



A Capacity Assessment for Transgender Individuals in Lebanon

Under the project

Enhancing the Inclusivity of the LGBTI Community in Workplaces in Lebanon



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Content

Acronyms

EIHDR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
FSW	Female Sex Workers
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex
PLHIV	People Living with HIV
SIDC	Soins Infirmiers et Développement Communautaire
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics

Background

Transphobia – individual-level, societal, and institutional discrimination against transgender individuals - is a condition that individuals who identify themselves as trans experience (Nemoto, Bödeker, & Iwamoto, 2011) due to their Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC). In fact, many trans people often experience stigma and discrimination, hostility, and pressure to “manage” their identities in social settings—including the workplace—to suit the expectations of others. Many institutions and organizations exclude and discriminate against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) individuals due to absence of awareness and education by employers, and cultural and religious norms embedded within society. Such experiences can set in motion a host of psychological responses including dysfunctional coping behaviors, social isolation, alcohol abuse, ruminative thoughts, hopelessness, and a negative self-image, all which could lead to greater mental health challenges such as anxiety and major depression and have devastating consequences for trans individuals’ emotional and overall well-being (Thoroughgood, Sawyer, & Jennica R. Webster, 2020). In return, such negative effects directly influence individuals from the LGBTI community through experiencing wage disparities, poorer job productivity and job satisfaction, inclination to remain with an employer, and decreased employment opportunities (Thoroughgood et al., 2020). Moreover, many trans individuals may also find their skills or competencies overlooked due to their non-conforming gender identities, and consequently resort to sex work to make a living which further aggravates their situation.

The LGBTI Community in the Lebanese context

The LGBTI community in Lebanon have been and continue to face oppression and marginalization on a social, health and legal level due to their SOGIESC. The Lebanese Penal code in article 534 which states that “Any sexual intercourse against nature is punished with up to one year of imprisonment” is chiefly being used to criminalize homosexuality and to violate the rights of LGBTI individuals.

More specifically, trans individuals (including transgenders, transsexuals, cross-dressers, and other gender variant individuals) encounter additional and unique challenges including poverty as a result of unemployment, social exclusion, stigma, harassment and discrimination, violence and abuse, criminalization, lack of healthcare coverage, and identity documents issues (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). All the aforementioned are largely due to identifying or expressing their gender differently from conventional or cultural expectations- either in terms of expressing a gender that does not match their designated sex at birth or physically altering their sex.

In efforts to address and promote the human and employment rights of the LGBTI community in Lebanon, including transgender individuals, Soins Infirmiers et Développement Communautaire (SIDC) in partnership with ACTED are implementing a 2-year project funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIHDR). .

This project targets primarily the LGBTI community in Lebanon, and secondly the private sector employers and HR managers through three main objectives:

1. To improve workplaces by making them more inclusive and responsive to the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the LGBTI community in Lebanon

2. To empower the LGBTI community to seek and maintain employment based on their personal preferences and professional goals
3. To facilitate change and challenge social norms, perceived roles of individuals and prejudices that exist in societies leading to stigma, discrimination and human rights violations of LGBTI at the workplace.

It is important to note that within the project, documentation of human rights violations experienced by members of the LGBTI community at the workplace is being conducted. And in response to these violations, support services are being provided to the cases to empower them to seek employment opportunities. The results of this assessment will allow SIDC to guide and direct trans individuals to job opportunities.

In order to complement and feed into the efforts of the mentioned project, it was deemed crucial to better understand the different experiences to accessing and maintaining employment among the trans community, as they are the most reporting to facing challenges in accessing employment opportunities in Lebanon. And in response, to help empower them find job opportunities that fit their professional capabilities.

Study objectives

This study aims to better understand the set of skills and capacities these individuals have, perceived barriers to employment and suggested recommendations to gauge the type of work they can occupy whilst leveraging with employers from the private sector.

Methodology

Study Design

This study was qualitative in nature, seeking to learn from the experiences that transgender women have had with employment in Lebanon.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population included transgender women who utilized SIDC services and were documented by SIDC based on the inclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Transgender women above 18 years of age who have been subjected to human rights violations at the workplace and whose case has been documented by SIDC

Exclusion criteria

1. Beneficiaries who are or relatives of SIDC employees
2. Beneficiaries who are unable to speak Arabic or English

Participants were recruited purposively by the case manager. Purposive sampling enabled the recruitment of information-rich participants that aided in answering the project question and were relevant to the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). After sharing the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the case manager contacted the potential participants by phone, explained the study, and asked them if they are willing to participate. The caller then elicited oral consent and permission to audio-record the discussion from the beneficiaries who agreed to participate. One day before the scheduled FGD, the participants were contacted by the case manager via phone to confirm their attendance to the FGD.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) by a SIDC employee familiar with the LGBTI community. One FGD, comprising 10 transgender women was implemented. FGDs are regularly advised as a standalone method, for research relating to processes, meanings, and group norms (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Group discussions aid in producing a rich understanding of participants' beliefs and experiences (Gill et al., 2008). An interview guide was developed in Arabic in order to explore the participants more systematically, keep the discussion focused around the study question, and achieve maximum use of the discussion time (Jamshed, 2014).

Participants were first asked to fill in a survey that gathered sociodemographic information. In the FGD, participants were asked about their background and work experience, perceived strengths and competencies on personal and professional levels, areas of expertise, and perceived barriers to employment and accessing the workplace. The duration of the FGD was 1 hour and 10 minutes.

Data Analysis

The FGD was audio recorded and transcribed by a research consultant. Recording allowed the interviewer to focus on the research content, avoid missing key points and will aid in obtaining the data more effectively (Jamshed, 2014). Thematic analysis was used for data analysis following Clarke and Braun's six phases of thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Mourtada, Schlecht, & DeJong, 2017) and was conducted using Deedose. The credibility

of the interpretation was enhanced through sharing and discussing emerging themes with the interviewer.

Results

A total of 9 transgender women, whose gender at birth were men, participated in the FGD, of which 5 are heterosexual, 3 are heterosexual (attracted to men), and 1 is homosexual. The participants’ age ranged between 21 and 45. Of the participants, 3 were the Lebanese nationality and 6 were of the Syrian nationality. The participants’ highest level of education ranged between technical school (3), high school (3), primary school (2), and middle school (1).

Themes	Subthemes
Overview of employment background	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Previously held job positions 2. Reasons to leave job
Perceived skills on a personal and professional level	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fields of work of interest 2. Competencies and skills on a professional level
Challenges and barriers faced by transgenders to employment and accessing the job market	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of societal acceptance 2. Economic crisis in Lebanon
Means for enhancing the employability of the transgender community	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collaborative efforts in finding jobs 2. Self-employment 3. Facing the society 4. Raising awareness and amending the educational system 5. Developing skills and capacity building 6. Financial aid

Table 1. The main themes and subthemes of this project.

During the focus group discussion, participants introduced themselves and shared previously held positions, shared perceived personal and professional skills and competencies, perceived barriers to accessing job market, and suggested recommendations for increasing chances of employability for the transgender community.

The theme “Overview of employment background” emerged as a result of questions about employment background.

The theme “Perceived skills a personal and professional levels” emerged as a result of questions about perceived strengths and required competencies to employability.

The theme “Fields of work of interest” emerged as a result of questions about fields of work in which the participants think they have the required skills and competencies to work in.

The theme “Challenges and barriers faced by transgenders to employment and accessing the job market” emerged as a result of discussion questions about perceived barriers to finding work opportunities or accessing the labor market in Lebanon.

The theme “Means for enhancing the employability of the transgender community” emerged as a result of discussion questions about suggestions to enhance the employability of the transgender community in Lebanon including the need for workshops, seminars, and capacity building exercises.

Overview of employment background

At the beginning of the FGD, participants provided an overview of their employment background where they discussed their current employment status, previously held job positions, and reasons for leaving previous jobs.

Previously held job positions

All participants are currently unemployed, but they have previously taken jobs in various fields, and held multiple positions such as salesperson, seamstress, assistant manager in shops, hairdresser, administrative assistant, security guard, assistant chef, janitor, and one has never been employed. One respondent mentioned:

“I have previously worked a lot, in cleaning, as a janitor, and as a salesperson...”

Another participant added:

“I worked in a restaurant as an assistant chef for almost 4 years, then I learnt hairdressing and was working in that field, and now I have been unemployed for 3 years and a half.”

Reasons to leave job

Despite taking jobs in various fields, the job duration of all participants was short, due to several issues at the workplace such as violations, bullying, harassment, and the economic crisis in Lebanon. One respondent mentioned:

“I worked in more than one place, and used to have issues in every place I worked in. It wasn't for long, I mean, couple of months and then I stop and start working at another place...”

Another participant mentioned:

“I worked once as a salesperson in a bag shop, and the owner sexually assaulted me...”

Another participant mentioned:

“I was working at a salon, for ladies not for men, and then it went bankrupt due to the economic crisis.”

Perceived skills on a personal and professional levels

Participants articulated that they possess several skills and competencies on both the personal and professional levels that makes them interested in several future positions.

Fields of work of interest

The participants expressed their interests in handling various future job positions based on their personal and professional skills such as being a makeup artist, hairdresser, model, fashion

designer, cabin crew member, being self-employed at their own business, owning a clothes shop, and holding positions related to management. A respondent mentioned:

“I want to have my own business rather than working in a certain place. I am a fashion designer; I want to open a small business. I love what I do, and I don’t like doing anything else.”

Competencies and skills on a professional level

When asked whether the participants think they have the professional skills required to fulfill their positions of interest, they all agreed that they would be committed to the job, deliver tasks on time, and be able to face challenges. Participants also stated that they always seek self-development. One respondent mentioned:

“She can be a salesperson because she has good communication skills... and because she is patient...”

Another respondent mentioned:

“I am currently unemployed, but when you asked me what I wanted to work, I didn’t tell you working at the fashion design house but instead told you opening my own business.”

Challenges and barriers faced by transgenders to employment and accessing the job market

Transgenders in Lebanon face numerous roadblocks in accessing employment opportunities such as discrimination due to lack of societal acceptance and the economic crisis in Lebanon. It is important to note that the majority of the employment discrimination reveals itself in the employment process.

Lack of societal acceptance

Participants agreed that the society is unable to accept or even “tolerate” transgenders. They also expressed their frustration of being bullied, harassed, and at risk of assault. Lack of societal acceptance often causes employers to judge, disrespect, and invade the privacy of transgender applicants. A respondent mentioned:

“I applied as an accountant at a gas station, and the employer accepted. But once he saw how I looked, like very feminine, he decided to make me work in the loading department to make me stronger...”

Another respondent stated:

“I came here to Lebanon and I once went to find a job, the employer asked for my ID. I gave him my ID, he mocked and bullied more. And since then, I swore not to search for jobs anymore because I became a mockery.”

Another respondent also mentioned:

“...and then he asked me if I were gay, and I told him it’s none of your business as long as I am getting my work done.. he was talking to me as if I were a male and then told me he cannot employ me because customers wouldn’t accept. I no longer want to search for jobs because I really feel bad, that’s why I am encouraging everyone to have their own business.”

As a result of the discriminatory behavior they experience, transgender employees experience pervasive pressure to remain closeted and hide their gender identity, which potentially limits their career potential. A respondent mentioned:

“Sometimes I think about giving up this style and returning to my previous identity.”

Economic crisis in Lebanon

Some participants mentioned that the economic crisis in Lebanon renders them unable to finance their personal business. The hyperinflation and the drop of value of the Lebanese pound also makes customers unable to purchase goods. A participant mentioned:

“I believe that in this current situation in Lebanon, you cannot open your own business... More serious crises are on their way...”

The participant then added:

“...let’s say we got her a sewing machine, and she designed a dress, but who will be able to buy it? You want someone to buy. You won’t be able to buy, neither will people from outside the community because the dress will be at least 10 million Lebanese pounds, noting that she wouldn’t be profiting that much...”

Means for enhancing the employability of the transgender community

According to the participants, employability of the transgender community can be enhanced through collaborative efforts in finding jobs, establishing their own business, facing the society, and raising awareness and amending the educational system.

Collaborative efforts in finding jobs

One respondent suggested the collaboration of the transgender community and non-governmental organizations to find jobs.

“...Depending on the field that each of us has the skills to work and develop in, let’s say makeup or hairdressing, we search all together and talk to salons to find a job...”

Self-employment

A few participants also mentioned that self-employment would decrease the chance of getting harassed or assaulted. A respondent stated:

“I believe that for those who would like to work as hairdressers, being self-employed and working as home services would be better than working in a salon, because there are people that might harass her.”

Facing the society

Some participants agreed that blending into the society and getting employed will eventually make the society accept them. Participants stated that this necessitates being themselves and showing commitment towards the job they handle. A respondent mentioned:

“For us to reach where we want, we have to fight. Let them mock and bully us, I don’t care... If we keep on hiding, we will remain where we are, and none of us will get her rights... We have to blend into the society to force the society to respect us... People are only seeing transgenders as prostitutes and thieves.”

Another participant stated:

“To change the societal perception, we have to blend in to show the other side, the good side: the working transgender who works and wants to protect the organization...”

Another participant also shared her story and stated:

“I got employed recently, I entered the company and stayed the way I am, I did not fake being someone else; I told them, judge me based on my work...”

Raising awareness and amending the educational system

Some participants agreed that the societal perception towards members of the transgender community can be changed over time through raising proper awareness and amending the education system. That latter includes embedding topics on sexual health and shed light on sexuality and gender in the school subjects. A participant mentioned:

“Once we start embedding the LGBTI in the educational system where kids would know that members of this community are not wrong or intruders; once we start raising awareness, we would be able to build a new and accepting generation from the beginning without having any black dots through religion or culture or anything else...”

Another respondent stated:

“...Nurture is the essence of everything, if it is done right, the result would be good. Whatever you sow, you reap.”

However, other respondents stated that they “lost hope” and that society cannot be changed, as it will views transgenders as “wrong” and also believe that there is no hope in Lebanon becoming an accepting country where no laws and policies are available to protect transgenders.

Participants expressed their frustration and stated that the only solution is immigrating. A respondent mentioned:

“I think we are wasting time with such a society... We are in a society where we are viewed as wrong, how would I live with someone who thinks it is okay to kill me... The best thing to do is to pack our bags and travel, we are wasting our time in this country.”

Another participant stated:

“The solution is to pack our bag and leave, we don’t want to work here anymore.”

Developing skills and capacity building

There were opposing opinions regarding the role and need for workshops in developing skills in order to increase the employability of transgenders. Some participants stated that workshops will not help in finding jobs or be able to resolve the issue of discrimination or harassment that the transgender community faces in the workplace. However, others stated that if available, they are willing to attend as it will enhance their skills and might increase their chances of getting employed. A participant stated:

“...you are suggesting attending workshops, classes, and learning new things, but we no longer can tolerate these things... we already attended several workshops with other NGOs and received a diploma in makeup and hairdressing from the ministry of education and higher education, but I didn't benefit at all.”

Another participant of an opposing view mentioned:

“If I had a chance to attend a workshop, I will. I have to try, I have no other choice.”

Financial Aid

Some participants also stated that receiving some sort of financial aid will facilitate the establishment of their own startup business. However, there were also opposing views regarding this matter, stating that due to the persisting economic situation in Lebanon, small business owners, especially if they were transgender, will face multiple challenges and will not be able to generate profit. A participant mentioned:

“...I want to be self-dependent... I want to receive a financial aid that would allow me to open a small business to fix clothes, not directly become a fashion designer. I want to start from scratch...”

A respondent with an opposing view stated:

“If you open your own business as a transgender, they will come up with something for you to close it, that’s what I have been saying. We cannot afford to establish a business because it will be challenging, whereas if you are working for an employer, that wouldn’t be an issue.”

Discussion

The widespread prevalence of homophobia, transphobia and discrimination results in social stigma, which in return fuels the exclusion of LGBTI individuals and creates numerous barriers to accessing markets, services, and spaces. As such, this study explored the experiences of transgender individuals in Lebanon within the workplace setting and means for improving those experiences.

This study revealed that trans individuals often suffer from widespread prejudice, violence, discrimination, and other forms of stigma in multiple aspects of their lives, including the workplace and employment. Transgender employees experience unprepared employers – employers who never encountered transgender employees before, and hence, are not aware of the best practices -, abusive colleagues, and various societal and cultural challenges. Despite being ambitious, always aiming for development, and possessing professional skills and competencies, trans individuals find it very difficult, if not impossible, to access the job market in Lebanon. The latter is mainly due to the societal challenges and the economic crisis in Lebanon. In fact, they were previously forced to leave their jobs due to discriminatory behaviors, violence, harassment,

and assault. Work-related transphobia has been shown to have detrimental effects on trans individuals ranging from poor mental health, adverse job outcomes such as not being hired, being denied from promotions or being terminated to physical and sexual harassment and abuse (Thoroughgood et al., 2020).

As such, some transgender individuals have already lost hope in the Lebanese society, while others believe that change starts when trans individuals decide to be authentic, face the society, help in raising awareness, trigger changes in the educational system, and break the stigma towards transgender people. In addition, some transgender individuals expressed their needs for financial aids to establish their own business, while others asked for workshops where they could build on their skills. This necessitates the collaboration of governmental entities and private organizations to make this possible and carve a way to develop and employ transgender individuals.

Despite a growing global awareness of the struggles trans people face, many employers remain unaware of the challenges faced by trans individuals and of the importance of fostering inclusive and diverse work environments and promoting equal employment opportunities for all that will in turn support the employability of transgender individuals. As such, below is a list of recommendations that could be implemented on the personal, governmental/institutional, and workplace levels in order to create inclusive and equal opportunities for all individuals despite their gender identity.

Recommendations

Level	Recommendations	Implications	References
Personal	Attend workshops relevant to field of work	This step would enable trans individuals not	

	of interest, in addition to capacity-building and vocational trainings	only to develop their skills and competencies, but also to network and connect with other people that may assist in finding jobs or potential employers. In addition, this would empower transgender individuals to seek, access, and maintain employment.	
	Addressing and enhancing their mental health statuses	This would enable transgender individuals improve their wellbeing, feel good about themselves, and become motivated to enhance their professional capacities, that will in return increase their employment opportunities.	
Workplace	Integrate gender-identity-specific nondiscrimination practices and policies	The integration of such policies and trainings will decrease homophobia, increase the understanding and acceptance of employees towards their current and future trans colleagues, and promote and protect the rights of people despite their gender identities, resulting in decreased experiences of discrimination. This will consequently affect the psychological wellbeing, disclosure decisions, and job attitudes of trans individuals. In addition, it will lead to the establishment of an inclusive work environment and will consequently result in a	(Redcay & Luquet, 2020; Ruggs, Martinez, Hebl, & Law, 2015; Webster, Adams, Maranto, Sawyer, & Thoroughgood, 2018).

		more productive, loyal, and engaged workforce.	
	Establishing gender-neutral toilets and/or promoting transgender employees to use toilets that align gender identities	This step would make trans employees would feel valued and respected, and consequently, would have better job satisfaction and productivity. It is important to note that some argue that this would increase the risk of sexual harassment and assault, however research suggests that incidents in toilets are rare despite any gender-identity policy on toilet use.	(Hasenbush, Flores, & Herman, 2019)
	Create and implement an inclusive and gender-neutral dress code	This would avoid gender stereotypes and aid in destigmatizing different expressions of gender. Furthermore, such practices would signal that normativity is not expected, and consequently may help in employee retention and recruitment.	(Raynor, n.d.; SHRM, 2021; Thoroughgood et al., 2020)

	Use email signatures and name badges that include desired names and pronouns	This cultivates the knowledge of the different gender identities that individuals may possess and would consequently make all employees feel valued and respected.	(Thoroughgood et al., 2020)
	Invest in diversity and inclusivity trainings	This would lead to raising the employers' awareness about the rights of transgender employees and result in cultivating a supportive work environment and reduced bias that would have eventually led to discrimination and harassment.	(Raynor, n.d.; Thoroughgood et al., 2020)
	Establish an incident reporting framework and clear complaint mechanism, and conduct relevant trainings to employees	This would equip employees with the tools that allow them to identify, report, and potentially decrease discriminatory and stigmatizing behaviors at the workplace, including those against transgender individuals. In addition, this would prepare employers to properly comprehend, analyze, investigate, and respond to such practices.	
Governmental/ Institutional	Establish a transgender employment program	Trans individuals would gain access to career coaching, workshops, networking, legal services, job postings and referrals to employers, and professional mentoring and community events, all which will enhance their skills and competencies and aid in	

		finding a relevant job. This would also inform transgender individuals about their employment and legal rights, as well as their responsibilities, which will equip them with the necessary knowledge to face any potential challenges.	
	Establish a green economy through amending the current Lebanese labor law and addressing its gaps	All individuals, regardless of their gender identity, would have equal opportunity in doing meaningful work in the absence of exploitation	(Green, 2021)
	Establish networks and partnerships between various key stakeholders such as governmental organizations, Civil Society Organizations, non-governmental organizations, media, etc.	This would result in developing rigorous and coherent policies and programs to promote and protect the rights of transgender individuals. In addition, it will aid in showcasing a positive representation of trans individuals, voicing out their challenges and struggles, and ensuring that the public has access to accurate information about transgender people, all which will potentially lead to promoting acceptance and inclusiveness in the society.	
	Lobby for eliminating article 534 that criminalizes homosexuality and article 521 that criminalizes transgender women	This would establish equity, bring about the rights of transgender individuals, aid in creating an anti-discrimination community and workplace, and ensure the protection of	

		transgender individuals against discrimination, exploitation, and harassment.	
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Table 2. Recommendations as a result of this project.

Limitations

This study is qualitative in nature; therefore, the aim was not to generate findings that are representative of all transgender individuals living in Lebanon but rather to discover insights about perceptions about employment and accessing the job market. However, it would have been more informative to recruit more participants whose cases were not documented by SIDC, but this was not possible due to time constraints.

Conclusion

The stigma and discrimination experienced by transgender individuals in general, and at the workplace in particular, will not be eliminated easily or quickly, as it has been an issue for years. It is a result of multiple societal, structural, and socioeconomic factors (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Discrimination stems early in family abuse, education, and social stigma, and is aggravated by cultural and legal barriers to accessing the workplace. As a result, it is important tackle the issue and bring about change by targeting the employers, government, institutions, and the transgender community all together in the aim of creating accepting and stimulating work environments that foster confidence and encourage employees, despite their gender identity, to feel authentic, because only when a person feels their true self can they connect with their organization and consequently achieve their full potential.

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