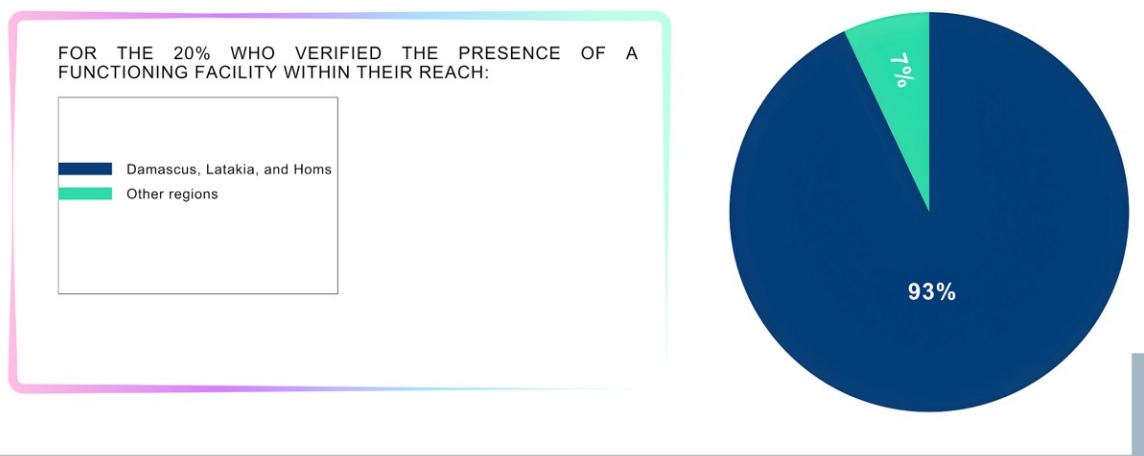


FIGURE 27

Distribution of Verified STI Treatment Facilities



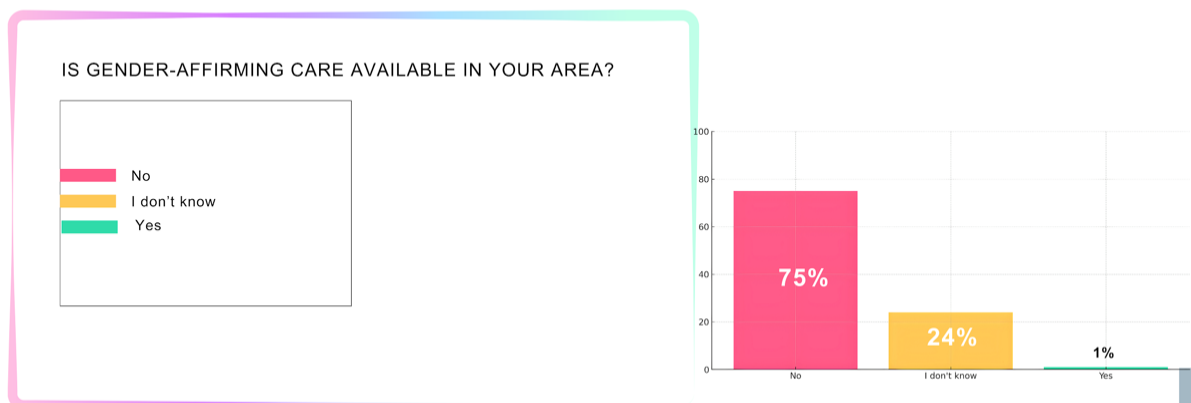
LACK OF ACCESS TO GENDER-AFFIRMING PROCEDURES

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, thus compromising their health and safety while also exposing them to maltreatment and exploitation. The experience of Reem, a transgender woman, exemplifies the consequences of this situation. In the absence of options for gender-affirming interventions in the formal health care facilities, she sought services at a beauty center in Rural Damascus:

"It wasn't a proper clinic, just a beauty center that later expanded to Botox and breast fillers. I observed a stark absence of sanitation; the doctor's assistant didn't even wear gloves. On my first visit, The doctor mocked my appearance, saying that not even a hundred surgeries would make me a woman. When it came to payment, I mentioned I had 650,000 S.P., but he demanded 700,000 S.P. and crudely suggested I find a way to earn the difference before returning. Years after the surgery, I experienced chest pain. In Lebanon, doctors found an abscess-like mass in my chest. One physician explained that the mass had ruptured, causing an abscess and inflammation. I underwent a mastectomy and extensive debridement to remove the remnants. My doctor in Lebanon was shocked that I underwent the surgery at 16."(188)

FIGURE 28

Availability of Gender-Affirming Care

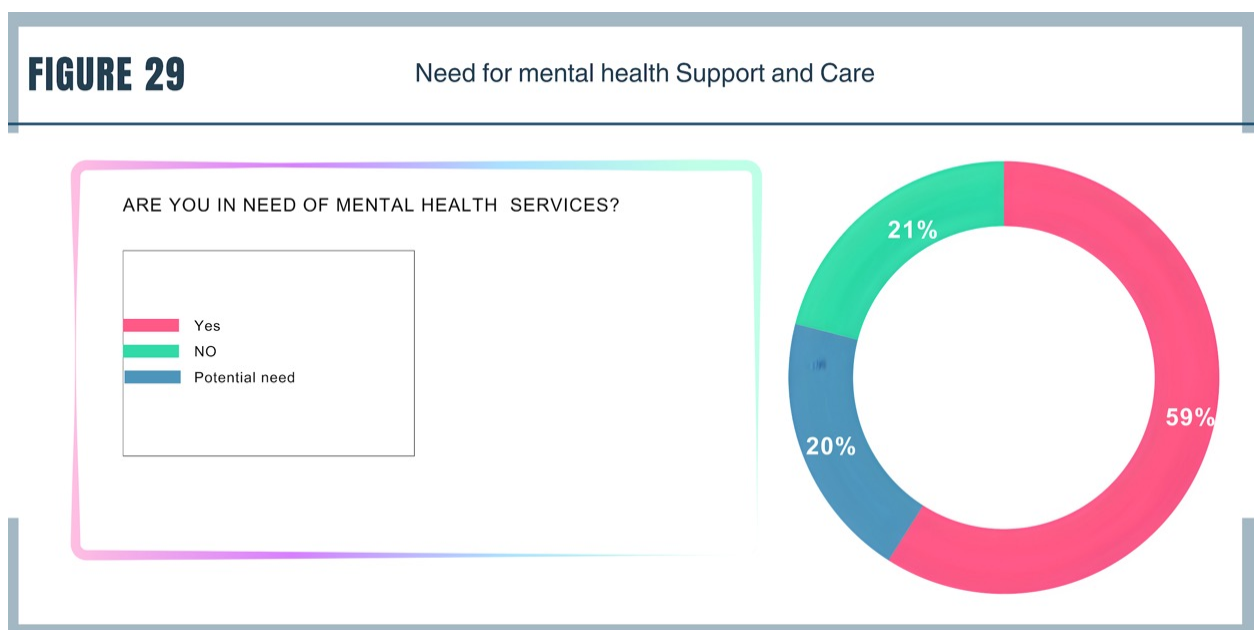


188 - Interview with Reem (Pseudonym), 2023-07-16.

ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE:

Syria's healthcare system offers inadequate services to serve the mental health needs of the general population. These shortfalls are made worse by the conflict, which has caused physical damage to infrastructure, emigration of health professionals, and over-crowding in areas that receive IDPs. Moreover, persistent conflict exposure has amplified the incidence of mental health disorders. Current estimates suggest approximately 10% of Syrians grapple with mild to moderate mental disorders, and a further 3.3% are afflicted with a more serious condition (189). Nonetheless, widespread stigma about mental health, coupled with a dearth of proficient health practitioners (190), stands as formidable impediments to adequate care.

There is an especially high need for mental health and psychological support among LGBTQI+ people. In our survey, a significant 59% of participants identified an urgent requirement for mental health services. Conversely, 21% felt no present need, while another 20% anticipated a potential demand in the foreseeable future.



Of those surveyed, 36% cited an absence of psychological support services in their locales. Conversely, 32% acknowledged the availability of such services, while a significant 25% were either uninformed or uncertain about their presence.

189 - WHO report on Syria.

190 - Mental Health among displaced Syrians: findings from the Syria Public Health Network. Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine.

The survey underscores the inadequacy of existing psychological support options, as well as the potential costs and risks faced by LGBTQI+ individuals who try to access them. These include exorbitant fees for private care, concerns about security, and apprehensions related to potential backlash or prejudice. The majority of respondents in our survey (65%) claim that they have never received any mental health assistance. Only 33% of respondents having accessed such care.

FIGURE 30

Previous Reception of Mental Health Support and Care



DETRIMENTAL PRACTICES AND MISCONCEPTIONS:

The propagation of misinformation by various media outlets concerning sexual orientation and gender identity has harmful ramifications for LGBTQI+ people. Information provided to the public is often not evidenced-based, and awareness initiatives and sexual education campaigns are often restricted in what they can discuss. Efforts to raise awareness about sexual health sometimes blur with attempts to change or “convert” people’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

The story of Fuad, a 26-year-old gay man, is illustrative. In an attempt to better understand his sexual orientation, he sought the services of a psychological support center, where the clinician recommended strategies to eliminate Fuad’s feelings toward men:

"I sought psychological support from one of the organizations. What happened was, after a month, she started asking me to disgust myself whenever I felt emotions towards guys, or when I would watch porn, to force myself to vomit. Unfortunately, I tried. I began to pinch or hit myself. My sessions with her lasted for about three months. I would always tell her that I wasn't comfortable and felt more depressed. She would reply, 'It's okay, it requires willpower and patience.' Eventually, after the methods we tried failed, she told me someone else should see me."(191)

While some professionals were bent on changing him, Fuad found that others were simply unwilling to help him and had nothing to offer but verbal abuse:

"I had been feeling strange emotions towards guys. From a religious and social perspective. I completely rejected these feelings. I went to a psychiatrist, and as soon as I started speaking about what was bothering me, he abruptly stood up from behind his desk, gestured towards the door, and began to berate me without listening. He said, 'All of you are like this, sluts, only wanting sex.' He began insulting me and claiming that I was untreatable, practically throwing me out of his clinic."(192)

Our study found that the medical facilities of four of the seven state universities distributed across Syria's seven provinces are reproducing detrimental perspectives towards the LGBTQI+ community. Their curricula are imbued with stigma, advancing an interpretation of homosexuality and non-cis gender identities as a kind of pathology that should be treated and cured. Furthermore, these institutions endorse and advocate for controversial practices such as conversion therapy, psychological tests that label homosexuality or non-cisgender identities as mental disorders, and invasive diagnostic examinations of reproductive organs (193)(194)(195)(196)(197)(198).

191 - Interview with Fuad (Pseudonym), 2023-11-06.

192 - Ibid.

193 - University of Damascus. College of Human Medicine. Psychiatry lecture: Sexual Disorders.

194 - University of Damascus. College of Human Medicine. Forensic Medicine book. (Chapter 18, p. 431)..

195 - University of Aleppo. College of Medicine. Forensic Medicine. (Chapter 5).

196 - Al-Baath University. College of Human Medicine. Psychiatry course: Psychiatry..

197 - Al-Baath University. College of Medicine. Forensic Medicine.

198 - Tishreen University. Forensic Medicine lecture: Sexual Injuries. RBCS team publications.

Global health authorities have called upon national and local establishments to overhaul outdated classifications that pathologize non-cis and non-binary gender identities (199), as this causes stigmatization and ostracization (200). These organizations also decry 'conversion therapy' interventions (201) that employ unscientific - and often harmful - methodologies like electroshock treatments and emetic drugs in order to alter an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. Such practices are emblematic of deeply ingrained homophobia and transphobia (202) and can even reach extents tantamount to torture (203).

Karim, a nonbinary individual, recounts their family's attempts to force them into SOGICE, which included harmful methods that hurt him physically, as well as sexual assault:

"At age 12, I confided in my parents. But they refused to accept me. My mother said, 'I wish I had aborted you and not given birth to you.' They took me to a psychiatrist with the intent of 'curing' me. The psychiatrist attempted 'conversion therapy', which included issuing threats. He asked my family to refer to me as 'pig' instead of my name, drawing a parallel to my alleged 'impure' actions. He prescribed antidepressants and anti-epileptic medications. I was also taken to a warlock who claimed I was possessed by a jinn (204) and attempted an exorcism, beating me with a stick. At age 14, when previous interventions failed to 'make me a man', they resorted to electric shocks on my genital area and pills that induced vomiting. This led to a delay in my puberty until age 16 and resulted in damage to one of my testicles. When the testicular damage was discovered, they stopped the electric shocks but continued with medication."(205)

199 - Pathologization – Being lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans is not an illness. International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia.

200 - The World Professional Association for Transgender Health, Inc.

201 - Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts are Unethical and Harmful. American Journal of Public Health.

202 - HARMFUL TREATMENT: The Global Reach of So-Called Conversion Therapy. Outright International.

203 - Practices of so-called "conversion therapy". Report of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity*

204 - Jinni - one of a class of spirits that according to Muslim demonology inhabit the earth, assume various forms, and exercise supernatural powers.

205 - Interview with Kareem (Pseudonym), 2023-06-15.

Our research indicates that Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Change Efforts (SOGICE)(206) persist as a widespread phenomenon in Syria. More than half (53%) of respondents reported that they or someone they know personally has been subjected to SOGICE within a formal healthcare setting. Some individuals encountered multiple attempts at “conversion”, as conveyed by the testimony of Hussam, a 20-year old gay man:

“The issue began when I started discovering myself and escalated when my family found out about my orientation. They began taking me from one doctor to another to ‘cure’ me. The first doctor never really looked at me despite my attempts to explain. He prescribed antidepressants, although I wasn’t there for depression, and told me, ‘Your issue isn’t with me.’ The second doctor informed my parents that he doesn’t treat such cases but suggested that drugs are the reason for homosexuality, intensifying the pressure on me. The third doctor disclosed everything I confided to him to my family, despite my request for confidentiality, saying, ‘Your son doesn’t want to be treated.’ Later, another therapist tried to convince me that I could change my orientation and attempted to reinforce religious aspects within me.”(207)

Samir, a gay man, recounts his experience with SOGICE:

“During my middle school years, following the stage of gender segregation, I was unsure of where I belonged, whether as a man or a woman. I struggled with delayed maturity and had a soft voice. I had problems with my family who consulted with various specialists about my situation. After examinations, all the doctors concurred that there was no physical issue with me and recommended cognitive-behavioral therapy. However, my family did not pursue this. Instead, they subjected me to psychological pressure, criticized my voice and movements, and often isolated me for periods of time. One internist diagnosed the issue as hormonal, pointing to elevated prolactin (a hormone)(208) levels. He prescribed a hormonal medication that resulted in pain and spasms resembling menstrual symptoms. He later prescribed a hormonal drug, to boost male hormones. I pretended to take it but discarded it, as I refused to change my identity and was fearful of potential cancers. In a subsequent phase, when the doctor noticed that the pills were ineffective, he proposed IVF-C injections (a chemical treatment method) (209). I was forced to receive a weekly injection at his clinic. Although he initially said I would need six injections, I was given nine, all during my tenth-grade year.” (210)

206 - SOGICE (Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Change Efforts).

207 - Interview with Hussam (Pseudonym), 2023-07-16.

208 - Prolactin is a polypeptide hormone that is responsible for lactation, breast development, and hundreds of other actions needed to maintain homeostasis.

209 - Ivf-C 5000 IU Injection is a hormone that helps the egg in a woman’s ovary to develop normally. It stimulates the release of an egg during ovulation.

210 - Interview with Samir (Pseudonym), 2023-07-05.

INTERVIEW WITH EXPERTS

To acquire a deeper insight into the state of psychological healthcare in Syria, we reached out to a clinical psychiatrist and a mental health therapist.

The psychiatrist explained: "In their developmental years, many LGBTQI+ individuals seek consultation at my clinic. This developmental stage is frequently marred by social dilemmas like feelings of alienation and a sense of divergence from peers. Many of these consultations arise because parents want to influence their offspring's sexual orientation. The financial burden of private clinics is a discernible barrier for several. Further complicating matters is the quest to find an empathetic and non-judgmental doctor. The looming shadow of societal stigma and anticipated condemnation often inhibits many from soliciting psychological aid." (211)

The mental health therapist explained, "In the face of persistent endeavors by humanitarian agencies to establish acceptance for various sexual identities and engender a comprehensive understanding and acceptance of all sexualities and genders, it's disheartening to observe certain practitioners infusing personal religious convictions into their professional demeanor. There's an exigent need to amplify training initiatives that bolster professionals' proficiency in acknowledging and understanding sexual diversity. Often, individuals approach health professionals with questions regarding their sexual orientations, wondering if they fall within the 'normative' spectrum or are categorized as a 'curable ailment'. A significant number also present symptoms of depression and anxiety, often stemming from family or societal ostracization of their sexual orientation." (212)

211 - Interview with a psychiatrist working in Damascus, 2023-07-05.

212 - Interview with a mental health therapist working in Aleppo, 2023-07-04.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

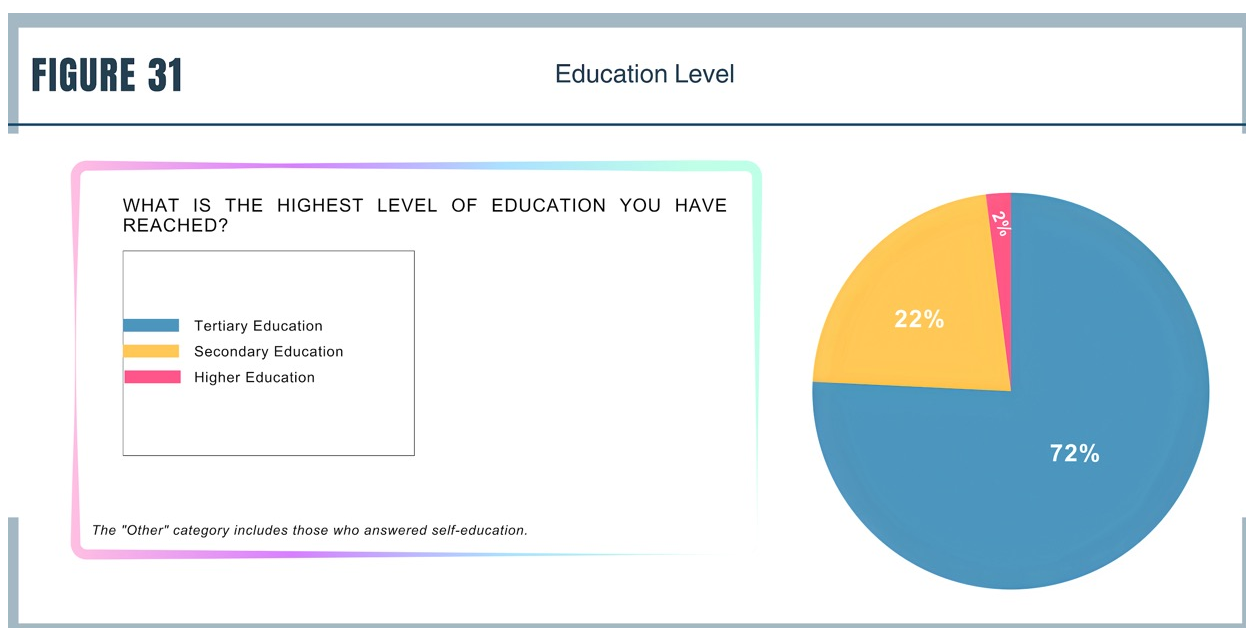
1. Champion resistance against practices executed by Syrian psychiatric medical establishments that aim to alter sexual orientation and gender identity. Furthermore, push for the cessation of pathologizing behavior directed towards LGBTQI+ community constituents.
2. Undertake comprehensive research endeavors to ascertain the conditions, requirements, and adversities confronted by the LGBTQI+ community in the Syrian psychiatric arena.
3. Implement training programs targeting mental health practitioners, emphasizing cultivating an appropriate engagement ethos with the LGBTQI+ community and bolstering their understanding regarding SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Sex Characteristics).
4. Embark on exhaustive mapping and assessment exercises to pinpoint and gauge secure medical amenities in the active operational zone.
5. Support and drive initiatives designed to augment public consciousness about sexual and reproductive health matters, ensuring the disseminated content and communication avenues are universally approachable and encompassing.
6. Pursue international accountability measures against medical institutions that perpetuate compulsory anal examinations, classifying such actions within the ambit of global legal violations.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION



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.

As seen in the chart below, a large percentage of the study’s participants have pursued higher education. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize the limitations of this study, which does not represent the entire community. Our recruitment method probably made the survey more accessible to those with higher education. We put the survey in front of those who might have been marginalized by the ongoing conflict and deteriorating educational infrastructure.



EXCLUSION AND MISTREATMENT IN SCHOOLS

16% of survey participants reported being denied educational access due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Such denial can stem from institutional discrimination, fear of bullying and harassment from peers and teachers, or punitive actions by families. Exclusion can also take the form of invisibilization. The Syrian education system is structured by traditional binary notions of gender, with segregation of boys and girls in many schools and mandatory gender-specific uniforms, especially at the preparatory and secondary levels (213). There is no recognition of learners who do not fit within the binary/hetero-normative framework for gender.

213 - Al-Ahmad, S. (2023). Education in Al-Hasakah province: Three authorities impose three curricula, and political tug-of-war at the expense of civilians.

Moreover, the education system fails to provide sexual education for LGBTQI+ learners. In fact, there is no sexual education at all in most schools, reflecting the traditional expectation that young people should abstain from sex until marriage.

Despite the announcement by the Syrian regime's Ministry of Education that they will introduce sexual education, this has not yet been implemented (214). The gendered nature of the system is especially harmful to LGBTQI+ students (215), who are at heightened risk of exposure to STIs.

An education system should provide a safe and inclusive environment that nurtures growth, learning, and emotional well-being for every student. Yet 58% of respondents reported a complete absence of LGBTQI+ acceptance in schools, while 39% feel that it is lacking. This data emphasizes an urgent need to bolster inclusivity and confront deep-rooted social biases. Lawand, a 22-year-old transgender man, shared his history of encountering practices that aimed to prevent him from accessing educational facilities:

"I faced a significant amount of harassment at the university, to the extent that I had to change universities twice. On one occasion, I arrived late for an exam, and the dean refused to allow me in, making derogatory comments about my hair and appearance. The most recent incident, which occurred approximately two years ago, involved an attempt to board the university bus, only to find out that the bus company, responsible for the transportation services, denied me access due to a perception that my appearance did not align with their expectations." (216)

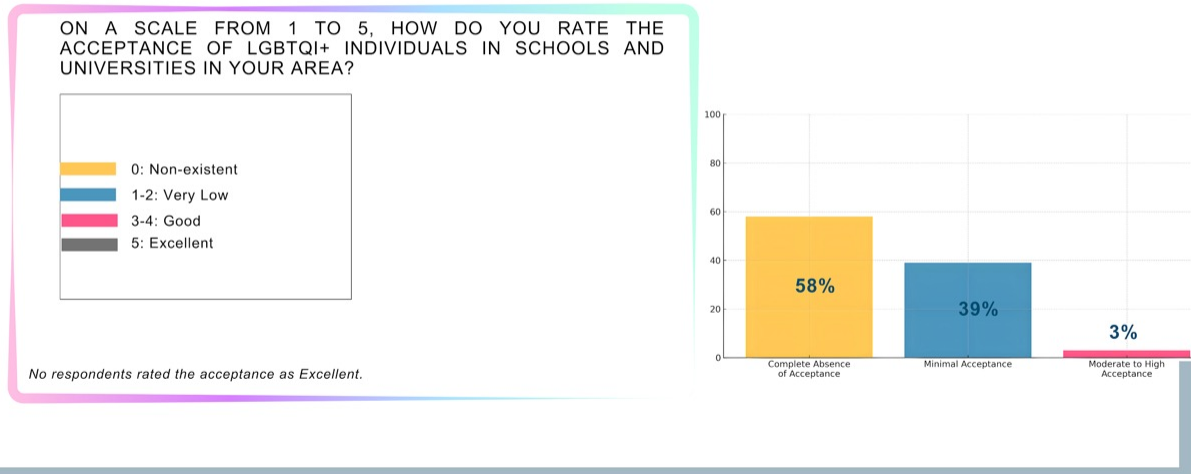
214 - Abu Suhail, F. (2022). The sexual education curriculum divides the Syrian street.

215 - Al Halabi, A. (2019). Sexual Education: A Missing Link in the Syrian Curriculum.

216 - Interview with Lawand (Pseudonym), 2023-07-15.

FIGURE 32

Acceptance of LGBTQI+ Individuals in Schools and Universities



Families that try to enforce traditional gender roles also contribute to LGBTQI+ learners' exclusion from education opportunities, as explained by Hayat, a 26-year-old transgender woman:

"During my childhood, there was a period when even my family treated me as a girl. However, issues with my family arose during my adolescence, around the age of 15. It was at this point that my family began subjecting me to physical and verbal abuse. Ultimately, they compelled me to leave school and work in the industrial sector in an attempt to conform to conventional masculinity."(217)

A majority of participants (58%) reported experiencing mistreatment in schools 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. While there are no official policies that explicitly convey hostility toward non-heteronormative gender identities in the education system, real-world attitudes often deviate from policy intentions, reflecting broader societal biases. A significant 73% of participants reported witnessing faculty members displaying prejudice against LGBTQI+ learners.

FIGURE 33

Faculty Prejudice Towards LGBTQI+

DURING YOUR STUDIES, DID ANY TEACHER EXPRESS OFFENSIVE OPINIONS ABOUT THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY?

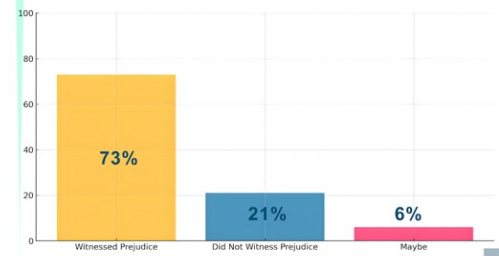
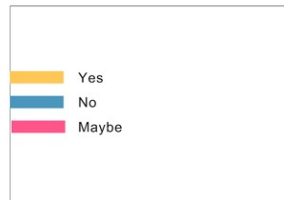
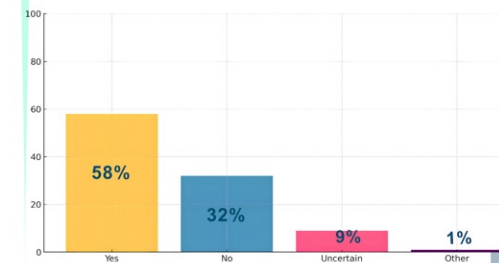
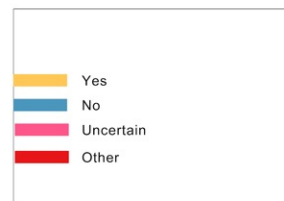


FIGURE 34

Mistreatment in the Education System

DID YOU FACE ABUSE DURING YOUR STUDIES BASED ON YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR GENDER EXPRESSION?



Samar, a 28-year-old lesbian woman, described how two lesbian students were treated at her school when their sexual orientation became known:

“In our school in 2011, two girls were found together in the bathrooms, and the entire school became aware of it through the administrative staff and teachers. They were marginalized, and a teacher entered the classroom to inform everyone that anyone who associates with or supports them would be regarded in the same way.”(218)

Mayada, a 29-year-old transgender woman, shared her experiences of enduring repeated assaults at school in the absence of any accountability mechanism. She stated:

“Even fellow students would harass me in the restroom; I couldn’t complete my education due to these circumstances. Even when I reported these incidents, the teachers would often blame me, insinuating that I was provoking the students. I remained silent, enduring whatever befell me.”(219)

Hate speech in schools critically undermines the psychosocial well-being of students, particularly those from the LGBTQI+ community. In our survey, 40% of respondents reported exposure to derogatory content directed at gender-diverse or non-binary individuals. Such a sizable proportion indicates that this is not merely an isolated occurrence but rather a pervasive issue in Syrian schools. The ramifications of this hostile exposure can be profound, ranging from feelings of marginalization to heightened psychological distress.

On the other hand, a majority (52%) of participants did not report encountering such prejudiced discourse. This figure, though reassuring, raises questions. It could indicate either actual non-exposure or underreporting due to ignorance or normalization of such content. The discrepancy underscores the need for more comprehensive research, which could shed light on the ways that the educational content and pedagogical methodologies used across Syria influence LGBTQI+ learners.

The pervasive culture of discrimination adversely impacts these students, potentially leading to diminished academic performance, higher dropout rates, and increased vulnerability to psychological distress or self-harm. 32% of respondents indicated they hadn’t faced any mistreatment. While this might hint at certain schools or regions being more accepting, it could also imply that some students conceal their identity and assimilate to heteronormativity in order to avoid attention.

218 - Interview with Samar (Pseudonym), 2023-07-19.

219 - Interview with Hayat (Pseudonym), 2023-06-09

Hamza, a 28-year-old homosexual man, who recounts his detainment by the National Union of Syrian Students at Damascus University in 2014. He vividly describes the incident, explaining:

‘While my friend and I were taking photos in front of the college, guards from the university, affiliated with the National Union of Syrian Students, suddenly approached us. They escorted us to their designated area and confiscated my mobile phone. Upon realizing that I am gay, they aggressively attacked us both verbally and physically. They alerted the security, informing them about us. After my release, I never returned to the university because students from the union had disseminated all my personal information and sexual orientation across various student groups in the college.’ (220)

Hassan, a 27-year-old nonbinary individual, shares their experience of being interrogated by the National Union of Syrian Students. Hassan recounts:

“I participated in an online campaign in support of the LGBTQI+ community, and I was summoned by the National Union of Syrian Students to investigate my participation due to a complaint from an individual about my involvement in this campaign within the university. My privacy was violated through the unauthorized inspection of my mobile phone, and I was threatened with referral to the branch of political security.”(221)

SAFEGUARDING AND PREVENTING ABUSE IN SCHOOLS

Syrian schools are also lacking in protective measures against child harassment and sexual assault (222). Reports from the Syrian Ministry of Education on violence lack guidelines or strategies for protecting students from sexual and physical violence (223)(224)(225)(226). Due to societal stigmas, fears of retaliation, and potential intimidation, many survivors refrain from reporting incidents, especially those from the LGBTQI+ community (227).

Safeguarding protocols are paramount for establishing a safe and inclusive educational environment, protecting students from harassment and potential maltreatment. Our survey reveals an alarming gap in safeguarding policies. In our survey, 87% of respondents reported a lack of mechanisms to deter or address harassment in their respective educational institutions (228).

220 - Interview with Hamza (Pseudonym), 2023-06-12.

221 - Interview with Hasan (Pseudonym), 2023-06-14.

222 - *ibid.*

223 - Ministry of Syria. (2018). Letter No. 543/5211 (13/4).

224 - Ministry of Syria. (2017). Letter No. 543/6037 (½).

225 - Ministry of Syria. (2012). Letter No. 543/2771 (13/4).

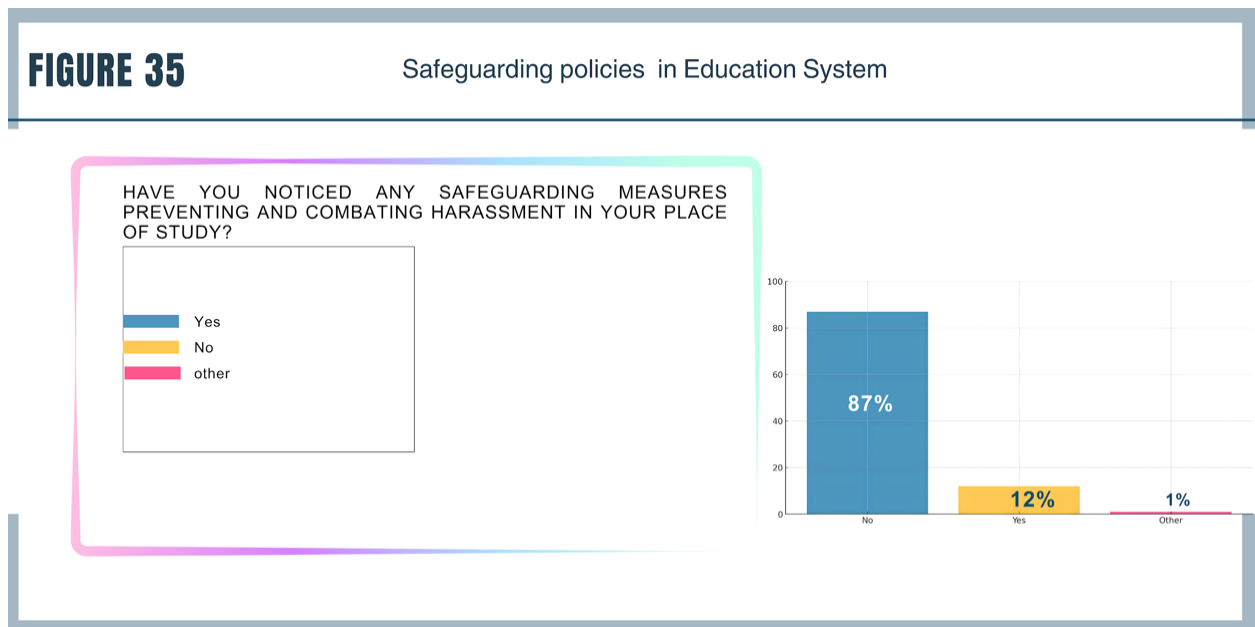
226 - Ministry of Syria. (2001). Letter No. 543/3045 (¾).

227 - Jeglic, E. L. (2022). Why Children Don't Tell Anyone About Sexual Abuse.

228 - Syrian Education Ministry. (2021-2022). Educational Training Guide: 'No to Violence'.

This absence of safeguarding mechanisms fosters a culture of silence, wherein victims hesitate to report incidents due to fear of retaliation or the perceived futility of speaking up due to the absence of protective measures.

However, there is a sliver of hope; about 12% of participants acknowledged the presence of safeguarding mechanisms, though their effectiveness and comprehensiveness remain subjects for further investigation. Notably, while the Ministry of Education, affiliated with the regime, did issue an educational guide titled “No to Violence”, it conspicuously sidestepped detailing specific behavioral measures for tackling harassment and ensuring student safety (229).



Rimaz Transgender woman faced repeated attempts of sexual harassment inside the school by the guidance counselor, exploiting his academic role and imposing a power dynamic, Rimaz said:

‘In high school, a new guidance counselor came to us, he always had a cheerful face.treated me well from everyone... Come and tell me to chat in his school’s office. He began to start conversations. He got up and locked the door, grabbing me by the shoulders from the side.He was touching his private parts on my hands. When the bell rang, he said, ‘do not forget that what happened between the social counselor and the student remains between them.’(230)

229 - ibid.

230 - Interview with Rimaz (Pseudonym), 2023-07-06.

Ibrahim, a non-binary individual who identifies as gay, faced harassment from their school peers and later experienced sexual assault by one of the teachers. After Ibrahim lodged a complaint, the school's decision was to transfer them to another school without any accountability, Ibrahim said:

"The most distressing aspect I recall from my past experience is the possibility that many other students may have faced similar actions by this teacher. Due to the prevalent nepotism in our country, the rights of these victims are often overlooked, and their childhoods are unquestionably scarred, much like mine."(231)

In another testimony, Karim, a nonbinary individual, recounts:

"In 2010, I experienced harassment by a university doctor. He attempted to harass me, but I firmly resisted. Subsequently, he threatened that I would not be able to graduate from college and would fail his subject as long as he remained employed at the university. Regrettably, I indeed encountered difficulties with that subject throughout my academic journey, failing to pass it in my first year and only achieving success when the instructor was changed during my senior year. It later came to light that this doctor had been referred to the disciplinary council approximately two years ago due to his involvement in sexual blackmail scandals with other students."(232)

Samir, a gay man, vividly describes the harassment he endured from his peers and the school's response to it. Samir recounts:

"While at school, I endured physical assault at the hands of some students and was also subjected to a group harassment incident. I sought refuge in the schoolyard as the harassment began, where the students continued to target me. As I attempted to escape, a group of my classmates valiantly attempted to shield me from harm. However, several students persisted in their pursuit of harassment until I found myself cornered against a wall. It was at this critical juncture that one of the supervisors intervened, wielding his stick and striking the perpetrators to maintain distance and safety. Unfortunately, the administration's resolution to address the incident entailed prohibiting me from taking breaks between classes and isolating me within the classroom, citing their inability to guarantee my protection."(233)

231 - Interview with Ibrahim (Pseudonym), 2023-06-14.

232 - Interview with Kareem (Pseudonym), 2023-06-15.

233 - Interview with Samir (Pseudonym), 2023-07-05.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Research and Data Collection: Allocate resources to conduct comprehensive research into the experiences of LGBTQI+ students in the Syrian education system. Such research is crucial for evidence-based policymaking and targeted interventions.

2. Oversight and Accountability: Implement rigorous oversight of the Syrian government's actions, as well as those of other stakeholders in the education sector. Uphold the principles enshrined in international human rights treaties, particularly those relating to students' rights, and set up regular assessment and reporting systems to ensure accountability.

3. Parental and Community Awareness: Roll out awareness programs tailored for parents, educators, and the broader community. These programs should underscore the unique challenges faced by LGBTQI+ students, emphasizing the importance of creating inclusive and safe educational environments.

4. Advocacy for Policies that Safeguard LGBTQI+ students: 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.

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Acknowledgments:

This study was conducted in partnership with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and SEEN for Gender & Sexual Equity (SGSE). The opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of FES.

