



**Supporting Transwomen Refugees:
Providing psychosocial support & building peer networks among refugee & host
community transwomen in Beirut, Lebanon**

February-August 2016

Case Study: Strengthening GBV Prevention & Response in Urban Contexts

Background

As part of a series of urban gender-based violence (GBV) pilot interventions the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) undertook throughout 2016, the WRC partnered with a local organization called MOSAIC¹ to strengthen GBV prevention and response for Syrian transwomen refugees living in Beirut. Previous research demonstrated that in addition to facing physical and emotional violence, stigmatization, and discrimination on a near daily basis, transwomen refugees experience exceptional difficulty accessing safe shelter, employment, and health and other services—including mainstream refugee services.² That research also found that having peers is instrumental to transwomen refugees' immediate safety and wellbeing.³ With this in mind, the WRC partnered with MOSAIC, a local specialized service provider already trusted by Lebanese and Syrian transgender individuals, to implement a project with Syrian transwomen refugees living in Beirut.

The project brought refugee transwomen from Iraq, Syria and Palestine together with Lebanese transwomen. Activities focused on strengthening their protective peer networks, enhancing their skills and capacities to claim their rights, and facilitating their access to support at individual and community levels.

The goals of this project were twofold:

- Create a safe space for transwomen refugees to access psychosocial support and build a sense of community with each other—as well as with Lebanese transwomen—while also developing skills related to advocacy, community mobilization, risk mitigation, and peer counseling; and
- Empower participants to be activists in their communities, including through asserting their GBV risks and service needs with service providers; drawing attention to rights violations and gaps, and joining together to mitigate risks while enhancing their overall protection.

To meet these goals, MOSAIC invited Syrian transwomen and Lebanese transwomen living in Beirut to participate in a joint workshop over a six-month period. Workshop activities would be designed and implemented with their input at every stage.

¹ The name 'MOSAIC' stands for the MENA Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration and Capacity-building. For more information about MOSAIC's work with marginalized groups within Lebanon, see www.mosaicmena.org.

² See WRC. 2016. [*Mean Streets: Preventing and Responding to Urban Refugees' Risks of Gender-Based Violence \(LGBTI Refugees\) \(reflecting the perspectives of transwomen refugees in Beirut and other urban contexts\)*](#).

³ These pilot interventions and the research underlying them were made possible by the support of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

Art & Drama Therapy for Lebanese and Refugee Transwomen

This project consisted of multiple stages. The first stage involved establishing ‘safe spaces’ for participants. This meant opening up (i) a figurative space for dialogue between Lebanese transwomen and refugee transwomen; and (ii) a physical space where they could meet and feel welcome, without any fear of violence or discrimination.

To establish these safe spaces, MOSAIC launched the project with the following:

- A two-day “Trans* Alignment Retreat”
- Four Information Sessions.

MOSAIC staff facilitated these meetings, which consisted of introductions, setting an action plan, adapting training modules, fostering a sense of shared experiences and community, and creating entry points for participants to voice ideas and concerns.

These introductory gatherings were followed by a series of Art and Drama Therapy group sessions. These were facilitated by a certified social worker with experience working with LGBTI persons, including transwomen, and involved the following:

- Participants: 20 transwomen living in Beirut (10 Lebanese, 5 Syrian, 2 Palestinian, & 3 Iraqi)
- Duration: 32 separate sessions
- Purpose: Building community, sharing information, providing psychosocial support, and enhancing resilience—including through the strengthening of peer networks

During these sessions, participants were guided to engage in visual and performance art activities in order to identify and explore common themes and shared experiences. The facilitator also prompted participants to probe the particular risks and challenges facing refugee transwomen, in order to compare and contrast them to the lived experiences of Lebanese transwomen.

In post-project evaluations, participants shared that although bringing Lebanese transwomen and refugee transwomen together was at first a challenge for them—given existing prejudices between communities— it ultimately strengthened their sense of community and inspired confidence. Building connections across the refugee/host-community divide enhanced their skills and capacities to respond to everyday situations and to be activists for themselves and their communities. Participants reported that this, in turn, bolstered hope that their individual wellbeing could be improved. They discussed this in terms of their own emotional wellbeing, as well as their physical safety and security in Lebanon, since their newly expanded peer network could provide avenues for, e.g., sharing information, knowledge and resources, as well as engaging in group advocacy and community building.



Participants act out an everyday incident of verbal assault against transwomen living in Beirut

“Before this project, I never really thought about my safety, but thanks to the meetings that happened within this project I started to think on how to protect myself and who to trust and who to not. Thanks to this project, I started opening myself to people and talking about things I never talked about before with anyone, like my relationship with my family, my general situation, and the problems that I was going through.”

– Participant

Conclusion

More general challenges to this project were limited funding and a limited timeline. Participants also faced logistical difficulties to attending sessions, such as encountering forms of violence while trying to take public transportation, as well as fearing for their anonymity and safety by being seen travelling to the same place regularly. These are obstacles that should be anticipated and addressed in future iterations of the project.

Humanitarian actors interested in replicating or adapting project activities will want to keep in mind two key lessons learned:

(1) The pilot project was implemented by MOSAIC, a local organization already trusted by LGBTI refugees and host community members. This meant the project was able to leverage the specialized knowledge, expertise, and credibility that a local organization already had, and then integrate those assets into humanitarian response for the benefit of an extremely marginalized refugee population.

(2) An approach that brings together both host community transwomen and refugee transwomen offers significant benefits to participants, because such engagement broadens peer support networks across refugee/host-community divides. This in turn enhances access to critical information as well as psychosocial/emotional support.

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