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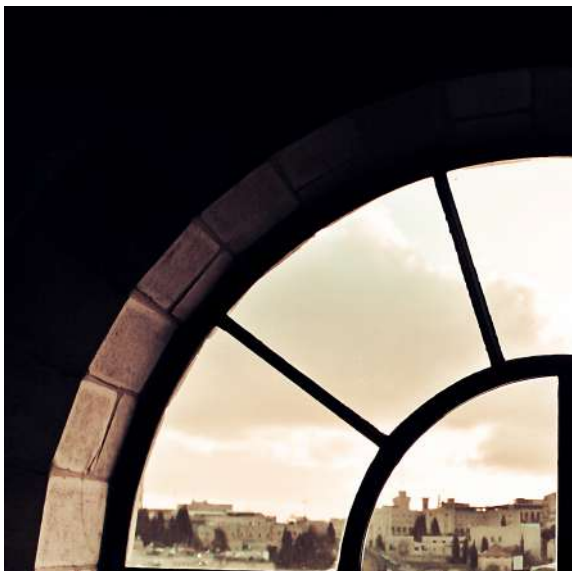
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Beyond LGBTQI Identity Rights Based Advocacy Implications and Opportunities for Sexual and Gender Rights in the MENA Region

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief builds on the arguments and conclusions set out in CTDC's publication titled *[Conceptualising Sexualities in the MENA Region: Undoing LGBTQI Categories](#)*. In this document, we compliment this extensive, research-led paper by setting out a number of concrete recommendations for practitioners, policy makers and activists from the region working to improve the situation facing non-normative people commonly referred to as LGBTQI peoples. In light of the key challenges facing this group, which include sexual, physical and mental violence, economic marginalisation, homelessness, poor sexual health service provisions and, in instances of displacement, barriers to international protection, we stress the need for research to map on to practice. Through a re-conceptualisation of commonly used frameworks, including SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity), we propose a more inclusive approach to advocacy by adopting a Sexual Practice and Gender Performance framework (SPGP). As is shown throughout our report, SPGP aims to recognise the nuances of specific regional contexts that are often obscured by the assumptions set out in LGBTQI rights categories and LGBTQI rights-based advocacy programing, often to the frustration of grass-roots, activist-led, organic and sustainable change.



“LGBTQI categories do not offer a fully inclusive pathway to change in the region.”

The Problem

Despite the many efforts to address gender and sexual rights in the MENA region, there still remains a major backlash against non-normative people. Efforts here have framed their response to such a backlash through the use of LGBTQI rights advocacy which, our research suggests, may actually be producing a number of exclusionary practices that makes efforts to address stigma flawed in two major ways:

1) Programs may not tackle the root of persecution:

Patriarchy and gender norms, rather than sexual *identity* is the key to persecution in the region, making diverse groups of people, and not just those who identify as LGBTQI vulnerable. The intersections of persecution are vast and complex, yet often overlooked by a narrow use of identity categories. For example, emphasis on LGBTQI identity categories does not address the root issue that discrimination and persecution of self-identified LGBTQI people is often based on their sexual practices and gender performances that are perceived as non-normative and thus threatening to the status quo of patriarchal gender structures.

2) Programs are too top-down:

Local communities and local people are best placed to advocate about sexuality. This also means that the language and categories that advocacy uses must be sensitive to and allow room for an organic, grassroots-led change. Whilst LGBTQI identity categories have proven to be an effective way to organise and create a visible sense of community around which advocacy efforts have been initiated, this has often happened at the expense of a more nuanced engagement with other non-normative people or of local and historically specific understandings of sexuality. In a context where resistance to sexual rights advocacy is often predicated on the idea that LGBTQI communities are the result of Western intervention, the need for more localised, contextual, bottom-up advocacy programs appears evident.



Opportunities

There have been many attempts to address gender and sexual rights in the MENA region, a majority of which have focused on women's empowerment and gender equality. More recently the rights of LGBTQI people have taken centre stage in development efforts and in the agendas of policy makers. This policy brief highlights some major problems in the frameworks underpinning these efforts, despite their well-meant intentions. A more extensive examination of these problems can be found in our report. In this report, CTDC concludes:

*“a narrower focus on LGBTQI people will never guarantee the rights needed to improve the lives of self-identified LGBTQI people. The solution cannot be to ‘add-and-stir’ more groups to programming, but to build frameworks that are **fundamentally inclusive from the beginning.**”*

In light of this conclusion, and the challenges highlighted throughout this policy brief, CTDC suggests that practitioners and policy makers adhere to the following key recommendations throughout their sexual and gender rights based advocacy work in the MENA region:

*“Practitioners should develop an **alternative framework** that recognises not only the ways in which persecution is linked to an ‘identity connection’ but also how persecution stems from **Sexual Practice and Gender Performance too**”*

Recommendations

- **SPGP versus SOGI:** Practitioners should develop an alternative framework that recognises not only the ways in which persecution is linked to an ‘identity connection’ (as is emphasised in Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity frameworks) but also how persecution stems from Sexual Practice and Gender Performance too. This alternative framework enables a more effective engagement with currently marginalised groups who fall outside of the remit of humanitarian and development programming because they remain invisible, despite facing SGBV.
- **Grassroots is Key:** It is imperative that efforts are taken to ensure advocacy comes ‘from below’. This is both more sustainable and effective in light of the rather extensive backlash that currently exists vis-à-vis LGBTQI rights in the region. Research has shown that this backlash has to some extent been premised on a misconception that marginalised sexual communities are the result of Western intervention. To move beyond this antagonism, more collaborative approaches must start with the local and aim to establish legitimacy for sexual rights advocacy through regionally coordinated, grassroots and community-led programming.
- **SPGP Sensitisation:** SPGP sensitisation trainings and workshops to professionals should be encouraged within humanitarian, development and advocacy programming. These will involve developing new approaches to ‘training of the trainers’ programs. Key targets for training by local activists should also include social care providers, health care providers, lawyers and journalists. Such sensitisation trainings will indirectly contribute to changing public attitudes and increasing support to LGBTQI-identified people, and people with non-normative genders and sexualities.
- **More Inclusion:** Currently, LGBTQI categories do not offer an inclusive pathway to change in the region. Rather, the advocacy efforts of CBOs, INGOs and NGOs could benefit from developing more regionally specific terms so that their programs can *become more inclusive to all people with non-normative sexualities and genders* including marginalised women who are discriminated against by patriarchal legal and social structures. This inclusivity would enable self-identified LGBTQI people to tackle the root problems and causes of their oppression, as well as the oppression of other people who do not fit into gender and sexual norms, rather than address the symptoms. This will also expand popular support for sexual rights.



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Recommendations

- **Supporting Local Women's Initiatives:** More support should be provided to local initiatives *focusing on women with non-normative sexualities*, as they are often marginalised and deemed invisible in conversations about LGBTQI rights, which focus more on the legal frameworks discriminating against men who have sex with men.
- **Reconsidering Visibility:** Practitioners working in the field of LGBTQI rights have often perceived visibility as a marker of success. However, research has demonstrated that as visibility of LGBTQI-identified people increases directed and targeted violence increase as well. *Visibility should be reconsidered as a measure of success* because it does not necessarily prove that progress has been made, in light of the often-invisible nature of SPGP based violence in the region.
- **Educational Programs with an SPGP Focus:** There is a general need for educational programs for the LGBTQI-identified community and for people with non-normative sexualities and genders about SPGP issues, as project work has shown that activists themselves often lack nuance, understanding and the language tools necessary to advocate for their rights.
- **Personal Rights Initiatives:** Personal rights initiatives are key to providing a base of allies for people with non-normative genders and sexualities. Those initiatives are often all encompassing to a wide range of rights that include sexual and gender rights, and are often inclusive of women. More funding should go toward these initiatives in the region.
- **Create SPGP-Sensitive Asylum Handbook:** Currently, NGOs and humanitarians responding to the needs of displaced LGBTQI refugees are forced to shoehorn claims into the narrow frameworks of LGBTQI identities. These fail to fully recognise the unstable dimensions of SPGP based discrimination, meaning that many individuals eligible for international protection are often put in harms way due to a lack of 'credibility'. Developing a handbook that is informed by local activists, contexts and advocacy groups will ensure seeking international protection can be a positive, rather than potentially violent, experience for victims of SPGP persecution.
- **Foreign Funding Visibility:** International concern over gender and sexual rights in the MENA region is legitimate and welcomed, however, support for LGBTQI people should not extend beyond discrete financial support for grassroots organisations and diplomatic pressure at the governmental level. This is essential if we are to build truly sustainable and legitimate campaigns free from claims that marginalised sexual communities are a Western invention, despite a long history of non-normative sexualities in the MENA.



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