Ways Forward for the Trans community and CSOs III:

Organisational Interventions, and Practical Recommendations for Service Provision

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Introduction

This paper is a follow-up to Qorras' most recent strategic paper. However, it only focuses on one of the three strategic pillars: organisational interventions. This paper builds on the lived experiences of trans people trying to navigate different civil society structures for various services, and on theoretical and practical knowledge and experience in the social work profession, most notably the global social work statement of ethical principles.

While this paper has been written with the trans community in mind, its recommendations are not exclusive to said community. Oppressive systems impact people differently depending on their situation and living conditions, and so it's important to consider how these systems manifest in the (hi)stories and experiences of other individuals and communities. This is why it is important to adopt intersectional[1] and ecological[2] analyses, as this paper does, to better understand the complex nature and situations that disadvantaged folks deal with on a daily basis.

The paper mainly addresses social workers – as they occupy a central role in service provision and in the client's rapport with the providing institution/organisation– but the recommendations should be flexible enough for you to adapt according to your role and the situation at hand.

To say that this paper will provide you with all the keys you need to facilitate your trans service user's liberation or autonomy would be a radical over-exaggeration. This paper aims to provide you, as a civil society worker – whether in a decision-making position, or as a front-liner or service provider – with practical strategies to push for better service provision and access to services for trans people.

Recommendation sections:
1. Intra-organisational level
2. Social work faculties and educational institutions
3. Service provider level
4. Inter-Organisational level

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[1] An intersectional approach drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework would allow to analyze how multiple systems of oppression and power collide, interlock and intersect in the lives of individuals.

[2] An ecological approach is one that allows a multifactorial analysis from a systemic perspective. This approach views each individual as their own system in constant interactions with other systems. (Pardeck, John T., 1988).

1. Intra-organisational level

- Civil society entities work depending on their mandate, whether it is based on a specific need or intervention sector, or on an identity/target community basis. In this logic, trans people are oftentimes limited to LGBTQ+ mandated organisations, who often consider that their transness is central to their entire being and experience. This one-dimensioning is harmful and does not allow trans people to exist in their entirety, nor does it allow for organisations to acknowledge individuals in their complexities. **It's crucial that we think of needs as interdependent and intersectional when planning proposals, and when organising working groups and sectoral meetings.**

- There have been several LGBTQ+ networking efforts in the past, with some still ongoing. These have included working groups, task forces and coalitions. **It's paramount to take a step back and reflect on the place and importance of these efforts in our current civil society contexts:** How effective have these efforts been? What were these groups able to achieve? What goals were unattainable? Why were they so? How effective have they been in resource mobilisation? And how do they (in)directly benefit the trans community?

  - This also applies to other working groups (health sector, protection working group, migrants etc.) as it is imperative to assess their purpose: such efforts should serve more than just a space where each organization shares their progress updates and targets reached. **It's important to use these spaces for strategising together and unifying efforts as a civil society.**

  - **Utilise these meetings to discuss complex challenges, exchange lessons learned, and brainstorm ways forward together**. This also applies to complex client cases, which would ideally lead to coordinated interventions and service provision, and a division of stressful workloads, limited resources, and institutional obstacles, all while ensuring client confidentiality.

  - **Such spaces should be open for grassroot and community-based organisations and collectives** to participate, contribute, but also to hold other CSOs accountable directly, without the need to navigate complex administrative processes and inaccessible jargon. However, it is crucial that **the safety and security of grassroots and community individuals is prioritised by the organising entity**.

  - Such networking efforts should be led with **transparency and accountability** in their work. Transparency would translate into the willingness to be open about your agenda, your objectives, your interests, and your priorities as an organisation. This is linked to **being accountable towards the communities you have committed to supporting and the individuals you have promised to help out**. Be transparent and upfront about your plans, your strategies, your capacities, and your limitations as an organisation.

- The **inclusion of trans individuals and communities should be a priority**, and this does not simply happen by having one staff member attend a SOGIESC[3] workshop. Discussions surrounding the history, the struggle and the experiences of trans folks should be held more frequently, and outside of the confinements of a workshop or training. Utilise the toolkits, research, and guidelines available online that aim to educate practitioners and organisations on trans identities and the experiences of the trans community; reflect on your practices and your work; reach out to activists and knowledgeable organisations and maintain positive and engaging relationships with them.

- Safeguarding is a priority. As an organisation, **you're responsible for the management of any potential risk or harm that might affect your service user**. This starts from training your building's doorman, caretaker, or security guard, to most senior-level staff at your organisation.

- **Prioritise accountability amongst organisations that exist to serve the greater good through their different mandates.** While intra-organisational accountability mechanisms do exist, including reporting mechanisms and whistleblowing, it is important to strengthen their status, improve their visibility, accessibility, and importance, but also adapt them to be community-based and community-driven so that they are able to address transphobic discriminatory behaviour. These mechanisms should also be made widely known to CSOs and other stakeholders.

- **Organisations should also prioritise strengthening their relations with the communities they serve**. This work falls under community outreach and accountability and is complementary to improvements to accountability mechanisms mentioned in the previous point.

- When it comes to gender-based programming and services – specifically shelters and protection from violence (GBV[4]) – these should not be limited to cisgender women. When adopting a gender-based framework, **one must understand how gender dynamics operate and impact individuals, especially those who do not conform to cis-heteronormative expectations and performances of gender**.

  - **This is not exclusive to trans people,** but applies to those who simply do not align with the rigid gendered expectations of what a man or a woman is, or how a good victim/survivor should act or behave to avoid being blamed for their traumas.

  - **Reframing the narrative** to focus on the repercussions of the patriarchal system under which we all exist will not only benefit trans people, but everyone who is marginalised. This includes various domains of life where choosing to go with your desires, against the norms, renders you an outsider.

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[3] Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sexual Characteristics.

[4] Gender-Based Violence

2. Social work faculties and educational institutions

Universities with a formal social work program are limited in Lebanon, but even those that exist do not equip their students with the knowledge they need to eventually provide adequate service to trans clients. While mentioning the LGBTQ+ community in passing through lectures might be considered as progress, it is not remotely sufficient to fight the preconceived ideas that students or staff might have regarding queer or trans communities. Social work curricula do not touch on the struggles of trans individuals, and students' exposure to these realities are limited to in-practicum experiences through internships, or if a student chooses to research the topic for an assignment or presentation. Considering the connections that faculties have with active civil society organisations, it is important that they utilise these connections for more than just internships:

- **Incorporate more practical exercises that focus on attitude reassessment** when it comes to working with different communities and groups, most notably the trans community.

- **Hold space for discussions and feedback regarding your faculty's efforts in fighting gender-based discrimination, transphobia and homophobia**. This also includes having anonymous complaints and feedback mechanisms, such as complaint boxes, where students can report and flag any instances of discrimination that they face or witness without being outed.

- **Organise a series of faculty-level SOGIESC workshops or lectures** for students, to be counted as practicum hours or class credits, thus ensuring attendance and participation. Other topics may also be integrated into such a program to provide a more holistic understanding of relevant issues.

- **Invite activists and community organisers to provide insights** regarding the struggles and lived experiences of trans folks. Such discussions and spaces would also allow activists and community organisers to firsthand address social workers regarding gender-affirming practices and what social workers can do to better serve their clients.

- **Hold routine roundtables for knowledge sharing with various well-informed organisations** to allow exchange between service providers, students, and faculty staff.

3. Service provider level

It is important to preface this section by saying that **social work and service provision are not easy professions**. This type of work is emotionally and mentally taxing, and it takes immense courage to keep pushing forward. With that being acknowledged, **social workers still hold a very important responsibility** vis-a-vis representing their organisation on one hand, and their profession on the other hand: social workers welcome and interview people when they are in difficulty and struggling to open up about their experiences. As a social worker or service provider, **nobody expects you to always have the correct answers, to be perfect, or not make mistakes**. However, it is your duty to take a step back and reflect on your practice and what impact it has on your clients. Working with clients requires an understanding of the context in which they exist, and to do it is important to keep the following in mind:

- If you know that your client is a trans person before you meet them, **do your research** about transness or reach out to knowledgeable organisations to inform and prepare yourself.

- If you're having concerns regarding unclear topics or experiences, **ask your colleagues** for information or advice.

- **Leave space for your client** to open up about their gender identity and express themselves.

- You can always ask your client for clarifications to better understand them, but **be mindful not to overwhelm them or put them in a place where they're doing all the educational work for you**. They can speak to you about their experience and their identity, but do not ask them to be a representative of the trans community.

- It is okay if the initial assessment requires two sit-downs or more: **people's stories are complicated and you should respect their pace**. This also gives you time between assessments to better research any questions you might have.

- Understand that while we speak about LGBTQ+ rights, **the struggle of each person is different** and nuanced according to their living conditions and realities. The advancement of a person's transition also plays a huge role, where passing[5] and conforming to binary ideals of social presentation can make or break a person's experience with their surroundings.

- **Avoid reducing your client to their trans identity**. Try to understand that they are a trans person that exists in a complex context under uncertain conditions, and that all of these different aspects interact together. Adopting a person-centered approach, with an ecological perspective, would help you understand your clients in their complexities.

- Avoid trying to box the person into a binary gender category. **Understand that gender is subjective, unique and fluid**. You do not need to be convinced or fully understand a

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[5] Passing refers to a trans person's ability to socially present as their lived gender and be perceived as a cisgender person.

person's gender, but you should make sure that the space you're creating allows them to exist as they are.

- **Understand how difficult it is to access healthcare services**: for trans people, options are limited, oftentimes expensive, and unadapted for long-term treatments and follow-ups. Raise the possibility of having a friend or a trusted person accompany your client to their appointments to hospitals, healthcare centers, doctors' consultations, other organisations etc. You can also offer to accompany them if they feel comfortable and welcoming of this accompaniment. People will take your client more seriously and treat them better when they're not alone and have someone alongside them supporting them.

- **Make an effort to understand the legal and administrative complexities that trans people face,** and to understand how uncomfortable it can be for your client to be asked for an ID or passport. If it is required, then make sure that you file the ID scan in the client's confidential case file. This also applies for digital databases and case files: people's personal information is to be protected.

- **Avoid using your client's legal name** while saving their contact information on your phone, as well as on any case notes as this will help you refrain from deadnaming[6] them.

- You are your client's biggest advocate. **It is your responsibility to ensure that they get treated with dignity and respect by you, your colleagues, and anyone that they might interact with while at your office or center**. If they ever come to you to express an unpleasant experience, make sure that you acknowledge how uncomfortable the situation is, how it's unfair, and how you will be escalating it through the available channels if that's what they wish to do.

- Always stress the fact that **any complaint would not affect the services they are to receive or are already receiving from your organisation,** and that it is their right to be treated respectfully.

- Be ready to defend and advocate for your client against discrimination or insensitive jokes by colleagues, by other organisations, or by service providers. It's important to **identify potential allies within your organisation** and to collaborate for more effective advocacy efforts.

- Keep in mind that many individuals did not have access to formal education, and do not know how to write and/or read. In such cases, instead of using text messaging, **recording voice messages would facilitate communication and be inclusive of all levels of literacy.** Make sure to provide them with pictures and detailed information, especially if they're trying to reach your center or any other organisation.

- Trans people have different preferences when it comes to their social presentation, and this should not affect your capacity to respect them and their identity. **You need to shift**

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[6] Deadnaming refers to calling a trans person by their legal/deadname instead of their chosen one.

your perception to who they tell you they are, and not base it on what you're making them out to be.

- **Trans people also have different goals and desires when it comes to transitioning**. Keep in mind that for some, passing is a priority for various reasons, while others may prioritise being comfortable in their skin without conforming to binary gendered expectations.

- **Expect a lot of frustration, anger, and mistrust when it comes to you as a service provider, or to your organisation.** These feelings stem from a long history of being ostracized by society in general, and of being constantly failed by organisations that gave them false hope and empty promises of a better life.

- You should acknowledge these feelings, and not take them personally: they are feelings towards what you represent, and not who you personally are. **This highlights the importance of building trust between you and your client.** You can try doing this by apologising that they've had to go through such bad experiences. **Make sure that you are always realistic, transparent and committed to what it is you're putting out there with a clear and unchanged narrative regarding what it is you offer, what you do not, and the limitations of your organisation, as to avoid any misunderstandings.** Make sure to include your client in the action plan whilst highlighting their primary role in its success. In such situations it is imperative that you stress on the fact that you are here to listen to your client, and to treat them with dignity and respect as it is a pillar value of social work.

- **Community occupies an important place for trans and queer people.** This can be through chosen families, solidarity networks, or mutual aid collectives, all of which represent safe havens for your clients, and are to be acknowledged as such. With that being said, personal relationships play a huge role in the trans community, and people talk to each other about their experiences.

- Some individuals might feel left out or ignored due to the way personal relationships and connections to organisational staff can lead to favoritism. This requires you to not only practice transparency with your clients, but to also remain objective, and to refrain from differential treatment or favoritism towards certain clients over others. **Make sure that you follow objective selection criteria in your assessments.**

- In order to avoid potential conflicts at your center or waiting rooms, space out appointments, or have clients wait in different rooms. Be mindful that some clients might not get along, or might have history and personal issues that could arise in such situations.

It is important that you develop **a trust-based relationship with your client,** and this can be nurtured through various actions and efforts on your end:

- If you're unsure how to gender the person, **address them using plural pronouns until you get the chance to ask them which pronouns they use.** Ask them how they prefer being addressed when in the waiting area or around other people; this includes both the first name and the pronouns. Always be wary that outing, even if accidental, could put them at great risk.

- **Make sure to ask them what would make them more comfortable** during the intake, or later on when they're ready. This can range from the way you address them, the language you use, contact preferences as some do not like phone calls and prefer texting, no note-taking during sitdowns, no visible phones or devices that can be used for recording etc. Double check with your client regarding which information they are comfortable sharing with others when it comes to filling out internal or external referral forms.

- **Be honest and realistic with your client:** explain that you might not fully understand everything they're going through, but that you're here to listen and understand their experiences.

- If you slip up and deadname or misgender a person, **it is important that you acknowledge it and the discomfort it caused your client**. Apologize and try to reflect upon what happened when you're alone. Thinking and talking about your client with yourself using their name and pronouns will help you avoid slip-ups, as you're now used to using them and associate them to your client.

- Different people use different words and ways of expressing themselves. Some individuals identify with words that are considered slurs. **While it might be unexpected to hear it, it's important to understand their relationship to these words and what they mean to them**. Voice the discomfort or concerns you may have around using the slurs when addressing them, and then try deconstructing together what the slurs mean, and what importance the terms hold for your client. The final decision is for your client to make. If they want you to use these words when addressing them or talking about their identity, respect this choice: you do not want to box them in your own idea of gender.

  - This also refers to the usage of NGOised terms and western understandings of gender, especially when they do not align with the local community's culture and ways of being.
  - It additionally refers to the tones that individuals might adopt when articulating their experiences. A prime example is that of humour and sarcasm, both of which are used as coping mechanisms to deal with the multilayered and multistructured violence and struggles faced on a daily basis. N.B. that when used with nuance and prudence, it does not ridicule or lessen the weight of the struggles instead, it allows your clients to deal with their realities without having to always assume the role of the victim.

4. Inter-Organisational level

- **Provide adapted capacity-building spaces and workshops that** prioritise community insights and contributions by activists and community organisers in order to learn about the realities of trans individuals, and to benefit from different learning methodologies and techniques such as real-life scenarios for roleplays.

- **Provide mentorship, supervision and mental health support to service providers** on the medium and long terms. This would allow them to reflect on their practices and help improve them.

- **Provide staff with leniency and flexibility** for professional development and learning opportunities.

- **Develop or add to existing training curricula, manuals and toolkits** that tackle intersecting issues faced by the trans community in Lebanon. These tools help staff understand and contextualise the realities of their clients: dealing with state violence and discrimination, practicing sex work, substance dependency, digital risks and safety that include those faced on dating applications, difficulties accessing education, healthcare and housing etc.

- If you are to hire someone for a social worker position even though they do not have the educational background for it, **make sure to provide them with technical capacity-building** on social work principles, methodology, and skills.

- When applying for funding and projects, **ensure that your services are accessible to trans people** through flexible and inclusive service provision criteria.

- Always prioritise your commitment to humanitarian principles, most importantly the "*do no harm*" principle. **Any activity that you wish to implement should be preceded by a risk assessment** of potential threats that might lead to pushback and backlash against your organisation and the queer community; and should be supported by a safety and security strategy for all stakeholders involved. This ranges from the level of visibility accorded to activities and events to visuals and colors used for visual content etc.

- **Design flexible programs** that allow you to adapt the services you provide to trans people:

  - **Take into account potential threats and difficulties** related to accessing public transportation: provide higher transportation reimbursement fees for safer modes of transportation.

  - **Provide accommodations that facilitate service provision,** including the coverage of medical consultations if the client has a preferred doctor or a provider they feel comfortable with.

- ○ Understand that gender-affirming hormone replacement therapy is a life-saving therapy that helps individuals feel more aligned with who they are. **Try to argue and justify to donors** that this hormonal treatment is crucial for the patient's wellbeing, and so you can have it be eligible for medical coverage in case you provide it.

- ○ If you are unable to directly provide gender-affirming care, **you can still support** by providing access to information, to relevant medical care such as post-surgery care, nursing care, blood tests coverage etc.

- **Widen your organisation's or program's target community scope to include trans people** of different nationalities, socio-economic classes, religious and cultural backgrounds, and regions including rural areas far from the capital.

  - ○ If there are difficulties for the client to reach your center because they live far away, you can try connecting with a PHC[7] or organisation that is close to them, and inquire about the possibility of doing the interview at said organisation.

- **Implement measures that ensure anonymity and the protection of clients' identities**. This can look similar to measures used by organisations working with individuals facing substance dependencies that use codes and file numbers when addressing clients in waiting rooms.

- **Avoid sensationalism when taking on complex and mediatised cases**, this includes:

  - ○ Not using the client's struggle and story for social media content.

  - ○ Ensuring the respect of confidentiality and preventing the sharing of private information.

  - ○ Holding media platforms accountable for any abuse or misconduct.

  - ○ Planning long-term accompaniment and support for the individual in need.

  - ○ Making sure to coordinate with other organisations for support. This requires a clear definition of each organisation's role, specifying who is handling the case file, and developing an extensive action plan including referrals to other organisations.

- **If you have any queer or trans staff members, make sure that you do not treat them as a spokesperson or representative of their communities**. Do not assume that their identity and belonging to a certain community would give them access to understanding the struggles of others. While they surely have a different insight than your own, and while their contribution is important, it should not be an expectation or an obligation. Do not assign your staff this responsibility as it is unfair and unethical.

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[7] Primary Healthcare Center

○ Make sure that they are comfortable partaking in such conversations.

○ Respect their choice not to participate or contribute.

○ Reach out to knowledgeable organisations who would know how to orient you.

○ Reach out to community members and host community consultations for a more well-rounded and comprehensive understanding of your queries.
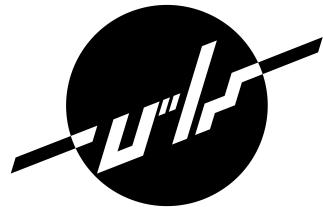
Conclusion

This paper was written with trans folks in mind, but many of the recommendations and perspectives offered came from conversations and work implemented with other communities facing struggles and oppression. As previously mentioned, this paper is not an exhaustive list of recommendations. It is open for new recommendations and suggestions from those who have insightful perspectives. With the direction that global, regional, and local politics are heading into vis-a-vis human rights, it is important that civil society organisations unite and fight against these harmful currents.

Biography:

This paper is the fruit of Summer's experience as a trans social worker herself who has professionally accompanied clients including trans and queer ones, but was also previously herself one of those people trying to navigate a (civil) society not necessarily built with them in mind.

Summer has gotten her undergraduate degree in social work from USJ - Lebanon, and has practiced social work with various communities across different fields including LGBTQ+ individuals, migrant domestic workers, victims of torture, and individuals struggling with their mental health. She is currently pursuing her master's degree in sociology in France in hopes of developing her knowledge and research experience in social work, sexology, and access to health.