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Fifteen years of LGBTI community activism in Lebanon: A story of existence and oppression

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The sun was shining above the groups demonstrating against the US-British military campaign against Iraq in 2003 in Beirut. We were a group of eager youths, university student activists meeting in front of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) building in the city centre. We stood at a corner, trying to avoid a crowd calling for the victory of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and another crowd cheering for a holy war in which Islam would defeat Christianity.

Suddenly, we saw a group of young people appear from afar, heading towards us calmly and organically. They raised a rainbow flag. It was one of the first times (if not the very first time) that the rainbow flag was raised in a public and activist context in Beirut. As it was a banner produced by the American gay rights movement in the 1970s, the crowd in the Beiruti square at that time did not understand what it meant, which helped to ensure the protection and safety of its bearers. They arrived, stood next to us, and together we chanted "no to war - no to dictatorships."

For years, this scene remained in my mind. The flag was not raised to demand personal freedoms alone; it was being raised to fight against all types of injustice.

The very next year, the first LGBTI organization in Lebanon was established, Helem. It was officially registered at the Ministry of Interior in September 2004. Since then, almost 15 years ago, 17th May in Lebanon has not been just any other day.

It is the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOTB), a day on which LGBTI organizations are keen to hold activities that bring LGBTI individuals and their allies together, celebrate them, and confirm their existence and rights.

However, in the past two years, state security authorities have intensified their [crackdown](#) on this day by cancelling activities on various pretexts, the main one being "to ensure the protection of the audience as radical religious groups have threatened to attack if the event goes ahead." The security authorities have chosen to support opposing groups that threaten violence by clamping down on the freedom of expression of groups wishing to mark this day in a peaceful manner. Instead of holding those making threats accountable, security forces have taken the threat as a given and imposed the ban.

Nonetheless, the crackdown did not start in recent years. The growing visibility of activist work has come with increased vulnerability to crackdown. Activists and organisations working on LGBTI rights claim that there has barely been a day in these past 15 years where there hasn't been a raid, or a violation of the fundamental rights of individuals through arrests, sanctions, and a limiting of the rights to privacy, protection against torture and degrading treatment.

Before the start of local LGBTI activism, hostility against homosexuality was well-established - mainly fueled by moral, socio-cultural and religious justifications. The media talked "about" LGBTI individuals but never talked "to" them. Before the rise of social media, if an LGBTI individual was invited to speak on television, their voice would be altered and their face hidden because of the risk of them being attacked if their identity was revealed.

Helem came about as the result of a local build-up of activism, most of which was taking place clandestinely, in closed chatrooms and semi-private spaces to which new individuals would only be welcome when accredited by two existing members. These chatrooms and spaces allowed people to come together to listen to each other's stories, discuss ideas about how to change their situation, and find support in friends in an otherwise hostile environment.

At the time, the main demand was the repeal of Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code which penalizes "any sexual relations that contradict the laws of nature" with a prison sentence of between one month and one year and a fine of between 200,000 and one million Lebanese pounds (133USD - 663USD). This Article, alongside other laws that criminalize sex work, drug use and trafficking, rendered LGBTI individuals vulnerable, not only within their families and society writ large, but also by the state.

Slowly, LGBTI activism in Lebanon began to widen. The activists began to gain more experience, engage in more meaningful discussions, and they started forming organisations. Despite differences and contradictions amongst each other - not always helpful to advocating on LGBTI issues – this year, IDAHOTB saw the formation of coalition of a group of organisations entitled the “Lebanese coalition of LGBTIQ rights.”

The media landscape started to shift too: LGBTI individuals started occupying a space in public discussions that had been going on about them for decades but in which they had no part thus far. They built alliances with journalists, who helped them break religious, social and political barriers, and shifting the way they were being represented in mainstream media. They became increasingly integrated within the broader civil society, in coordination or through alliances with organizations working on freedom of expression, women’s rights, right to health, or other rights-related issues.

Over time, the public in general appears to have become used to the existence of LGBTI individuals amongst them, but that is not to say that they have become more accepting or even ready to endorse or support their struggle for their rights.

The very first demand that LGBTI activists had raised was protection. To this day, this demand remains unfulfilled, but is no longer the main and only call. The legal fight for LGBTI rights has been bringing lawyers to police stations and courts when needed, advancing principled arguments and obtaining judgments that are setting a precedent for others to build on. It has brought judges to deliver brave and solid judgments that refuse to criminalize the right to privacy. These rulings are few – perhaps less than a dozen - but they are prominent. They refer to Lebanon's international binding agreements to refute the crime of homosexuality and thus reject the prescribed penalties. They also rely on internationally-approved medical references to refute that same-sex conduct "goes against nature," rendering thus Article 534 inapplicable.

These breakthroughs illustrate how the past 15 years of sustained and brave work has carved out a space for LGBTI activism within the wider activist community.

Today, the LGBTI people in Lebanon stand somewhere in the middle - their very existence is no longer being criminalized, but they still don’t enjoy the freedom to exercise their rights. There is no doubt continued hostility towards any person identifying as or perceived to be LGBTI; for instance, there are social media pages that call for transwomen to be prosecuted and calling on the state to arrest them, torture them and simply remove them from public view; television programmes continue to discriminate against LGBTI individuals, and with every show that addresses this issue, a myriad of phone calls and contacts by individuals and organization are made to try and ensure that LGBTI people aren’t harmed in the process; security authorities continue to arrest activists and hamper the work of organizations and individuals.

In 2018, Helem stated that there had been an increase in the number of arrests under Article 534 - not the other way around. This organization alone monitored 35 arrests and trials, and more specifically, of 27 trans women and eight gay men, five of whom were in the military. Most of them were subjected to violations, ranging from insults to threats, to severe beatings and

harassment. Anal exams, which the doctors' syndicate came out publicly against, is still banned at police stations in Beirut but individuals continue to be subjected to those exams outside of Beirut, not to mention that the threat of this exam is used to obtain so-called "confessions." Police patrols still arrest people arbitrarily on the basis of suspicion of same-sex conduct when they see individuals of the same sex walking together in the street. The courts still try them on the basis of "confessions" obtained either through intimidation or false promises.

In addition to this, in the past two years, organizations have been ordered to cancel their IDAHOTB activities. Last year, activists were banned from entering Lebanon. Films or scenes promoting homosexuality or presenting a homosexual person in a positive manner are censored and not given permission for public screenings.

The road ahead is long; but the steps taken thus far are important. Mentalities change, laws are not static... The demands will continue, as LGBTI individuals are residents and citizens of this country. In 2003, they raised their flag for Iraq; since then they have raised it repeatedly to protect the right to freedom of expression, criminalize violence against women, demand justice for migrant workers, and to protest against the garbage mismanagement crisis... The wider society will one day raise the pride flag to support their rights, just as LGBTI individuals have supported the various and many causes raised by other segments of society.

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