

Supporting Queer Refugees in Lebanon
Bates College
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Project Location: Beirut, Lebanon.
Project Dates: June 1– August 30th.

Background and Project Summary

Over 4.8 million people have fled Syria since the beginning of the conflict in 2011 with an additional 8.7 million thought to be displaced internally. Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey have seen the largest influx of Syrian refugees, with Lebanon taking in more than 1 million displaced persons. Already having taken in a huge number of Palestinian refugees in the past, Lebanon is witnessing an amalgamation of refugees, who are often subject to various forms of discrimination, xenophobia, and marginalization. A minority within a minority, queer refugees are often at the very bottom of the social order, with virtually no specific programming, sensitive aid, or proper representation. Facing threats of physical violence as well as carrying the trauma of displacement and war, these populations are often the most vulnerable, yet the least paid attention to. Without a community to turn to, they are often alienated from their surroundings.

The goal of this project, for the summer of 2018, is to establish a program with direct and specific services to queer and trans refugees in Lebanon. Working with Abaad—an organization working on gender equality in refugee communities in Lebanon—I am hoping to contribute to peace and relief. This will be done through a series of programming initiatives including: training key staff and volunteers at Abaad regarding the special needs of the queer and trans refugee populations; partnering with Abaad's housing department to field specific requests for housing placement assistance; engage different LGBT organizations in Lebanon (including Lebanese Medical Association for Sexual Health and Proud Lebanon) to form a coalition aiming to increase the social connectedness of queer refugees as well as provide well-rounded economic and social support; partner with therapists, practitioners, and different clinics to put together a list of potential medical referrals; and provide psychosocial support through community building activities and different support groups.

Being an Arab femme myself, and coming from a family of refugees, I know too well the multi-layered oppression facing refugees worldwide. The issues facing Arab refugees and their hardship has always materialised its way into my life starting with my late grandmother. I feel especially tugged towards serving this community that often suffers from a lack of proper representation, deafening silence, improper responses, and the consistent threat of physical and psychological violence. Being a queer transman, and growing up in Egypt, I have experienced the sense of loss and specific trauma of being queer in the Arab world. It is extremely important to me that queer refugees in particular, find community and take ownership of their bodies and identities. More importantly, I care very much that this is done in an explicitly anti-colonial and anti-imperialist way that does not leave Arab queers with an impossible choice to make: their Arabness or their queerness. In order to foster peace and provide relief in conflict-zones, collective healing is essential and refugee organizations working in Beirut aim to address the nuanced needs of the community. However, collective healing and relief is meaningless if a group within refugees is being left behind. In order to build a healthy community, space for LGBT refugees must be created and acknowledged. In this project for peace, I will attempt to create programs and provide resources that are directly suited for LGBT refugees. In attempting to address and provide outlets for the trauma experienced by this community, my project will contribute towards building an overall healthy refugee community. Over this past year, I have chosen to take a gap year from Bates College to be in Philadelphia and work as the Program Assistant Intern for William Way LGBT Centre, where I am heading their LGBT Refugee Program, an experience that has definitely helped me better concretely conceptualize this project.

Implementation and Measuring Success

The success of this project for peace lies in creating a community of queer and trans refugees that can seek support within and from outside their community. In order to do this, the following steps will be taken:

- Firstly, I will foster an environment within Abaad that is best suited to address the particular needs of queer and trans refugees. This will be led by Saja and myself. We will hold workshops to train key staff members towards this purpose.
- Reach out to engage different LGBT organizations in Lebanon through Abaad. These organizations include Lebanese Medical Association for Sexual Health, Proud Lebanon and Meem. These organizations will come together to form a coalition that is able to answer to the different needs of refugees per the

organization's area of expertise such as housing, economic development, sexual health, and community. This coalition will function as a support network that queer and trans refugees can choose to fall back onto.

- Community building will be key to ensure that queer refugees find empowerment and a collective sense of self. Some of the ways the project will promote community building include various trips to different local cultural, historical, and educational institutions; support groups; and narrative and story sharing events.
- I will engage with therapists and clinics to create a group of referrals that Abaad can use to direct queer and trans refugees to for proper mental health care.
- Towards the end of the project, we will be launching a peer mentorship program, where veterans of our different programs can choose to provide mentorship to newer participants. This will ensure the project's sustainability as well as encourage peer support and self-empowerment within the queer refugees community.

I will be testing the utility of our chosen action steps by tracking participant engagement, retention, and relevant socio-economic outcomes. Weekly follow-up with key staff members and bi-monthly meetings with partner agencies, will allow me to collect anecdotal evidence of program success and adjust outreach, training, or services to accommodate emerging needs of participants.

Steps Taken

After a series of conversations, I have the full support of Abaad, who are very excited about the radical potential of this work. I will be working most closely with Saja Michael who is the designated person at Abaad for sexuality. Over the next few months, Saja and I will be brainstorming logistics, getting in touch with different organizations, enlisting the help of fellow staff members at Abaad, and integrating this work into the different departments across Abaad.

Timeline

Before this summer: Continue in conversation with Abaad, particularly Saja, to finalize all the logistics for this work. I will also be finding a place to live and getting a visa to Lebanon.

June: This will be the month where it all comes together in terms of partnership with organizations, outreach, developing a system for program documentation, measurement and evaluation, and internal organizing in Abaad.

July: I consider July to be our true launching date, where services are full and running. At the end of July, we will be doing a mid-project evaluation to assess our needs, performance, and necessary adjustments.

August: While programming continues, I will be focusing on ensuring the sustainability of this project. We will also be launching the peer mentoring program then. I have also already discussed with Abaad the potential of hiring another full-staff member at the end of the summer as well as integrating this work across the different departments in Abaad to strengthen the program's reach.

Sustainability

In undertaking this project, I recognize that the dire need for sensitive targeted programming for LGBT refugees cannot be fulfilled in a three months period. This is continuous and tedious work that needs to be carried forth for real substantial change to take place. Since the project is entirely built upon close collaboration with an established organization, sustainability lies at the very core of its implementation. In creating programs within Abaad and training key staff members, there's a flourishing sense of co-ownership of the project, something that will undoubtedly ensure the continuity of programming. Having the human resources to continue long after summer, Abaad is a perfect partner for such a project that requires tireless dedication. Moreover, establishing a coalition with different organizations across Lebanon will ensure mutual accountability for the continuous growth and expansion of the project. Finally, much like many silenced communities, LGBT refugees simply lack access to proper resources. By designing a project that is specific to their needs, we are directly reaching out to this community, which will certainly encourage more LGBT refugees to seek safe spaces. When a small part of this community's needs are exposed, the existing gap in sensitive programming across Lebanese refugee organizations will be highlighted, and will hopefully at least start the conversation on how best to address the issue.