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A Beirut blast: how inclusive disaster management for refugees and hosts reassembled a community in a disintegrated city

Jasmin Lilian Diab 

ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the Beirut Port explosion, LGBT+ NGOs in Lebanon emerged as pillars of unity and support, particularly for women in all their diversity (WITD) and gender minorities in both refugee and host communities. These NGOs swiftly pivoted towards disaster management, prioritising risk mitigation and rapid emergency response strategies amid the chaos. Their immediate focus was on providing safe havens and inclusive support networks for vulnerable groups, recognising and addressing the unique vulnerabilities faced by WITD and gender minorities affected by the blast. By leveraging their networks and expertise, these NGOs created spaces that transcended societal barriers, ensuring equal access to crucial resources regardless of gender identity, orientation, or nationality. Collaborating actively with humanitarian agencies and other stakeholders, these entities emphasised intersectionality in their relief efforts. This approach enabled them to fill gaps in assistance and prioritise marginalised individuals who faced compounded challenges due to their gender identity, sexual orientation, and refugee status. Beyond immediate humanitarian aid, these organisations invested significantly in long-term disaster preparedness and risk reduction. The proactive approach of these LGBT+ organisations exemplifies a commitment to integrating inclusivity and diversity at every stage of disaster management and emergency response. Against the backdrop of Lebanon's failure to integrate refugees and gender minorities into the country's broader cultural and societal identity, this paper draws on qualitative interviews with these NGOs and their constituencies to critique conventional notions of resilience, arguing instead that for marginalised groups, the event of the disaster is not singular. Consequently, resilience must be understood as the capacity to navigate and withstand multiple ongoing adversities that are disproportionately both felt and addressed.

KEYWORDS

intersectionality; LGBT+; refugees; inclusivity; disaster management

Après l'explosion survenue dans le port de Beyrouth, les ONG LGBT+ du Liban sont devenues des piliers de l'unité et du soutien, en particulier pour les femmes dans toute leur diversité (FdLD) et les minorités de genre, tant dans les communautés de réfugiés que dans les communautés d'accueil. Ces ONG se sont rapidement tournées vers la gestion des catastrophes, en accordant la priorité à l'atténuation des risques et aux stratégies de réponse rapide aux situations d'urgence dans un contexte chaotique. Elles se sont immédiatement attachées à fournir des refuges sûrs et à créer des réseaux de soutien inclusifs pour les groupes vulnérables, en reconnaissant et en prenant en compte les vulnérabilités particulières auxquelles étaient confrontées

les FdLD et les minorités de genre touchées par l'explosion. En s'appuyant sur leurs réseaux et leur savoir-faire, ces ONG ont créé des espaces qui transcendaient les barrières sociétales, garantissant un accès égal aux ressources cruciales, indépendamment de l'identité de genre, de l'orientation sexuelle ou de la nationalité. Collaborant activement avec des organisations humanitaires et d'autres parties prenantes, ces entités ont mis l'accent sur l'intersectionnalité dans leurs efforts de secours. Cette approche leur a permis de combler les lacunes de l'assistance et de donner la priorité aux personnes marginalisées qui étaient confrontées à des difficultés encore plus grandes en raison de leur identité de genre, de leur orientation sexuelle et de leur statut de réfugié. Au-delà de l'aide humanitaire immédiate, ces organisations ont fait des investissements considérables dans la préparation aux catastrophes et la réduction des risques à long terme. L'approche proactive de ces organisations LGBT+ témoigne d'un engagement à intégrer l'inclusivité et la diversité à chaque étape de la gestion des catastrophes et des interventions dans les situations d'urgence. Dans le contexte de l'échec du Liban à intégrer les réfugiés et les minorités de genre dans l'identité culturelle et sociétale plus large du pays, ce document se sert d'entretiens qualitatifs menés avec ces ONG et leurs groupes constituants pour critiquer les notions conventionnelles de résilience, en faisant plutôt valoir que, pour les groupes marginalisés, l'événement de la catastrophe n'est pas unique. Par conséquent, la résilience doit être comprise comme la capacité à négocier et à résister à de multiples adversités qui se poursuivent et qui sont tant ressenties que gérées de manière disproportionnée.

Tras la explosión ocurrida en el puerto de Beirut, las ONG que agrupan a colectivos LGBT+ de Líbano, tanto en las comunidades de refugiados como de acogida, operaron como pilares de unidad y apoyo, especialmente para las mujeres en toda su diversidad (WiTD, siglas en inglés de Women in all Their Diversity) y para las minorías de género. Con agilidad, estas ONG reorientaron sus actividades hacia la gestión de catástrofes, priorizando la mitigación de riesgos y las estrategias de respuesta rápida de emergencia en medio del caos. Inmediatamente se centraron en proporcionar refugios seguros y redes de apoyo incluyentes a los grupos vulnerables, reconociendo y abordando las vulnerabilidades específicas enfrentadas por las WiTD y las minorías de género afectadas por la explosión. Aprovechando sus redes y su experiencia, estas ONG crearon espacios que trascendieron las barreras sociales, para garantizar la igualdad de acceso a recursos cruciales con independencia de la identidad de género, la orientación sexual o la nacionalidad. Asimismo, mediante la colaboración activa con organismos humanitarios y otros actores, enfatizaron la interseccionalidad en sus esfuerzos de apoyo. Dicho enfoque les permitió subsanar lagunas en la asistencia y priorizar a las personas marginadas que hacían frente a problemas agravados por su identidad de género, orientación sexual y condición de refugiadas. Más allá de la ayuda humanitaria inmediata, estas organizaciones LGBT+ invirtieron significativamente en la preparación a largo plazo y en la reducción del riesgo de catástrofes. Su enfoque proactivo ejemplifica el compromiso de integrar la inclusión y la diversidad en todas las fases de la gestión de catástrofes y la respuesta ante emergencias. Teniendo como telón de fondo el fracaso de las autoridades libanesas a la hora de integrar a los refugiados y a las minorías de género en la identidad cultural y social más amplia del país, este artículo se apoya en entrevistas cualitativas con estas ONG y sus beneficiarios para

sustentar una crítica a las nociones convencionales de resiliencia; en su lugar argumenta que, para los grupos marginados, el acontecimiento de una catástrofe no es singular. En consecuencia, la resiliencia debe entenderse como la capacidad de navegar y soportar múltiples adversidades continuas que dichos grupos sienten y deben afrontar de forma desproporcionada.

Introduction

The ground shook. The dust settled. Then they saw us. (Beirut, April 2021)

The Beirut Port explosion (also referred to as the Beirut blast) of 4 August 2020 stands as one of the most catastrophic events in Lebanon and the world's recent history (Helou et al. 2022). The explosion, the largest ever non-nuclear blast, devastated the port area and adjacent neighbourhoods, leaving behind a scene of utter destruction in a city already teetering on the brink (*ibid.*). Alongside grappling with the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lebanon's socioeconomic and political standing was precarious; as such, the explosion exacerbated existing vulnerabilities (El Daif, Shuayb, and Maalouf 2021; Obeid and Saad 2022; Oxfam 2021). The human cost was staggering: close to 200 lives lost, thousands injured, and hundreds of thousands displaced (El Zahran et al. 2022; Hajjar et al. 2021; Miller 2023). Beyond the physical devastation, the blast inflicted deep psychological wounds, leaving a population grappling with widespread trauma and an ongoing absence of closure (Al Hariri et al. 2022; El Hajj 2023; El Khoury et al. 2022; El-Hajj 2023; El Zouki et al. 2022), as investigations into the explosion remain hindered by political and sectarian corruption (Mroue and Jo 2023), as well as a rampant culture of impunity. Marginalised communities, including refugees, women in all their diversity (WiTD), and gender minorities, faced a disproportionate burden in the aftermath (El Daif, Shuayb, and Maalouf 2021; Jahshan 2021).

Lebanon hosts one of the largest per capita populations of refugees in the world, primarily from Syria and Palestine. Refugees often live in precarious conditions, with limited access to employment, health care, and education. This situation fosters a sense of competition for resources, exacerbating social tensions and marginalisation. The Beirut Port explosion devastated a significant portion of the city, including neighbourhoods with a dense population of refugees and marginalised communities. Beirut, being a city with a diverse demographic, houses a considerable number of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, along with migrant workers from various countries. These groups often reside in economically disadvantaged areas, making them particularly vulnerable to disasters. The affected neighbourhoods included Karantina, Gemmayzeh, and Mar Mikhael, which are known for their mixed populations of Lebanese citizens and refugees living in close quarters. Understanding the host-refugee dynamics in Beirut is crucial for comprehending the challenges faced by these groups.

Lebanon's failure and deliberate refusal to integrate refugees and gender minorities into its broader cultural and societal identity stem from a complex interplay of political, social, and historical factors (Moussawi 2017; Nassar and Stel 2019; Stel 2020). The

country's sectarian power-sharing system, deeply entrenched political elites, and fragile national identity have contributed to a hostile environment for integration efforts – particularly, the integration of perceivably non-conforming identities (Diab and Samneh 2024; Diab and Skulte-Ouaiss 2024b). The Lebanese government's reluctance to implement inclusive policies and initiatives reflects a broader strategy of maintaining the status quo and preserving the existing power dynamics (Bahout 2016). By sidelining refugees and gender minorities, the government perpetuates divisions within society, using them as convenient scapegoats for broader socioeconomic challenges and political unrest (Diab 2023a; Hourany 2022).

Moreover, some feminist and women-focused organisations in Lebanon have tended to prioritise the needs of cisgender, heterosexual Lebanese women, often overlooking the unique challenges faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT+) women and refugee women. This exclusionary feminist practice is rooted in broader societal prejudices and a lack of intersectional awareness. Feminist organisations that adopt this approach justify their exclusionary practices by arguing that other NGOs specifically cater to LGBT+ and refugee communities, thereby absolving themselves of the responsibility to address the needs of these marginalised groups. This lack of inclusivity further marginalises WiTD and queer refugees, particularly in times of crisis, when their specific vulnerabilities are amplified.

On another level, sectarian tensions and geopolitical complexities exacerbate Lebanon's unwillingness to embrace diversity and inclusivity (Cortés and Kéchichian 2018). The fear of upsetting delicate sectarian-political balances and the perception of refugees and gender minorities as threats to national security and the country's social fabric further marginalise these vulnerable groups (Chamas 2021; Cheaito 2023; Saghieh 2023). Discriminatory practices, fuelled by prejudices and nationalist rhetoric, continue to reinforce exclusionary attitudes and hinder efforts towards social cohesion and solidarity. Amid Lebanon's outward refusal to confront these systemic issues and prioritise the rights and dignity of all its residents, regardless of their background or identity, genuine integration and societal progress remains elusive.

Lebanon's LGBT+ community has long navigated a complex social landscape marked by discrimination, stigma, and legal barriers despite the country's branding as one of the more 'queer-friendly' countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Diab et al. 2024a; Moussawi 2015, 2021; Naber and Zaatari 2014; Nagle 2021; Reda and Proudfoot 2021). In the aftermath of the explosion, established LGBT+ NGOs rose to the challenge, transforming themselves from gender justice advocates into crucial actors in disaster response (David 2021; Sewell 2021; Skinner 2022). These organisations, accustomed to operating within a marginalised space, possessed a unique understanding of navigating complex social dynamics. Their established networks, expertise, and unwavering commitment to inclusivity became invaluable assets. Recognising the heightened vulnerabilities faced by WiTD and gender minorities, both within the Lebanese population and the refugee community, LGBT+ NGOs stepped in to fill critical gaps in assistance and response frameworks of mainstream relief actors (*ibid.*).

This paper draws on participatory research conducted in Beirut between 2021 and 2024 with staff from LGBT+ and women-led/focused NGOs as well as their

constituencies in order to offer an understanding of the pivotal role of LGBT+ NGOs in the post-Beirut blast response.¹ The examination highlights how their inclusive approaches and collaborative efforts effectively addressed the intersectional vulnerabilities faced by marginalised communities while challenging the rigid and binary frameworks of traditional humanitarian support. It also trains a critical lens on conventional notions of resilience, which often focus on bouncing back from a single traumatic event, obscuring from view the multiple lines of trauma that course through the lives of marginalised groups. Consequently, resilience must be understood as the capacity to navigate and withstand multiple ongoing adversities that are disproportionately both felt and addressed by marginalised groups. Through in-depth interviews with NGO representatives and members of the communities they serve, the paper unpacks the dynamics of solidarity building between refugees and hosts. It examines these movements through a gendered lens, offering valuable insights into how inclusive disaster response strategies can foster resilience and social cohesion in times of crisis – particularly in a country experiencing ongoing waves of anti-refugee and anti-LGBT+ sentiments at different points in its fragile sociopolitical history (Diab 2023b; Haddad 2023).

Theorising around intersectionality and differentiated vulnerability in disasters

Incorporating intersectional perspectives into disaster research and response is essential for addressing disparities among marginalised groups. Jean, Hall, and Vickery (2023) emphasise the necessity of understanding how privilege, power, and oppression intersect to better identify and mitigate vulnerabilities. Hill et al. (2023) further propose an intersectional framework for disaster risk governance (DRG) that considers the complex interplay of power dynamics, positionality, and personal experiences, advocating for more inclusive and context-aware disaster responses. This approach is crucial in addressing the specific needs of marginalised groups, including LGBT+ individuals and refugees, whose experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping identities.

Focusing on LGBT+ experiences, Haworth, McKinnon, and Eriksen (2022) critique the persistent neglect of LGBT+ individuals in disaster risk reduction and crisis response, arguing that societal marginalisation and Western heteronormative perspectives exacerbate vulnerabilities. They call for a paradigm shift towards recognising diversity and intersectionality in understanding and addressing disaster vulnerability. Similarly, Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray, and McKinnon (2013) highlight the importance of including LGBT+ experiences in natural disaster contexts, noting that recovery efforts often fail to accommodate their specific needs, thus increasing their risk.

Further exploring differentiated vulnerability, Bhatt et al. (2022) highlight how gender identity influences disaster experiences and resilience, advocating for the integration of gender perspectives into disaster risk management for more-inclusive approaches. Seglah and Blanchard (2022) introduce the concept of ‘hyper-marginalisation’, describing how intersecting vulnerabilities – such as legal, economic, cultural, or religious barriers – intensify the impacts of disasters on marginalised communities, particularly LGBT+

refugees in Lebanon. This notion aligns with Haddad and Sakr's (2022) analysis of disaster management following the Beirut explosion, which emphasised the need for effective inter-organisational collaboration to address the needs of marginalised groups through intersectional approaches.

This discussion is further enriched by incorporating theories of Social Movements and Critical Humanitarianism to analyse the response of Beirut's LGBT+ NGOs following the 2020 Beirut Port explosion (Moore 2013). Intersectionality, as posited by Crenshaw (1991), reveals how LGBT+ individuals, especially those from disenfranchised groups like refugees, face compounded discrimination and marginalisation in accessing aid due to overlapping social identities. The additional layer of refugee status exacerbates these vulnerabilities, particularly in exclusionary humanitarian spaces that are often unwelcoming to LGBT+ individuals. From an intersectional perspective, it becomes clear how diverse forms of discrimination converge to shape the disaster experiences of these communities, highlighting the need for tailored disaster response efforts that address the varied needs and experiences within LGBT+ populations.

Navigating Lebanon's complex and diverse vulnerability landscape

In the aftermath of the Beirut blast, LGBT+ NGOs engaged with a variety of constituencies, each with distinct needs and challenges. These included WiTD, sexual minorities, Syrian and Palestinian refugees, migrant workers, and economically disadvantaged queer Lebanese citizens. Many of these groups had pre-existing relationships with the NGOs, particularly WiTD and sexual minorities, as the NGOs had long been providing psychosocial support, health services, and advocacy for these communities. Their past experiences working with refugee populations, particularly Syrian and Palestinian refugees, were invaluable in this context, as they had already developed a nuanced understanding of the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by these groups. However, the scale and nature of the disaster required the NGOs to recalibrate their actions and perspectives significantly. They had to expand their scope of operations rapidly, integrating immediate disaster relief efforts into their existing frameworks. This included conducting needs assessments to identify the most urgent requirements of the affected communities, establishing communication channels for efficient information dissemination, and collaborating with other humanitarian actors to co-ordinate relief efforts.

One key area of recalibration was the recognition that the disaster had created new constituencies with specific needs. For instance, economically disadvantaged queer Lebanese citizens, who may not have previously sought assistance from LGBT+ NGOs, now required urgent support. The NGOs adapted by creating inclusive spaces that transcended their usual focus areas, ensuring that all marginalised individuals, regardless of their pre-existing relationship with the organisations, had access to essential services and support. In working with these diverse constituencies, the NGOs leveraged their established trust within the LGBT+ community and their experience in navigating complex social dynamics. They focused on fostering solidarity among different groups, promoting an inclusive approach to disaster response. This involved extensive

community outreach, leveraging social media and local networks to spread awareness about the available support, and ensuring that their interventions were sensitive to the specific needs of each group.

The Beirut blast impacted LGBT+ individuals, particularly WiTD and gender minorities, in distinct ways (Barkawi 2020; Berjikian 2022; Sewell 2021; Skinner 2022; UN Women et al. 2020). These communities faced a complex web of vulnerabilities that traditional disaster response efforts often failed to address (King 2022). According to informants, discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity served as a major hindrance to accessing mainstream aid channels. The immediate fallout of the blast saw many LGBT+ individuals rendered homeless (Chehayeb 2021; NRC 2021). The lack of secure housing exacerbated their vulnerabilities, leading to increased exposure to violence and exploitation. In the long term, these communities faced significant health problems, both physical and mental, stemming from the trauma of the blast and the harsh conditions of displacement (Al Hariri et al. 2022; El Khoury et al. 2022; Fouad et al. 2021). Additionally, many lost their livelihoods, as businesses were destroyed and job opportunities became scarce, particularly for those who already faced employment discrimination due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Action Against Hunger 2021; Bonet 2021).

Pivoting towards disaster management for the LGBT+ NGOs involved shifting their focus from their traditional roles in providing psychosocial support and health services to more immediate and comprehensive disaster response activities. This transition required them to adopt emergency preparedness measures such as risk mitigation strategies, establishing rapid communication channels, and mobilising volunteers for immediate relief efforts. These NGOs had to quickly develop and implement plans for distributing essential supplies like food, water, and shelter materials, while also setting up safe havens for vulnerable individuals. Their efforts included conducting internal vulnerability assessments to identify at-risk individuals and ensuring targeted interventions. Politically, this pivot marked a significant change from their routine service provision to active engagement in disaster management, which involved closer collaboration with humanitarian agencies, local authorities, and other stakeholders to address the compounded challenges faced by marginalised communities. By integrating their inclusive and intersectional approach into the broader disaster response framework, these NGOs played a crucial role in filling gaps left by traditional relief efforts, ensuring that marginalised groups received the necessary support and resources.

Combating exclusion, exclusivity, and elitism in 'safe' spaces

Recognising the exclusionary nature of conventional disaster responses and the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by LGBT+ individuals, LGBT+ NGOs developed innovative strategies to prioritise inclusion in their disaster response efforts. These organisations established 'safe havens' and 'vital spaces free from discrimination and violence', specifically designed to support LGBT+ individuals irrespective of their legal status. For example, these NGOs set up community centres and temporary shelters where

LGBTQ+ refugees and local individuals could seek refuge and access essential services without fear of discrimination. The process of creating and maintaining these spaces involved several key steps: identifying safe locations, training staff on inclusivity and trauma-informed care, and establishing clear guidelines to ensure that all beneficiaries felt secure and respected. Continuous community engagement and feedback loops were crucial in adapting these spaces to meet evolving needs, fostering an environment of trust, safety, and empowerment for all members.

Creating spaces that ensured equal access involved several strategic actions by the LGBTQ+ NGOs. These organisations capitalised on their extensive networks and leveraged a snowball effect to spread the word about the existence and accessibility of these safe spaces. Their primary challenge was overcoming deeply entrenched societal and institutional discrimination, which often marginalised individuals based on their nationality, gender identity, or sexual orientation. To navigate these challenges, the NGOs used their established trust within the community to promote inclusivity and ensure that no one was turned away. Sustaining these spaces required robust partnerships with other humanitarian organisations, continuous fundraising efforts, and personal donations. Many NGOs also had to negotiate with donors to reallocate existing funds from different projects to disaster relief efforts, ensuring that budget lines could be flexibly used to meet urgent needs. The operation and maintenance of these safe havens were thus a collective effort, grounded in strategic resource management and the unwavering commitment of the organisations to provide inclusive support. These spaces became the empirical foundation of the essay, illustrating how intersectional, inclusive approaches can create resilient and cohesive communities in the face of disaster.

On this point, a staff member at an LGBTQ+ NGO in Lebanon elaborates:

Queer refugees were being cut off at every corner – particularly from within the refugee community. Adding insult to injury, queer women, whether refugee or Lebanese, were being excluded from support targeting women as well – this was particularly true for the country's trans community. Exclusion for the country's marginalised social and gender groups in Lebanon is extremely layered and complex, particularly when they belong to more than one of these marginalised and vulnerable groups. As queer-focused NGOs we transcended this in a way. We brought refugees and Lebanese together in one space under a 'gender' umbrella if I may. No one was excluded; and I can confidently say that our model worked at breaking down quite a few negative impacts of the blast. Importantly, negative competition over aid and resources among refugees and Lebanese for one. (Interview, Beirut, March 2021)

As such, the study found that the response of LGBTQ+ NGOs in Beirut transcended immediate relief efforts, contributing significantly to long-term resilience. These organisations swiftly adapted to prioritise disaster management, emphasising risk mitigation and rapid emergency response strategies while leveraging their networks and expertise. By fostering solidarity across the refugee–host divide, LGBTQ+ NGOs facilitated trust and social cohesion within the community. Importantly, the study found their initiatives to be poised to drive policy changes addressing the specific needs of refugee and host communities, thereby promoting greater gender equality in disaster preparedness and response. This successful response was found to largely underscore the imperative of

integrating intersectionality into disaster management frameworks. On this point, a Syrian trans woman shares:

LGBT+ organisations' responses were the only place where we felt seen. It was as though the ground shook; the dust settled. Then they saw us; we were seen in a community that invisibilises us, that compartmentalises us, or even worse, that homogenises us because it's convenient for humanitarian aid actors. As queer refugees, we have needs that are different, and that are urgent in ways the broader refugee community will never understand. But you know who did? The NGOs that serve the LGBT+ community. They recognised that being queer, whether you are Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, or even a migrant from another place, means much more precarity for many of us. Lebanese queer individuals came to recognise this as well, and embraced us in these spaces as a result. (Interview, Beirut, April 2021)

Qualitative interviews with self-identified feminist and women-focused organisations in Lebanon revealed a concerning trend: exclusionary practices. While these organisations framed their selectivity when it comes to who they serve as 'prioritising specific needs', their practices often excluded women who did not conform to the cisgender, straight, Lebanese archetype. This revealed a lack of intersectionality within feminist humanitarianism, failing to support WiTD. Notably, these organisations cited the existence of other NGOs supposedly catering to LGBT+ and refugee communities as justification for their exclusion. This raises questions about whether Lebanon's broader exclusionary feminist rhetoric has permeated the humanitarian sphere, particularly during a critical time when diverse women desperately need support (Diab 2023b). The findings suggest a troubling perception: LGBT+ and refugee communities already have 'enough' NGOs, absolving these feminist organisations of responsibility in their own eyes. On this point, a staff member from a women-focused NGO elaborates:

... as an organisation that caters to the needs of women in Lebanon, we do not necessarily exclude anyone, we simply find that they do not need us as much as straight, Lebanese women do. LGBT+ individuals have their own NGOs – so women who identify as lesbian or trans can go there for support. Similarly, there are more than enough NGOs supporting refugees that refugee women can turn to – whether they are Syrian or Palestinian, or even from other migrant nationalities as well. (Interview, Beirut, April 2021)

This persistent problem within the feminist and women-focused NGO landscape is far from new, having long been a concern among gender and refugee rights advocates. Testimonies and reports detailing instances where specific groups of women have felt unwelcome or marginalised within women's shelters operated by these NGOs have marred the reputation of such essential facilities for years (Christou 2023; Human Rights Watch 2019). Tragically, the aftermath of the blast served to amplify these already problematic and exclusionary dynamics. The profound strain placed upon these shelters in the wake of the Beirut blast, both in terms of logistical challenges and heightened demand for services, only exacerbated the existing issues. Under such heightened pressure, the discriminatory practices within these shelters saw an alarming escalation, creating an even more hostile environment for vulnerable women in need of protection, access to services, and support. As a trans Syrian refugee

woman explains, exclusionary practices at shelters have been a reality in Lebanon for years:

It's not that women's shelters welcomed us as Syrians before the explosion. It's not like they welcomed us as trans women either. We were isolated on every front. They would turn us away and tell us they no longer have space in many cases. In other cases, where the staff was a bit more explicit about their homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia, they would tell us to go find an NGO that's 'for us' – one that basically either supports LGBT+ people or refugees. Largely, it was understood in our social spaces that if you were not a Lebanese straight woman surviving GBV [gender-based violence] from a 'male' husband figure, that you were not accepted in these spaces. At some point, we stopped going. But when the blast happened, we thought maybe this would change. It didn't. In fact, it became more acutely felt and explicitly implied. (Interview, Beirut, November 2021)

Testimony from a social worker from a Beirut-based women's shelter further elucidates and supports this finding:

... you know very well how much funding there is for refugees in the country. All of them – Palestinian, Syrian, and others. So why would we need to open our doors to shelters when no one looks at a Lebanese woman in our society. On another level, let's also be honest with ourselves. Many of the women in our shelters would not accept the presence of refugee women, and would also, on another level, not accept any gay women or trans women sharing safe spaces with them. Many of these women are traumatised. We do not want them to be more uncomfortable than they already are. Queer women have their NGOs, and refugees have their NGOs. We are filling a different gap, and catering to a different need. After the Beirut blast, we were even more strained and pressured. (Interview, Beirut, December 2021)

LGBT+ refugees faced a double bind in the post-Beirut blast era unprecedentedly, as their intersectional vulnerability was targeted from a multitude of different angles simultaneously. Lebanon's rich tapestry of cultures and identities remains marred by a complex web of isolation that disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable members of society (Diab and Skulte-Ouais 2024b). Among these are LGBT+ refugees and WiTD, who find themselves navigating a labyrinth of support structures that often act as barriers rather than bridges. This fragmented approach to humanitarian aid not only restricts access to vital resources but, in many cases, intentionally cuts off these communities from the very support they need most desperately. Following the Beirut Port explosion, these realities were centre stage – a gay Syrian refugee male shares:

... all hell broke loose after the blast. The humanitarian space was struggling. The need was huge. Importantly, NGOs' cracks and exclusivity began to show. We started to see more than ever how elitist some spaces were, and importantly, who was welcome and unwelcome in these spaces. In a disaster situation like this, it's harder to hide discriminatory practices of NGOs – as they are pushed into a corner and to their limits. It was obvious that everyone was in need. The only issue was with who would welcome you into safe spaces. Refugee spaces were homophobic – not just the refugees themselves, but even their staff. They would tell us to go to our 'gay' NGOs. (Interview, Beirut, April 2021)

The NGOs tackled divides by creating inclusive safe spaces that facilitated dialogue, mutual support, and collaboration among varied communities, thereby dismantling

traditional barriers. They further reduced exclusionary dynamics through communication and referral systems, ensuring access to necessary services and support for all.

Inclusive disaster management and emergency response

In the immediate aftermath of the Beirut Port explosion, the response of LGBT+ NGOs was swift and comprehensive. Recognising the urgent need for immediate action, these organisations pivoted towards disaster management with a focus on risk mitigation and rapid emergency response strategies. One key risk mitigation strategy employed by these NGOs was establishing communication channels to disseminate accurate information and co-ordinate relief efforts efficiently. This involved leveraging social media platforms, establishing hotlines, and activating local networks to ensure timely dissemination of information to affected communities according to experts interviewed. Additionally, these organisations implemented proactive measures such as conducting internal vulnerability assessments to identify at-risk individuals and communities to allow for targeted interventions. These discussions continue to take place in safe spaces such as the national United Nations (UN)-brokered LGBT+ Task Force (United Nations 2022). On this point, the Task Force's former Co-Chair explains:

While the LGBT+ space can be fragmented at times, as we compete over funding and resources just like any other NGO, what the Beirut blast did was bring us all together much more effectively and pragmatically. Our referral systems were enhanced, our internal needs assessments were more collaborative, and our safe spaces also became more open. We were collaborating on information sessions, campaigns, hotlines, and reporting. The space is bound together in a unique way. Importantly, we were the only space, and I say this confidently, where every nationality was welcome. Every queer refugee, migrant, and Lebanese. (Interview, Beirut, September 2021)

Rapid emergency response strategies were also crucial in addressing immediate needs. This included mobilising volunteers and resources for search and rescue operations, facilitating referrals for emergency medical aid, and distributing essential supplies such as food, water, and shelter materials to displaced individuals. Crucially, LGBT+ NGOs did not operate in isolation but actively collaborated with humanitarian agencies, local authorities, and other stakeholders in the relief efforts. Emphasising intersectionality, these organisations sought to address the compounded challenges faced by marginalised individuals, considering factors such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and refugee status. As such, LGBT+ NGOs operationalised intersectionality in their relief efforts by recognising and addressing the multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities faced by marginalised individuals, particularly WiTD and gender minorities within both refugee and host communities.

The NGOs tailored their disaster response strategies to address the unique challenges faced by individuals at the intersection of gender identity, sexual orientation, and refugee status. According to interviewees, this included conducting detailed vulnerability assessments through community consultations and focus groups to pinpoint specific needs such as safe housing, mental health support, and access to hormone therapies. For instance, recognising the heightened risk of violence faced by transgender refugees, the

NGOs established designated shelters that provided secure and inclusive environments, free from discrimination and violence.

Leveraging their established trust within the community, these organisations offered targeted support that went beyond standard aid packages. For example, they created safe spaces where LGBT+ refugees could access health care and psychosocial support without fear of stigma. These NGOs also worked closely with a diverse range of stakeholders, including other humanitarian agencies and local authorities, to embed intersectional considerations into broader disaster response frameworks. This collaboration involved regular co-ordination meetings and joint information sessions, which emphasised the importance of recognising intersecting identities in disaster preparedness and response.

Furthermore, these organisations invested in long-term capacity building by offering workshops and training sessions on disaster preparedness through an intersectional lens. These sessions included practical exercises on crisis response tailored to the needs of LGBT+ individuals and refugees, as well as discussions on combating discrimination in emergency settings. According to experts interviewed, these actions ensured their relief efforts were inclusive, comprehensive, and responsive to the complex realities faced by those they served.

By adopting a holistic approach that centred on the diverse needs of affected communities, they played a pivotal role in filling gaps in assistance and ensuring that marginalised individuals were not left behind in the recovery process. Moreover, LGBT+ NGOs collaborated closely with other humanitarian organisations to maximise the impact of their response efforts and avoid duplication of services. Through these concerted efforts, the LGBT+ NGOs played a vital role in supporting the affected communities and mitigating the impact of the disaster. On this point, the Founder and Director of a local LGBT+ organisation outlines:

... we were working together as LGBT+ organisations, but we were also working with UN agencies and other actors in the space that provide health support, medical attention. We were even working closely with hospitals of the two American Universities in Beirut. We needed to know what each of us was doing individually, so that we could get organised collectively. Beyond this, we worked with our local networks to provide housing and shelter to some groups, as well as provide them with basic needs where possible. Importantly, one of our most successful adaptations was the reallocation of funds from different programmatic areas following discussions with donors, in order to ensure that they were directed towards service provision as much as possible. Some of the most successful services we were able to provide were psychosocial support and mental health. (Interview, Beirut, October 2022)

Furthermore, the collaborative efforts of LGBT+ NGOs extended beyond mere service provision to fostering solidarity and resilience across refugee and host communities. By recognising and amplifying the voices of marginalised groups, these organisations helped to 'build bridges and break down barriers', creating a sense of shared purpose and belonging amid the ongoing 'physical and mental loss'. In doing so, they not only provided immediate relief but also laid the groundwork for long-term social cohesion and inclusion in post-disaster recovery efforts. A gay Lebanese beneficiary shares:

... there was no room for conversations on nationality, nor for anti-refugee sentiment in our spaces. We were queer. We knew we were vulnerable, and we knew our Palestinian and Syrian refugee brothers and sisters were being rejected from other services for their queerness just the way we were. LGBT+ NGOs in Lebanon operated through this exact lens and approach after the blast. This approach had long-term positive effects on the LGBT+ community – it fostered many collaborations and networks that are active to this day. (Interview, Beirut, October 2022)

According to Lebanon's Co-Chair of its LGBT+ Task Force, important overlaps between the ongoing COVID-19 response and the Beirut blast response aided in a quick shift towards emergency preparedness – a matter explicitly communicated to donors by multiple organisations who found that a rapid reallocation of funding from one response to the other served as a 'quick fix'. This was particularly true for cash assistance, psychological first aid, hygiene kits, capacity building for beneficiaries (who later served as volunteers), as well as for more 'blast-specific' responses such as building inspections and field visits to beneficiaries' homes. He explains:

... as part of our disaster and emergency responses, we discussed with donors the potential of moving money we had already secured for COVID-19 around, and expand the criteria of who can receive both cash and other forms of assistance. For this, we used our network. We were able to provide all of our services to even more beneficiaries, and also expand to the provision of counselling, therapy, as well as maintain our referrals and case management. (Interview, Beirut, May 2024)

This strategic reallocation not only addressed immediate needs but also highlighted the importance of flexibility in funding to enhance response efficiency. Building on this, the NGOs recognised the necessity of investing in long-term disaster preparedness to ensure sustainable support for marginalised communities in future crises. The next section delves into how these organisations have focused on enhancing long-term resilience through continuous capacity building, community engagement, and robust preparedness strategies.

Investment in long-term disaster preparedness

Beyond immediate humanitarian aid, LGBT+ NGOs demonstrated a forward-thinking approach by investing significantly in long-term disaster preparedness and risk reduction initiatives – a major gap within the post-disaster assistance landscape. Recognising the importance of building resilience within communities, these organisations embarked on a series of proactive measures aimed at equipping LGBT+ individuals across Lebanese society with the necessary tools and knowledge to navigate future crises effectively. One key strategy employed by LGBT+ NGOs was the implementation of workshops and training sessions focused on disaster preparedness and response for both refugees and hosts. According to study participants, these trainings provided practical guidance on emergency planning, evacuation procedures, and first-aid techniques, empowering participants to 'take proactive steps to safeguard themselves and their communities' in the face of potential disasters. Importantly, these workshops were tailored to address the specific health, protection, and social needs and vulnerabilities of LGBT+ individuals,

ensuring that intersectional vulnerabilities and mental health dimensions were woven into these efforts. These sessions were held in safe spaces, organised through secure networks, and held in ‘small and private groups’ according to an NGO staff member. He explains:

We wanted our people [the LGBT+ community] to be prepared for anything. We always want them to be. We found that capitalising on capacity building and training along these lines served as an important tool for them – mostly because, in these types of situations, they can encounter exclusion from broader responses. As a community we have long fended for ourselves. And I speak to you as a Lebanese queer member of society. Can you imagine the queer refugee community? Certainly many of them are embraced by UN agencies, and more ‘high-level’ humanitarian actors, but within their own communities, grassroots networks and local NGOs are homophobic. Let’s face it. They are not welcome in capacity-building spaces, nor are they able to access the information they need about their health, security, and safety. The sessions we held, training and others, were intended to remedy this. Importantly, it aimed to fill the knowledge and skills gap. (Interview, Beirut, September 2022)

Alongside these forms of capacity building, as the LGBT+ Task Force Co-Chair explains, volunteers of all nationalities within these organisations, who themselves were either former beneficiaries or members of the community, were further trained on psychological first aid with the aim of ‘equipping the community itself to provide their own services from within’. This served as an important empowerment tool according to beneficiaries. A Palestinian lesbian woman insists: ‘when you retain the skills and ability to support within the community itself, then no one can take this away from you – not governments, not donors. No one’ (interview, Beirut, September 2022). Ultimately, these services were advertised, and continue to serve the community through a helpline. In addition to formal training sessions, LGBT+ NGOs engaged in extensive community outreach programmes aimed at raising awareness about disaster risk reduction and resilience-building strategies. Through targeted campaigns, informational materials, and public events, these organisations worked to dispel myths, educate the public, and foster a culture of preparedness within Lebanese society – and across groups in all their diversity. By reaching out to diverse audiences and engaging with community members at all levels, LGBT+ NGOs played a crucial role in promoting a collective sense of responsibility and solidarity in mitigating disaster risks.

According to key staff members within LGBT+ organisations interviewed, long-term disaster preparedness further played out in efforts of coalition building, as well as an attempt to build on the Beirut blast’s (and COVID-19) experience to mainstream and streamline the entire national LGBT+ response under the country’s humanitarian, development, and peace nexus when it comes to protection in emergency. As such, the LGBT+ Task Force, founded in 2021, serves as an important culmination of these efforts. Established and supported by UN agencies, the Task Force currently builds capacity of frontliners, humanitarian workers, as well as UN staff in order to ensure that activities, programming, and interventions are ‘informed, inclusive, and strategic – instead of reactionary and *ad hoc*’ (interview, Beirut, November 2023).

LGBT+ organisations invested in long-term disaster preparedness through both internal practices and policy advocacy. Internally, they conducted workshops and training sessions focused on disaster preparedness, equipping community members with practical skills such as emergency planning, evacuation procedures, and first aid. These sessions were tailored to address the specific needs of LGBT+ individuals, ensuring that their unique vulnerabilities were considered. Additionally, the organisations engaged in extensive community outreach to raise awareness about disaster risk reduction and resilience-building strategies, fostering a culture of preparedness within the community.

In terms of policy advocacy, the organisations worked to integrate intersectional and inclusive approaches into national and local disaster management frameworks. They collaborated with humanitarian agencies, local authorities, and other stakeholders to ensure that policies and practices were informed by the diverse needs of marginalised groups. The establishment of the LGBT+ Task Force, supported by UN agencies, exemplified these efforts, as it aimed to build the capacity of frontliners and humanitarian workers, promoting informed and inclusive interventions. These organisations also engaged in continuous dialogue with donors to secure flexible funding arrangements that could be reallocated to disaster preparedness and response initiatives as needed. Through these combined efforts, the LGBT+ organisations not only strengthened their own disaster readiness but also advocated for systemic changes to create more inclusive and effective disaster management policies.

While the collaborative efforts of LGBT+ NGOs in disaster management fostered solidarity and resilience, it is crucial to acknowledge that these spaces are not free from internal inequities and power dynamics. Despite their inclusive intentions, marginalised voices within the LGBT+ community, particularly those of transgender individuals and refugees, often encounter barriers related to representation and resource allocation. Addressing these internal disparities remains an ongoing challenge as organisations continue to work towards creating truly equitable and inclusive spaces for all.

Conclusion

This paper does not intend to generalise the experiences of participants across all gender-focused or queer-focused programming. Instead, it aims to highlight the unique approach taken by LGBT+ NGOs in response to the Beirut blast, which, in contrast to the broader humanitarian space in Lebanon, transcended the typical ‘nationality’ trope to create more-inclusive and comprehensive humanitarian responses. By adopting an inclusive gender lens, these organisations provided a space where all those affected could seek support, regardless of legal status, effectively moving beyond the conventional host-refugee paradigm that dominates Lebanon’s humanitarian efforts.

Recognising the diverse temporalities of crises affecting marginalised populations prompts a reconsideration of resilience. Traditional resilience emphasises bouncing back from a single event, but for marginalised groups, resilience is built in a context in which the sources and forms of harm are multiple and thus requires strategies that are firmly anchored to an intersectional approach. This broader understanding shifts the

focus from short-term recovery to long-term sustainability and empowerment. In this context, resilience involves building robust support systems that address immediate needs and structural inequities.

The Beirut blast starkly exposed historical exclusions embedded in Lebanon's sociopolitical fabric, highlighting state neglect towards marginalised groups as well as exclusionary hierarchies within supposed progressive spaces. In the vignettes shared in this paper, solidarity between hosts and refugees, especially within queer spaces, comes to be rooted in a shared sense of vulnerability that transcends divisions of nationality, sect, or religion. LGBT+ NGOs leveraged this emerging solidarity to bridge divides and promote inclusivity in their disaster response efforts. By creating safe havens where every individual – whether Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, or from another marginalised group – felt seen and supported, these NGOs dismantled traditional barriers that often segregate communities.

These NGOs' approach emphasised intersectionality and inclusivity, providing a platform for dialogue and mutual support. This environment facilitated immediate relief efforts and laid the groundwork for long-term social cohesion and resilience. For example, the NGOs' safe spaces allowed refugees and host community members to collaborate on recovery efforts, share resources, and offer emotional support, fostering collective responsibility and unity. Moreover, the NGOs integrated intersectional principles into their broader advocacy and policy efforts, challenging exclusionary hierarchies within humanitarian responses, ensuring comprehensive and equitable interventions.

Post-blast, these organisations expanded their scope to include immediate relief while continuing to address underlying vulnerabilities through community-building, capacity training, and policy advocacy. By embedding resilience within a framework that considers the ongoing nature of crises, these NGOs challenge the traditional disaster response paradigm. Their inclusive and intersectional approach ensures that relief efforts do not merely offer temporary reprieve from harm but strategically contribute to the creation of social relationships that enable sustained empowerment and systemic change. Fragmentation, rooted in a narrow understanding of identity, has long plagued Lebanon's political system, demographics, and humanitarian aid approach. When coupled with a binary approach to vulnerability, this fragmentation isolates groups and compartmentalises identities. This myopia extends to humanitarian actors, who often focus on specific demographics and lack resources or training to address those outside predefined categories. This has led to situations where women's rights organisations are unwilling to assist an LGBT+ refugee woman, or a Syrian refugee programme is ill-equipped to handle a transgender asylum seeker's challenges.

These limitations are stark in humanitarian aid, where relief efforts often deliver aid based on categories like 'refugee', 'woman', or 'child', with little regard for complex identity intersections. This binary approach fails to recognise the dangers faced by a queer Lebanese woman navigating a society rife with both homophobia and sexism, or a transgender Syrian refugee struggling to access health care in a system that does not acknowledge their gender identity. The Beirut Port explosion tragically exposed the cracks in this fragmented system.

Vulnerable groups, lost in the gaps between siloed responses, struggled to access aid in the chaotic aftermath. This disaster highlighted the urgent need for a more intersectional approach to humanitarian aid delivery. The lack of inclusivity within intended ‘safe spaces’ and ‘shelters’ further marginalised queer and transgender women, forcing them to choose between compromising their identities or returning to environments where they face discrimination and violence. In the nuanced terrain of Lebanese identity politics, the presence of LGBT+ NGOs in Beirut following the port explosion marked a significant paradigm shift. These entities assumed influential roles as agents of change, transcending conventional disaster management frameworks by consistently championing inclusivity and diversity. Their rapid mobilisation of resources and specialised knowledge made them pivotal pillars of support for marginalised segments of society, extending their impact beyond immediate relief efforts. Recognising the intricate vulnerabilities shared by LGBT+ individuals across refugee and host communities, these NGOs cultivated a sense of solidarity among disparate groups. Through collaborative endeavours and inclusive gatherings, LGBT+ NGOs cultivated a robust communal ethos. Shared narratives and communal support mechanisms served as sources of solace and empowerment, fostering reciprocal assistance between refugee and host populations.

While the structural capacity and funding limitations of these NGOs, which have primarily focused on advocacy, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and mental health services, pose significant challenges to the sustainability of such a response, their work in the immediate aftermath of the Beirut blast has demonstrated that humanitarian relief practitioners need to see them as actors providing vital humanitarian relief. The blast demonstrated the potential for more nuanced and effective humanitarian strategies that prioritise inclusivity and equity, serving as a valuable model for future responses both within Lebanon and in similar contexts globally.

This holistic approach defied the compartmentalised nature of traditional disaster response by underscoring inclusivity as an indispensable facet of humanitarian action. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of the marginalised, these entities ensured that relief initiatives were attuned to the specific exigencies encountered by vulnerable demographics. This inclusive modality stands as a blueprint for guiding future disaster response strategies within analogous contexts. Insights from the Beirut experience resonate profoundly. As expressed by participants in this study, shared experiences served as ‘bridges across divides’, facilitating resource mobilisation and fortifying recovery groundwork. These endeavours reconfigure disaster preparedness paradigms, spotlighting the significance of fortifying the social fabric that binds communities together in times of adversity, standing as a testament to the transformative potential inherent in this form of solidarity building-based relief and recovery practice.

Note

1. Interviews adhered to the ‘Do No Harm’ principle, prioritising participants’ well-being and safety through a trauma-informed participatory approach (Alessi and Khan 2022; Edelman 2023; Isobel 2021; Karakamar and Duggal 2023). Collaborative dialogue aimed to minimise re-traumatisation,

centring on safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural humility, fostering an inclusive environment for meaningful data collection and analysis (Azzeh 2023; Darouiche 2023).

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