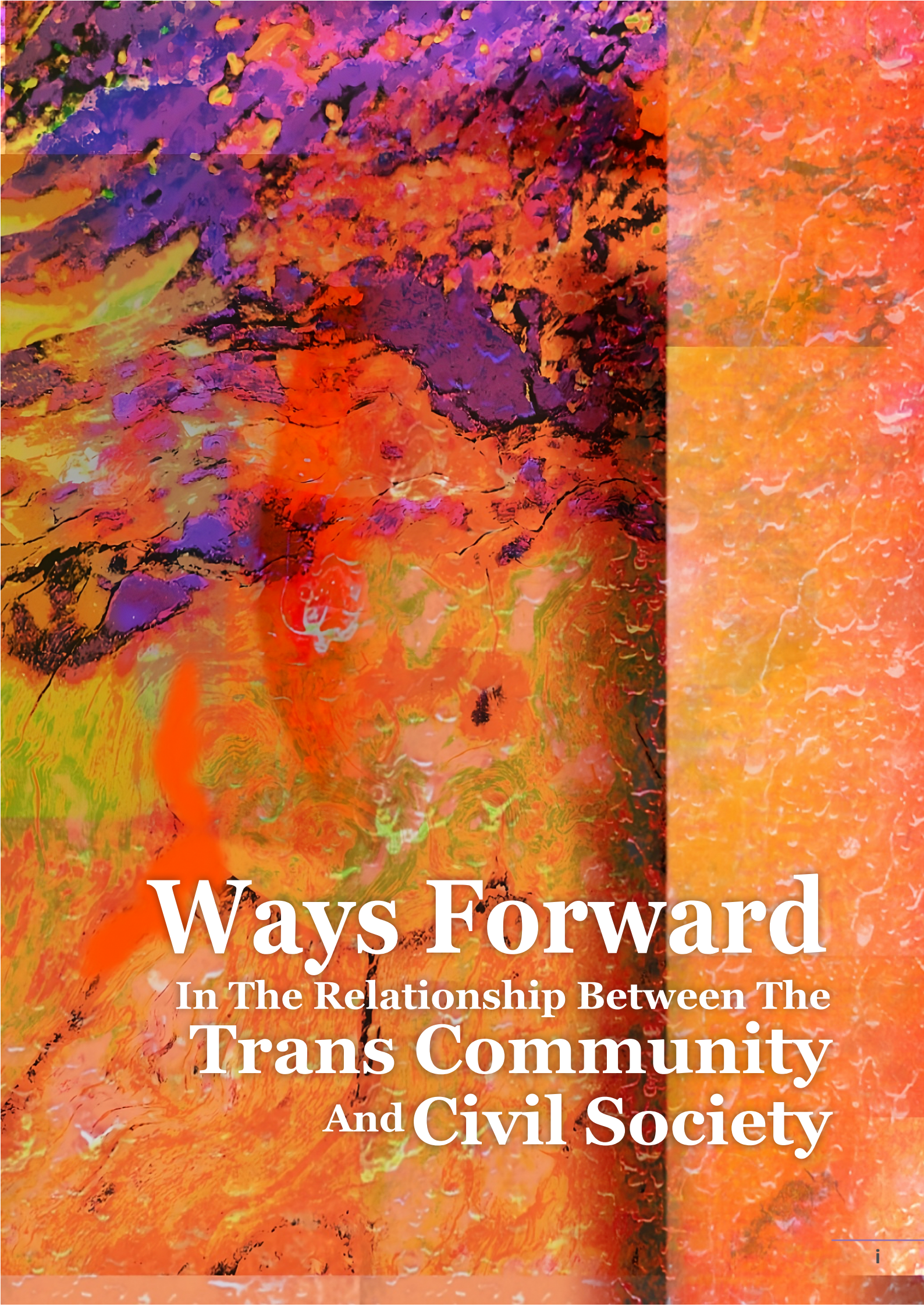


The background is a complex, abstract composition of colors and textures. It features a mix of warm tones like orange, red, and yellow, alongside cooler tones like purple, blue, and green. The textures appear to be layered, with some areas looking like marbled paper and others like rough, painted surfaces. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and depth.

Ways Forward

In The Relationship Between The
Trans Community
And **Civil Society**

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INTRODUCTION

As a trans-led working group and community organizers, Tajassod engages with multiple stakeholders: from agencies and institutions to members of the trans community - trans working-class Lebanese nationals, as well as trans refugees, asylum-seekers and economic migrants.

In 2022, Tajassod launched the first trans-led research on “accessibility to community, mental health and legal services in Lebanon”. This increased Tajassod’s engagement with aid and humanitarian agencies and community organizations. The research highlighted the interest of such agencies and organisations in trans issues and their desire for trans presence in their spaces and on their platforms. On the other hand, it underlined evident gaps in their work and their perception of trans individuals, and vice versa.

While trans stakeholders, both migrants and nationals, will generally apply for assistance with basic needs and other services supplied by agencies and service providers, the support and services provided by the latter , have not tended to address the particularities of the trans experience. Indeed, it is often designed without any in-depth research or consideration of the trans experience.

The disconnect between the two sides is further amplified by the sheer amount of bureaucratic requirements imposed by donors and internal organizational policies on

service-providing institutions, as these enforce blanket processes that do not factor in the specificities of the communities of concern.

Adding to the disconnect and lack of trust is the excessive focus on project-specific implementation, predicated on meeting preset outcomes and targets. This has led agencies to accumulate data without a comprehensive and sustainable plan to support the community, in turn leading to the provision of services that do not align with the needs of the community.

As the first trans working group in Lebanon, Tajassod has the opportunity to be present in spaces trans individuals rarely access. Conversely, this presence has created an imposed sense of visibility and representation of the stakeholder community in a space, which legitimized too quickly, can create harm for trans people. Therefore, from our position as community organizers, our continued assessment of our context, and our ongoing engagement with the community, Tajassod found it necessary to initiate a mapping of organizations working with trans individuals. The mapping's main objective was thus, in brief, to identify, as a community, the gaps and areas of improvement and work towards change with peers, allies and community organizations.

Within this piece of work, it was paramount to center trans leadership in discussing and prioritizing working methods, set questions to identify needs and gaps from a community-based perspective, create room for discussion, and work to eliminate the dynamics created by INGOization and international/social development settings.

To do so, Tajassod led a consultation consisting of 20 interviews with trans individuals. Interviews were conducted by a trans peer from the community. Interviewees came from various backgrounds, including migrants – refugees, asylum seekers, low-income economic migrants – and low-income to no-income and nationals. Interviews reflected the realities and experiences of members of the trans community when seeking services within agencies and organizations.

In parallel, Tajassod conducted interviews and mapping exercises with 18 community organizations, and peer-led and grassroots groups, to understand organizational and staff knowledge of trans issues, internal capacities, and ways of work. Here, four recurring themes were brought to our attention: Availability vs. Needs; Perception vs. Reality; Obstacles.

OBJECTIVES AND FOCUS

The objective of this paper is to detail gaps highlighted by the community consultation and mapping processes. On this basis, the paper will also present preliminary recommendations that center community-led groups and entities as primary service providers. Recommendations will, at a later stage, be reviewed and further refined and contextualized.

This is based on the established facts that:

- 1- Community-led groups are focused on the needs of the community, rather than on outcomes and results of project-specific funds.
- 2- The unrestricted communication and interactions established at community-level allow space for better understanding and determination of needs and support.
- 3- Community-led groups foster relations of mutual support, based on both formal and informal ways of working, as they operate outside the rigid and traditional modalities of humanitarian and development aid.
- 4- Community-led groups not only meet people's survival needs and mobilize people to join the struggles for justice and liberation, but also evade and question state governance as well as its accomplices: charities and professionals. This form of self-determination allows the movement to step away from creating more structures of power and focus on relational empowerment.
- 5- Community-led funds and unrestricted donations provide room for recipients of support to have an exchange built on trust and openness, which are often absent from agency- and organization-led settings, as mutual understanding between the community and organizers is rooted in shared communal values rather than donor requirements.

In short, centering community-led groups is a foundation for clearer and more accurate information and knowledge, produced from community engagement and identified needs. It also paves the way for informed advocacy and community solidarity in demanding accountable and transparent actions response to issues related to the trans community.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are no known consolidated data sets or mapping of service provision for the trans community in Lebanon. There are certainly none that have been created in consultation with the community, let alone any that are community-led from start to finish.

The economic collapse and the increased state securitization, militarization, and violence, combined with the particularities of the trans experience, have exacerbated the need of the community to seek support from service providers. At the same time, agencies and organizations providing services have been limited by the scarcity of resources available to them, by their internal dynamics and politics, by bureaucracy, and by their limited knowledge of trans issues. Against these factors, and within the four themes identified in the mapping, one can state the problems that need to be addressed alongside the preliminary recommendations that will be subject to review and adjustment to fit the context.

FINDINGS

Availability vs. Needs

The mapping and community consultation indicated that services offered by agencies and organisations have been primarily limited to cash assistance, despite evidence of increasing need for other types of services. The latter vary and include mental health support, medical referrals, testing for STIs, capacity building, livelihood support, and knowledge production. The availability of services is most often restricted by earmarked funds and a strong focus on preset donor requirements, which limit the capacity of organizations to redirect resources to other services, even where these are found to be more adequate.

Interviews with non-profit organizations highlighted the need for understanding the political and economic ecosystems that transform the need for proper gender affirming care into a single request for hormones. This leads to the issue of self-medication and reliance on under-the-table methods for accessing medication that is possibly lower quality or more expensive. This stems from the lack of comprehensive knowledge produced around issues related to the trans community and trans needs. Further, this can lead to self-medication and reliance on under-the-table methods for accessing medication that is either lower quality or more expensive. All in all, this prompts the question: “How to ask for the proper need without being limited by the one service offered to me?”

Perception Vs. Reality

The historical lack of representation of trans individuals and communities has left much room for interpretation and created false perceptions regarding their realities, experiences, and needs. Across the LGBTQ organizing history, we have never witnessed proper

representation. Rather, representation has been limited to a narrative of victimization and struggling. A representation that has, conversely, allowed people who have minor information or involvement in trans issues to position themselves as experts.

In past years, Tajassod started providing information on the general health concerns of the trans community. This was surprisingly seen as revolutionary, although we know it not to be so. That Tajassod was able to push against false perceptions and bring forward lived experiences and realities stemmed from the then scarcity of information and knowledge production around trans issues, coupled with the increased interest from within the community to delve into the history of trans organizing and address gender-affirming care.

Obstacles

The trans community and organizations face many obstacles when working and engaging with each other. Issues such as lack of transparency, distorted data collection, and unclear/non-existent selection criteria, have been compounded by a collapsing economy and, in turn, rampant burnout among frontline workers. It is fundamental to look at common obstacles in order to take a deeper dive into possible solutions and recommendations for collective work.

Lack of clarity regarding the organizations' work

The most common factor mentioned in discussions with peers and in community consultations is the lack of clarity around what makes up an organization, the way it functions, and what type of services it provides. Peers do not for example know how people are selected to receive services, what the internal requirements and policies of an organization are, or even what restrictions donors might have imposed on it. This situation translates into a lack of knowledge from the trans community's side on which entity to seek for support and what channels to use for accountability and complaints. Accordingly, in the race organizations are engaged in to finalize projects, complaints and referral systems have not been sufficient to provide the answers the community has asked for. According to many community members consulted during interviews, this situation has prompted individuals to attend workshops and trainings in order to share their complaints through trainers who, in turn, were not knowledgeable or trained on what to do and where to report these disclosures so that they were followed up on and/or addressed.

Data misrepresentation

There are many factors that influence the lack of information about and knowledge of the trans community other than the scarcity of historical representation.. Data management, as approached by agencies and donors, has always been a key point of discussion, whether in terms of collection methods or data analysis. Indeed, most data collection happens through focus group discussions that oftentimes do not provide proper representation of

the community and its needs. In fact, the outreach process for participation to these groups rarely reaches those who are unsatisfied with the service provided.

Additionally, data collection or vulnerability assessments continue to follow a rigid mathematical formula that measures vulnerabilities based on certain preset criteria defined by mainstream humanitarian aid actors. These assessments are deprived of any knowledge on how to define community-based needs and on the multifaceted aspects of vulnerability outside the humanitarian “norm”. This process prompts trans individuals, who as a result do not know where and how to direct their demands for support, to try and benefit from whatever service is available in the hope that they might make it fit their specific needs.

The lack of specificity in what little knowledge organizations have of the particularity of the trans experience with all its layers - from citizen status, race, class, and ability - combined with the pressure trans individuals feel to provide specific information in order to receive conditional service/support, leads to inconclusive data and furthers the chasm between perception and reality. This is amplified by the absence of historical representation and documentation regarding the state of the trans community across nationality, citizen status, race and class.

In turn, all of the above bring about a situation where there is not enough data to push for strategic change at the level of donors. Shortage and inaccuracy of data were highlighted throughout the organizational mapping as problems preventing organizations from pushing towards better services. Data shortage works in synergy with the nature of projects led by organizations, wherein data collection is conditional on funding and donor requirements, which typically focus on pre-set outcomes. This creates cycles of quick data collection and analyses, which are limited in time and do not account for long term sustainable investment in knowledge production.

Another layer that influences knowledge production and availability of data is the disconnect in communication amongst members of the community and organizations, which often means absence of information sharing, reconciliation, and consolidation among organizations, and a resulting absence of a collective strategy of work.

Difficulty defining the criteria for who needs help

One of the main obstacles noted among organizations is that there is not enough information regarding actual trans needs. This limits efforts to determine the right criteria upon which to base services, and the extent to which such criteria reflect the complexity of the experience. Additionally, there is little comprehension of the support that trans individuals may need across citizen status, class, nationality and background. Support must be customized to individual needs, especially as we know that blanket support, of the kind that is usually offered, may end up doing more harm than good. A blanket approach that is deprived from an informed customized structure can further lead to the misdirection of aid, and force the most vulnerable people to fall through the cracks.

So far, vulnerability criteria have been predefined by organizations' perception of vulnerability, rather than by consulting the community on its reality of vulnerability.. Organizations resort to specific measuring tools such as «the scale of vulnerability¹» which combines a list of criteria that fails to recognize that being trans in Lebanon is a vulnerability in and of itself, regardless of one's social and economic situation.

Lack of cooperation between the community and the CSOs

The spaces where non-profit organizations and trans individuals meet are rarely stripped of unequitable power dynamics. Meetings are always either structured as focus groups, or led by caseworkers engaging with individuals, leaving no space for an equal conversation. As a result, the organization is unable to transparently elaborate on what they do, and the individual is unable to safely communicate their needs outside of the institutionalized preset service itself. Although dynamics are beginning to change, there is an active need to create a space for strategizing in a safe, holistic, and egalitarian collective way.

Deterioration of frontliners' mental health

The Beirut Port explosion, COVID-19, and the worsening economic crisis, all imposed a harsh situation on minorities, especially refugees, asylum-seekers, and economic migrants. This situation has weighed heavier on the trans community as well as frontline responders. On the one hand, frontliners are suffering from great emotional and physical burnout. This is all the greater when they are from the queer community and are themselves impacted by the constant hardships they are responding to. On the other hand, the unending stream of quickly cycled and recycled data collection for vulnerability assessments - through focus group discussions or individual interviews - without clarity on objectives or outcomes nor certainty of support, has left the trans community frustrated and exhausted. This dynamic is evident in the ensuing limited connectedness, lack of trust, and restricted communication between the community and organisations around providing/receiving services.

Power dynamics and their impact on confrontation, resentment and exhaustion

It is paramount to address inequitable power dynamics within the humanitarian/development sector and the silencing that happens across the community and workers. In moments of frustration, caseworkers are silenced by their role and positionality of power within the development sector when dealing with the community as beneficiaries of services from their position of vulnerability. The impact of silencing and inequitable power dynamics is much heavier still for the trans individuals, as it puts them face to face with the

1 (ex: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/38061>), (<https://ialebanon.unhcr.org/vasyr/#/>) (<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/57f21f6b4.pdf>)

dismissal of their struggle and experience, and further mistreatment and discrimination. . Being in a context of vulnerability, trans people end up disregarding harmful attitudes and behaviors out of fear of jeopardizing access to much needed services and support. This causes additional hurt, frustration and hesitation among the community, and is amplified in the case of trans individuals from the refugee, asylum-seeking, and economic migrant communities who are even more dependent on NGOs for access to aid, resettlement, asylum application, legal support against incarceration and deportation, and many other life-saving services.

This breeds a reality wherein both parties are deeply exhausted and resentful, for different reasons. Indeed, this proved a big obstacle during community consultations and the organizational mapping. In the midst of this, when pushing for further services, most organizations tend to adopt quick-fixes, shifting their programming and current services rather than addressing frustrations and building more sustainable solutions in partnership with the community.

Economic Collapse

The country's administrative, medical and legal service infrastructures are one of the main obstacles that one can identify when conducting a context or problem analysis. The suspension of duties in governmental institutions brought to a halt many legal procedures and amplified violations that have become difficult to follow up on or address, thus creating what resembles a police state. Through an increase in securitization, the state has enforced checkpoints, and propped up its security apparatus for crackdowns and raids on vulnerable populations, including LGBTQ people, refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants..

Additionally, the banking system's collapse and ensuing ongoing restrictions have been key in limiting individuals from receiving services or monetary aid. Excessive donor- and self-imposed documentation requirements from agencies clash with the realities of trans individuals in relation to identification papers, gender markers, and social passing, leaving the community exposed and with no tools and solutions to access services and support. This is especially true among the non-national community, whose members are not entitled to mobility or official documents allowing them to seek services.

The economic and security situations have instigated an exodus of community organizers, social workers, caseworkers, therapists, and community members, seeking better opportunities elsewhere. this has prompted an exit of the knowledge and experience they had accumulated within the organizations and communities they belonged to, leaving behind neither memory nor continuity, in the absence of adequate systems to record them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through and analysis of the findings of both community consultations and organizational mapping, their contextualization, and their discussion with stakeholders, follows a list of recommendations for mutual and collective work to support trans issues from a community-led standpoint.

Knowledge Production

To avoid reducing the trans community to statistical studies, it is important to produce knowledge that is informed and rooted in the community. Knowledge produced should be politicized and comprehensive, meaning that it should have a deep analysis of the ecosystem that surrounds and influences the needs of and vulnerabilities affecting the trans community. This can be done through creating tools and processes that appropriately highlight needs and offer space for trans individuals to voice and reflect on their realities without the conditionalities imposed by service provision and organizational requirements.

Advocacy and Campaigning

Informed knowledge production is a key factor when working toward advocacy and campaigning. It is important to consider areas of and topics for campaigning and advocacy, as well as the conditions surrounding advocacy: including tensions, safety, visibility, and community priorities. A calculated advocacy process centers the community while being inclusive of its social capital in all its variety - stakeholders, allies and peers – in an effort to not isolate the movement. Advocacy campaigns should steer clear from donors' language and prioritize community inclusion across all phases. They should also underline the various experiences of the trans community across nationalities, backgrounds, races, citizen status and classes, without reinforcing a racist narrative of host/refugee and them vs us.

Organizational Interventions

It is vital to differentiate between community-led organizations, collectives, and grassroots groups on the one hand, and international agencies on the other, when talking about organizational interventions. Specifically, it is international agencies' interventions and what accompanies them of repetitive, unending, extractive data collection and assessments, performed without sufficient nor comprehensive channels of follow-up and support, that have created exhaustion amongst the trans community. In addition myriad restrictions imposed by donors' requirements and agendas create projects, activities and criteria of inclusion that more often than not exclude a big portion of the community. Rather, interventions should factor in the multi-layered experience of the trans community in an inclusive manner. To achieve this, it is essential to center the individual and their experience into what agencies do and how they do it, rather than impose on agencies to shift their mandate by way of a quick fix that can overload both the agency and the community.

International agencies' interventions combined with donor requirements are also exhausting in their demands from community-led organizations. One of the main issues to address on this point is how to validate and accept internal policies and methods of work of community-led organizations as legitimate. Another concern is how to improve the status of community-led organizations and collectives in a participatory manner that answers to the needs of both international partners and the community.

As for community organizations and grassroots collectives that do not possess the capacity or the resources to set up systems that cater for sustainable long-term solutions, and are wholly dependent on international agencies and donors, there needs to be an ongoing discussion with the community on how to adjust methods of work without eliminating human resources. Rather, there needs to be strategies that address the competitiveness created by career driven approaches, to maintain resources.. It is crucial that this mutual discussion between community and organizations is geared towards creating tools to facilitate maintaining resources and fostering long-term sustainable systems, bearing in mind that such systems require consolidated contextual analysis, centering community-led work, and creating exit strategies that reduce harm and institutional dependencies. Further, centering community's leadership in these conditions allows for integrated and intersectional work, improves connectedness for experience and information sharing, and challenges the patriarchy embedded in the hierarchal structure of international funds.

When looking at power dynamics between organizations and the trans community, it is clear service-providing entities with resources and tools possess more authority and power over a community that is highly dependent on services. Organizations should make a conscious effort when approaching the community to redefine the concept of participatory approaches and integration, to allow the transference of spaces and tools in a way that pushes forward trans community leadership.

Accountability and Transparency

Accountability and transparency should start from within. Therefore, the first priority in this area is to have a community-based context analysis and discourse. The fragmentation of work around LGBTQ and more specifically trans issues, combined with the lack of historical memory for collective work, has prevented the community from creating or reclaiming its own narrative. A first step for enhancing accountability and transparency is to understand that being trans is a continuous state of existence, and that trans issues are not the result of an emergency crisis. Although issues are amplified by crises, it is important to look at needs from the viewpoint of institutional and systemic failures towards minorities, and especially towards the trans community.

Against this reality, it is beneficial to create systems of accountability and transparency away from donors' processes, which treat individuals as numbers, rather than address core issues. Community-based accountability systems rooted in ongoing discussion between community members could address transparency and accountability from a political

standpoint, away from numbers and statistics, and could help in creating community-led solutions. This system would also allow space to discuss the types and qualities of services provided, away from the concept of false “confidentiality” that hovers over organizational methodologies and prevents complaints and feedback from being sufficiently documented. A community-based accountability system could also prevent and readjust organizations’ attempts to create projects and activities that are deprived of community consultations, as well as minimize the panic around the inclusivity of trans identities in spaces.

Community and Solidarity

Solidarity begins by acknowledging the inequitable power dynamics preventing the trans community from having ownership over decisions and interventions related to its own issues. Solidarity in the trans movement manifests in multiple forms, first and foremost through recognizing the complexity of identities that make up the person and the community. When addressing trans issues, what is needed is not only recognizing the complex identities, but also moving away from identity politics. Building solidarity happens when we create a shared understanding of why people’s needs (with their differing identities) are not met under our capitalist-racist-heteronormative systems.

Solidarity is also established by recognizing the authority and power of organizations and institutions in community encounters and ensuring the kind of inclusivity and participation through which the community is able to reclaim its narrative, including providing space and agency for trans youth. Radical interdependency is needed for solidarity. This happens when we mobilize people to act across issues, identities, and communities. We thus entice them to move away from siloed spaces, towards becoming larger movements regardless of their individually lived experience.

Finally, solidarity includes ensuring resources are available to and shareable with the community, in their pursuit of services and support: including referrals to medical care, navigating institutions, and seeking legal support.

Building Trust

Building trust requires the active labor of stepping away from the culture of blame that has been prominent in the settings of social rights and the LGBTQ movements. Key to this is leading a collective approach that is inclusive of the community, creating tools that allow the community to hold us accountable, and staying open to questions.

Trust, within in collective political thinking, should manifest through donor-free language, where work is for the community and centered around it, rather than to satisfy donors’ and agencies’ agendas. This also fosters further openness and approachability amongst community leaders and organizers, as building trust requires all stakeholders to stop

working in silos. They thus step out of their solitary bubbles into more collective systemized collaborations that allow the collective community to communicate and remain informed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, historically, organizational work around trans issues has been informed by a scarcity of information around and methods of work with the community. In the current context of the many obstacles that face both organizations and community members, such as the economic collapse, the lack of trust, and the increasing need for services and support, we hope that this paper serves as a stepping stone for a much needed connectedness between community organizations and the community. This will help establish collective, intersectional, and inclusive ways of work that center the community in the decision-making process and allow us to create solidarity, trust and better accountability.

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