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UPHOLDING RIGHTS AT A TIME OF GLOBAL BACKLASH

STRATEGIES IN SWANA

THE CASE OF LEBANON

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DISCLAIMER

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the rise of anti-rights backlash against feminist, LGBTQI+, and gender non-conforming communities in Lebanon amid intersecting political, economic, and social crises. It argues that this backlash is not a temporary reaction but a structural phenomenon rooted in sectarian governance, authoritarian practices, and the erosion of civic space. Drawing on interviews, focus group discussions, discourse analysis, and existing literature, the study maps key actors, narratives, and strategies shaping contemporary anti-rights mobilization. It explores how discourses around morality, family, cultural authenticity, and national identity are used to undermine gender and sexual rights.

KEYWORDS

Lebanon; LGBTQI+ rights; anti-rights backlash; authoritarianism; feminist movements; queer activism; civil society; sectarianism;

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1. INTRODUCTION

The multilayered and compounded crisis of political paralysis, economic collapse, social fragmentation, and regional instability post-Lebanese civil war and its 90s neoliberal bloom has converged to create one of the most protracted and multifaceted breakdowns in its modern history. What began as promises of reconstruction and economic liberalization devolved into the political, economic, and financial collapse of 2019, marking a turning point in the Lebanese crisis. The systemic failure of the state and its institutions, currency devaluation, near-total financial ruin, and growing authoritarianism entrenched in what Majed (2021) calls the mutual reinforcement of "sectarianism and neoliberalism" have all disproportionately impacted marginalized communities.

The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic following the economic crash further strained Lebanon's decaying health system and widened existing socioeconomic gaps (UNICEF Lebanon, 2022). The port explosion, one of the largest non-nuclear blasts in history, devastated large sections of Beirut, killing over 200 people, injuring thousands, and displacing tens of thousands while also exposing the criminal negligence and impunity of state institutions. There was extensive damage to infrastructure, including transport, energy, water supply and sanitation, and municipal services, totaling US$390-475 million in losses. According to the World Bank, the explosion caused an estimated $3.8-4.6 billion in material damage (Human Rights Watch, 2021). For Beirut's queer communities, the intersecting crises produced a loss that was simultaneously material, spatial, and existential. Entire neighborhoods where queer people had found community, livelihoods, refuge, and artistic and intimate expression had been completely destroyed and queer safe[r] spaces annihilated by the same systemic negligence that had long rendered their existence precarious (Skinner 2022, 5).

The crises did not stop there. As part of its broader expansionist agenda and efforts to consolidate regional dominance, Israel has, since 2023, continued to bomb Lebanon and intensify its military campaign, targeting civilian areas. As of November 2024, these operations have resulted in over 3,300 deaths, approximately 13,800 injuries, and the displacement of more than 1.2 million people across Lebanon (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024; UNICEF, 2024). This climate of sustained aggression and permanent crisis has unraveled Lebanon's already fragile social contract, deepening the chasm between the state and a population increasingly abandoned to insecurity and displacement. By 2025–2026, continued escalation, targeted assassinations, and widespread infrastructural damage have further entrenched conditions of chronic insecurity, with entire communities experiencing repeated cycles of displacement and renewed evacuation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2026).

In a society where political institutions are largely paralyzed, and sectarian elites continue to dominate public life, scapegoating becomes a political strategy (McClearn, Jensen, and Talhouk 2023). Increasingly targeted by both state and non-state actors, and in a coordinated effort to reverse the modest gains made in gender justice and civil rights since the early 2000s, feminist, LGBTQI+, and gender non-conforming individuals have found themselves at the forefront of a regressive anti-gender and anti-rights backlash.

This paper seeks to examine the intensification of this backlash, situating it within broader global and regional trends while centering its specific manifestations in the Lebanese context. It builds upon interviews, group discussions, media and discourse analysis, and existing academic and policy literature with the aim of mapping the landscape of rights-based resistance in Lebanon, identifying the key actors driving the backlash, and offering potential policy recommendations for stakeholders invested in human rights, social justice, and democratic integrity.

A central component of the analysis will focus on the conceptualization of "backlash" in Lebanon. This backlash is neither episodic nor reactive; it is institutional and cultural and appears in the form of public incitement to violence and in legal systems, policy and governance. The enactors are not fringe groups; they are often overtly supported by politicians, media outlets and religious leaders. Conservative values and the protection of the sacrality of the family unit, drawing upon narratives of cultural authenticity, religious morality, and national sovereignty, are woven as tools of

authoritarian governance to preserve patriarchal and sectarian values. Non-state actors have played an increasingly influential role. Groups such as Jnoud El-Rabb (in English “Soldiers of God”), formed in 2019 as a Christian extremist militia that has emerged more visibly in recent years, exemplify this dynamic. Its young men would tour Beirut’s predominantly Christian eastern neighborhoods acting as guards against strangers coming in (Mroue and Chehayeb 2023). These groups operate with explicit support from political parties, local authorities, and even security institutions. They function as de facto enforcers of sectarian and ideological agendas. The outsourcing of state authority to armed non-state actors is not a new trend; collusion between these militias and state actors has always been manifest in authoritarian and exclusionary visions of national identity.

Whenever Lebanon’s crises fueled a decline in institutional legitimacy, non-governmental organizations, civil society actors, and grassroots initiatives stepped in to fill the void. Over time, the proliferation of NGOs came to provide services that the government was meant to deliver, at times inadvertently allowing state institutions to evade accountability (AbiYaghi, Yammine, and Jagarnathsingh 2019). Movements advocating for women’s rights, LGBTQI+ visibility, sexual health, and freedom of expression have many times been framed as foreign intrusions, often funded by “Western agendas” and therefore incompatible with Lebanese tradition. This trend has been exacerbated within the current context. Backed by a globalized rhetoric rooted in social media (McClearn, Jensen, and Talhouk 2023), media figures routinely portray feminism and queer activism as existential threats to the Lebanese family, moral values, and communal identity.

A particularly alarming dimension of the current backlash is the attack on foreign-funded civil society organizations. Prominent among these are campaigns targeting donors such as the Open Society Foundations and other international human rights bodies, which are accused of orchestrating cultural imperialism or undermining national unity. These attacks, often bolstered by conspiracy-laden discourse, serve to delegitimize the work of civil society organizations, restrict their access to funding, and cast suspicion on activists as “agents of foreign interests.” This is not to suggest that critical discussions around the sustainability and political implications of foreign funding should be off the table; on the contrary, such debates around how humanitarian actors substitute structural transformation with service delivery, leaving power relations largely intact, are necessary and legitimate. However, within the aforementioned context, the posture and intent behind these accusations are to discredit rights-based movements, sow distrust, and stifle dissent.

Building on the compounded political, economic, and social crises outlined above, this study illustrates the emergence of contemporary anti-rights dynamics within Lebanon’s broader institutional fragmentation, sectarian governance, and shrinking civic space. Rather than treating these developments as isolated reactions to specific events, it approaches them as structurally embedded within a longer crisis formation that has reshaped relations between state authority, non-state actors, and civil society. Within this context, the weakening of public institutions, alongside the intensification of sectarian clientelism and authoritarian practices, has contributed to the uneven exposure of marginalized communities to forms of legal, social, and physical vulnerability.

This paper seeks to document and analyze these dynamics by first identifying and mapping key anti-rights actors operating in Lebanon, including religious authorities, political parties, municipal figures, and influential media networks. It then examines the discursive and legal strategies through which anti-rights backlash is articulated and operationalized, including the use of language, morality-based narratives, and legislative instruments. A central focus is placed on the concrete impact of this backlash on LGBTQI+ individuals while documenting grassroots and collective resistance strategies that have emerged in response. It also acknowledges significant gaps in both research and advocacy, particularly regarding refugee and migrant LGBTQI+ communities, whose experiences remain underrepresented, especially outside major urban centers.

Methodologically, the study draws on interviews, focus groups, discourse analysis, scholarly literature, NGO reports, and media sources in order to map the evolving dynamics of anti-rights movements in Lebanon, which are further examined in the following literature review.

As the state has retreated from its obligations and civic space has narrowed, the bodies and lives of feminist, queer, and gender non-conforming communities have become sites onto which anxieties about sovereignty, morality, and national identity are projected and violently managed. And so, the backlash documented in this paper is not incidental to Lebanon's collapse; it is constitutive of it and embedded within a longer crisis formation, constantly reshaping the relationship between state authority, non-state actors, and civil society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section synthesizes scholarly studies, NGO reports, and media analysis in order to map the evolving dynamics of anti-rights movements in Lebanon. It aims to highlight how feminist and LGBTQI+ organizing are increasingly under attack through a confluence of political, religious, and media forces, often in service of authoritarian and sectarian interests.

2.1. AUTHORITARIAN INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF MORAL PANIC

In Lebanon, real political alternatives are lacking, and the discourse surrounding gender and sexuality is growing more aggressive and coordinated, with religious figures, politicians, and media platforms often converging around narratives that frame feminist and queer movements as existential threats to social cohesion. Wahba (2024, p. 40), in her thorough study, argues that these narratives are instrumentalized to legitimize authoritarian rule: "By framing dissent as a threat to the moral fabric of society, regimes weaponize these narratives to entrench power." Aligned with this, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch document public officials launching attacks on LGBTQI+ rights amid the collapse of state authority (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Political and religious figures have always been a driving force when it came to anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric and policies. But in recent years, figures such as Hezbollah's former Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah labeled homosexuality a "danger to society" (Kassem, 2023) during televised speeches, while state officials moved from rhetoric to legislation. In March 2023, Nasrallah had denounced the "attempt to change our culture, led by the West." He took the opportunity to attack the LGBTQ+ community, saying, "The culture of homosexuality is very influential and comes from the United States. It is not only demonic; it has real effects." (L'Orient Today 2023). In July 2023, during a public speech later reposted by Akhbar al Sa7a on X, (أخبار الساحة 2023), he explicitly incited violence against gay and lesbian people, calling for them to be killed and urging people to use derogatory terms to describe gay people and to "collectively face this phenomenon [homosexuality], by all means necessary, without any limits." (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Former Minister of Interior and Municipalities Bassam al-Mawlawi issued a decree prohibiting the assembly of LGBTQI+ individuals in public spaces, targeting not specific gatherings but any celebration, meeting, or assembly deemed to promote this "phenomenon." Culture Minister Mohammad Mortada and Member of Parliament Ashraf Rifi similarly aligned themselves with efforts to criminalize homosexuality and ban queer-related events outright (Kassem, 2023; Wahba, 2024). The minister of interior thereby transcended his executive function and made a regulatory decision to restrict freedom of assembly (The Legal Agenda, 2022).

Since June 2022, Lebanon's feminist and women's rights movements, diverse and at times internally contested, have also faced significant opposition, primarily driven by targeted campaigns from religious and political groups. On August 3, 2023, and in reaction to a July 2023 initiative by nine MPs to repeal Article 534[1] , the penal code provision long used to prosecute same-sex conduct, MP Ashraf Rifi in Tripoli announced his intention to propose a bill to criminalize homosexuality, which he said would be ready "in tw[1]o or three weeks". According to Rifi, "Western associations, under progressive cover, encourage the promotion of homosexuality, claiming that it is something natural," Rifi told L'Orient-Le Jour. "This threatens our society, whether we are Christians or Muslims" (Kassem, 2023). Around the same time, Prime Minister Najib Mikati issued a statement calling for "all authorities, educational institutions, media and civil society to focus on national identity, its ethics and values, including the family" (Wahba 2024, p. 39). As a consequence, human rights organizations face smear campaigns, activists are harassed or interrogated under morality or defamation laws, and LGBTQI+ events are canceled or violently disrupted.

1 Article 534 of the *Lebanese Penal Code* punishes any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature with up to one year in prison.

And in a broader erosion of freedom of expression, stand-up comedians who attempt to address political, social, or sectarian issues through satire are targeted, threatened, and pressured to self-censor. Such was the case of comedian and activist Shaden Fakih, who was prosecuted before the Military Court on charges related to defamation and "insulting" security forces, reflecting the increasing use of legal mechanisms to criminalize criticism of state institutions. Another example was given of a woman doctor who was successfully providing sex education and female medical advice on TikTok. Following a campaign by religious institutions calling on people to report her, she was banned on social media platforms. One participant noted that "she kept getting banned over and over and over again" due to the organised silencing campaign. In some cases, online reporting and censorship of women led to them being taken in for government investigation (McClearn, Jensen, and Talhouk 2023). Such prosecutions are part of a wider pattern of harassment of activists and journalists, including interrogations over social media content and the referral of civilian cases to military jurisdiction, raising concerns over systematic restrictions on freedom of expression (Amnesty International 2022).

2.2. SECTARIAN VIGILANTISM

Activists interviewed across journalistic reporting and advocacy literature have predominantly concluded that these tactics are part of a broader strategy of social control by a sectarian political elite. As Makarem & Kazma have noted in an article for Jeem, titled: Queer Mutual Aid Lebanon: Centering the Peripherized (2024), "We are living in times of collapse. We are living in the time of monsters. Four years into an ever-worsening economic crisis in Lebanon, a new social order appears to be forming. Sectarian vigilantism, reminiscent of the civil war era, is returning."

In August 2023, A violent attack on Madam Om nightclub in Beirut's Mar Mikhael district illustrates the escalation of such repression, where members of the group Jnoud El Rab stormed the venue hosting a drag performance, verbally and physically assaulting patrons while framing the space as "promoting homosexuality" and "the forbidden". According to eyewitness accounts, dozens of attackers attempted to forcibly enter the venue, while security forces reportedly arrived but failed to intervene effectively, further contributing to perceptions of impunity and institutional abandonment of LGBTQI+ individuals (Sleiman 2023). Videos of the attack, reviewed by Amnesty International, "show the assailants destroying furniture outside the bar, beating people who tried to leave the bar, and threatening the owner with more violence if they continued to 'promote homosexuality". The assailants also chanted homophobic slurs and said that LGBTQI+ people are "satanic" and have no place in Lebanon (Amnesty, 2023).

On that very night, Sheikh Hassan Merheb of the Dar al-Fatwa religious authority voiced his approval of the attack. Being a prominent senior Sunni Muslim cleric, his endorsement received favorable reactions. Several other individuals also took to social media to express their support for the attack, encouraging and rallying behind Jnoud El Rab (Hourany 2023).

Between 2022 and 2023, under the guise of defending tradition, Jnoud El Rab attacked queer spaces and symbols in Beirut, prompting many community members to delete dating profiles, censor their appearance, or avoid public events (Kassem, 2023). Their actions, which are very evocative of the tactics of sectarian militias from Lebanon's civil war, exemplify the alliance between political leaders and vigilante actors, a symbiosis that is not all new to the Lebanese reality. For example, Antoun Sehnaoui, the owner of Société Générale de Banque au Liban (SBGL), is, according to several sources, the founder of the group. Saghieh and Ibrahim, in Legal Agenda (2024), document the relationship of political and militia-linked groups often acting with impunity, using both legal and extralegal methods to intimidate activists. Reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (2023) have also documented how state institutions are complicit. As Lebanon's multilayered crises deepen, fear of being outed or attacked has become part of everyday life (Makarem & Kazma, 2024).

2.3. MEDIA BACKLASH AND DIGITAL REPRESSION

Historically, Lebanon's media landscape has developed through a system in which major outlets were founded, funded, or sustained by political elites, sectarian parties, and influential business families closely tied to power structures. This has resulted in a media system in which ownership and financing are deeply embedded in sectarian and political affiliations, shaping editorial lines and limiting journalistic autonomy. Within this context, Lebanese television has frequently contributed to the reproduction of dominant social and political narratives, including those that frame feminism and gender-related issues as synonymous with "westernization," social decay, and threats to the moral fabric of society. These narratives are, as noted in the opening paragraph, often echoed by state officials. Political and media elites increasingly operate in alignment, at times contributing to public pressure campaigns, including calls for corporations and institutions to withdraw LGBTQI+-inclusive messaging (Kassem 2023).

Across major Lebanese television channels, such as LBCI (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International), MTV (Murr Television), OTV (Orange Television), and Al-Jadeed, contentious issues are often framed through polarizing discussions that prioritize political spectacle and controversy. In this environment, civil society actors are frequently portrayed through narratives of external interference, particularly during periods of political unrest or protest mobilization. As Salhani (2022) notes in relation to the October 2019 protests, ruling elites actively sought to undermine street mobilization by circulating claims of foreign interference, including allegations of external funding and coordination, while simultaneously delegitimizing non-governmental organizations by grouping them together as instruments of influence.

In a study unpacking Lebanon's media landscape, El Rahi argues that "in Lebanon, these television programs – usually dubbed "political" – never address issues related to women's rights, gender, and/or sexuality. In fact, Lebanese political talk shows steer away from these issues and relegate them to the realm of the 'social' (El Rahi, 2024). These social programs resort to sensationalist tools and adopt a scandalous and voyeuristic approach to sexuality, thus normalizing the violation of people's privacy and routinely exposing their guests for no purpose." Far-right figures in Lebanon have also mastered social media as a weapon of cultural counterinsurgency.

As per SMEX's report (2025), "far-right users frequently target activists, journalists, and safe spaces with doctored images, private data leaks, and smear campaigns. These attacks are framed in populist terms, redirecting national grievances, such as poverty or state failure, toward feminist and queer communities." They exploit collective trauma by pitting social justice against survival and considering all fights for gender rights as a distraction from the real, everyday problems. As a result, women who express themselves openly or engage in social and political activism often face backlash and harassment online, mirroring pre-existing gender inequalities embedded in Lebanese society (SMEX 2025, p.8). Additionally, poor data protection and privacy frameworks leave activists exposed to hacking and surveillance. These issues, compounded by inadequate platform moderation of gender-based hate speech, particularly in Arabic language and biased algorithms, often result in decreased online visibility and stifled freedom of expression (SMEX, 2025). This is also reflected in the extensive circulation of related discussions, archived television segments, and audience commentary on platforms such as YouTube and Reddit, which can be traced through keyword searches combining terms such as "Sar el Waet," "المثلية," "النسوية," and "sexism in Arab media."

2.4. NGO COMPLEX AND GRASSROOTS ALTERNATIVES

The non-governmental organizations -“NGO-industrial complex”- is an intertwined system of international donors, professionalized NGOs, and state or quasi-state institutions that shape and often limit the scope of political, feminist, and grassroots activism, especially in the Global South.

Figures from Daleel Madani suggest a peak in NGO creation after each of the recurring humanitarian crises that the country witnesses. Hence, following the Israeli War on Lebanon in 2006 and the conflict in Syria in 2011, the associative sector saw a proliferation of new initiatives, campaigns, and organisations. An average of 50 registration requests to Daleel Madani’s Civil Society Directory are received on a monthly basis (AbiYaghi, Yammine, and Jagarnathsingh 2019). In recent years, many activists have been critical of these structures that seem to uphold foreign-funded conservatism (Abu-Assab, Nasser-Eddin, and Seghaier 2020), and what Abou-Habib (2024) terms “impostor feminism.” Abou-Habib argues that this version of feminism privileges “women in boardrooms” and “women entrepreneurs” over the lived realities of working-class and migrant women, aligning state feminist agendas with existing power structures rather than challenging them. These critiques interrogate how both liberal NGO frameworks and diluted feminist narratives undermine structural transformation; they also question funding opportunities, and as Ben Jebara (2025) puts it, “operate within the same capitalist logic: chasing funding cycles, writing endless project reports, stretching ourselves thin to meet donor expectations instead of movement needs. Surviving on funding that is short-term, precarious, and unsustainable”.

Some activists argue that NGOs replicate capitalist hierarchies, with salaried professionals controlling funding, narratives, and agendas, often marginalizing the grassroots voices they claim to support. As Makarem and Kazma (2024) write, “the organizational structure of NGOs in Lebanon mimics the hierarchies of private companies. There is little room for autonomy, democracy, or plurality in many cases”. In addition, “it is crucial to underscore that discussions about safety are intricately connected to social class, as the disparities within the LGBTQI+ community are not only about gender identity and sexual orientation but also about the socio-economic privilege that shapes experiences and risks. Addressing these multifaceted challenges is essential for fostering a safer, sustainable, and genuinely inclusive environment for all members of the LGBTQI+ community” (Astraea, 2024; p.13).

In response, grassroots actors in Lebanon have been developing alternative forms of resistance. Following the 2019 October Uprising, mutual aid networks, feminist coalitions, and queer-led initiatives emerged to address overlapping crises of state neglect, economic collapse, and political repression (Makarem & Kazma, 2024). These efforts reject the “NGOization” of social movements, advocating instead for horizontal organizing, collective care, and radical solidarity. Some LGBTQI+ organizations are moving away from traditional hierarchies and top-down approaches, recognizing that the community and activists themselves possess valuable insights into the services and projects that should be prioritized (Astraea, 2024; p.30). In response to the Beirut Port explosion, queer-led groups, including the YallaCare Coalition, which mobilized not only to provide direct aid but also to assert a feminist politics that centers the most marginalized (Sanders 2020). The YallaCare Coalition, composed of eight LGBTQIA2+ organizations in Lebanon (Haven for Artists, Queer Relief Fund, Marsa, LebMASH, Skoon, SIDC, AFE, and later Mosaic), emerged through collaboration across local initiatives to coordinate emergency response and long-term community support. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut blast, these groups consolidated their efforts to assess urgent community needs, distribute essential aid such as hygiene kits and food boxes, and develop multi-sectoral needs assessments to guide sustained intervention. “Despite the narratives of impostor feminism,” Abou-Habib (2024) writes, “there is a growing and diverse form of intersectional feminism in action, which is the source of radical change and radical hope in today’s Lebanon.” Through mutual aid networks addressing housing loss, food insecurity, and emergency cash assistance, queer and feminist collectives stepped into roles typically associated with state welfare systems,

filling critical gaps left by institutional failure and exclusionary relief structures (Hamzeh 2021). These practices of collective care not only functioned as immediate survival mechanisms but also constituted forms of political resistance, challenging the uneven distribution of vulnerability produced by intersecting economic collapse, infrastructural destruction, and long-standing social marginalization.

Despite a growing body of scholarship, NGO reporting, and media analysis, important gaps remain in both research and advocacy. In particular, refugee and migrant LGBTQI+ communities continue to be significantly underrepresented in existing literature, as are individuals and informal networks located outside Beirut and other major urban centers. This spatial and social bias in knowledge production limits understanding of how intersecting forms of marginalization are experienced across different regions of Lebanon, particularly in rural and peripheral areas where access to services, visibility, and protection mechanisms is often more constrained.

At the same time, there is a need to more carefully examine the circulation of transnational anti-gender narratives, including those that originate in or are amplified through U.S.-based and Russian media ecosystems, and how these discourses are adapted within Lebanese political and media contexts. Closely linked to this is the lack of sustained analysis of Arabic-language digital spaces, where content moderation, platform governance, and informal policing practices shape what can be said, shared, or amplified in relation to gender and sexuality. Finally, there remains limited empirical insight into how broader segments of Lebanese society interpret, negotiate, or internalize anti-gender discourse, including the identification of potential points of contradiction, ambivalence, or solidarity that may not be visible through institutional or elite-focused analysis alone.

Addressing these gaps in a comprehensive way lies beyond the scope of this paper, given its limited dataset and the constraints of time and access. Rather than claiming to fill them, this study engages with them as structuring absences that shape both the production of knowledge and the visibility of certain experiences within existing scholarship.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMING

This paper draws on Intersectional Feminist Theory, rooted in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and further developed in feminist scholarship and socio-political theory, which provide tools to understand how multiple forms of oppression intersect to shape marginalization. Rather than viewing racism, sexism, classism, or homophobia as independent systems, intersectionality conceptualizes these structures of power as mutually constitutive, producing unique forms of exclusion and vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw later expanded this framework by distinguishing between structural intersectionality, which refers to how overlapping systems of power produce compounded forms of marginalization, and political intersectionality, which examines how advocacy movements and public policies often fail to address the needs of individuals located at the intersections of multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, experience compounding layers of discrimination that cannot be understood through a single-axis analysis. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts characterized by political fragmentation and overlapping governance systems, where legal status, sectarian affiliation, citizenship, gender, class, migration status, and sexuality simultaneously influence access to rights, services, and protection. In the Lebanese context, this framework helps situate LGBTQI+ experiences within a broader system of sectarian governance, legal ambiguity, and crisis-driven precarity. Lebanon's confessional political system distributes power through religious communities rather than universal citizenship, creating uneven access to social protection and reinforcing dependence on sectarian institutions (Makdisi, 1996). LGBTQI+ individuals therefore navigate multiple intersecting forms of exclusion that extend beyond sexuality or gender identity to include economic insecurity, religious belonging, refugee status, and access to healthcare and legal protection. These inequalities became particularly visible following the October 2019 uprising, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020, when community organizations increasingly filled the gaps left by state institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2023). By foregrounding these intersections, the study tried to move beyond single-axis analyses of sexuality or gender and instead situate LGBTQI+ lives within the structural and institutional conditions that shape vulnerability, visibility, and resistance in Lebanon.

Additionally, Social Movement Theory was used to examine how and why collective action emerged, evolved, and was sustained within the Lebanese context, as well as the conditions that enabled or constrained mobilization. It provided a framework for understanding the formation of mutual aid groups, LGBTQI+, and broader rights-based movements not as isolated or spontaneous responses to crisis, but as structurally embedded forms of political engagement shaped by long-standing patterns of governance and inequality.

One of the foundational approaches within this tradition is Resource Mobilization Theory, developed by McCarthy and Zald (1977), which argues that social movements depend not only on shared grievances but also on access to material resources, organizational capacity, leadership, communication networks, and external support. From this perspective, successful mobilization depends upon the ability of movements to acquire, coordinate, and strategically deploy resources in pursuit of collective goals. This approach is particularly useful for understanding the emergence of Lebanese LGBTQI+ organizations, which combined local activism with international funding networks, legal expertise, public health initiatives, and digital advocacy to sustain mobilization despite recurring political and economic crises. Following the Beirut Port explosion, many of the organizations shifted their activities toward emergency relief, psychosocial support, housing assistance, and mutual aid while continuing to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights, illustrating how social movements adapt organizational resources to changing political and humanitarian contexts. Rather than emerging in stable civic conditions, these movements were shaped by contested public space, moral regulation, and fluctuating degrees of visibility and risk. These dynamics became increasingly evident during the state's repeated attempts to suppress LGBTQI+ visibility, including the cancellation of Beirut Pride activities in 2018, successive bans on public LGBTQI+ events issued by the Ministry of Interior, and the escalation of anti-LGBTQ+ political rhetoric during 2022–2023 by both religious authorities and political actors.

Similarly, Charles Tilly (1978, 2004) conceptualizes social movements as sustained forms of contentious politics that evolve through interactions between challengers and authorities. Tilly argues that movements operate within historically specific “repertoires of contention”, shared sets of protest practices, organizational forms, and public performances that adapt over time according to changing political contexts. Rather than viewing mobilization as exceptional, his work situates collective action within broader processes of state formation, political conflict, and changing relationships between citizens and governing institutions.

Integrating Intersectional Feminist Theory with Social Movement Theory enables this paper to examine not only how multiple systems of inequality shape LGBTQI+ experiences, but also how collective actors navigate these structural conditions through strategic forms of resistance, solidarity, and political engagement. Together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional understanding of both the production of marginalization and the organizational dynamics through which communities respond to intersecting forms of social, legal, and political exclusion. In Lebanon, repertoires of contention have evolved from traditional street demonstrations toward hybrid forms of activism that combine online campaigning, legal advocacy, artistic interventions, community care, and mutual aid. LGBTQI+ organizations have increasingly relied on encrypted communication platforms, digital documentation of rights violations, community-based health services, and strategic litigation following landmark judicial decisions that challenged the application of Article 534 of the Penal Code to consensual same-sex relations.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to capture the personal experiences in relation to the backlash against feminist and LGBTQI+ rights and feminist organising, as well as understanding and addressing the aforementioned backlash, the study adopted a comprehensive and multi-layered research methodology combining literature review, discourse analysis, and qualitative interviews. At its core, the process willed itself to uphold strong ethical research practices, taking into account risks as it engages with politically sensitive and potentially dangerous subject matter.

The first phase of the research consisted of a structured literature review, drawing on academic scholarship, NGO reports, and policy papers. This phase aimed to map the existing knowledge on anti-rights and anti-gender movements, identify dominant narratives, and trace transnational ideological influences. It also served to highlight key gaps in existing research, particularly regarding marginalized and underrepresented populations.

Digital ethnography also formed part of the research design, involving qualitative observation of publicly accessible online spaces, including social media platforms and comment sections, where activist discourse, public debate, and mobilization processes were visible. This included attention to how narratives circulated, were contested, and were amplified across digital environments.

Social media platforms and forums such as X, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit and TikTok were analyzed to understand how anti-rights rhetoric circulates and gains traction. This dual focus on scholarly work and media discourse served as a contextual foundation but also as a comparative lens through which primary data can eventually be interpreted.

At the core of the primary data collection were semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders. This qualitative method allowed for a nuanced exploration of lived experiences, strategies for resistance, and perceptions of risk and resilience within affected communities. It also shed light on firsthand perspectives, individual challenges faced, and the strategies employed to counter the backlash. Six semi-structured interviews and two informal focus group discussions were conducted between January 2025 and February 2026.

The interview and focus group participants included feminist and LGBTQI+ activists and organizations in Lebanon, sexual and reproductive rights activists, coordinators of LGBTQI+ projects and safe spaces, community leaders engaged in feminist and queer organizing, as well as mutual aid organizers working at the intersection of crisis response and social justice. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in feminist, queer, anti-racist, and mutual aid organizing, including roles within NGOs, grassroots initiatives, and emergency response structures. The selection criteria prioritized individuals engaged in movement-based work addressing gender, sexuality, migration, and social justice, particularly those operating within or alongside Lebanon's crisis-affected civil society landscape. Geographically, the majority of participants were based in Lebanon, with one participant recently relocated abroad who continues to work closely with asylum seekers and displaced communities from the region.

The interactions followed a semi-structured format to allow flexibility while maintaining consistency across key themes. Open-ended questions guided the conversations, while allowing space for participants to introduce new topics based on their experiences. Questions were centered on several core areas:

- How have collectives and movements adapted in response to growing backlash since 2019?
- In what ways has anti-rights and anti-gender discourse evolved?
- How have public spaces, both physical and digital, been transformed by this discourse?
- Do participants feel increasingly surveilled or threatened?
- What narratives in media and society are perceived as most harmful to marginalized communities?

- How do participants perceive the role of foreign funding in shaping the discourse around backlash?
- Are political and public figures seen as contributing to or resisting the backlash, and how?

This approach aimed to capture both individual and collective perspectives on feminist and LGBTQI+ organizing in Lebanon. Interviews were conducted either in person or virtually, depending on the safety, accessibility, and comfort of participants. Recruitment took place through existing networks and partnerships with community organizations, supplemented by snowball sampling. Word-of-mouth recruitment was also used to reach informal and grassroots mutual aid workers who did not necessarily operate within formal institutional structures or visible organizational frameworks.

Fieldwork conditions significantly shaped the scope of participation. More than twenty organizations and individuals were contacted; however, many declined to participate due to time constraints, activist fatigue, ongoing frontline engagement, or discomfort with academic research contexts. This discomfort reflected broader critiques of extractive or externally driven research practices, particularly in contexts where activists are frequently asked to contribute narratives and labor without clear material return or alignment with their immediate priorities. This limited level of engagement reflected broader conditions of exhaustion within civil society, particularly among groups working under sustained crisis conditions.

While the original research design included an anonymous survey component, this was not ultimately successful due to low participation rates. In addition, two informal focus group discussions were conducted in May 2025 and February 2026. These discussions primarily centered on questions of organizing under conditions of crisis, with a recurring emphasis on care work, collective survival, and emotional and material exhaustion as central dimensions of contemporary activism.

By triangulating data from interviews, literature review, and discourse analysis, the study constructed a more holistic understanding of the contemporary landscape of anti-rights narratives in Lebanon, while remaining attentive to the existing gaps and silences within the available data. Given the politically sensitive nature of the research and the potential risks to both participants and the researcher, rigorous ethical protocols were applied throughout the study. The safety, privacy, and dignity of participants remained central to the research design.

- Informed Consent: All participants were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the research. Written or verbal consent (as contextually appropriate) was obtained, and participants had the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.
- Confidentiality and Anonymity: Where appropriate, pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities. Identifying details were removed or altered in research outputs. No data was shared without explicit permission.
- Data Security: All interview recordings, transcripts, and survey data were securely stored on encrypted drives provided by the AUB team. Communications with participants occurred via secure, encrypted platforms to protect both their identities and the integrity of the research.
- Flexible Research Design: The current climate of political instability and increased surveillance presented logistical challenges. The research design remained flexible and adaptive, allowing methods to be modified based on shifting security or access conditions. This included switching from face-to-face interviews to encrypted messaging interviews, or extending timelines if necessary.
- Researcher Safety: Risk assessments were conducted prior to all fieldwork engagements. The research team received guidance on digital and physical security, and protocols were in place for managing any incidents that arose during data collection.

In conclusion, the research methodology was designed to explore and analyze the complex and evolving backlash against sexual and reproductive rights, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in Lebanon. By combining a robust literature review, discourse analysis, qualitative interviews, and anonymous surveys, the study adopts a multi-layered and ethically conscious approach to data collection and analysis. Through the lens of Intersectional Feminist theory, socio-political theory, and Social Movement Theory, it aims to reveal how intersecting systems of oppression operate and how communities respond, organize, and resist amidst adversity. The methodology not only prioritizes the safety, dignity, and agency of participants, but also seeks to produce grounded, context-sensitive insights that contribute meaningfully to the broader discourse on democratic erosion, authoritarianism, and the resilience of feminist and queer organizing under crisis.

5. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the main findings of the research, situating them within the broader political and material conditions that structure feminist and LGBTQI+ organizing in contexts of ongoing crisis. Across the dataset, three interrelated dynamics emerge: the normalization of insecurity, the reconfiguration of visibility as risk, and the fragmentation of collective organizing under conditions of sustained pressure.

5.1. CONTEXT OF CRISIS AND RESEARCH CONSTRAINTS

Throughout the interviews and focus group discussions (FGD1) , a recurring theme was the intensification of repression, though not always in direct or centralized forms. Participants repeatedly described environments marked by exhaustion, fragmentation, and strategic withdrawal, where visibility increasingly becomes a liability rather than a resource.

Several participants, including those in FGD1 and FGD2, emphasized that activism had increasingly shifted toward survival-oriented work, particularly mutual aid, emergency response, and care-based organizing. This shift framed the broader environment in which feminist and LGBTQI+ organizing took place.

5.2. REPRESSION, SURVEILLANCE, AND STATE/ PARA-STATE PRESSURE

State and para-state pressure on migrant activists operated through routinized practices of surveillance, intimidation, and procedural arbitrariness. P1, a migrant activist, described experiences of state and para-state harassment through an incident in which she was summoned for interrogation by security forces seeking information about a migrant-led advocacy initiative. As she explained, “you just have to go, you don’t even know if it’s personal or professional.” The experience reflected both arbitrariness and intimidation, as she recounted being taken into “this three-floor underground situation… four hours of absurd conversation.” Such encounters required calculated forms of navigation, where “you really need to have stamina to deal with these random men in uniform, guns on the table.” Importantly, she framed this experience not as exceptional, but as routine, stating that “this is just a dot in an ocean of what we’re dealing with.”

The normalization of intimidation and instability also appears in other interviews, particularly in discussions around visibility and organizational presence. P1 adds that these dynamics within a broader normalization of violence and authoritarian resurgence, arguing that “fascism is back in style—not the first time, not the last time.” The current moment is marked by continuous crisis and exhaustion, where activists operate under extreme pressure: “we are in survival mode 24/7.” At the same time, she points to the erosion of shared political frameworks, noting that “the basics of human rights… we had a common ground somewhere. That’s collapsing.”

Similarly, P2, a feminist researcher, explained that anti-gender discourse functions as one of the few points of cross-sectarian alignment within Lebanon’s deeply divided political landscape. In her words, “if they have one thing in common… it’s that they are anti-gender.” Gender and sexuality therefore become unifying points of consensus across otherwise fragmented political and sectarian actors. This convergence enables coordinated forms of moral panic that are often amplified by religious and political figures across sectarian lines. However, P2 also emphasized the contingent nature of this alignment, noting that it tends to recede when larger political crises emerge, such as war, “which they (religious and political figures) cannot actually agree on.”

5.3. VISIBILITY AS RISK AND STRATEGIC WITHDRAWAL

Questions of visibility, exposure, and safety emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews. Participants described a growing perception that visibility no longer functions primarily as a tool for advocacy and mobilization, but increasingly as a source of vulnerability.

P3, a Trans Activist, emphasized a deliberate politics of controlled visibility. Rather than seeking broad public exposure, the organization prioritized internal community engagement. As he explains, "we don't seek public visibility as much as we seek community visibility... which makes us difficult to locate." This approach reflects a strategic withdrawal from exposure while maintaining forms of internal collective presence and support.

Although the organization had not experienced sustained direct targeting, P3 described a broader erosion of safety, explaining that "the sense of safety was kind of taken away." This loss of security translated into concrete organizational changes, including the removal of online content and the reduction of public-facing activities: "we removed everything... we just withdrew from any public presence." In this context, visibility, particularly online visibility, increasingly became perceived as a liability rather than an asset.

Similar concerns emerged in P2's account, though through more indirect forms of caution and self-regulation. Rather than withdrawing entirely from public presence, the organization adopted delayed publication and suspended dissemination practices. P2 described how backlash produces indirect constraints that shape organizational decision-making even in the absence of direct repression. This became particularly evident in discussions surrounding sensitive materials related to queer communities. One example involved a resource on feminist research methodologies with queer participants, which, despite being completed, remained effectively unpublished. As P2 explained, "up until now, we didn't really launch it... there was this sense that it might be a risk." The uncertainty surrounding even limited forms of dissemination reflects a broader climate of anticipation and caution, where decisions regarding visibility are increasingly shaped by perceived threats rather than direct intervention.

5.4. FRAGMENTATION OF ORGANISING AND CRISIS TEMPORALITIES

Participants also described significant disruptions to organizing processes and coalition-building efforts. P2 highlighted how attempts to rebuild collaborative networks following COVID-19 were ultimately short-lived. Although there were efforts to "bring collectives together... to think of resource sharing," these initiatives struggled to sustain momentum under the weight of overlapping crises.

The rapid succession of economic collapse, political instability, and war produced conditions in which long-term strategic thinking became increasingly difficult. As P2 explained, "we didn't even have time to actually sit and think... what is our discourse?" These accounts point to a broader temporal crisis within organizing, where urgency and emergency increasingly displace strategy, reflection, and sustained political planning.

Adding to that, P4 placed greater emphasis on the relationship between backlash and Lebanon's broader political economy. They described their organizing trajectory as initially rooted in queer activism before expanding toward economic concerns, including cooperatives and alternative forms of organizing. P4 situated these developments within Lebanon's broader post-2019 collapse, arguing that what is often framed as "backlash" cannot be separated from the country's wider structural breakdown.

At the same time, there seem to be challenges of distinctions between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements, particularly at the grassroots level. However, as P2 notes, "We don't have a history of a feminist movement that was not queer," and many of these struggles have been deeply intertwined in practice, even if institutional frameworks attempted to separate them. However, larger, more established organizations often maintain a narrower focus, avoiding engagement with sexuality and gender diversity. P3 adds "We stopped doing [networking] eventually. Not because people were locating us or our work was targeted. We just couldn't trust the actors around."

Within this broader context, P4, a feminist and queer activist, described anti-refugee mobilization, sectarian violence, and anti-queer hostility as interconnected rather than isolated phenomena, explaining that "it's hard to think of it outside the context." P4 also echoed concerns raised by P3 regarding the reduction of public visibility among queer organizers and collectives, noting that "a lot of groups had to go a bit quiet, a bit dark."

P4 further explained that the economic collapse generated a broader form of social collapse that reshaped both everyday life and political organizing. In their words, "when the infrastructure of the country collapses, and people lose their money or face hyperinflation, it becomes a kind of social collapse as well." According to P4, these conditions reinforced dependency on the family unit, which they described as an inherently patriarchal economic structure. This resulted in the reversal of earlier gains in autonomy among women and young people, as "a lot of young people were just forced back into the family, either to help them or to be helped by them."

5.5. DIGITAL SPACES AND MORAL PANIC NARRATIVES

Digital platforms emerged as central sites through which backlash, surveillance, and moral panic circulate and intensify. Across interviews and focus group discussions, participants described a shift from direct policing toward forms of anticipatory self-regulation shaped by digital exposure and insecurity.

A key finding emerging from multiple interviews is the reconfiguration of visibility as a strategic concern. Visibility, once considered central to advocacy and rights-based organizing, is increasingly understood as a source of vulnerability. Social media, which had previously functioned as a tool for mobilization and awareness-raising, is now increasingly perceived as facilitating surveillance, targeting, and exposure. Activists described how online visibility can rapidly translate into offline threats, creating a continuous feedback loop between digital and physical insecurity.

Questions surrounding public presence and street-based mobilization also emerged during focus group discussions. Participants emphasized that "taking the street" could no longer be understood as a straightforward or accessible form of political action within the current wartime context. Public demonstrations and visible gatherings were increasingly framed not only as politically difficult but also as direct security risks. As a result, forms of organizing historically dependent on visibility, protest, and public occupation have become significantly constrained.

P5, similarly, highlighted the role of digital platforms and algorithmic systems in amplifying moral panic narratives. They recalled how seemingly minor cultural incidents, including rainbow-themed products or school-related controversies, rapidly escalated into broader political flashpoints online. However, participants emphasized that these digital debates cannot be understood as disconnected from offline political actors. Sectarian and political groups, including actors such as Jnoud al-Rab and Amal (The Shia political party founded by Musa al-Sadr in 1974 and now led by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, long a central pillar of Lebanon's sectarian political establishment), entered and amplified these discussions. As noted by P2 and P5, "all the sectarian groups… weighed in on the issue," demonstrating how moral anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality were mobilized across multiple political formations.

5.6. TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION OF ANTI-GENDER DISCOURSE

Participants consistently situated anti-gender backlash within broader transnational dynamics rather than treating it as an exclusively local phenomenon. Similar to P1 and P2, P4 argued that local backlash is deeply connected to international trends and the global circulation of anti-gender discourse.

As P4 explained, “the moments that you see the anti-trans discourse coming out in Europe, in America, in Canada, you also see it here,” highlighting the transnational movement of these narratives. Participants emphasized that such rhetoric frequently circulates independently of local realities, particularly through misinformation regarding schools, children, and gender identity. As P4 noted, “people say they will teach children about gender in schools… and this is not true.” To which P3 adds “They are Arabizing and Americanizing this anti-gender discourse…Our minister of culture banned Barbie because Saudi Arabia was considering banning it…If Trump says something about trans people, it gets into the main headlines.”

P4 further argued that much of the rhetoric circulating in Lebanon mirrors narratives emerging from Europe and North America, particularly those focused on schools, childhood, and “gender ideology.” In their words, “it was a very Western kind of backlash… which is very special in the context of Britain, America, and France,” but which later became localized through regional media, political actors, and online circulation. The resulting backlash, therefore, appears neither entirely local nor fully imported, but rather emerges through the interaction between global narratives and local political conditions.

P6, an LGBTQI+ activist and community organizer, similarly emphasized the influence of U.S. political discourse on local debates, arguing that public attention is increasingly redirected toward issues that are not materially central to Lebanese society. According to P6, political decision-makers remain unwilling to engage publicly with questions of gender and sexuality because these issues are perceived as politically costly and potentially damaging to electoral legitimacy. P6 also explained that whenever queer-presenting individuals speak publicly about broader political conditions, their queerness is frequently mobilized against them as a means of undermining their political credibility and delegitimizing their positions.

For P1: “You have to deal with the online violence, you have to deal with the offline violence.” “Fascism is back in style. The signs of it are everywhere around us.” “All of these things are obviously meant to distract you or fill up as much time from your time so that you don’t do the actual work.” “The commonality in terms of governments that are ruling us and ruling the world… is very international.” “We need to find international spaces and avenues of lifting each other up.” “There is no fascism cycle that comes forever. It’s always a matter of time.” “If you want to continue being alive… we need to fight for our space.”

5.7. MUTUAL AID AND SURVIVAL-BASED ORGANIZING

Despite the conditions outlined above, participants also described ongoing processes of adaptation, survival, and collective support. Across interviews and focus group discussions, activists emphasized the increasing centrality of mutual aid and community-based organizing within the current political and economic context.

They mentioned how much activist labor and organizational capacity have been redirected toward emergency response, care work, and resource distribution. Survival needs consistently override longer-term political organizing, forcing collectives to prioritize immediate forms of support and protection.

At the same time, several interviewees expressed growing skepticism toward institutionalized forms of activism, particularly NGO and academic frameworks. Participants frequently criticized the disconnect between knowledge production and practical community needs. Research outputs, reports, and publications were often perceived as insufficient responses to ongoing material crises. This critique also extended to donor-driven models of activism, which participants argued tend to prioritize measurable outputs and standardized programming over structural transformation. As P3 puts it, “It’s always academics and donors doing that research.” “It’s never us sitting and talking.” “They’re taking these documents. And what you get is a paper. And never action.”

While mutual aid structures were widely recognized as essential in the absence of functioning state support, participants also raised concerns regarding their long-term sustainability and political limits. As noted by P6, the central challenge lies in developing forms of mutual aid capable not only of sustaining communities materially but also of contributing to broader processes of advocacy, political transformation, and governance. Participants repeatedly expressed concern that organizing risks becoming permanently trapped within cycles of emergency response without the capacity to influence structural change. To quote P1: “what used to work before will not serve us anymore… we need to figure out how to organize while we are in survival mode all the time.”

Taken together, the findings suggest that anti-gender backlash in Lebanon cannot be understood as a discrete political phenomenon operating alongside crisis, but rather as something that is produced through crisis itself. In this sense, backlash functions less as an isolated reaction to gender and sexuality and more as a mode of crisis governance, in which moral panic, insecurity, and fragmentation are continuously reproduced across state, para-state, and digital spaces. At the same time, while participants describe intensifying precarity and the erosion of stable organizing infrastructures, they also demonstrate the emergence of adaptive political forms grounded in withdrawal, fragmentation, and survival-oriented collectivities.

6. ANALYSIS

Repression in Lebanon increasingly operates through indirect and decentralized forms rather than solely through formal legislation or explicit state policy. Surveillance, intimidation, online harassment, anticipatory self-censorship, and diffuse community monitoring create an environment in which activists continuously regulate their own visibility and behavior. This normalization of insecurity fundamentally reshapes the conditions of organizing. This echoes broader scholarship on "everyday authoritarianism" and digital governance (SMEX 2018), which highlights how governance is partially outsourced to social networks and digital environments, producing what can be understood as distributed self-regulation. Visibility, once central to advocacy and movement-building, is increasingly perceived as a source of vulnerability. Feminist and queer organizations are therefore compelled to adopt strategies of controlled invisibility, withdrawing from public engagement while attempting to maintain internal forms of solidarity and support.

The limited participation of organizations within the research process itself also constitutes a significant finding rather than merely a methodological limitation. Hesitation toward participation was consistently contextualized through interview accounts describing exhaustion, wartime conditions, economic collapse, surveillance, and the prioritization of survival-oriented labor and mutual aid. These dynamics were echoed in focus group discussions, where participants repeatedly emphasized the difficulty of sustaining long-term organizing, coalition-building, and strategic reflection under conditions of continuous crisis. This suggests that "participation" in both activism and research is unevenly distributed through crisis hierarchies of urgency, challenging assumptions embedded in academic methodologies about availability, voice, and representability.

For many activists and organizations, the urgency of mutual aid, survival, and community protection has overtaken the capacity to engage in academic research. In this sense, the relative scarcity of interviews and questionnaire responses cannot be read simply as disengagement, but must be interpreted within a context in which participation in knowledge production may appear secondary. To solicit extensive research engagement under such conditions risks reproducing a form of extractive inquiry that is, at best, misaligned with lived realities. This confirms recent literature on crisis-driven organizing in the Global South, which argues that emergency conditions often displace long-term political strategizing in favor of immediate survival infrastructures.

The focus group discussions further reinforced these findings, particularly around fragmentation, safety, and the shifting priorities of organizing under wartime conditions. Across two focus group discussions, participants described multiple attempts to build coalitions and organize collective initiatives, including discussions around coordinating events for International Women's Day as an example. The conversations called for a rethinking of knowledge production in contexts of crisis and conflict. Traditional research methodologies, which prioritize access, participation, and comprehensive data collection, were not always seen as feasible or appropriate and raise the issue of where research itself must account for temporal disruption, infrastructural fragility, and the collapse of stable participatory conditions.

At the same time, the research highlights the fragmentation affecting feminist and LGBTQI+ organizing. Repeated crises, war, displacement, donor dependency, political disagreements, and organizational exhaustion have weakened possibilities for sustained coalition-building and long-term strategic planning. The findings suggest that movements are increasingly forced into reactive modes of survival, where emergency response and mutual aid take precedence over structural political organizing. These accounts echo existing literature on NGO-ization in the Global South, which highlights how donor dependency and institutional fragmentation often undermine sustained collective action and political continuity (Abu-Assab, Nasser-Eddin, and Seghaier 2020). While literature on NGO-ization emphasizes institutional fragmentation and donor dependency, the Lebanese case suggests an additional layer: fragmentation is no longer only organizational but temporal. Activism is structured through cycles of emergency that repeatedly reset political continuity, producing movements that are not simply NGO-ized but crisis-suspended, where long-term strategy is continuously deferred by survival imperatives.

Another significant finding concerns the transnational character of anti-gender discourse. Narratives surrounding “gender ideology,” children, education, morality, and national decline are shown to circulate globally, particularly from Europe and North America, before being localized within Lebanese political and sectarian contexts. These imported discourses frequently bear little relation to local material realities, yet they gain traction through digital media ecosystems, political opportunism, and algorithmic amplification. The Lebanese case therefore demonstrates how global reactionary narratives are adapted and redeployed within local struggles over legitimacy, identity, and power. But rather than treating anti-gender discourse as a process of diffusion from the Global North to Lebanon, there is a more complex mechanism of selective localization. Transnational narratives gain political traction not through direct importation but through their ability to be re-encoded into existing sectarian and moral economies. This complicates linear models of ideological transfer by showing that “global” anti-gender discourse only becomes politically effective when it is reassembled within local regimes of legitimacy.

The prevalence of moral panic narratives is not only described by participants but also reflected in media discourse and public debates, where gender and sexuality are repeatedly framed as social, moral, or national threats. Interviewees independently identified the circulation of anti-gender rhetoric through sectarian, religious, and political networks, while also linking these narratives to transnational discourse emerging from Europe and North America. The recurrence of these observations across unrelated interviews strengthens the analysis of backlash as both locally mediated and globally connected. This convergence suggests that moral panic operates less as spontaneous discourse and more as a structured and amplified transnational narrative assemblage that is continuously reconfigured across contexts rather than simply transmitted.

7. CONCLUSION

Early Organizations: Welfare, Religion, and Informal Community (1980s–1990s).

The Lebanese context illustrates how conditions of prolonged crisis produce fertile ground for moral panic and exclusionary politics. As the country continues to experience economic devastation, infrastructural collapse, displacement, and war, gender and sexuality become instrumentalized as symbolic battlegrounds through which anxieties around national identity, morality, sovereignty, and social order are negotiated. Anti-gender discourse therefore functions not only as an attack on feminist and queer communities, but also as a diversionary mechanism that redirects public frustration away from structural failures and toward marginalized populations. In this sense, backlash must be understood as deeply connected to the preservation of patriarchal, sectarian, and authoritarian systems of power.

Despite these constraints, the research also points to important forms of resilience and adaptation. Mutual aid networks, informal organizing structures, and community-based systems of care continue to emerge as crucial survival mechanisms in the absence of state accountability. However, participants also expressed growing concern regarding the long-term sustainability of these models. This points to the need to strengthen decentralized, community-based organizing models by reducing dependency on highly centralized or donor-driven NGO structures and reinforcing horizontal coordination mechanisms that keep decision-making grounded in grassroots priorities.

Methodologically, this research also underscores the challenges of conducting knowledge production in contexts of crisis, surveillance, and war. The limitations encountered throughout the research process, including reduced participation, organizational exhaustion, and restricted access, are themselves analytically significant. They reveal how conditions of insecurity shape not only activism, but also the very possibility of documentation, research, and public discourse. In this sense, absence, silence, and fragmentation must be read not simply as gaps in the data, but as reflections of the broader political and material realities within which activists operate. This requires adopting trauma-informed and context-sensitive research methodologies that treat fragmentation, silence, and partial participation as meaningful reflections of crisis conditions, while ensuring research processes remain accessible, ethical, and non-extractive for participants.

Ultimately, what is at stake is not only the status of gender and sexual rights, but the broader question of who is allowed visibility, political legitimacy, safety, and participation within an increasingly fragmented and authoritarian social order. This makes it essential to expand collective care infrastructures within activist spaces by integrating burnout prevention, mental health support, and long-term sustainability practices as core political priorities rather than secondary support functions.

Strengthening digital security and protection against surveillance and harassment is also crucial, particularly through collective training, encrypted communication practices, and shared safety protocols that allow activists to navigate increasing risks while maintaining both visibility and protection where needed.

At the same time, building cross-movement alliances across feminist, labor, migrant, anti-sectarian, disability justice, and broader social justice struggles is necessary to counter fragmentation and to build more unified political fronts capable of addressing structural inequality beyond identity-based silos.

For researchers and knowledge producers, there is also a need to ensure that knowledge production remains accountable to activist communities by sharing findings in accessible forms, prioritizing reciprocity, and avoiding extractive research practices that benefit institutions more than the movements they study.

Finally, for policymakers and human rights actors, addressing anti-gender backlash requires moving beyond narrow understandings of gender and sexuality as isolated “cultural issues.” The

findings demonstrate that anti-gender mobilization is deeply connected to wider structures of authoritarianism, economic collapse, sectarian governance, and social inequality. Efforts to protect feminist and LGBTQI+ communities must therefore include broader commitments to freedom of expression, association, and political participation, while also addressing the structural and global conditions that enable exclusionary and reactionary politics to flourish.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: CODING MATRIX FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

Code	Role
P1	Migrant activist
P2	Feminist researcher
P3	Trans activist and community organizer
P4	Feminist and queer activist
P5	Trans activist
P6	LGBTQI+ activist and community organizer
FGD1	Focus group: feminist participants (9 participants)
FGD2	Focus group: queer/LGBTQI+ participants (6 participants)

ANNEX 2: QUESTIONNAIRES

1. FGD questionnaire

- How have collectives and movements adapted in response to growing backlash since 2019?
- How have public spaces, both physical and digital, been transformed by this discourse?
- What are some tangible strategies you are trying to adopt?

2. Interview questionnaire

- How have collectives and movements adapted in response to growing backlash since 2019?
- In what ways has anti-rights and anti-gender discourse evolved?
- How have public spaces, both physical and digital, been transformed by this discourse?
- Do participants feel increasingly surveilled or threatened?
- What narratives in media and society are perceived as most harmful to marginalized communities?
- How do participants perceive the role of foreign funding in shaping the discourse around backlash?
- Are political and public figures seen as contributing to or resisting the backlash, and how?

3. Survey questionnaire

- What type of activism are you affiliated with?
- How long have you been active in human right/feminist/LGBTQI+ activism?
- Which forms of backlash have you experienced or witnessed?
- In your view, which of the following factors contribute the most to the backlash?
- How effective do you think the following strategies have been in countering backlash in your context?
- How would you rate the support provided by current policies and laws for feminist and LGBTQI+ activism in your country?
- What are some successful strategies or approaches you have seen to counter backlash, and why do you think they worked?
- What are the main challenges you face in building alliances across feminist, LGBTQI+, and other movements?
- What policy changes or protections do you believe would make the biggest difference for feminist and LGBTQI+ movements in your country?



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