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# The Effect of Transitioning for Transgender People in the Lebanese Labor Force: Investigating the Changes Seen Pre- and Post-Transition

George Mouawad

## Abstract

This article examines the discrimination experienced by transgender people in the Lebanese workforce. Following a literature review, this article presents findings from interviews conducted with five trans individuals and two staff members affiliated with nongovernmental organizations that work on issues related to trans rights. The paper concludes with several recommendations for ameliorating the position of trans Lebanese people in the labor force.

## Introduction

Gender and sex are usually perceived as the same thing. However, by definition, they are entirely different. Sex characteristics are biologically defined, mainly noting the genitalia and genetic differences. It was not until around the mid 1950s when the terminological distinction between sex and gender was introduced by the sexologist John Money (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). According to feminist scholars, gender, in its modern sense, is socially defined as one's self-perception, behavior, and expression (Lindqvist et al., 2020). Gender reflects the outward embodiment of one's personality, and that reflection equally shapes gender identity. Even with the separation between gender identity and biological sex, the two-sex (or heteronormative) binary of male/female still prevails. Breaking down that binary has been pushed by transgender

pioneers, such as Michael Dillon (1915-1962), who was the first person to transition from female-to-male through hormones and surgery.

To start, it is important to review a few terms, mainly, transgender, gender nonconformity, body dysmorphia, and sex reassignment. A transgender individual is one whose sense of personal and gender identity does not correspond with the sex assigned at birth. Correspondingly, gender nonconformity is when one does not conform with gender roles restricted to the socially constructed ideology of masculine and feminine features. Gender nonconformity can range from fluid clothing<sup>1</sup>, for example, to sex reassignment. Sex reassignment is done through a surgical procedure where a transgender individual matches their gender identity by reshaping their genitalia following post-hormonal replacement therapy (Ring and Malone, 2020). Lastly, body dysmorphia is the psychological distress and discomfort often experienced by transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (Zucker, 2017). Before looking at prior research, it is important to clarify certain acronyms and terminologies: MTF refers to an individual transitioning from male (birth sex) to female while FTM refers to individuals transitioning from female (birth sex) to male.

Due to gender nonconformity, transgender individuals are marginalized by different barriers affecting multiple dimensions of their lives. One important dimension is their career. This paper discusses the changes a transgender individual undergoes over the course of their career in the Lebanese labor force, before and after transitioning. Data on transgender persons in the workforce is limited, particularly in Lebanon. To address this gap, this article is based on qualitative interviews with five Lebanese transgender individuals and two local nongovernmental organizations, Helem and LebMash. All the interviews were held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic for safety reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Gender-fluid clothing aims to break individuals free from the dichotomy of cis women and cis males. Unisex, gender-neutral, and androgynous clothing are all terms used to describe a wardrobe in which gender is no longer a factor in how an individual chooses their clothing.

The transgender community's poor experiences in the Lebanese labor force are rooted in several factors: governmental and systemic, social and cultural, and religious and patriarchal. All these different but interrelated factors present barriers to the improvement and growth of transgender people's careers in Lebanon. However, individuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and certain political figures and parties fighting to change these barriers to improve the lives of transgender people in Lebanon. These two "sides"—those that support the current gender binary system and those that do not—oppose each other based on values and ideologies that are deeply rooted, making change even more difficult to achieve. The persons and institutions pushing for change, therefore, must deconstruct beliefs and values while demanding reform from rigid and more powerful religious, social, and political systems. These lofty goals have made it exceptionally difficult to achieve long-lasting change. Today, rights for transgender Lebanese in the labor force are nearly non-existent.

### **Past Research: Effects of transitioning**

This paper discusses the positive and negative changes a transgender individual faces in their career after transitioning in Lebanon. Available research on the Lebanese labor force is restricted and somewhat inconsequential. Therefore, this paper relies heavily on research conducted on the livelihoods of trans workers outside of Lebanon.

One study conducted by Schilt and Wiswall (2008) mentions two theories for analyzing the experiences of transgender people in the workforce: omitted variables and discrimination theories. The study examined the change in salary for both MTF and FTM transgender individuals through surveys completed by 64 participants. It was found that MTF workers lose about 31% of their earnings after their gender transition whereas FTM respondents were estimated to gain about 10% in their earnings post transition. According to the authors of the study "these findings suggest that the male gender carries a workplace benefit that cannot be carried over in a gender transition. That MTFs cannot take male privilege with them into womanhood may account for their significantly later age at transition than their FTM counterparts" (Schilt and Wiswall, 2008, p. 2).

Another study that conducted in depth interviews with 28 transgender individuals in Texas and California examined the consequences an employee faces while at the same job after transitioning from one gender category to another. When transmen and transwomen transition at work, they must deal with a “new” gender group. People in these “new” gender groups—in other words, men for transmen and women for transwomen—are often opposed to their transitioning colleague joining these spaces, as they are assumed to not have a biological claim to gendered spaces. As Schilt and Connell (2007) note:

Some trans women also express relief about the cessation of gendered expectations to participate in stereotypically masculine interactions... Attempting to gain access to same-gender spaces in the workplace, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, can create a great deal of anxiety for people transitioning at work. (p. 610)

Another study conducted in Italy by Prunas et al. (2016) examines the experiences of discrimination, harassment, and violence in a sample of Italian transgender individuals who have undergone sex-reassignment surgery. The study distributed questionnaires by hand or online to 72 participants, with an overall response rate of 37%. It was found that the workplace was reported to be one of the places where the most gender discrimination occurs according to 22% of the participants. As the authors note:

In both samples, the highest number of episodes of discrimination and harassment occurred in the workplace, with a prevalence of up to 28% in the MtF sample, with no significant difference between MtF and FtM (Fisher’s exact test = 0.142,  $p > .05$ ). (p. 8–9)

### **Analysis and Applicability to the Lebanese Context**

An individual post-transition faces many difficulties adapting to daily life. Transgender individuals either find themselves unemployed or facing discrimination and harassment in their careers. Based on the research cited above, MTF individuals face a higher level of discrimination, going from a privileged category (men) to a less privileged gender category (women), while still not being

fully accepted as women. This issue arises from sexist beliefs and ideologies that heteronormative societies live by. Women are subject to gender-based discrimination because of the patriarchal masculine system ruling in most societies, including Lebanon. Additionally, anything that is feminine is considered inferior, therefore, any man associated with feminine actions, such as gay men, are shamed and segregated. Going further, MtF are considered “freaks” and “sinners,” which marks them as outcasts in Lebanese society. It seems that it is easier for FTM individuals to adapt and pursue a career they want as they are now considered part of the privileged category. However, this might not be the case in Lebanon. Both transgender categories in Lebanon face almost the same types of discriminations in the labor force, either by being excluded from it or harassed in it.

The types of discrimination transgender individuals face after transitioning include pronoun and name issues in the workplace, demotion or a drop in salary, psychological and physical harassment, and finally permanent unemployment. This change pre- and post-transitioning is a result of a combination of factors. First, governmental and systemic: the Lebanese government is ruled by cisgender men following power and money. The issue of gender-based violence does not concern them. In addition, the capitalist economic system allows big corporations to have complete control over their employees: they do not care about their employees’ safety in the workplace. They only care that the work gets done. The issue of the capitalist system in Lebanon and the world regarding gender-based violence goes even deeper but this is beyond the scope of this study.

Other factors aggravate and contribute to this issue such as social, cultural, religious and patriarchal constructs. Individuals who deviate from these constructs are often overtly or covertly reminded of their gender deviance. This type of discourse is enforced through the gender binary that defines and promotes heteronormative gender norms. Thereby, society is obliged to distinguish between masculinity and femininity in a way that enforces people to adhere to socially defined gender expectations. As Dietert and Dentice (2009) note:

Gender binary discourse enforces gender norms that reflect two exclusive categories, male and female. Societal expectations require that individuals who are born female or male reflect feminine or masculine attributes, respectively. (p. 127)

In addition, the sectarian political system in Lebanon makes it increasingly difficult for transgender individuals to claim or access justice. Transitioning and sex reassignment surgery are prohibited in most monotheistic religions. These religious institutions enforce a patriarchal system that deems any gender other than men inferior. Women are assigned the roles of nurturing, and caring. While these roles are portrayed as necessary, they perpetuate gender norms and patriarchal power systems in society.

This directly causes discrimination against transgender individuals. One main example of gender-based discrimination resulting from religion is sexism and the gender discrimination women face because of it. According to Human Rights Watch (2015), "Lebanon's religion-based personal status laws discriminate against women across the religious spectrum and don't guarantee their basic rights." Lebanon has 15 different religious personal status laws, but no civil code that addresses topics like divorce, property rights, or childcare. These laws are enforced by independent religious courts with little or no government control, and they frequently make decisions that violate women's rights. Men can divorce at any time, unilaterally, and without a cause under Lebanon's Shi'a, Sunni, and Druze laws. However, a woman's ability to divorce is limited, and typically comes at a high cost and after extensive judicial hearings (HRW, 2015).

Transgender youth also face discrimination in education. This has an important impact on the experiences of trans individuals in the workplace. As a result of discrimination in the education system, trans youth often leave education early. This lack of education has a negative effect on their ability to secure stable and long-term employment.

Compared to non-transgender youth, transgender youth had: (1) nearly two times higher odds of being truant from school, missing school because they felt depressed, or missing

school because they were suspended; and (2) six times greater odds of missing school because they felt unsafe or to engage in substance use. (Day et al., 2018, p. 8)

### **The Lebanese situation**

Lebanon has recently been affected by three major situations causing the country to collapse. The economic crisis started to impact Lebanon around the beginning of March 2020 when the Lebanese currency lost its value, with an inflation rate of 136.8 percent and an almost triple increase in prices. In addition, an enforced lockdown due to COVID-19 was set. On top of that, a devastating explosion occurred in the port of Beirut on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August killing at least 200 people, injuring about 5,000 people while around 300,000 people lost their homes.

Between these crises, the fight for the rights of transgender individuals has become “unreasonable” to many. Queer rights have generally been placed at the bottom of the list of demands. Today, in the face of the worsening economic and political situation in the country, queer rights remain at the bottom of the list. However, these situations affected marginalized communities, including transgender individuals, the most. The effects of these crises on transgender people will be discussed in the next section.

### **Research Methodology and Findings**

To better analyze the situation of trans individuals in Lebanon, several interviews were conducted with Lebanese transgender individuals and with two Lebanese NGOs working on LGBTQ+ issues, Helem and LebMash. Our initial goal was to conduct around 10 to 15 interviews with Lebanese transgender individuals. However only five individuals responded. The interviews were done online using video conferencing, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some patterns were seen across all five interviews. First, all the individuals were still in the pre-transition phase and did not wish to legally transition in Lebanon, even though it is possible to do



so. They were afraid to transition legally due to the public and bureaucratic issues. Also, all five of them were currently unemployed because of the socioeconomic situation and their transgender identity.

### Interviews with NGOs

Helem is one of the first organizations to fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Lebanon. This organization has a community center creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ individuals. The employees interviewed at Helem stated that they face many attacks against their events and projects. One main opposing front was the Islamic religious front, Dar Al Fatwa. This has resulted in many threats to Helem's events. In addition, Helem faces constant social media threats. Staff members even reported that once, Helem's website was hacked and taken down. Helem works on many dimensions to help transgender individuals, including fighting for legal reform. However, interviewees mentioned that it is so hard for Lebanese stakeholders to amend laws so that they include LGBTQ+ rights.

Regarding employment, Helem interviewees emphasized the effect of education on the unemployment of transgender individuals. Interviewees highlighted the effects of this detrimental cycle: a lack of education leads to unemployment which in turn leads to no income, which forces individuals to live without access to basic needs. Interviewees also mentioned that transgender and queer individuals were highly affected after the Beirut port explosion, as they resided in areas close to the range of the explosion such as Badaro, Gemmayze, and Mar Mikhail. These areas are known as areas that are more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, the increased presence of the police all over Beirut has also affected transgender individuals as they became more afraid to go out.

In addition, the effect of the lockdown was also mentioned. The abuse and physical threats experienced by LGBTQ+ persons increased during this period. On that basis, Helem tried as much as possible to offer help to individuals affected by this situation. For example, 800 food boxes were distributed. Finally, in a study conducted by Helem on the reasons underpinning the

unemployment of transgender individuals, out of 50 individuals 42% stated that the reason was the sex on their national ID cards, while 24% stated that the reason was their education level.

LebMASH is an NGO consisting of healthcare professionals with the goal of spreading equity in the health field for LGBTQ+ individuals. LebMASH, similar to Helem, also created a community relief plan in response to the current crises. Important work is done by LebMash to integrate transgender and queer individuals into the Lebanese labor force. This work will be highlighted in the next section of the paper. In addition, LebMASH plays an important role in providing safe healthcare services to queer individuals. As discussed in an interview with the Executive Director, LebMASH has created an online portal that includes different lists of queer and transgender-friendly healthcare practitioners. This has created a safer pathway for transgender individuals in the Lebanese healthcare system. Unfortunately, while two staff members from Helem were interviewed for this paper, only one interview was conducted with the Executive Director of LebMASH.

### **Possible Solutions**

Interviewees from both Helem and LebMash offered possible solutions to alleviate the current situation of transgender individuals in the workforce. First, Helem suggested that it is important to implement laws that abide by the rules and norms established by international humanitarian laws. In addition, it is crucial to equip transgender individuals with knowledge about their rights so they can report any discrimination that they face. Towards that end, LebMash is working on multiple projects that build on these suggestions. For example, LebMash is providing awareness and educational training about equality in the workplace to big companies such as AZADEA and Beeline. LebMASH is also working on a scorecard system that rates Lebanese businesses based on the diversity of their employees and their acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. This scorecard system, first, gives trans individuals an idea of businesses that are open to the LGBTQ+ community. Second, it can also incentivize businesses to be more open towards the LGBTQ+.

Most importantly, it is necessary to implement policies and a code of conduct that prohibit and penalize any type of harassment and discrimination on the basis of gender in order to create a safe working environment for every individual. Going a bit further, another direct and crucial solution is the removal of religious control, particularly through the personal status laws. Religion, sectarian political parties, and sectarian politicians overwhelmingly control Lebanon's decision-making positions. This leads to biased legislations that do not protect everyone equally. Thus, adopting secularism is a main step toward any equality, and especially gender equality, in the labor force. As Scott (2019) notes, "secularism and gender equality go hand in hand. The civilizational polemic makes gender equality synonymous with secularism" (p. 9).

## Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, transgender individuals are prone to various types of discrimination in the Lebanese labor force. The fight for transgender rights in the workforce is an issue of importance for various stakeholders, including several Lebanese NGOs. Yet, the current situation is still deteriorating, and the protection of transgender persons has become a secondary concern for the Lebanese public. Instead, transgender individuals live on the margins of society, and the market does not utilize the skills and abilities they have to offer. Finally, although the fight for change in Lebanon is difficult, it is critical for ensuring the equal rights of all individuals living in the country today and in the future.

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