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**Subject: Input for Lebanon Visit submitted by MOSAIC-MENA & ILGA Asia**

Dear Professor Oliver De Schutter,

Thank you for your Call for Input on Lebanon. ILGA Asia and MOSAIC-MENA greatly appreciate that you intend to conduct a county visit and present your findings on this important issue concerning extreme poverty and human rights in Lebanon. In this letter, we would like to present to you the socio-economic challenges confronting Lebanese LGBTI populations as well as those LGBTI refugees and IDPs residing in the country.

ILGA Asia is an umbrella member-organization representing more than 170 LGBTI organizations in the Asian region to advance SOGIESC rights protection. ILGA Asia has been actively involving in advocating LGBTI rights in the MENA region since 2017 through several initiatives.

The MENA Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration & Capacity Development (MOSAIC-MENA)is a holistic program committed to improve the health and well-being of marginalized and vulnerable groups in Lebanon and beyond. Founded by activists, legal and health experts in September 2014, MOSAIC provides specialized and comprehensive services for marginalized groups, research and advocate for policy reform, develop knowledge and capacities on SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity/Expressions, and Sex Characteristics) issues, and engage the societies in the fight against human rights violations, especially against LGBTI rights violations.

**Background**

As a result of the economic situation and the widespread of COVID-19 cases, estimates state that over 55% of the Lebanese people are now in poverty and up to 23% are in extreme poverty. Add to that, there is an immense erosion of the middle class to reach now less than 40% of the entire population as well as the higher class to shrink from 15% to 5% of the population. Moreover, the circumstances have driven people to flee illegally on fishing boats from Tripoli to Cyprus where over 21 boats have left between July and September and have faced many challenges during their travels where many have lost their lives. After the Beirut port explosion, more than 36% increase in legal immigration of youth was also reported (The New Humanitarian, 2020 & ESCWA 2020). Moreover, the existing situation along with the imposed quarantine has produced social tensions, cases of violence, and murders. According to KAFA (enough) violence and exploitation; a local non-governmental organization; the number of reported cases of violence has increased drastically with the beginning of 2020. The number of calls on KAFA’s hotline and the number of murders and suicide due to violence within one month was shocking (KAFA, 2020).

**The impact of Political Crisis, Economic precarity, and COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTI Persons**

According to the recent report *Impacts of the Syrian Civil War and Displacement on Diverse SOGIESC Populations,* published by MOSAIC-MENA, a Beirut-based LGBTI organizations in 2020, persons of diverse SOGIESC in lebanon are facing multiple layers of discrimination and harassment in society and private settings. Moreover, the catastrophic economic situation, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the August 2020 Beirut port explosion have compounded this situation that many LGBTI people are discriminated against on a crowded and over- priced housing market, especially if they are refugees.

The economic crisis has pushed many persons of diverse SOGIESC further into the margins of the economy, and COVID-19 prevention measures have hit many hard, including those dependent on sex work for survival. The increasing socio-economic strain has in part increased anti-refugee and anti-diverse SOGIESC hostility, especially by some party militias. Based on the report, the Beirut explosion was seen by all respondents as a ‘stand-out’ event which fundamentally shook their already limited sense of security.

Within the existing economic and health crisis, many people of the LGBTI community were victims of systemic discrimination where they did not have access to NSSF or healthcare services including hormonal treatment or mental health services. Many have lost their jobs as well since they worked in informal economies with no protection from their work contract; in addition to the fact that these types of jobs (retail, industrial services, etc.) cannot be performed remotely amid the lockdown. Moreover, most Lebanese businesses are managed by family members and since LGBTI individuals are rejected by their families they remain with no connections to finding jobs in the Lebanese economy.

Due to the COVID-19 and economic crisis, the Lebanese government distributed financial aid to family units which basically excluded queer people. Due to their loss of jobs, many LGBTI persons were forced to move back with their parents where they were previously abused or live with friends which did not contribute to social stability. Extended family members play an important role for social support in times of crisis within Lebanese society; however, some LGBTI people are victims of domestic violence and are often rejected by family members. Thus, queer people lost their social network and grassroots societies and had to handle the discrimination and abuse. This was explained by the increase in calls reporting mental health issues and cases of domestic and partner violence to concerned non-governmental organizations such as MOSAIC.

Although there is more of a possibility of living out one’s SOGIESC in some areas of Lebanon, respondents still felt insecure in many areas and had difficulty accessing services. The lack is perhaps greatest in terms of psycho-social support services. Respondents were often grateful for what support and protection they did receive from UNHCR and NGOs, and the spaces and contacts to others they enabled. To a degree, respondents had been able to create their own spaces of support and were using coping mechanisms such as learning new languages.

The Lebanese laws do not govern the rights of LGBTI people for protection from harassment or structural violence. The revolution of October 17 has given the queer community a public space safe from oppressions to profound their existence as part of the Lebanese society which changed drastically the views of many societal entities about the rights of LGBTI individuals after attempting several times to marginalize them (Salem and Shaaban, 2020 & Human Rights Watch, 2020). However, this societal lobbying for LGBTIQ rights that was manifested during the revolution is still not enough if the government still punishes relations of same-sex according to the penal code law (article 534). Add to that, LGBTI community’s rights of freedom of safe space to practice their activities is still fought by Christian and Islamic institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2020 & Civil Society-Centre', 2018).

**Socio-economic situation, especially LGBTI refugees and IDPs**

Over the years, Syrian refugees in Lebanon have increasingly become seen as a social and political threat and as economic competitors (Slavova 2015). These fears and stereotypes are gendered, and as Qubaia and Gagné (2014) put it: ‘Syrian male refugees are at the bottom of this [social] order, and viewed as dangerously sexual and hyper- masculinised, rapacious, morally bankrupt, and flat out criminal’ (cf. Farah 2015, Khattab and Myrttinen 2017). Syrian refugees of diverse SOGIESC in Lebanon face a wide spectrum of social and economic discrimination and abuse, which mix together class-based prejudices, xenophobia, and misogyny with homo-, lesbo-, bi- and transphobia (Heartland Alliance 2014, Gagné and Qubaia 2013, Laruni et al. 2018, Myrttinen et al. 2017). This includes discrimination in getting jobs and housing; extortion (including for sexual favours) and blackmail by colleagues, employers, officials, taxi drivers, landlords and others; shunning and discrimination, including even within the LGBTI community; verbal abuse; as well as physical and sexual assaults.

There is little to no research on IDPs of diverse SOGIESC. Some of the research on forced displacement focuses on the life situations of diverse SOGIESC refugees while others are more theoretical in nature, with a focus on politics of categorisation. In addition, numerous NGOs and UN agencies have published reports and guidelines on diverse SOGIESC in displacement, again mostly focusing on refugees rather than IDPs (Heartland Alliance 2014, Myrttinen and Daigle 2017, ORAM 2011, and UNHCR 2015). Much of this research underscores the multiplicities and ubiquity of discrimination and abuse faced by persons of diverse SOGIESC, the difficulties of accessing services (e.g. reporting abuse to the police) and the humiliations of the refugee application process, but also tensions between different refugees and the comparatively privi- leged processing of diverse SOGIESC refugee claims by the UNHCR (e.g. Shakshari 2014). The issue of visibility and its paradoxes of having to be visibly conforming and visibly non-conforming to different audiences, is sum- marised by Shakshari (2014:1006) as follows:

*“Passing is an ironic reality of queer and trans refugee applicants in Turkey [....] Passing the test of being gay, lesbian, or transgender according to the UNHCR standards, and passing as straight or cisgender at work or in public in Turkey mark forms of policing and surveillance that queer and trans refugees experience on a daily basis.”*

In spite of the incrementally increased interest by various actors in the impacts of conflict and displacement on persons of diverse SOGIESC, the issue nonetheless remains somewhat at the margins of discussions on gender, peace and security, of international humanitarian and refugee law, and of transitional justice (Bueno-Hansen 2018, Fobear 2014, Hagen 2016, Margalit 2019, Muddell 2007).

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