

Project Title: Supporting Queer Refugees in Lebanon

Project's Location: Beirut, Lebanon

Sponsoring College: Bates College

Project Leader: Yara Abdelhady, Egypt, Bates College

Section I: Narrative

The purpose of this project is to establish a program that directly and specifically serves the LGBTQIA+ refugee community in Lebanon. One of the main goals of the project was coalition building to ensure its sustainability and widen its reach. There were not any other fund-raising efforts that contributed to this project.

The idea for this project came about through personal experience and research. As a Palestinian Egyptian transman of colour, I know first-hand the trauma associated with displacement and growing up queer. A minority within a minority, LGBTQIA+ refugees are often at the very bottom of the social order, with virtually no specific programming, proper aid, or representation. Facing threats of physical violence, as well as carrying the fresh trauma of war and displacement, LGBTQIA+ refugees are among the most vulnerable populations, yet they're rarely paid specific attention and are often left feeling alienated from both the LGBTQIA+ community as well as the refugee community.

The issues facing LGBTQIA+ refugees in Lebanon are two-fold. Refugees in general face tremendous amounts of xenophobia and aggression from host communities due to erroneous beliefs about the scarcity of resources, as well as belligerent political environments that often hang their own failure to address communal problems on the arrival of refugees. In addition, LGBTQIA+ refugees are often further alienated from refugee and host communities due to insistent homophobia and transphobia that often depicts LGBTQIA+ communities as sexually predatory and unethical. Moreover, there is a common belief among refugee communities that LGBTQIA+ refugees have an easier time immigrating to Western countries by "using" their queerness as a basis for their claim. Finally, as a result of neo-colonial approaches that often justify attacks on brown and black countries in the name of LGBTQIA+ rights, LGBTQIA+ refugees are often labelled as traitors to their own people.

There are many reasons why I chose to work in Lebanon in particular. First of all, Lebanon is a melting pot of refugees. Previously taking large numbers of Palestinian refugees who still reside in Lebanon, the country has also taken over 1 million Syrian refugees. Secondly, Lebanon is the hub for LGBTQIA+ rights in the Arab world. The initial spark for LGBTQIA+ rights started right in Beirut with a "group chat" that grew into different organizations and the region's first and only LGBTQIA+ Pride. In Lebanon, there is a sense that the movement started here and activists have made tremendous legal strides in decriminalizing queerness.

Working in Beirut was both amazingly personal and deeply challenging. Having never met, let alone built, community with any LGBTQIA+ Arabs before this project, it was incredibly validating to be in spaces with people who identify similarly. For the first time in my life, I had the chance to discuss my queerness in Arabic, something I had never done before. However, that personal connection also proved to be a challenge because I took it personally when things did not work out perfectly or plans for the project had to be changed or abandoned due to constraints on time, money, or fear of being arrested. I always knew that working with LGBTQIA+ refugees was going to be incredibly emotional, but due to my personal connections with the community, it was downright crippling at times to deal with the guilt and frustration of implementing the project in the real world.

There were so many times over the course of three months when I felt that there was no way this project was going to see the light. It first started when I began working with the original organization I had previously made contact with and had plans to implement the project through. I was left frustrated, when throughout the first month, the organization paid very little attention to the project and sometimes refused to implement our workshops. Upon discussing it further, I learned that while they were fine with opening their space for LGBIA+ refugees, they refused to do the same with transgender refugees because "most of them were sex workers." Shocked and appalled, I started looking for other organizations to work with. The following two weeks would prove to be very stressful as I attempted to find inclusive spaces to work through. I was incredibly lucky to find and partner with Helem, commonly referred to as the "father organization" of the LGBTQIA+ movement in Lebanon. Helem did not have any programs that were specific to LGBTQIA+ refugees and they were more than happy to let me implement my project and start a number of programs for LGBTQIA+ refugees through them. Immediately after starting to work with Helem, I made contact with other LGBTQIA+ organizations to set up weekly meetings for us to work together in coalition. Eight sister organizations

Project Title: Supporting Queer Refugees in Lebanon

Project's Location: Beirut, Lebanon

Sponsoring College: Bates College

Project Leader: Yara Abdelhady, Egypt, Bates College

would join us at Helem for weekly briefings and to discuss different projects. Things seemed to be going well. However, we woke up one morning to news that the director of one of the organizations we were working with had been accused of sex trafficking the LGBTQIA+ refugees at his organization. The entire LGBTQIA+ movement in Lebanon, and in the Arab world, seemed to be in crisis mode, as homophobic political leaders and news channels seemed to capitalize on the news and present a narrative of an unethical sexually promiscuous LGBTQIA+ community. As a result, the municipality in which Helem is located issued a statement promising to "cleanse" the neighbourhood of "Al-Shawaz," a derogatory term meaning irregular used to describe LGBTQIA+ people. In response, I worked with the community to organize a protest at the City Center that resulted in the municipality retracting its previous statement. Currently, the organization is still under investigation and its director has threatened multiple times to publicly out members of the other organizations. While these were some of the main challenges that faced the project, there were multiple hindrances, most notably the constant change in directors and board members, as most of them left Lebanon for academic or personal reasons, and ISIS' attack on Helem's website, which is no longer operational.

Speaking the same language, communication wasn't a huge problem for me. Most of my communication problems stemmed from my lack of experience in talking about gender and sexuality in Arabic. It took me a good while to get used to referring to myself in the masculine pronouns in Arabic, as well as referring to other transgender people correctly. It was also challenging because my name in Arabic is very femme, so people would often ask if I had taken another name already, something I had no answer to.

I define peace as an intersectional process by which justice is served. I define peace as native sovereignty, as a free Palestine, as black liberation, and as reparations. I define peace as a commitment against anti-blackness, Zionism, colonialism, and classism. I define peace as a process by which we come to dismantle white supremacy, capitalism, and the notion of borders as it serves to cement a nation state.

In the short term, I think my project contributes to peace by offering much needed immediate services to a marginalized community that is very much in need of resources. In the long term, I hope efforts such as this project inspire the LGBTQIA+ refugee community to find empowerment from within and to take our place at the forefront of movements in the region. LGBTQIA+ refugees serve as a reminder that Western imperialism and pink washing can never provide any emancipatory potential to brown and black LGBTQIA+ communities. Our existence is an act of resistance. It's an act of peace.

My project has definitely changed the way I think about myself, my identity, my people, and the world. It was so amazingly empowering to hear transgender refugee women critically discussing whiteness and white feminism, aggressively opposing pink washing, and our misrepresentation as vulnerable victims. I'm so much more grounded in my identity as a transman. I now realise more than ever that my queerness is not synonymous with Western ideologies. I don't have to be queer just in English. Arabic can and should accommodate my queerness. I know I'm part of a community whose history is filled with instances of resistance, sacrifice, and love. I'm not the only queer Arab in the world. I'll never be, and my people are critical. They're intelligent; they're strong; they can fight back; and they can love unconditionally.

Project Title: Supporting Queer Refugees in Lebanon

Project's Location: Beirut, Lebanon

Sponsoring College: Bates College

Project Leader: Yara Abdelhady, Egypt, Bates College

Section II: Photographs

