Original Article

Missiles and Misfits: Reimagining Home and Security for Queer Internally Displaced Persons From South Lebanon

Jasmin Lilian Diab [iD]
Lebanese American University

Executive Summary
This paper sheds light on the often-overlooked intersectionality of armed conflict, displacement, and sexual and gender identity, with a focus on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ internally displaced persons (IDPs) from South Lebanon amidst the ongoing armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study conducted 18 in-depth interviews with members of the displaced LGBTIQ+ community to capture the nuances of their lived experiences. Through thematic and narrative analysis, the research aims to uncover the multifaceted challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals who have been internally displaced due to the protracted conflict. The findings highlight the intricate interplay between the external conflict dynamics and the internal struggles of sexual and gender minorities navigating displacement. Themes such as resilience, identity negotiation, discrimination, and community building emerge from the narratives, providing a rich and textured understanding of the intricate fabric of their lives. The paper not only contributes to the growing body of literature on conflict-induced displacement but also foregrounds the unique challenges and coping mechanisms employed by LGBTIQ+ individuals in the face of adversity. By amplifying the voices of those often silenced, this research seeks to inform policies and interventions that are more inclusive and responsive to the specific needs of internally displaced LGBTIQ+ populations in conflict settings, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in their journeys of survival, resilience, and identity reconstruction.

Introduction

The armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in South Lebanon has endured since 1982 (Hussain 2007; Casais 2009). Israeli forces began withdrawing in 1985, marking the start of a new phase driven by Hezbollah's goal to liberate Lebanese territories still under Israeli control, including the disputed Shebaa Farms area, which Israeli forces had unilaterally occupied (Norton 2000; Kaye 2002). Hostilities escalated again in early 2000 and continued until Israel's withdrawal from Southern Lebanon on 25 May of the same year (Geist Pinfold 2023). One of

the most recent major confrontations between Israel and Hezbollah occurred during the 34-day Lebanon-Israeli War between July and August 2006 (Nakhleh 2007; Mason 2009). These clashes resulted in significant civilian infrastructure damage on both sides and triggered a massive internal displacement crisis, with one third of the Lebanese population fleeing the

Corresponding Author:
Jasmin Lilian Diab, Institute for Migration Studies, School of Arts and Sciences, Lebanese American University, Beirut 1102 2801, Lebanon.
Email: jasminlilian.diab@lau.edu.lb

South for safer areas in Lebanon (Khawaja et al. 2011; Nuwayhid et al. 2011).

Against the backdrop of Israel's bombardment and the mass destruction in Gaza since late 2023 following Hamas' 7 October 2023 attack (UN News 2024; Bordas 2024; Qudaih 2024; Wells et al. 2024), renewed clashes have erupted between Israel and Hezbollah, further intensifying the long-standing conflict (Borger 2023; Diab and Skulte-Ouaiss 2023; Cook 2024). This latest escalation was marked by increased cross-border attacks, with Hezbollah launching rockets and missiles into northern Israel and Israel responding with airstrikes targeting Hezbollah positions in Lebanon (Ibid). The violence has led to further casualties and displacement, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the region. According to UN reports, close to 100,000 persons had been internally displaced by mid-2024 (OCHA 2024a, 2024b). International humanitarian organizations have called for restraint, respect for human life and dialog, but the situation remains volatile and uncertain, with the conflict moving outside the country's Southern regions. Multiple political assassinations in Beirut followed (Berg and Baker 2024; Khalil 2024; Houssari 2024). It is within this protracted and intricate conflict, characterized by its shifting phases, that the experiences of LGBTIQ+ IDPs warrant examination.

Lebanon has long-been a notable hub for LGBTIQ+ organizing in the Middle East, despite the challenging legal and social environment (Moussawi 2015). Beirut, in particular, has seen the development of several LGBTIQ+ organizations that advocate for the rights and well-being of sexual and gender minorities. These organizations, such as Helem, MOSAIC, and the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, have played crucial roles in providing support, creating safe spaces, and advocating for legal reforms. Lebanon's relatively more "open" social atmosphere, compared to its regional neighbors, has also made it a destination for LGBTIQ+ refugees fleeing persecution in countries where homosexuality is criminalized or socially unacceptable (Moussawi 2018). While Lebanon does not offer specific legal protections for LGBTIQ+ individuals, these organizations have been instrumental in addressing the unique needs of refugees and IDPs from the community, offering critical resources and support networks (Ibid).

Displacement trends in the context of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict reveal a complex and multifaceted situation affecting both Lebanese citizens as well as Palestinian and Syrian refugees residing in South Lebanon (IOM 2024). Displacement has primarily occurred from areas in close proximity to the conflict zones, such as villages and towns near the southern border, pushing these populations to safer regions within Lebanon, including Beirut and other northern areas (Ibid). The duration of displacement has varied, ranging from temporary evacuations during peak hostilities to prolonged or even permanent displacement due to the destruction of homes and infrastructure. Displaced individuals have found shelter in a variety of settings, from makeshift shelters opened by local municipalities and overcrowded public buildings, to private homes offered by relatives or volunteers (Hayek and Alameddine 2023). Humanitarian assistance is provided by a combination of local NGOs, international organizations and UN agencies, although the response is frequently hampered by limited resources and the ongoing political and economic crises in Lebanon. Displacement continues to affect both citizens and refugees, with the latter group facing compounded vulnerabilities due to their pre-existing precarious status, lack of legal protections, and restricted access to services (Le Poidevin and Haddad 2023; Davis and el-Hreich 2023).

This paper explores the contemporary global trend of violence and displacement resulting from armed conflicts within sovereign states, often involving other states and sub-state groups. In these crossfire scenarios, civilians are no longer just collateral damage; they become direct targets or strategic tools for belligerents aiming to assert territorial control by preventing repopulation or cleansing regions of unwanted ethnic, religious, or political groups. This form of warfare has become increasingly prevalent from the last century to the present, yet comprehensive data and analysis remain lacking. One pertinent example is Israel's attacks on South Lebanon, which can be seen as an attempt to push Lebanese populations back and cleanse the border area of Lebanese presence. The use of white phosphorus in these attacks is a deliberate tactic to render these areas uninhabitable, targeting civilians with no real strategic military aim (Amnesty International 2023; Human Rights Watch

2023; Chehayeb 2024; Crawford 2024). This strategy aims to distance both Hezbollah and civilians from the border, allowing settlers on the Israeli side to return to the country's Northern region (Al Mayadeen English 2023, 2024; Middle East Monitor 2024). This deliberate targeting of civilians and their livelihoods contravenes international humanitarian law and highlights the need for stricter enforcement of UN resolutions, such as UN Resolution 1701, which calls for the cessation of hostilities and respect for the Blue Line between Lebanon and Israel (Murphy 2012; Dionigi 2014).

Despite the fact that IDPs outnumber refugees globally, the increased focus on the international refugee regime, marked by extensive codification of refugee rights in international law and numerous studies, has not extended to IDPs. Many of these studies emphasize the prolonged nature of refugee situations but fail to adequately address the plight of IDPs or codify their rights with the same rigor (Ahmad 2017; Ní Ghráinne 2021; Casalin 2023). This oversight leaves a significant gap in the international protection framework, resulting in insufficient legal safeguards and limited international attention for IDPs, who often face similar, if not greater, challenges compared to refugees. As such, the framework to address IDPs' specific protection and assistance needs is evolving, representing one of the most critical policy challenges in the humanitarian sector (Deng 2004; Fielden 2008; Ní Ghráinne 2022; Schimmel 2022). These factors underscore the focus of this research on IDPs in South Lebanon, a region plagued by forced population displacements due to prolonged, protracted and unresolved conflicts, and profoundly affected by political, social, and economic neglect (Norton and Schwedler 1993; Volk 2009; Fournier 2019). This situation is further complicated by a legacy of past displacements and double displacements intertwined with complex, and at times mixed, migration patterns at the national level (Le Poidevin and Haddad 2023; Rischke and Talebi 2021; Diab 2024; Diab and Skulte-Ouaiss 2024).

Too often, research overlooks sexual and gender minorities, treating their minority status in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity as secondary to other pressing humanitarian concerns. This oversight results in a significant lack of data on this population, leading to a deficiency in tailored programs

and policies. Against this backdrop, the study focuses on understanding how the convergence of sexual and gender minority identities with displacement impacts the overall well-being of these individuals, their survival strategies, and their further marginalization and isolation from various spaces and protection responses. Specifically, the research seeks to explore how the experiences of sexual and gender minority IDPs—often marginalized and overlooked in both national and international discussions—differ from those of the broader IDP population in Lebanon by elevating their visibility in discussions and actions related to armed conflict and forced migration.

Gender, Displacement, and Queerness in the Literature

The intersection of gender, displacement, and queerness in conflict settings is a complex and multifaceted area of study. Although it has garnered increasing attention in recent research, it remains largely absent from broader conversations around humanitarianism, protection, and the complexities of aid and development responses in times of conflict. Gender plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of displaced persons (Fouad et al. 2023; Diab 2021a; Diab et al. 2024). Numerous studies have shown that gender dynamics significantly influence the vulnerability, protection needs, and coping mechanisms of displaced individuals. Women and girls, for instance, are often at higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during displacement (Diab 2020a, 2020b; Daigle et al. 2023). They also face specific health, economic, and social challenges that differ from those of men (Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2012; Flegar and Iedema 2019; Cameron et al. 2021; Lwamba et al. 2022; Desalegn et al. 2023; Sachseder et al. 2024). Men, on the other hand, may experience different forms of vulnerability, such as forced recruitment into armed groups or the stigma associated with failing to protect their families — particularly when they do not fit into rigid patriarchal systems of heteronormativity and masculinity (Denov and Marchand 2014; Affleck et al. 2018; Clark et al. 2021; Turner 2021; Taggart et al. 2022; Palillo 2023; Blackwell et al. 2023). The gendered nature of displacement is thus well-documented, but the experiences of queer individuals are less frequently addressed in the literature. This gap

highlights the need for more inclusive research that encompasses the full spectrum of gender identities.

LGBTIQ+ individuals in conflict settings face unique challenges that are often exacerbated by their sexual orientation or gender identity (Moore and Barner 2017; Haghiri-Vijeh et al. 2022; Held 2023; Michelis 2023). The stigma and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people can be particularly severe in conflict zones, where social norms may be more rigid, and legal protections are often lacking or unenforced (Giametta and Havkin 2021; Bhagat 2023; García Rodríguez 2023; Venturi 2023; Carron and O'Keeffe 2023). Research indicates that LGBTIQ+ individuals are at higher risk of violence, including sexual violence, and may be targeted by armed groups, community members, and even family members (Alessi et al. 2021; Byström et al. 2023; Phillimore et al. 2023).

The literature also highlights the strategies that LGBTIQ+ individuals employ to navigate these hostile environments. These strategies often include concealment of their sexual orientation or gender identity, forming informal community support networks, and seeking assistance from "sympathetic" organizations (Vitikainen 2019; Beagan et al. 2022; Yarwood et al. 2022). However, these coping mechanisms come with significant psychological and emotional costs, including heightened stress, anxiety, and isolation (Messih 2017; White et al. 2019; Golembe et al. 2020; Nematy Namer, and Razum 2022; D'souza et al. 2022). Despite the recognized vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ+ individuals in conflict settings, humanitarian responses often fail to adequately address their specific needs (Barbelet and Wake 2020; Pincock 2021). Mainstream humanitarian programs frequently adopt a one-size-fits-all approach that overlooks the unique challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ persons. This oversight can result in inadequate protection, lack of access to essential services, and further marginalization (Chen 2024).

Several reports and studies advocate for more inclusive humanitarian practices. International organizations have called for the integration of LGBTIQ+ considerations into all aspects of humanitarian programing, from needs assessments to service delivery (Daigle and Myrttinen 2018; Shaw and Verghese 2022). Creating safe spaces and providing targeted support services for LGBTIQ+ individuals is emphasized as crucial (UNHCR and IOM 2021). Case studies from various conflict settings provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals and the effectiveness (and ineffectiveness) of different interventions (Lee and Brotman 2013; Nyanzi 2013; Brizuela et al. 2023; Tschalaer 2023). Research on refugees in Lebanon highlights the extreme levels of violence and discrimination faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals, as well as the critical role of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in providing support (Diab and Samneh 2024). Moreover, multiple studies underscore the importance of community-based approaches and the need for greater international support for local organizations (Allouche 2017; Greatrick 2019; Reda and Proudfoot 2021).

While there is a growing body of literature on gender, displacement, and queerness in conflict settings, significant gaps remain. One major gap is the lack of longitudinal studies that track the long-term impacts of displacement on LGBTIQ+ individuals. Additionally, there remains a need for more research on the intersectionality of different identities, such as how race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status intersect with gender and sexual orientation to shape experiences of displacement. Research is also lacking in evaluating the effectiveness of various interventions and identifying best practices for supporting LGBTIQ+ individuals in conflict settings.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates intersectionality theory, queer theory, and the human security paradigm to understand the unique experiences of LGBTIQ+ IDPs in South Lebanon. Intersectionality theory, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a lens to examine how various forms of social stratification, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, intersect and create unique experiences of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Carbado 2013; Smooth 2013; Rice et al. 2019; Kelly et al. 2021). In the context of this study, intersectionality is crucial for understanding how the overlapping identities of being LGBTIQ+ and an IDP affect individuals' experiences of displacement and conflict. This theory helps to highlight the compounded discrimination and vulnerabilities

faced by LGBTIQ+ IDPs, who are marginalized not only because of their sexual orientation and gender identity but also due to their displacement status.

Queer theory challenges normative constructions of sexuality and gender, advocating for a broader understanding of these identities beyond binary frameworks (Minton 1997; Watson 2005; Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 2009; Compton et al. 2018). This perspective is essential for this study, as it allows for the exploration of the diverse and fluid identities within the LGBTIQ+ community. Queer theory also critiques the heteronormative assumptions often embedded in humanitarian policies and practices, emphasizing the need for more inclusive approaches that recognize and address the specific needs of sexual and gender minorities (Quintero and Hari 2022; Bhagat 2023). By applying queer theory, this study seeks to question and deconstruct the normative frameworks that often exclude LGBTIQ+ individuals from adequate protection and support during displacement.

The human security paradigm shifts the focus from traditional state-centric security concerns to the safety and well-being of individuals. It encompasses various dimensions of security, including economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security (Owens and Arneil 1999; Paris 2001; Waisová 2003; Tadjbakhsh 2008; Gazizullin 2016). For LGBTIQ+ IDPs, the human security approach is particularly relevant as it underscores the importance of ensuring their safety from violence, discrimination, and deprivation (Makofane et al. 2014). This paradigm supports the argument that security measures should be inclusive of all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and should address the specific threats and vulnerabilities they face.

By integrating these theories, the study aims to provide insight into the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ IDPs in South Lebanon. Intersectionality theory helps to capture the multifaceted nature of their identities and the intersecting forms of oppression they encounter. Queer theory offers a critical lens to examine the shortcomings of current humanitarian responses and advocates for more inclusive policies. The human security paradigm emphasizes the necessity of protecting the fundamental rights and well-being of LGBTIQ+ IDPs, highlighting the broader implications of displacement on their lives.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the intersectionality of armed conflict, displacement, and sexual and gender identity, with a specific focus on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ IDPs from South Lebanon amidst the ongoing armed conflict. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of the LGBTIQ+ community affected by internal displacement. The study targeted individuals who self-identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community and have experienced displacement due to the conflict in South Lebanon. Recruitment was facilitated through collaboration with local NGOs and community groups that support LGBTIQ+ individuals. A total of 18 participants were selected for the study, ensuring a balance of gender identities, sexual orientations, and displacement experiences to the extent possible. Participants were either Lebanese, Syrian, or Palestinian who were either still displaced in South Lebanon, or made it to Beirut.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2023 and March 2024. The interviews, lasting 60–90 minutes, were guided by a protocol covering themes like displacement, identity, resilience, discrimination, and community support. Conducted in private settings for confidentiality, the interviews were in Arabic or English, based on participant preference. In light of security concerns and access to some participants that were outside Beirut, several interviews were conducted online. Transcriptions underwent thematic and narrative analysis. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports.

This study's research cohort, while providing valuable insights, is subject to several limitations. The small sample size of 18 participants, selected through purposive sampling in collaboration with local NGOs, while aiming for diversity in terms of gender identities, sexual orientations, and displacement experiences, may not fully capture the broad spectrum of experiences within the LGBTIQ+ IDP community in South Lebanon. The recruitment process, reliant on self-identification and connections with NGOs, may introduce selection bias, as those engaged with these organizations might differ from others in the community who remain more hidden or

isolated. Additionally, accessing this highly marginalized and often invisible population was particularly challenging, especially in the context of ongoing armed conflict, further constraining the sample size and diversity. The sensitive nature of the subject matter might also lead to underreporting or discomfort during interviews, potentially affecting the depth and accuracy of the data collected. As such, the findings should be considered indicative rather than definitive, with their applicability limited to the specific context of this study. Existing literature on LGBTIQ+ experiences in conflict and displacement settings can help provide additional context, but further research with a larger and more varied cohort is necessary to validate and expand upon these findings.

It is important to clarify that, for the purposes of this study, the term "IDPs" encompasses not only Lebanese nationals displaced within their own country but also Syrians and Palestinians who, while already refugees in Lebanon, have experienced secondary displacement due to the ongoing armed conflict in South Lebanon. This approach acknowledges the complex realities of displacement, where individuals who have already sought refuge in Lebanon face further displacement within its borders. By including Syrians and Palestinians under the IDP category, this study aims to highlight the fluidity and overlap between the identities of "refugee" and "IDP," recognizing that these categories are not always distinct in practice. This perspective also allows for a more nuanced understanding of the compounded vulnerabilities faced by individuals who navigate multiple layers of displacement and marginalization. Consequently, this study challenges the often rigid separation between "refugee" and "IDP" categories, emphasizing the need for more flexible and inclusive frameworks that better reflect the lived experiences of those affected by conflict and displacement.

Findings

The findings of this study are framed against a backdrop of significant challenges in accessing the LGBTIQ+ IDP community, primarily due to their desire to remain invisible and the inherent difficulties in reaching such a marginalized group. LGBTIQ+ IDPs often strive to conceal their identities to avoid further persecution and discrimination, making it challenging for researchers and humanitarian organizations to gather comprehensive data (Frary 2019; Byström et al. 2023). This invisibility is a protective mechanism, reflecting the community's acute vulnerability in conflict and displacement settings (Beagan et al. 2022). Despite these challenges, the study has uncovered critical insights into the unique experiences and needs of LGBTIQ+ IDPs, highlighting their heightened vulnerability, the lack of tailored support, and their remarkable resilience. The following sections detail these findings, offering a nuanced understanding of the struggles and survival strategies of this underrepresented group.

Heightened Vulnerability and Self-Isolation

Interviews highlight the acute challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ IDPs in South Lebanon, illustrating their heightened vulnerability and isolation in comparison to the broader IDP population—whether this isolation is a survival strategy they employ themselves or a condition perpetuated by societal forces. The experiences of these individuals reveal a complex landscape of discrimination and violence, exacerbating their already precarious situations. More than half of participants reported encountering discrimination and violence from various sources, including external actors such as armed groups, local authorities, and sometimes even humanitarian workers, who may harbor prejudices or lack sensitivity toward LGBTIQ+ issues. Such external hostility manifests in physical violence, verbal abuse, and other forms of mistreatment. Unfortunately, the discrimination does not end with external threats. Within their own displaced communities, LGBTIQ+ IDPs share that they face prejudice and exclusion from their peers — even in the ongoing situation of heightened insecurity perpetuated by the ongoing armed conflict. This internal community discrimination is particularly insidious, as it comes from those who are also experiencing displacement and hardship, yet still perpetuate exclusionary practices. This is not an isolated example of gender-exclusionary practices within refugee communities in Lebanon (Diab and Samneh 2024; Diab et al. 2024). A Syrian study participant explains:

Imagine being a Syrian from South Lebanon, now internally displaced alongside Lebanese citizens. You are already not a priority for local authorities and receive less sympathy from the 'anti-refugee' host community. Now, add being a gay Syrian refugee man in a conservative community that excludes you for your gender. Even international humanitarian staff are often homophobic locals. Where do I find a safe space? As queer refugees, we have learned to conceal parts of our identity to survive and access support amid this tragedy –but then again, we've always concealed ourselves to survive. (Gay male, age 37, South Lebanon, November 2023)

This dual layer of marginalization, as well as the queer refugee community's own self-perception around hierarchies of vulnerability within their own identities, results in severe social and psychological impacts (Diab and Samneh 2024). According to testimonies, this reflects both individual and community-wide perceptions. These hierarchies often stem from the intersection of various factors such as gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, and legal status, which influence how members of the queer refugee community perceive and prioritize their vulnerabilities. These perceptions can affect social networks by creating informal support structures that may prioritize certain identities over others, impacting help-seeking behaviors and access to resources (Diab et al. 2024). Additionally, these hierarchies can influence mental health, as individuals who perceive themselves as more vulnerable may experience heightened stress, anxiety, or feelings of marginalization within their own community (Fouad et al. 2021).

The compounded discrimination leads to significant social isolation. As such, across all interviews, findings reiterate that LGBTIQ+ IDPs are ostracized by both the host communities and their fellow displaced individuals, leaving them without a support network. Furthermore, the fear of discrimination often prevents LGBTIQ+ IDPs from accessing essential services, such as healthcare, legal assistance, and psychosocial support — particularly amid the ongoing conflict. This exclusion is not only due to direct hostility but also because of a lack of trust in perceivably "non-queer friendly" service providers' ability to protect their privacy and respect their identities (Diab et al. 2024). A Lebanese study participant elaborates:

Fear of exposure is terrifying for us as queer people in the South, especially in areas controlled by certain hyper 'religious' and conservative armed groups. Although we hide it, others' mistakes often expose us, even humanitarian actors. Being branded as queer here is very scary. Outed individuals face restricted access to municipality shelters and safe spaces, or are told to seek help from inaccessible 'gay organizations in Beirut'. I cannot begin to tell you about the toll of all of this on our mental health amid these incredibly insecure and stressful times. It is too dangerous for me to go back to my apartment at the moment; our building has been bombed twice. (Gay male, age 28, South Lebanon, November 2023)

The consequences of this heightened vulnerability and marginalization are profound. Isolated and without support, LGBTIQ+ IDPs are more susceptible to exploitation, including sexual exploitation (Zouhairy 2022; Kassir 2023; Heidari et al. 2024). The constant threat of violence and the experience of persistent discrimination was found to have contributed to severe mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Orr et al. 2019). A Syrian participant shares:

[. . .] I needed to leave the South. I was outed by my brother in a moment of rage –we had just lost a family member to an airstrike. My family threatened to physically harm me so I left our family home early on in the conflict. It is now completely destroyed, and my family members are at a local NGO-run shelter in a neighboring town. To leave the South I hitchhiked to Beirut. I had very little financial resources, resorted to performing a sexual act on one of the men who picked me up. He then kicked me out of his car at least an hour and a half walking distance outside of Beirut. I made it there eventually, completely disheveled. By the time I arrived, I was completely depressed, anxious and humiliated. Yes, the numbers are important, but our individual traumas are something that will never be unpacked. We are people. The measures we have resorted to in order to flee for our lives often take place with limited humanitarian resources, and absolutely no government resources. (Gay male, age 26, South Lebanon, December 2023)

The exploration of heightened vulnerability and self-isolation among LGBTIQ+ IDPs underscores the complex interplay of external threats and internal community dynamics, paving the way to examine

how these factors further entrench their marginalization and impede access to essential services.

Lack of Tailored Support and Services

A significant gap was found to exist in the availability of tailored support and services for LGBTIQ+ IDPs who are currently present inside and outside South Lebanon. This gap is evident in several key areas, all of which are crucial for the well-being and protection of LGBTIQ+ individuals facing displacement. Participants consistently highlighted the absence of safe spaces, mental health services, and legal assistance specifically designed to cater to their needs. This deficiency in tailored support significantly impacts their ability to access necessary resources and protection. The absence of safe spaces is particularly detrimental, as they are essential for LGBTIQ+ IDPs as an environment where they can express their identities without fear of discrimination or violence (Nagle 2022). Such spaces offer not only physical safety but also a sense of community and belonging, which is often missing in the broader displaced population — and even more so in South Lebanon. As such, queer friendly humanitarian actors have long-formed lifelines for LGBTIQ+ individuals in Lebanon's southern regions. With the ongoing armed conflict however, and escalating security situation, many of these Beirut-based organizations have lost all access to their beneficiaries in the South due in part to beneficiaries' ongoing movements to different regions, as well as the physical inability of many organizations to reach regions of the South that are closer to the borders due to the danger this could pose on their staff and volunteers. A Syrian participant shares:

> [. . .] Queer-friendly and gender-focused humanitarian organizations from Beirut used to come to the South for many years, providing services, support, food parcels, cash assistance, and psychosocial support. We would gather in safe spaces to meet, converse, and feel a sense of belonging. Now, we have lost their presence. They can no longer come here, and remote support is not the same. Many queer men I know have lost access to HIV meds, contraception, and safe check-ups. These were the only spaces where this could happen. (Lesbian female, age 31, South Lebanon, December 2023)

Mental health services tailored to the needs of LGBTIQ+ IDPs were also found to be notably lacking. At least two thirds of participants reported experiencing severe mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and trauma, often as a direct result of their displacement and the discrimination they face. According to testimonies, mainstream mental health services being provided for IDPs in South Lebanon presently, continue to fail to address the specific experiences and challenges of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Moreover, mainstream humanitarian programs were found to overlook or inadequately address the unique vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ+ IDPs. This lack of targeted intervention has led to significant gaps in service provision, leaving LGBTIQ+ individuals at a disadvantage compared to their peers. This is particularly pronounced for trans women, who remain unable to access shelters for women, while also being denied access in family shelters (Diab 2024). A Syrian participant who identifies as a trans woman explains:

> [. . .] I am a trans refugee woman from Syria, living in a small village in South Lebanon. I have survived alone for years doing cleaning work and odd jobs. When my already run down home was bombed in mid-November, I sought refuge in women's shelters but was verbally abused, misgendered, and violently turned away. I am also unwelcome in family shelters and unsafe in male-dominated ones. Currently, I am hiding with a group of migrant domestic workers in an apartment further from the border. They are kind, but this is not sustainable. (Trans woman, age 33, South Lebanon, January 2023).

These findings vividly illustrate the dire consequences of the absence of tailored support and services, leaving LGBTIQ+ IDPs in South Lebanon increasingly vulnerable, isolated, and forced to navigate survival in environments that are often hostile and devoid of essential resources.

Survival Strategies and Resilience

Despite the numerous challenges they face, LGBTIQ+ IDPs were found to demonstrate remarkable resilience and employ a variety of survival strategies to navigate their difficult circumstances. These strategies, in their own words, are "a testament to the

community's strength and resourcefulness," yet they also highlight the critical need for more formalized support systems that can adequately address their specific needs. One of the primary survival strategies employed by LGBTIQ+ IDPs is the formation of informal support networks within the LGBTIQ+ community. These networks provide a sense of solidarity and mutual assistance, offering emotional support, and practical help in times of need. Through these networks, individuals have shared information about safe spaces, resources, and services, creating a lifeline in environments where formal support is often lacking. These informal communities, albeit scarce and fragmented, were found to be crucial for the psychological well-being of LGBTIQ+ IDPs, as they provide a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation. On the role of informal networks, a Palestinian participant from Syria elaborates:

> [. . .] We have an informal WhatsApp group where we share updates about health services, meetups, queer-friendly spaces, and support for queer people in the South needing to flee or find transport and safe spaces in Beirut. We often delete these groups for safety, but they are helpful. We connected through Beirut-based organizations. Sometimes, the groups are used for socialization or finding places to sleep, meals, or hideouts. At one point, there were more than 100 participants in one of the groups I was in. (Lesbian female, age 36, South Lebanon, January 2023)

Seeking assistance from what participants describe as "sympathetic" local, smaller NGOs was found to be another key strategy. Even though these organizations lack specific knowledge about LGBTIQ+ needs and priorities, their in-depth understanding of the local context coupled with their human-rights based approaches make them "safe to seek out for urgent requests" according to multiple respondents. They offer support such as legal advice, medical care, and safe housing allowance where possible, and "do not discriminate" even if their approaches are perceived to be "a little too homogenized and less targeted than they should be" according to testimonies. By forging connections with these NGOs, LGBTIQ+ IDPs are able to access resources and support that would otherwise be unavailable through larger, mainstream humanitarian programs. A Lebanese respondent explains:

> [. . .] larger humanitarian actors skip over us a lot –there are multiple reasons for that which I will not get into. However, we have found that smaller grassroots NGOs that work on 'human rights' accept us all, and don't get into specifics. While sometimes you want them to, because let's face it, as a trans man I have needs that are very different to those of a cis gender straight man, I appreciate at least that they adopt a welcoming approach and do not isolate anyone. Although it is limited, they do what they can. Many of us have received support that way. Some cash, and even some food and places to sleep. In short, there could be more done, but they do enough. (Trans man, age 34, South Lebanon, January 2023)

As discussed, many LGBTIQ+ IDPs conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity as a survival strategy (Frary 2019; Byström et al. 2023). While often necessary to avoid persecution and violence, this approach carries significant psychological and emotional costs. Concealment can lead to a profound sense of disconnection and internal conflict, as individuals hide a core aspect of their identity (Beagan et al. 2022). Despite these challenges, navigating hostile environments through concealment demonstrates remarkable adaptability and resilience. However, interviews reveal that the nuances associated with this ability — particularly the fact that the difficulty of concealing queerness varies significantly depending on one's position on the gender spectrum and type of expression. Gay men, for example, were found to face particular challenges in accessing shelters. Testimonies indicate that many gay men have been turned away from shelters set up by local municipalities, highlighting a severe gap in inclusive shelter policies. On the other hand, lesbian and bisexual women who present as "femme" or are perceived as heterosexual did not report the same level of difficulty when attempting to access shelters. This discrepancy underscores the varying degrees of visibility and acceptance within the LGBTIQ+ community, affecting the extent to which individuals experience discrimination (Diab and Samneh 2024). A Syrian participant elaborates:

> [. . .] of course we conceal our gender and sexual orientation. It is easier for some of us than for others though. As a femme-presenting lesbian woman, I slip through the cracks. I do not look like what our society 'thinks' a lesbian should look like –more masculine,

more butch, doesn't wear heels or lipstick. So when I come to a women's shelter, I have less of an issue than say my trans or more masc-presenting friends. For gay men, more feminine men have a challenge concealing their gender identity as well –whereby a more masc-presenting gay man can lie through his teeth about his gender or sexual preferences. Again, this is because we challenge the uninformed 'typical view' of what a gay person looks like or how they conduct themselves. I stayed at a women's shelter for four months with no issues at all. I watched many of my friends get turned away. (Lesbian female, age 40, South Lebanon, January 2023)

The resilience and adaptive strategies employed by LGBTIQ+ IDPs highlight the stark inequalities within their community, where certain individuals can navigate hostile environments more easily than others, underscoring the urgent need for more inclusive and targeted support mechanisms.

Barriers to Accessing Protection and Assistance

LGBTIQ+ IDPs face numerous barriers in accessing protection and assistance as the armed conflict at the border persists, including fear of discrimination, lack of awareness about available services, and mistrust of authorities and service providers. One of the primary barriers is the pervasive fear of discrimination. Many LGBTIQ+ IDPs have experienced stigma and mistreatment in the past, which makes them hesitant to seek help from mainstream humanitarian organizations (El Hajj 2023). This fear is not unfounded; instances of prejudice and bias from service providers are reportedly "well-documented and common knowledge" among community members according to study participants. Discriminatory practices often create a fear among LGBTIQ+ IDPs that seeking help could expose them to more harm or discrimination, leading to further marginalization. Consequently, many choose to hide their identities and gender-specific health needs as a survival strategy. However, as the need for protection and assistance becomes more urgent, maintaining this self-invisibility becomes increasingly challenging, as it conflicts with their need to access essential support. A Syrian participant elaborates:

Before this last armed conflict, we could make ourselves invisible. We never wanted this much attention. The conflict has forced us to scramble for help and essentially 'come back out' into society —pun intended. We led quiet lives, kept to ourselves, and had our networks and safe spaces. It took years to achieve that level of privacy and comfort. Now, the conflict thrusts us into the spotlight, only for us to be rejected again by humanitarian and government actors. It's humiliating. We did not need this. We did not ask for this. We just wanted to be left alone. (Trans man, age 26, South Lebanon, January 2023)

The findings highlight the critical importance of queer-friendly humanitarian networks and spaces in supporting LGBTIQ+ IDPs. Participants who had access to these networks reported feeling safer and more supported, both emotionally and materially. Once they reached Beirut, queer-friendly NGOs and community groups provided essential services such as counseling, legal assistance, and safe housing. These organizations also facilitated the formation of informal support networks, allowing LGBTIQ+ IDPs to connect with others facing similar challenges, which significantly alleviated feelings of isolation and marginalization.

Another significant barrier to accessing protection and assistance is the lack of awareness about available services. The majority of participants interviewed insisted that LGBTIQ+ IDPs are not informed about the support systems and resources that could assist them, largely due to the "quiet" and "distanced" lives they lead, relying primarily on queer-friendly organizations based in Beirut for their community-specific needs. This lack of information, as well as lack of familiarity with the humanitarian landscape of South Lebanon, is often due to poor outreach and communication by humanitarian organizations, which fail to tailor their messaging to the specific needs and circumstances of LGBTIQ+ individuals — and a "neglected" South Lebanon in general (Norton and Schwedler 1993; Volk 2009; Fournier 2019). Based on participant testimonies, this is also due to their deliberate disengagement from mainstream humanitarian programing which they perceived as "exclusionary" and "unhelpful." Without knowledge of where to find safe shelters, legal aid, or mental health services, LGBTIQ+ IDPs

are left without crucial support that could improve their situation. A Syrian-Lebanese respondent shares:

> [. . .] We never thought local NGOs, municipalities, or even larger humanitarian actors in the South could do anything for us. As a community that preferred to stay under the radar, we created strong networks for support and services with queer-friendly organizations in Beirut, relying on them for years. Now, however, they cannot reach us. We are being thrust into humanitarian spaces where we know we are unwelcome and where support is inadequate. While some community members who are straight-passing, such as femme-presenting queer women and masc-presenting gay men, have been able to slip through the cracks, this is not the case for all of us. For our trans brothers and sisters, the complexities are even greater. (Gay male, age 37, South Lebanon, March 2023)

The persistent barriers to accessing protection and assistance, combined with the lack of awareness and mistrust toward mainstream services, exacerbate the vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ IDPs, leaving many without the critical support they need in an increasingly hostile environment.

Differences in Experiences Based on Nationality

The study reveals distinct differences in experiences between LGBTIQ+ IDPs based on their nationality. LGBTIQ+ IDPs who are already displaced refugees, such as Syrians or Palestinians, were found to face compounded discrimination and marginalization due to their dual status as both refugees and sexual/gender minorities. These individuals reported facing harsher living conditions, greater difficulty accessing services, and more significant social exclusion. In contrast, Lebanese LGBTIQ+ IDPs, while also experiencing severe challenges, describe having a somewhat different set of experiences. Being part of the host community, they describe navigating the complexities of displacement within a socio-cultural context that they are more familiar with, while still facing significant stigmatization and legal challenges due to their sexual orientation or gender identity nonetheless. These differences underscore the need for nuanced approaches in addressing the needs of LGBTIQ+ IDPs from various national backgrounds.

A Lebanese participant sheds light on these intersections:

> [. . .] our Syrian and Palestinian brothers and sisters within the queer community are facing much larger hurdles than us. Many of them don't have families here, parents or support systems. Again, even though it is extremely tough for us as Lebanese queer IDPs, their experiences have so many more dimensions of vulnerability to them. They have refugee vs. host dynamics to navigate alongside their gender identities and sexual orientations. By the mere fact of being refugees they are unable to access some shelters. Their vulnerability and ours is shared, but also, varying in degree based on legal status. Our society is exclusionary on so many levels, and for so many reasons, that when it comes to people who fit into more than one vulnerability category, their experiences are unspeakable. (Gay male, age 41, South Lebanon, March 2023)

The compounded challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ refugees highlight the intersection of their marginalized identities, intensifying their struggle for survival and access to services. This stark contrast in experiences based on nationality emphasizes the need for tailored interventions that address the unique vulnerabilities of each group within the broader LGBTIQ+ IDP community.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The findings of this study illuminate the acute challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ IDPs, framed against a backdrop of significant obstacles in accessing this marginalized community. The desire of LGBTIQ+ IDPs to remain invisible and the inherent difficulties in reaching them have made it challenging for researchers and humanitarian organizations to gather comprehensive data. This invisibility serves as a protective mechanism, reflecting the community's layered vulnerability in conflict and displacement settings. Despite these challenges, the study has uncovered critical insights into the unique experiences and needs of LGBTIQ+ IDPs, highlighting the complex interplay between displacement, sexual and gender identity, and the broader socio-political context of ongoing conflict. By examining these

issues through the lens of intersectionality theory, queer theory, and the human security paradigm, this study not only uncovers specific vulnerabilities but also challenges prevailing humanitarian approaches that often overlook the unique needs of this marginalized group.

One of the most surprising and significant findings is the difference in inclusivity between small local human rights NGOs and large international humanitarian organizations (INGOs). While mainstream INGOs often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, small local NGOs have shown a greater capacity for inclusivity, particularly toward LGBTIQ+ individuals. This inclusivity can be attributed to the grassroots nature of these organizations, which allows them to be more attuned to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of marginalized groups within their communities. Despite their limited resources, these NGOs demonstrate a deeper understanding of the local context and a commitment to human rights that larger INGOs, with their more bureaucratic structures and standardized procedures, often lack. This finding underscores the importance of supporting and strengthening local NGOs, which play a crucial role in filling the gaps left by larger humanitarian actors. This also aligns with queer theory's critique of normative frameworks that often exclude sexual and gender minorities from adequate protection and support, highlighting the need for more targeted and inclusive humanitarian responses.

The data also reveals the alarming risk of sexual exploitation faced by LGBTIQ+ IDPs, a form of violence that is exacerbated by their marginalized status and the lack of tailored support services. The intersection of sexual orientation, gender identity, and displacement status creates a perfect storm of vulnerability, making LGBTIQ+ individuals particularly susceptible to exploitation. This finding aligns with the human security paradigm, which emphasizes the need to protect individuals from violence, discrimination, and deprivation. The risk of sexual exploitation is not only a grave violation of human rights but also a significant barrier to accessing essential services and support, as the fear of exploitation or stigmatization may prevent LGBTIQ+ IDPs from seeking help. This calls for more robust protection mechanisms and targeted interventions to address the specific risks faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals in conflict settings.

The study highlights the particular vulnerability of trans individuals compared to other LGBQI+ persons. Trans individuals face unique challenges, including being turned away from shelters and services that are not designed to accommodate their needs. The intersectionality theory is particularly relevant here, as it helps to explain how multiple forms of discrimination—based on gender identity, sexual orientation, and displacement status—compound the difficulties faced by trans individuals. Their exclusion from both male and female spaces reflects a broader societal rejection of non-binary and gender-nonconforming identities, which is exacerbated in times of conflict and displacement. This finding calls for a critical reassessment of humanitarian shelter policies and the need for safe spaces that are truly inclusive of all gender identities. The experiences of trans individuals also challenge the normative assumptions embedded in many humanitarian programs, which often fail to recognize and address the diverse needs of the LGBTIQ+ community.

Another key finding is the intersectionality of multiple displacements for Syrian and Palestinian refugees who are also IDPs within Lebanon. These individuals experience compounded vulnerabilities due to their dual status as both refugees and sexual/gender minorities. The intersection of nationality, legal status, and sexual and gender identity creates layers of discrimination and marginalization that are distinct from those experienced by Lebanese LGBTIQ+ IDPs. This highlights the need for nuanced approaches that consider the specific contexts and intersectional identities of displaced individuals. The human security paradigm, with its emphasis on the safety and well-being of individuals, underscores the importance of addressing these compounded vulnerabilities in a holistic manner. The study reveals that Syrian and Palestinian LGBTIQ+ IDPs face greater difficulties in accessing services, securing safe spaces, and finding support networks compared to their Lebanese counterparts. This differential treatment reflects broader societal and structural inequalities that are exacerbated in times of conflict and displacement.

In light of these findings, it is clear that a rethinking of humanitarian strategies is needed—one that not only recognizes the diversity within displaced populations but also actively works to dismantle the structural barriers that exacerbate their vulnerabilities. By prioritizing inclusive, context-sensitive interventions, humanitarian efforts can better support the safety, dignity, and resilience of LGBTIQ+ individuals in conflict zones, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of protection and human rights.

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ORCID iD

Jasmin Lilian Diab https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4158-7728

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