

Online Privacy Threats to Women and LGBTIQ Communities in Lebanon



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to Women and LGBTIQ
Communities in Lebanon**

Acknowledgments

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SMEX is a Lebanese NGO that since 2008 has worked to defend digital rights, promote open culture and local content, and encourage critical, self-regulated engagement with digital technologies, media, and networks across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

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■ About

The lack of a comprehensive legal framework for privacy rights and data protection in Lebanon has led to the violation of individual and collective privacy without repercussions. In order to understand the mechanisms under which surveillance is conducted, and to devise strategic advocacy for privacy protections, SMEX issued its inaugural report on digital surveillance and online privacy titled “Mapping the Landscape of Digital Surveillance in Lebanon” on December 14, 2016.

Then, on October 5, 2017, SMEX followed up with “Building Trust: Toward a Legal Framework that Protects Personal Data in Lebanon,” which analyzed data breaches and the shortcomings of the draft form of the Electronic Transactions Law.

This research study aims to take a more targeted approach regarding digital privacy and produce a baseline assessment of the online privacy threats that Lebanese women and members of LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer) communities face, the measures that NGOs take to combat them, and the role of the authorities in preventing or exacerbating these threats. This study catalogues and analyzes the cases in which women and LGBTIQ individuals in Lebanon have been blackmailed or doxxed on social media and dating applications. In addition, it analyzes civil society’s recommendations to victims of online privacy violations and the capacity it has to deal with these issues.

■ Introduction

The employee of a high profile Lebanese businessman is spotted at Posh, a nightclub in Beirut with a ‘gay-friendly’ reputation. Photographs and videos of that employee, taken without their knowledge or consent, surface on social media a few days later. The video’s caption includes his full name and personal contact information and tags the employer. A few days later, the employee is fired and continues to receive a swarm of online hate messages, threats, and verbal abuse.¹

“ And yet, the digital realm often remains insecure, disproportionately exposing women and LGBTIQ communities to threats, such as on-line blackmail and doxing, which can translate into violations of their physical privacy as well. ”

A woman from a Lebanese village receives a message from a Facebook profile that bears her full name and photographs. According to the woman, the profile picture, taken from her personal Instagram account, was a photo of her on the beach, in swimwear. After she reported the account and got Facebook to shut it down, several other accounts, all with her name and photos reappear. The accounts contact her friends and family, impersonating her and sending profanities and insults to people close to her. Most messages make assumptions about the woman’s sexual habits because of the way she dressed, and then shame her for both. Soon after, the woman herself starts receiving threatening messages from these accounts.²

Both of these cases are all too common in Lebanese society. In Lebanon, long-standing religious, patriarchal, and heteronormative social norms, as well as the repeated gridlock resulting from a confessional system’s patronage practices perpetuate a weak rule of law, which has increased the vulnerability of women and the LGBTIQ communities. Patriarchal attitudes translate into cultural, social, and religious norms that discriminate against women and compromise their rights and safety, as well as legislation and laws that deprive women of many basic rights, such as the right to pass on their nationalities and have full custody of their children, and that facilitate the evasion of punishment for perpetrators of rape and abuse.^{3,4}

The LGBTIQ communities in Lebanon remain vulnerable, though some individuals are at more risk than others. With public opinion and mainstream media largely pitted against them, and with a judicial system, security apparatus, and laws that discriminate against them, these communities mostly maintain a low profile when possible. Nevertheless, LGBTIQ groups and individuals have been threatened, both by authorities and by vigilante enforcers of public morals.⁵

With this ongoing repression and marginalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other sexualities and gender identities, and the repeated offenses against women within legal and societal frameworks, the need to communicate safely, seek help, and mobilize in the digital world has become a necessity.

The rise of social media, the availability of chat and dating applications, and the spread of online forums and digital safe spaces have been hailed in places like Lebanon as

democratizing tools that provide new opportunities for vulnerable people to mitigate some of the disadvantages they face. And yet, the digital realm often remains insecure, disproportionately exposing women and LGBTIQ

communities to threats, such as online blackmail and doxxing, which can often lead to direct violations of both their physical and digital privacy.



1 Interview with legal and social services officer from Helem. Speaking on their own behalf, July 30, 2018.
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■ Legal Framework

Privacy Law

In general, there are weak privacy protections in Lebanese law, making it more difficult for women and members of the LGBTIQ communities to protect their online privacy. Article 14 of the Constitution is the foundational privacy law in Lebanon, stating, “the citizen’s place of residence is inviolable. No one may enter it except in the circumstances and manners prescribed by law.”⁶

The legal framework in Lebanon also does not clearly outline how phones should be treated in criminal searches. Article 98 of the Civil Procedure Code, which concerns searches and seizures, does not reference evidence obtained from mobile phones or whether there is a warrant required to search them. For example, one clause states, “if confidential documents are impounded during the search, they shall be numbered and may be viewed only by the Investigating Judge and their owner,” but there has been no further ruling to determine whether the information inside of a password-protected phone counts as a “confidential document.”

Moreover, the law in Lebanon is not equipped to deal with online blackmail, including the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, doxxing, or other increasingly common online privacy threats. As an International Medical Corps (IMC) employee mentioned in an interview with SMEX, “the law in Lebanon doesn’t protect against [blackmail], you cannot sue people for it.”⁷ While this is not entirely true, the protections in place are weak and unevenly applied. Article 569 of the Penal Code, which contains the only clause referencing blackmail or extortion directly, punishes a “perpetrator who used his or her victim as a hostage to intimidate individuals, institutions or the state with the intent of extorting money or coercing them to carry out their desires or to get them to abstain from acting upon something” with hard labor,⁸ which is a largely “symbolic” sentence that accompanies a lengthy prison sentence.⁹ Furthermore, this stipulation almost exclusively pertains to kidnapping and is not applicable to cases of online blackmail.

Human Rights Obligations

Lebanon is among the original signatories to the international human rights law set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The law’s main principle declares that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Article 12 of the law affirms that “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.”¹¹ Lebanon is also a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which states “each State party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”¹²

More directly, Lebanon also signed the Vienna Declaration, Article 18 of which upholds that the “human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights” and condemns “gender-based violence” and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation.¹³ In spite of its support for women and girls, Lebanon has not supported any of the United Nations joint statements or resolutions explicitly mentioning the rights of LGBTIQ individuals.

⁶ The Lebanese Constitution (1926). <https://www.lp.gov.lb/backoffice/uploads/files/Lebanese%20%20Constitution-%20En.pdf>

⁷ Interview with caseworker at IMC.

⁸ مرسوم اشتريعي رقم 340 صادر في 1 آذار 1943 قانون العقوبات (1943). <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/89873/103350/F300391946/LBN89873%20Arab.pdf>

⁹ Alabaster, Olivia. “Empty Hard Labor Sentences Hinder Lebanon Internationally.” The Daily Star. August 24, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2011/Aug-24/147008-empty-hard-labor-sentences-hinder-lebanon-internationally.ashx>

¹⁰ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

¹³ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/vienna.aspx>

■ Background

Challenges Facing Women

As a result of patriarchal attitudes and a sexist social structure in Lebanon, women have fewer legal rights, face societal discrimination, and comprise a small portion of the total number of elected officials. They remain subject to religion-based personal status laws, which fail to guarantee basic rights, according to Human Rights Watch.¹⁴ Autonomous religious courts, subject to little government oversight and unique to each confession, are charged with the administration of 15 laws related to divorce, property rights, and childcare.

Legally, women face greater obstacles than their male spouses when they wish to terminate a marriage, even when facing abuse. For example, women face more difficulty in initiating and finalizing divorces, as well as securing custody of their children who also suffer as a result of such discriminatory laws. As these personal status laws are specific to each confession, women from different religions are treated differently under the law. The system therefore creates a framework of inequality amongst Lebanese women and jeopardizes their rights and safety.¹⁵

Lebanese law still does not criminalize rape in all scenarios. In 2017, the parliament finally repealed Article 522 of the Lebanese Penal code, which allowed men convicted of sexual assault, abduction, or statutory rape to avoid the penalty of five years of hard labor by obtaining a valid marriage contract with the survivor of the assault. Activists claimed that the repeal of Article 522 alone was inadequate because articles 505 and 518 of the Lebanese penal code “stipulate that the rape clause would still apply when sexual assault is committed against a girl between 15 and 18 years old, and there is consent or a prior promise of marriage.”¹⁶

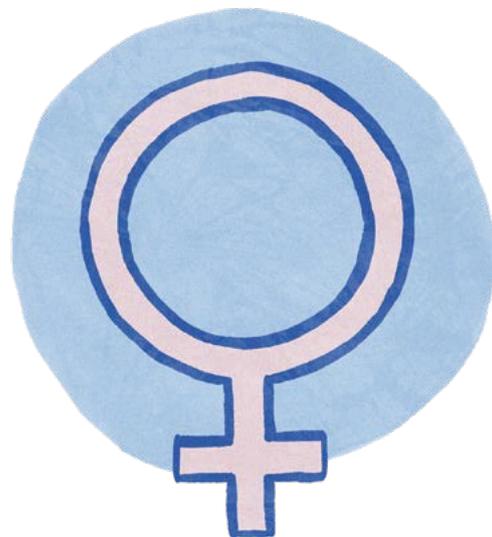
At the societal level, women remain subjected to patriarchal religious norms and traditions that support their oppression. In many rural communities, the rate of women with access to proper education and healthcare remains lower than that of men.¹⁷ On the other hand, many employed women report cases of discrimination, harassment, and assault in the workplace.¹⁸ The stigma against women in Lebanese society prevents them from speaking out in cases of abuse, and discourages real public discussions about subjects still considered taboo, such as sex, sexual health, abortions, and marriage. In cases of assault, public opinion often places blame on women survivors.¹⁹

In the last year, several women have reported becoming targets of “revenge porn,” which has led their families to alienate them for “compromising” the family’s honor.

Furthermore, government agencies report that there are five to six official complaints of non-consensual sharing of online images per week. The authorities often refer to this practice as “sextortion.”²⁰

Politically, the representation of women in public office remains low in spite of a growing focus on women’s rights issues in Lebanon.²¹ Although 86 women ran for office in the May 2018 parliamentary elections, only 6 women were among the 128 elected MPs.²² Additionally, a man is currently the Minister of State for Women’s Affairs.²³

Opposition to this widespread sexism is growing, with campaigns launched by the Kip Project on Gender and Sexuality, such as “NotYourAshta” and “Mesh Basita” gaining traction. Sexual harassment is a part of everyday life for women and girls, and is often downplayed by Lebanese society. The “Mesh Basita” campaign called for the end of this attitude and urged the adoption of sexual harassment legislation.²⁴ A draft law to criminalize sexual harassment was approved by the Cabinet in March 2017, but has still not been passed.²⁵



Challenges Facing LGBTIQ Communities

The Lebanese constitution does not explicitly criminalize homosexuality and homosexual acts, but it includes legislation that has been widely interpreted as opposed to homosexuality. The current legal framework, actions of the authorities, and perceptions of homosexuality in Lebanese society together demonstrate that LGBTIQ communities remain vulnerable and at risk in both the digital and physical spheres.

Most notably, Article 534 of the penal code, in a provision derived from the era of the French Mandate, states that “sexual acts which contradict the laws of nature” are punishable by up to one year in prison.²⁶ The law does not define the key terms, and so interpretations of this law have been left to the discretion of judges. Interpretations that consider homosexual acts “contradictory to the laws of nature” have justified the prosecution of individuals suspected of homosexuality, and their subsequent sentencing. The article is used as a pretext to police gender expression and identities or sexual orientations that are perceived as improper or immoral (i.e those outside the realm of cisgender, heteronormative societal expectations). Though this law has been used to oppress all members of the LGBTIQ communities, it primarily applies to gay and bisexual men as well as transgender women, according to the director of the Gender and Body Rights Program (GAB) at the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality (AFE).²⁷

Arrests, conducted by security forces and sometimes facilitated by reports from vigilante citizens, such as the administrator of the popular Facebook page “Wainiyeh al-Dawleh (Where is the state),” are based on the presumption of homosexuality, which often rely on arbitrary assessments of fashion choices, behavior perceived as non-normative, and raids on private clubs, restaurants, and cinemas with reputations of being safe spaces for the LGBTIQ communities. According to activists, rarely are arrests motivated by concrete proof of homosexual acts between two individuals, as evidence and confessions are often obtained during interrogations, when suspected individuals are forced to unlock their phones and reveal private chat conversations and photos, or by the use of intimidation, sleep deprivation, and other violent methods.²⁸



Another practice that is employed to obtain proof is the “anal virginity test” performed by medical examiners in holding cells. These tests, referred to informally as “egg

tests”, rely on the forced introduction of an egg within the rectum of the arrested individuals to prove their “homosexuality.” The practice has been designated as rape by many activists.²⁹ In 2014, the Lebanese Order of Physicians banned doctors from carrying out the so-called egg tests, warning doctors participating in these tests that they would face disciplinary measures. More progress has been made on the medical front when the Lebanese Psychiatric Organization announced that “homosexuality was not an illness” and therefore could not be cured, thus condemning conversion therapies. This effort required extensive lobbying from NGOs.³⁰ Yet, anal virginity tests are reportedly still taking place illegally in many holding centers, and many members of LGBTIQ communities still report to be forced to undergo conversion therapy.³¹

In recent years, several judges have ruled in favor of LGBTIQ individuals on trial, with landmark rulings stating homosexuality is not “contrary to nature” and therefore can not be tried under article 534. Though courts had ruled homosexuality and queerness did not fall under the jurisdiction of Article 534 in 2009, 2014, 2016 and 2017, the most recent ruling came in 2018, when a “Mount Lebanon appeals court upheld the 2017 acquittal of nine people,” most of whom were transgender women. In the wake of this ruling, activists moved to draft a law to remove the articles used to persecute LGBTIQ communities.^{32,33} Additionally, in May 2018 the censorship office at General Security shut down a poetry reading and detained the primary organizer of Beirut Pride because the poem’s text had not been approved. Then, the general prosecutor cancelled the weeklong event all together.³⁴

Outside of these high profile decisions, many arrested LGBTIQ individuals are tried under accusations of sex work, prostitution, and disturbance of public morality.

Lebanese society remains largely opposed to homosexual behavior. A 2015 study conducted by the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality (AFE), which surveyed 1,200 Lebanese citizens across the country, found that 81.2% of respondents disagreed that homosexuality was natural and 64.6% “felt that homosexuals should not be accepted into society.”³⁵ Though 65.5% of the respondents believed that “homosexuals” should not go to prison, 61.7% also “[disagreed] that society should offer homosexuals some form of protection from discrimination.³⁶ Moreover, 71.8% of respondents disagreed that “people could identify not strictly as either a man or a woman” and 97.5% agreed that there are “two sexes only.”³⁷ This marks a slight improvement from a 2013 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, which revealed that 80% of Lebanese people believed “homosexuality should be rejected by society” and only 18% believed it should be “accepted by society.” In both studies, younger respondents tended to be more accepting of homosexuality.³⁸

Additionally, members of LGBTIQ communities still suffer from unfair and harmful representation from most media outlets that, more often than not, reduce them to stereotypes and normalize their bullying and persecution. Many LGBTIQ individuals fear exposure and “outing” by government authorities and homophobic non-state actors, which can lead to ostracization from their families, communities, and even jobs. In many cases, physical violence is also a significant threat faced by members of these communities.

In the past few years, the authorities have also conducted mass arrests at several venues and locales generally considered to be “safe spaces” for LGBTIQ individuals in Lebanon, notably, the 2014 raid on Hammam Al Agha in Beirut following a “tip” that “homosexual activities” took place within the Turkish bathhouse.

Legal Agenda documented the arrests with testimonies from the arrested employees.³⁹ One of the arrested individuals recounted: “When (the investigator) was done beating me, he moved me into a detention cell. He then entered the cell with two other officers, who started beating me with a stick on my head and body...Later, I was surprised when someone arrived who I was told was a ‘physician’. They asked me to take off my clothes. They said: ‘of course you’re afraid to get undressed because you’ve waxed like a girl’. They left me standing there naked for about fifteen minutes, without anyone coming near me, and then asked me to get dressed again. One of them said to me: ‘aren’t you ashamed to be a faggot on a Friday, you dishonorable lout! You’re Syrian and you’re doing this in our country!’.”⁴⁰

Vulnerable Communities

Of course, some women and members of LGBTIQ communities, including migrant workers and Syrian and Palestinian refugees, have even fewer societal protections. Representatives from NGOs that SMEX spoke with noted that women migrant workers, in particular, are more vulnerable. They arrive to Lebanon under the Kafala system, “which binds them to one employer” and often enables their sponsors to confiscate their passports and legal papers despite the fact that the Ministry of Labor has deemed this practice illegal.⁴¹ They regularly face workplace abuse and are not protected by Lebanese labor laws, which leaves no one accountable for any such abuse.⁴² In 2017, it was reported that two migrant workers were dying per week, and “many of the deaths [are] suicides or botched escape attempts.”⁴³ According to 2016 government data, there are over 100,000 Ethiopian migrants, 47,000 Bengalis and 19,000 Filipinos currently working under this system in Lebanon, though not all of them are women.⁴⁴ Syrian refugees, especially women, also have very few protections in Lebanese society and are often exploited by landlords and employers.⁴⁵ Thus, these women’s accounts of online harassment and blackmail are under reported, though these communities are at greater risk.

The individuals SMEX interviewed for this research project also identified trans women as particularly vulnerable in Lebanon. After speaking with various Lebanese NGOs, Neela Ghoshal, the senior researcher for LGBTIQ issues at Human Rights Watch, emphasized that “people who face multiple forms of oppression in Lebanon – transgender women, for instance, or gay Syrian refugees – are often the most likely to be targeted.”⁴⁶ Because they have fewer societal protections, it is also more difficult for them to come to the authorities or relevant organizations for help.



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■ Research Methodology

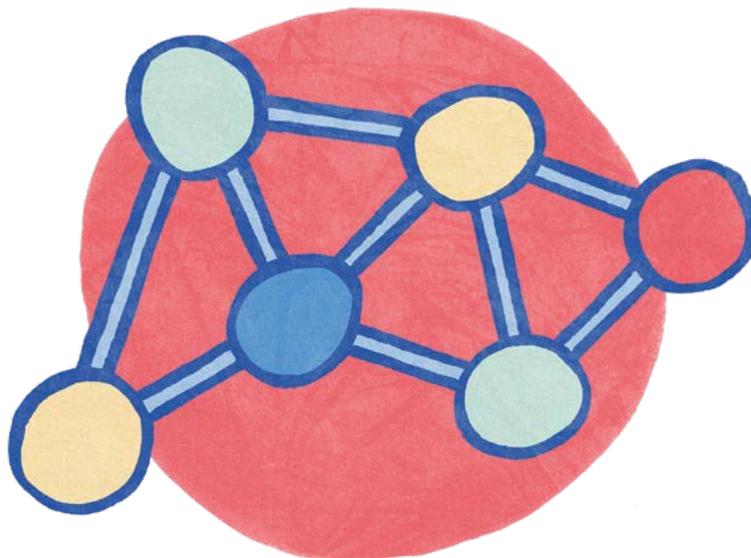
For this project, SMEX aimed to obtain a combination of qualitative and quantitative information concerning the online privacy threats women and members of LGBTIQ communities face in Lebanon. Initially, we catalogued all of the threats that had been reported in Arabic and English local news outlets in the past five years (2014-2018). SMEX recorded these cases with the understanding that the online privacy threats faced by LGBTIQ communities, and more vulnerable members at the intersection of both communities, would be severely underreported or not reported at all. We noted the region, the gender identity of the victims, the arresting party, the punishment handed down to the perpetrator, and the social media platforms on which harassment or blackmail occurred. Additionally, we applied keywords to each case including “blackmail,” “doxing,” “harassment,” and “sextortion.”

In order to get original qualitative information, we drafted both interview questions and a survey. We conducted six one-on-one, in-person, interviews with employees of local NGOs and activists who work closely with women and members of LGBTIQ communities. Respondents included both the legal and social services coordinator and the manager of the community center and safe spaces from Helem, an organization that works with members of the LGBTIQ communities in Lebanon; a case manager at the International Medical Corps (IMC); a communications officer from KAFA, an organization that fights gender-based violence against women;

an employee at the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE); and the Director of the Gender and Body Rights Media Center (GAB Media Center), also at AFE. All interviewees spoke as experts on their own behalf, not on behalf of these organizations. The majority of the interviewees work at Beirut-based NGOs, which means this report may overlook some of the issues that occur in other cities and rural areas. The interviews consisted of nine initial questions, but the researcher often offered improvised follow-up questions. All of the interviews were conducted primarily in Arabic.

Originally, SMEX planned to distribute a survey as well, but the interviewees cautioned that this may be ineffective and time-consuming on their behalf because many did not have the networks in place to easily facilitate distribution. Additionally, SMEX feared that distributing the survey online and through our social media channels would produce a data sample that was not truly representative of the populations.

Before each interview, each interviewee signed a consent form, which was available in both Arabic and English, explaining the scope of the study and the ways their answers may be included. Additionally, we gave all interviewees the option to participate anonymously in the study and kept any requested information off the record.



47 The GAB Media Center is an AFE project.

■ Online Harassment

Online harassment manifests itself, on dating applications and on social media, in the form of hate speech, the creation of fake profiles, and stalking. Within the LGBTIQ communities, the manager of safe spaces from Helem reports that dating applications, like Tinder and Grindr, can be a platform for harassment.⁴⁸ The organization's legal and social services officer observes that harassment takes place on these apps, even though they were originally intended to be safe spaces for the LGBTIQ communities.⁴⁹ The legal and social services officer stressed that this abuse is related to toxic masculinity and patriarchal values. They explained "users attempt to impose their masculinities, shaming other users who don't display traditional masculine looks which creates a lot of intercommunity harassment and bullying."⁵⁰ The GAB program director commented that some members of the LGBTIQ communities have unfortunately replicated the oppression that they are subjected to, which leads them to sometimes bully, harass, and ostracize other members of their communities because of their sexual orientation, looks, or HIV status.⁵¹

“ a colonel at the ISF's Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Bureau, reported that it received 346 total complaints of online “sextortion” and by early 2017 it was receiving complaints practically every day. ”

Harassment is also rampant against women on social media. The GAB program director stated that hate speech towards transgender women, particularly speech concerning whether they have undergone sex reassignment surgery, is common on social media platforms and further stigmatises this community.⁵² The situation for cisgendered women is difficult as well. "Women are exposed to sexual harassment," they said: "you have no idea the amount of messages and quality of messages that cis women receive."⁵³ The other employee from AFE also blamed masculinity for this harassment. They recounted an instance when "A person I didn't know texted me on Facebook, and I ignored the text messages," and added "he proceeded to insult me, say disgraceful things to me, and call me names, just because I wouldn't interact with him. Following that conversation, [he] started to threaten me by saying things like 'I will find out where your house is'."⁵⁴ This type of online harassment regularly evolves into online blackmail.

Online Blackmail

Lebanese women and LGBTIQ individuals face blackmail online; threats range from the non-consensual sharing

of intimate images to "outing" members of the LGBTIQ communities.

Online blackmail is prevalent and women and LGBTIQ individuals are especially vulnerable. In 2015, Suzanne Hajj Hobeiche, the former head of the Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Bureau of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF), told *The New Arab* that the majority of online blackmailers reside in foreign countries like "Morocco and the Philippines;" however, in recent years, there has been an increasing number of cases within Lebanon, especially concerning the non-consensual sharing of intimate images.⁵⁵ Oftentimes, these cases involve people the victim knows intimately. For example, a caseworker at KAFA reported that "online privacy breaches with women [can] happen within the larger context of domestic abuse in the household."⁵⁶ Describing the different methods of online harassment and detailing the recorded cases more clearly illustrates the repercussions online privacy violations have for women and LGBTIQ individuals.

Non-Consensual Sharing of Intimate Images

The non-consensual sharing of intimate images for the purpose of extortion has been a rising threat across the world, with women predominantly targeted. In a 2016 study, Janis Wolak and David Finkelhor, professors at the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, defined "sextortion" as "threats to expose a sexual image in order to make a person do something, or for other reasons, such as revenge or humiliation."⁵⁷ Though scant academic literature exists on the subject, a 2016 report from the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution, which analyzed 78 United States and European Union based cases, concluded that "virtually all of the adult victims in these [sextortion] cases are female."⁵⁸ Though the sample is smaller, women constituted the majority of the victims in the cases SMEX catalogued.

The number of cases in Lebanon has grown in recent years, with the Internal Security Forces (ISF) issuing more warnings each year. In 2016, Joseph Moussallem, a colonel at the ISF's Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Bureau, reported that it received 346 total complaints of online "sextortion" and by early 2017 it was receiving complaints practically every day.⁵⁹ In April 2018, a security source from the Internal Security Forces reiterated to *Lebanon Debate*, an online publication, that they still receive these complaints daily.⁶⁰

Obtaining accurate numbers about sextortion victims in Lebanon is difficult. SMEX tracked 25 mentions⁶¹ of

non-consensual sharing of intimate images reported in online media outlets since 2014. Of the 25 mentions, we identified 22 individual cases and 3 general mentions of sextortion by the ISF or other media outlets. Out of 22 cases, 14 victims identified as women and 8 identified as men. Obviously, this sample does not represent the full picture, as the ISF receives almost 20 times more complaints each year than the total number of cases SMEX tracked over a four year period. Additionally, 15 of these 22 individual cases were reported immediately following an arrest and 1 immediately after a suicide, demonstrating that these cases are usually only reported after there is a resolution. Moreover, the dataset includes no cases mentioning LGBTIQ individuals, which is likely a result of both communities' fear to report these cases to the authorities and the media's reluctance to report on these issues.

Out of 22 cases of the non-consensual sharing of intimate images reported in online media outlets since 2014



Across these cases, the same sextortion tactics were repeatedly used. Many of the perpetrators in the dataset convinced women to send them revealing images over online messaging applications, hacked into social media accounts, gained physical access to targets' phones and computers, or already possessed compromising media about the victim because they were previously in a relationship. In one instance, perpetrators coerced targets into non-consensual sex acts and then recorded them without consent.⁶² Additionally, 10 of the 22 perpetrators in the dataset were serial offenders, and had either attempted or succeeded in extorting multiple victims. Moreover, in Lebanon, cases involving the non-consensual sharing of intimate images do not necessarily need to be sexual images; for example, in one case, a former army officer threatened to send an image of a veiled woman without her hijab and in a swimsuit to her family members. As the GAB program director put it, "a picture on the beach could be used against [women]."⁶³

While money remains the most common motive behind acts of sextortion, perpetrators can also be involved in a domestic dispute with the victim or seeking sexual favors.⁶⁴ For example, the caseworker from IMC reported that in one case "a husband took photographs of his wife in her underwear without her knowing and then threatened to share the photographs."⁶⁵ When one woman in Tripoli refused to pay the sum the perpetrator requested, he asked her to meet him in a park to have sexual relations, but she told the ISF and the man was arrested.⁶⁶ Similarly, another perpetrator blackmailed underage girls in return for sexual favors.⁶⁷ Thus, the violation of privacy is never limited to the online space and often has physical implications. One of the interviewees from AFE mentioned that the organization has received many cases where women have complained that men, who they had shared intimate images with, have shown up to their house and threatened to share these images unless the women agreed to sleep with them or pay a certain sum of money.⁶⁸

“ 10 of the 22 perpetrators in the dataset were serial offenders, and had either attempted or succeeded in extorting multiple victims. ”

In some cases, images and information are shared for the purpose of revenge. In 2018, a PDF document began circulating via chat apps such as WhatsApp. The document, initially posted on Twitter, exposed the detailed story of the relationship between a man and a woman and included private conversations. The PDF resorts to name calling the woman in question, passing moral judgements about her sexual activities, and deeming her worthy of being exposed to society. The PDF ended with a photograph of the girl, her full name, and a quotation: "At the end of the day, you can take the girl out of the whorehouse, but you can't take the whorehouse out of the girl."⁶⁹

The document exposed the woman's identity, as well as conversations she had over WhatsApp with two men. The conversations were allegedly screenshotted from her own phone - the technicalities and circumstances of which remain unknown. The identities of the men, and their photographs were also included. Within two days, her name was tweeted 40,900 times, while the man's name was tweeted 21,700 times.⁷⁰ The PDF was circulated heavily on WhatsApp, triggering slurs and judgement aimed at the woman. The story even got the attention of the mainstream media and most outlets published the woman's name.

Non-consensual sharing of intimate images also occurs in the LGBTIQ communities, but there are fewer reported instances, largely because it is much more difficult for these individuals to go to the authorities. In one case, a

man entered into an intimate relationship with his driver, and the driver took images that were consensual at the time. When the relationship ended, the driver later used the images to blackmail the man for money, according to the employee from AFE. The man refused to pay, but the driver sent people to physically harm him; eventually, he came to a local NGO for help, as going to the police would jeopardize his freedom.⁷¹

Outing and Other Forms of Blackmail in the LGBTIQ Communities

Though there are fewer reported cases of non-consensual sharing of intimate images, online blackmail remains a prevalent issue among LGBTIQ individuals in Lebanon. The legal and social services coordinator from Helem described it as “common.”⁷² According to them, blackmailers obtain information about their victims through different online platforms and channels, adopting different social engineering tactics to lull victims into a false sense of trust and security. This happens by putting up fake online profiles, assuming false identities, or simply pretending to have the victim’s best interests at heart in order to earn their trust. Once this occurs, over the span of weeks or even months, the victim reveals private information about their sexuality or their habits, thus giving blackmailers information which can be used to extort their targets. Additionally, one interviewee mentioned that blackmailers also exploit victims who are HIV positive.⁷³ Sometimes perpetrators blackmail these victims through social media platforms, while other times they target them through online dating applications, such as Grindr.⁷⁴

In these cases, the motives vary: blackmailers could be pursuing sex, believing they can obtain it through coercion and threats to divulge the information they’ve obtained, or they could be family members or friends acting upon doubts about said victim’s sexuality and gender, ultimately seeking to coerce the victim into changing their sexual behaviors or gender identity by exposing them to the rest of the family. Similarly, the methods used vary as well: many times blackmailers obtain compromising messages; however, in some cases victims are blackmailed with screenshots of gay dating applications on their phones.⁷⁵

Online blackmail affects different members of the LGBTIQ communities in different ways. The legal and social services officer from Helem stressed that because masculine-presenting gay men have the ability to “hide” their sexuality from society - that is, by dressing and behaving in ways deemed normative by conservative societies - they are particularly vulnerable to blackmail. They believed that non-normative presenting individuals, namely queer and transgender people, are exposed to much harsher types of abuse offline, and to online harassment, but are less prone to blackmail.⁷⁶ On the other hand, the safe

spaces manager from Helem believed that people who are “straight-looking” face less risk of blackmail than non-normative LGBTIQ individuals, as there is less risk of their families and friends uncovering their orientations and gender identities. Transgender, queer, and intersex individuals, they claimed, are more at risk of being targeted and blackmailed, with strangers threatening to send their photographs and online posts to their families and loved ones.⁷⁷ An employee at AFE mentioned that lesbian and bisexual women are less susceptible to online blackmail, largely because they are not targeted by straight women in the same way that many straight men attempt to use blackmail to harass and bully gay and bisexual men, cis women, and transgender women.⁷⁸

Regardless of the orientation and gender of the victim, both representatives from Helem agree that blackmail is a frequent occurrence within the LGBTIQ communities. Many victims of blackmail, upon reaching the point of having to reveal their identities to their families, decide willingly to go to conversion therapy in order to appease their parents, thinking they can “fake” their way out of the procedure.⁷⁹ The truth is far less pleasant. According to the legal and social services officer from Helem, exposure to this therapy creates emotional stress, doubts about one’s identity and sexuality, self-loathing, and a pressure to give in, regardless of the victim’s preparedness.⁸⁰ In other words, even the most vigilant victims still suffer from this practice.

Of course, online blackmail has numerous effects. The societal isolation and emotional pressure placed on victims as a result can cause immense strain on their mental health, leading to depression, anxiety, and in some cases, as the case worker put it, “suicidal ideation.”⁸¹ In rural areas with less awareness about these issues and less resources, the results can be more dangerous.

In addition to the previously mentioned forms of online blackmail, LGBTIQ communities are threatened by hacking as well. The legal and social services officer from Helem relayed that two cases of hacking, where perpetrators used phishing links to obtain access to targets’ computers, have been reported to the organization in the past year.⁸²

Doxxing

Women and LGBTIQ individuals in Lebanon are also vulnerable to “doxxing”, a practice that is frequently encouraged by members of the public. While some researchers have defined “doxxing” as publicly revealing a person’s full name and address, Sarah Jeong, a technology writer, stressed that “the context in which the [public] information gets posted matters. When the dox is posted ‘before a pre-existing hostile audience,’ the likelihood that malicious action follows from it is much higher.”⁸³

In Lebanon, this is often the reality.

For instance, a man lost his job after a video of him at a gay club was posted on Facebook. The Facebook post in question included his personal information and the information of his employer, who worked in politics, according to the legal and social services officer from Helem.⁸⁴ The director of the GAB Program described another instance in which an individual collected images of gay men and posted them on a Tumblr page, printing their names as well.⁸⁵ Though the Tumblr page was ultimately removed, the perpetrator simply migrated the images to a Dropbox account from which they continued to distribute them. Eventually, AFE was able to contact Dropbox and convince the company to block access to the document, but it was a “big deal” for the company to block it.⁸⁶

“ [...] this Facebook page has posted transgender people, simply “walking down the street” and that “these posts have led to arrests. ”

Transgender individuals are also often victims of doxxing. In September 2017, the popular Facebook page “Wainiyeh al-Dawleh (Where is the state),” which posts videos of crimes and asks its followers to report people or send tips with information, posted a video of a transgender woman and a man engaging in a consensual BDSM act, encouraging its followers to dox the woman.⁸⁷ Sami Beiruti, the pseudonymous owner of the page, not only doxxed both the woman and the man, but also posted the woman’s birth name. Though the page is not officially connected to the ISF, it has an open contact line and maintains a close relationship with them.⁸⁸ In an article for the Atlantic, writer Kaveh Waddell claimed that he did not see any other mention of LGBTIQ communities on the Wainiyeh al-Dawleh page, but the legal and social services officer from Helem stressed that this Facebook page has posted images of transgender people simply “walking down the street” and that “these posts have led to arrests.”⁸⁹

In September 2018, Wainiyeh al-Dawleh also published a video that had already been circulating on social media: the video depicted two men seemingly embracing in a pool. It was filmed by an anonymous onlooker, without the consent or knowledge of the men in the video, and later published on Wainiyeh al-Dawleh’s page, with the faces of the men. The caption included: “Sodomy and the lack of manhood [...] have become a kind of civilization.”⁹⁰ Though the post by Wainiyeh al-Dawleh was not removed by Facebook when the SMEX researcher reported it, providing the justification that the post did not violate the platform’s community standards, the video was also reported by activists and NGOs such as AFE, and successfully removed from other pages.

While Wainiyeh al-Dawleh is an unofficial media page with a tangential connection to the authorities, the official media and the security forces also partake in more direct doxxing when it comes to migrant workers. The caseworker from KAFA explained that when media outlets report on the personal information of migrant workers involved in a news story, they mention names, information, addresses, and nationalities - even if they cover the face, which they don’t always do.⁹¹ These articles and videos are later published on social media platforms and shared and disseminated, exposing migrant workers to humiliation and violating their privacy.⁹² When the media and the ISF mention Lebanese nationals, or other Arab nationals, they take additional steps to protect their identity, including abbreviating their names and excluding further identifiable information, such as exact addressees.

An environment that encourages vigilante justice can lead to physical violence. For instance, one of the representatives from AFE reported that “through Grindr, a man was drugged” and sexually harassed by “a gang of straight men.” According to the employee, this gang uses Grindr to “target people and then harasses them, sexually abuse them, drug them, beat them, leave them there, and split.”⁹³



48 Interview with the manager of the community center and safe spaces from Helem.

49 Interview with the legal and social services officer from Helem.

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51 Interview with the Director of the GAB program.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Interview with employee from AFE, Speaking on their own behalf, September 11, 2018.

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61 A mention sometimes includes multiple cases.

62 "Two Arrested on Charges of Assault and Blackmail." The Daily Star. August 3, 2016. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2016/Aug-03/365275-two-arrested-on-charges-of-assault-and-blackmail.ashx>

63 Interview with the Director of the GAB Center.

64 "ISF Arrests Accuse Man of Blackmailing Woman in Palestine." The Daily Star, August 29, 2018. <https://www.pressreader.com/lebanon/the-daily-star-lebanon/20180829/281578061528607>

65 Interview with caseworker from IMC.

66 "Alleged Instagram Sextortionist Arrested for Blackmailing Women." The Daily Star. August 17, 2018. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Aug-17/460471-alleged-instagram-sextortionist-arrested-for-blackmailing-women.ashx>

67 "بدي ياكى وإلّا بنشر صورك... الابتزاز الجنسي في لبنان مصدر تمويل عصابات...!" Tayyar, May 29, 2017. <https://www.tayyar.org/News/Lebanon/150485>

68 Interview with employee from AFE.

69 "عندما تخون المرأة.. يقولون إنها عاهرة." رصيف22 July 28, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2QY0y8A>

70 Ibid.

71 Interview with employee from AFE.

72 Interview with legal and social services officer from Helem.

73 Interview with the Director of the GAB Center.

74 Ibid.

75 "Apps, Arrest, and Abuse in Egypt, Lebanon and Iran," 21. Article 19, February 2018. https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/LGBTQ-Apps-Arrest-and-Abuse-report_22.2.18.pdf

76 Interview with legal and social services officer from Helem.

77 Interview with manager of community and safe spaces from Helem.

78 Interview with employee from AFE.

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85 Interview with Director of GAB Center.

86 Ibid.

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90 Link redacted.

91 Interview with caseworker from KAFA.

92 Ibid.

93 Interview with employee from AFE.

■ The Authorities: Violating Privacy

Although the authorities constantly issue warnings about the rise of online blackmail and do take measures to assist straight, cisgender women with prosecuting blackmailers or extortionists, their efforts often fall short. In many cases, especially those concerning LGBTIQ individuals, the authorities violate the right to privacy and safety.

In cases involving, straight, cisgendered women, the authorities attempt to help arrest blackmailers. According to the caseworker at KAFA, if a woman reports that she's getting blackmailed, the authorities will pursue the suspect, even if the woman had indeed sent revealing photos or information, and prosecute the perpetrators on account of libel and damaging the personal image.⁹⁴ At the same time, the authorities ask women to take preventive measures and inquire about the clothes they are wearing, thus putting the burden of protection on the victims rather than the perpetrators.⁹⁵ For example, in one of its posts recounting the arrest of a blackmailer, the ISF "[asked the woman] to agree not to take indecent photos to avoid them being used against her later."⁹⁶ Taking precautionary measures may be helpful, but it is not sufficient to protect against online blackmail and can cause emotional distress and problems of their own.

LGBTIQ individuals rarely receive any kind of protection from authorities, who instead often violate their digital privacy. The legal and social services officer from Helem views the state as the last resort to help with blackmail in the LGBTIQ communities.⁹⁷ Most of the time, arrests are based on physical appearance, with the authorities, especially the Internal Security Forces, intimidating detainees into unlocking their phones, even though this violates Article 14 of the Lebanese constitution. A 2018 study conducted by Article 19 noted that "the

checking of phones for LGBTIQ-focused dating apps at certain police and military checkpoints in Lebanon has been prevalent."⁹⁸ According to a representative from Helem, the ISF and other branches of the authorities often confiscate LGBTIQ individuals' phones and force them to use the fingerprint feature to unlock them. The authorities also use this tactic during interrogations when a suspect refuses to surrender their phone's access PIN, using the legal pretext that these people are threatening public security.⁹⁹ The authorities then use the possession of "pornographic" photos or media to justify arresting these individuals.¹⁰⁰

The authorities also target transgender women. An employee from AFE explained that officers at Maghfar Hobeish (Hobeish Station), a police station in Beirut which gained notoriety for its poor treatment of prisoners, routinely target transgender sex workers through online dating applications, such as Grindr. The authorities use more than just dating applications, as the representative from AFE explained, recounting that a police officer from the Hobeish police station had also once shown her WhatsApp messages and voice notes which the authorities had used to arrest these women.¹⁰¹ Many transgender women also "face the stigma of prostitution and some do turn to prostitution due to a "lack of job opportunities."¹⁰² As sex work is illegal in Lebanon, this is a common justification the authorities use to target transgender women and violate their digital privacy. Though another interviewee relayed that contact with officers at the Hobeish police station has improved after Human Rights Watch's reporting, the issue remains prevalent throughout Lebanon.

94 Interview with a representative from KAFA.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Interview with legal and social services officer from Helem.

98 "Apps, Arrest, and, Abuse in Egypt, Lebanon and Iran," 21.

99 Interview with legal and social services officer from Helem

100 "Apps, Arrest, and, Abuse in Egypt, Lebanon and Iran," 21.

101 Interview with employee from AFE.

102 Marsi, Federica. "Transgender in Lebanon: A Story of Courage and Determination." Middle East Eye, October 10, 2016. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/transgender-lebanon-story-courage-and-determination-sexuality-homosexuality-1971943699>

■ Adopted Precautions and Safety Measures

Through SMEX's interviews with different organizations, we were able to categorize several different precautions and policies that local NGOs encourage regarding online blackmail, harassment, and other online threats faced by women and LGBTIQ individuals.

Understanding the Risks

The director of the GAB Center believes a common challenge faced by both women and LGBTIQ communities in Lebanon when it comes to online risks is: "a lack of awareness about what we post and what kind of info we're giving to online platforms." They stress that a large problem is the "lack of awareness from women and the LGBTIQ communities: Not everybody knows how Facebook works, how WhatsApp works. If I save a name on WhatsApp, why does the person appear on Facebook? And they post a lot of pictures, a lot of check-ins, phone numbers. It affects them."¹⁰³

Though this "lack of awareness" is not exclusive to the LGBTIQ communities nor to women, they are generally the most affected by its consequences since their identities already place them at greater risk in Lebanese society, and can therefore be used against them. "Women and members of the LGBTIQ community are constantly giving away their own privacy. To protect themselves, they should not have to wipe out their online presence, just be more aware of its risks," the employee from AFE said.¹⁰⁴ While awareness can help, as one of the experts from Helem stressed, "there are precautions that can be taken, but these people are in no way responsible for what happens to them."¹⁰⁵

Protecting Personal Information

Many of the organizations SMEX spoke with insisted that while individuals are not responsible for what happens, there are certain measures they can take to protect themselves. Broadly, the caseworker at KAFA suggested that women should be careful about what messages and images they send and share online.¹⁰⁶ More specifically, a representative from Helem suggested that people should send photographs that do not reveal their identity, and that they avoid using the fingerprint unlock function on their mobile devices, so that police cannot gain access to them during searches or arrests.¹⁰⁷

Staying Online

Disappearing from the digital world only causes more ostracization and alienation for these communities. The employee from AFE emphasized "even if [people] do know how online privacy works, they're just living their lives. They cannot opt for wiping out their online existence and remove their Facebook accounts, Instagram, or applications: social media has become essential."¹⁰⁸ They stressed the importance of visibility and compared withdrawing offline to the impact street harassment has on transgender individuals. According to the employee, this harassment discourages transgender individuals from going out during daylight or mingling with the public. This in turn, makes them less visible in everyday spaces, and therefore more alienated. Instead of advising vulnerable individuals to stay off social media, the individual believes "on the contrary: our job is to create a safe space for them on social media, even though it's not safe for them."¹⁰⁹

Damage Control

Almost all employees from the organizations SMEX interviewed encouraged victims of blackmail not to cooperate. One individual suggested: "If the discussion is still light, try to reason with these people."¹¹⁰ However, others warned of follow up threats: "There is a case of someone sending money for a year, and when the person stopped the other person outed them."¹¹¹ In most cases, NGOs unsurprisingly advocated for victims to come to NGOs initially and then try to gain legal representation. Usually, these NGOs then refer them to legal services, but other times they manage to resolve it without going to court. While this seems to be the standard procedure, one representative SMEX spoke to believes ethical hacking to be the most effective solution.

¹⁰³ Interview with Director of GAB Center.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with employee from AFE.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with manager of community and safe spaces from Helem.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with caseworker from KAFA.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with manager of community and safe spaces from Helem.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Director of the GAB Center.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

■ Capacity of Civil Society

All of the representatives from civil society organizations that SMEX interviewed are willing to provide advice on handling online harassment and blackmail but a capacity gap does exist. For example, organizations working primarily on women's issues simply do not have the time or resources to also devote focus to online privacy issues. The caseworker at the IMC acknowledged that "online abuse [is] within [the organization's] scope of work," but also explained that online privacy threats are a low priority for the organization, which mostly handles domestic violence cases, because they do not involve physical abuse. Moreover, she noted that the organization had not trained its employees on how to deal with cases involving online privacy threats.¹¹²

On the other hand, Helem and AFE, which work more closely with LGBTIQ individuals, seemed much more aware of the online privacy threats faced by members of these communities and were much more prepared to offer advice on how to mitigate them. When it comes to harassment, Helem advises users on the types of online harassment they might face, and handles many more blackmail cases than organizations predominantly focused on women's issues. In addition, Helem has a "direct communication line" with Grindr and can suggest improvements to the app if the organization feels that certain features are jeopardizing user safety.¹¹³ Yet, even the employee from AFE stressed that "the more [the organization has] consistent funding, the better [it] can do this [work] continuously."¹¹⁴



¹¹² Interview with caseworker from IMC.

¹¹³ Interview with legal and social services officer from Helem.

¹¹⁴ Interview with employee from AFE.

■ Conclusion

Women and LGBTIQ individuals in Lebanon are marginalized across the board. As a result, they are especially susceptible to a wide range of digital privacy threats, which regularly extend into the offline world as well. These threats include harassment, blackmail, and doxing. A small number of civil society groups are proactively addressing issues such as online blackmail, but these organizations rarely have an effective recourse for preventing online blackmail or stopping harassment, and often rely on unofficial channels to solve these problems.

“ One consensus amongst all of SMEX’s interviewees seems to be that the most effective long-term solutions to online privacy threats involves changing the current societal and legal landscape and promoting an environment that is safe and inclusive both offline and online, for women and members of the LGBTIQ communities. ”

The biggest obstacle is the adversarial role the authorities play in handling online blackmail and privacy threats, particularly regarding the LGBTIQ communities. While some straight, cisgendered women have the option to go to the police, for many other people this is not the case. As the employee from AFE stated: “you can call 112 in the case of assault or harassment. But I don’t trust this system, I don’t trust that 112 will get there in 15 minutes or 10 minutes to save me.” They continued: “Even if they pass a law, I don’t trust the law, I don’t trust the people who are applying the law.”¹⁰⁵ If Lebanon were to pass a law legislating blackmail and harassment, it could be misinterpreted to further repress freedom of expression, as this has occurred in other countries. At the same time, existing laws used to criminalize homosexuality and sex

work play a big role in facilitating and encouraging online harassment, blackmail, and breaches of privacy by both state and non-state actors, since these laws automatically incriminate or shame most victims, stripping them of all legal recourse and family support. A reform of privacy laws and laws related to sexuality and gender is necessary.

While this study was limited through its dependence on local media, its qualitative nature, and its bias towards organizations in Beirut, there is a clear need for more digital security trainings and awareness raising efforts regarding online privacy across the country. The trainings that are offered, such as the one mentioned by the AFE employee, often cater to journalists and activists. While it is important to continue to hold similar trainings, the most at-risk women and LGBTIQ individuals are not always included. Part of the burden for combatting these issues also rests on the shoulders of social media companies, such as Facebook, who do a poor job making users aware of the negative effects their default privacy settings could have.

There is no “one size fits all” solution for online blackmail and privacy violations in Lebanon, or anywhere for that matter, but the creation of a helpline or similar resource, run by a civil society organization, may help provide women and members of the LGBTIQ communities with a more effective recourse when facing online privacy threats.

One consensus amongst all of SMEX’s interviewees seems to be that the most effective long-term solutions to online privacy threats involves changing the current societal and legal landscape and promoting an environment that is safe and inclusive both offline and online, for women and members of the LGBTIQ communities. With fewer sources of legal or societal support, they are the most vulnerable victims of these attacks, as they remain victimized by the law and the norms of Lebanese society.

115 Interview with employee from AFE.

