Activism and the Economy of Victimhood: A Close Look into NGO-ization in Arabic-Speaking Countries

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ACTIVISM AND THE ECONOMY OF VICTIMHOOD: A CLOSE LOOK INTO NGO-IZATION IN ARABIC-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

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Over the past ten years, countries in the Arabic-speaking region have witnessed a significant increase in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) branding themselves as LGBT-focused. Predominantly male-led, these organizations brought with their emergence a discourse around gender and sexuality that utilizes identity politics and narratives of victimhood. Consequently, NGOs became able to simultaneously secure funding, to claim struggles around gender, sexuality and bodily integrity as their own, and to appropriate local community and individual victories. The feminist thought became appropriated to legitimize neoliberal organizing. This essay provides a critique of identity politics used by NGOs, claiming representation of diverse queer voices, while reproducing narratives of victimhood. Drawing on a contextualized analysis of trends of the NGOization of activism in the region, this essay offers theoretical and empirical contributions around the complex geographies, continuities, and ruptures within the so-called civil society,

state systems, and international funders. The essay questions what is "civil" about a society of functionaries that alienate oppressed populations deemed "unfit" to a foreign imaginary of victimhood. We here aim to expose the role the NGO-ization of activism plays in relation to maintaining the status quo around gender and sexuality, and erasing feminist histories. The essay exposes how victories claimed by NGOs are in fact the work and effort of those whose organizing is located outside the institutions. The essay suggests that LGBT-focused NGOs are often complicit with oppressive state systems and structures, promoting homonationalist narratives. We propose that much activism within NGOs is creating an economy of victimhood that is ultimately dependent on funding provided by states in the Global North. In this essay, we argue that Arundhati Roy's writing around the NGO-ization of resistance is also applicable to the context of the region, as it has material implications on queer intersectional feminist organizing and voices.

Introduction

The past years have witnessed the mainstreaming of the term "civil society" in the majority of Arabic-speaking countries, to describe non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This practice resulted in two alterations of the term. First, the assigned interchangeability of the term with NGOs overlooks the wide range of community-organizing actors predating the existence of such institutions and operating outside of them. Second, it creates a classist standard of legitimacy to what type of work is considered "activist" work. Furthermore, the practice erased contextual nuances of the contested usage of the term "civil society" in different countries. For example, in Lebanon, the "civil" qualifier might indicate actors that have not engaged in the civil war (1975–1990); in Egypt, it could refer to opposition to the military rule; and in countries where networks of kinship organize social life, it could refer to the non-familial bonds of community building. Due to this mainstreaming and misuse of the term, the majority of knowledge produced about "activism" in the region focuses on NGOs, rather than grassroots community organizing. Thus, NGO employees have become branded as activists and champions of the "rights" they promote. Hereafter, we will be using "community organizing" to refer to grassroots social justice plights in order to acquire some terminological distance from NGO work dubbed as "activism". We specifically focus on NGOs that utilize sexual and gender identity categories as identity politics. We are concerned with the meta-processes occurring in a top-down manner, led by heads of NGOs and donors, not the vertical opposing processes emerging from acts of dissent and

challenge. This analysis is focused on the larger mechanisms that contribute to sustaining state-centric and identity-based hegemonic discourse, while understanding the complexities and disparities between and within NGOs, especially when it comes to interconnections between individuals at the bottom of both the institutional hierarchy within NGOs and the funding priorities of donors in the Global North.

This essay elaborates on the role played by the NGO-ization of activism in producing hegemonic identity discourse around gender and sexuality, and in maintaining the one-dimensionality of struggles thereby sustaining the status quo. We discuss some of the ways in which this NGO-ization contributes to the appropriation of the victories of those whose organizing is located outside the institutions as the fruit of NGO work, thus contributing to the systematic erasure of feminist histories. We elaborate on the NGO-ized civil societies' complicity with oppressive state systems and structures through their promotion of homonationalist narratives. Granted, NGO work has been able to benefit a few people through immediate assistance; however, such assistance operates on an individualistic narrative unmindful of multi-layered struggles. This assistance is often granted on the basis of laying claim to marginalization based solely on sexuality, disregarding needs on the basis of class, race, and legal status, and depoliticizing needs through identity-focused activism. Therefore, we argue that identity-based activism within NGOs is not the driver of large-scale meaningful change in the region, but is rather creating an economy of victimhood that is ultimately dependent on funding provided by states in the Global North. We argue that this economy of victimhood manifests itself through three main trajectories: (1) the promotion of exclusionary identity politics, (2) the NGO-ization of activism, and (3) the recreation of patriarchal norms within NGOs' modes of operation. These manifestations not only hinder the work carried out by grassroots feminists and community organizers in Arabic-speaking countries, but also reinforce the conditionality of funding and its reliance on victimization narratives. The fiscal and moral dependence on the economy of victimhood also entails the existence of a conflict of interests: NGOs working within this framework only exist because of the survival of the oppression that creates the victimhood upon which their funding relies. To address these points, we start with unpacking the concept of "economy of victimhood" and with presenting the methodology informing this research, before moving to the three main analysis sections addressing the manifestations of this phenomenon.

NGO-ized LGBT organizing has only emerged in the early 2000s in the region, with Aswat, the Palestinian Feminist Centre for Gender and Sexual Freedoms, being the first organization to be founded in 2003, with a focus on queer women. In the years to follow, the region witnessed the emergence of a number of registered organizations in different countries

across the region. It is important to note here that Aswat only became registered in 2018. It is even more important to point out that gender, sexuality, and bodily integrity are not new topics of conversation among local communities; however, the usage of a particular language and discourse, which has capitalized on the visibility of both identity categories and NGO work itself, has made other forms of organizing invisible. NGOs have survived the changing tides of funding mechanisms through singling out sexual and gender identity as the sole premise of victimization of self-identified LGBT people. The acronym, cramming together three sexual orientations and one gender identity, presents non-normative and queer populations as if they were a homogeneous community, stripped from differences of class, race, citizenship, sect, and so on, as well as other aspects of their lives.

In Marxist terms, an economy of victimhood ensures that resources remain in the hands of those whose organizing sustains a one-dimensionality of struggle. By claiming specialization in the struggle and the attempted monopoly over knowledge produced in the field, LGBT organizations limit access to resources for queers, feminists, and community organizers. In other words, non-governmental organizations focusing particularly on LGBT rights have a vested interest in highlighting the experiences of self-identified LGBT people as victims of their own societies and thus in need of support, marginalizing many other non-normative people who do not identify with such labels, and also demonizing their societies at large. In addition to that, the same organizations often fail to address the main shared structures of oppression causing injustices for self-identified LGBT people as well as others in their communities, and particularly class structures. In order to harness funding, sidelining the voices of others, such as those who do not identify with identity categories and those who do not have access to the same cultural and material resources, becomes inevitable. We explore the problematic of these processes in the following sections.

Methodology

This essay is inspired by standpoint feminist methodologists, who have long called for a production of knowledge that centralizes personal experience, as the personal is political. Despite the fact that it is informed by a body of research carried out by some of the authors over the past six years, this essay is based on different feminist research methods, which assign value to personal experiences of women, including ourselves, working in the field of gender and sexual rights in different contexts in Arabic-speaking countries.

Our insights on regional methods of organizing are the product of our combined thirty years of experience in the "field", and our positionality within it, and as part of it at the same time. The idea of this essay developed organically through conversations between the authors, which took place over WhatsApp, Skype, or face to face in Lebanon, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Our conversations allowed us to coin the term "economy of victimhood", through patterns we collectively identified in relation to our research and practical work in the region, in different capacities, as trainers, mentors, educators, and researchers. We situate ourselves within this research as part of the "field" rather than in it. Based on the conclusions we arrived at through our conversations, we started searching for more voices that have been sidelined by male gay organizing in the region. We found many, and we received informed consent to use these encounters as interviews for this essay. This essay has been driven by frustration with the discourse promoted around gender, sexual, and bodily issues in the region by NGOs, erasing the voices of others including women and other non-normative people. As women who are part of the field, we consider our experiences a valid source of knowledge. We consider the data utilized for this essay an auto-ethnography, based on work and discourse analysis carried out in different Arabic-speaking countries. These contexts have been treated as case studies through which similar and dissimilar patterns emerged. This essay is concerned with some patterns we have identified in relation to LGBT activism and its NGO-ization, and which we consider counter-productive and harmful to discourses around justice in the region.

Identity politics

Our critique of identity politics is inspired by Crenshaw (1991) who contends: "the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend differences, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (45). We hereby do not attempt to reduce organizing around identity *ad absurdum*, as we acknowledge its power in dismantling some systems of oppression. However, we denounce identity politics aiming to achieve economic, social, and political gains only offered to those who identify with it, reinscribing the "us/them" divide. Identity politics are harmful as homogeneity is assumed and a claim of purity is made, as such politics will always favour one voice over others, making them exclusionary to and silencing of the myriad of voices within. This lays the ground of our critique for LGBT identity politics that not only assume homogeneity within the acronym despite the disparities of the needs and struggles within it, but also aim to achieve gains for those who fit within it, at the expense

of larger society and other marginalized groups. Identity politics thus dilute the structural causes of oppression by capitalizing on a mono-dimensional struggle, one that focuses on sexuality without understanding it within overall structures of power. The removal of the structural causes of oppression from the realm of public discourse and organizing is also indicative of the complicity to keep the status quo intact.

Fixed identities have been mobilized in a system of co-optation and othering, often promoted by colonists, around the Global South. Similarly, it has been established in previous scholarship that people who have non-normative genders and sexualities do not necessarily identify themselves as LGBT in the Arabic-speaking region (Abu-Assab, Nasser-Eddin, and Greatrick 2017; Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 2018). The cultural "fixity" or unchanging order (Bhabha 1994) of LGBT identities is not only limited to a spatial–temporal setting, but transcends it to an ideological one, as they resist the fluidity of queerness. Therefore, organizing that favours the LGBT framework does not seek gender, sexual, and reproductive justice for all. Instead, it manufactures both identity-based affinities and precariousness in a twofold manner: the organizing is exclusionary to those who might share a similar struggle but not the same label and also to those self-identified LGBTs who were co-opted into the fixity of the acronym but who experience oppressions on account of their race, sect, class, ability, and citizenship status more direly. The practical implications for offering "special treatment" to those who identify with the acronym range from denying access to services to the most marginalized who neither use Global North LGBT language nor identify with it, to gatekeeping the access to resources and platforms. For this reason, organizing around LGBT identity labels in particular is problematic, as it caters to an outsider gaze by not speaking to the language of local communities.

The ways in which the identity-politics framework of LGBT organizing disadvantages community justice are explicable through the logic of individual gain and the freeloading dilemma (Lichbach 1995). The equation is simple: if sexual, gender, and reproductive justice were to be the target these organizations are serving, or if such NGOs were working towards a "public good", then resources would have been available to masses at large, both for those who fit within the LGBT framework and for those who do not. And, as competition over resources takes its toll on organizing, the goods claimed by the economy of victimhood, which often are asylum statuses and social mobilities, are exclusive to those who partake in the maintenance of the moral and fiscal dependence on Global North donors. This entails an erasure of different and contradictory voices in pursuit of social, political, and economic gains for a particular social group, and in this essay we focus on the practice of social grouping based on gender and sexuality.

This type of organizing also maintains a victim narrative, through which economic gains are attained – the first manifestation of the economy of

victimhood. In 2018, a social media campaign was launched with the hashtag #no-longer-alone claiming to raise awareness around LGBT issues in the region. The campaign was also accompanied by a report based on interviews with 34 activists, said to represent the whole Arabic-speaking region. That is almost 1.5 persons from each Arabic-speaking country claiming to be representing the wide range of people with non-normative genders and sexualities across the region. The campaign was launched with a donate button, which is reflective of its target audience, its main driver and the motive behind it. The selected content of the interviews used for the campaign revolved around creating a victim narrative and yet encouraging visibility. The implied imminence of visibility as per defined LGBT categories is not only unnecessary but also ahistorical. It is unreflective of indigenous forms of practices and self-expression, as it provides a blanket representation for myriads of practices and preferences. The subtext of the said campaign encourages people to "come out of the closet" despite the many challenges they could potentially face, making visibility an indicator of individual success, rather than addressing the root causes of oppression or questioning why some people can afford visibility while others choose not to and do not need to. Identity politics as such are exclusionary in nature, as they do not accommodate the different experiences within struggles but rather claim representation for all LGBTs, assuming that their genders and sexualities are "innate", leading to an essentialization of discourses around them and of gendered and sexualized experiences. In addition to that, NGOs who act as intermediaries between the people and the state, as well as the North and the South, intensify the professionalization of social work and community organizing, ultimately leading to their depoliticization.

Through this process, new norms and normativities are created, and instead of breaking gender and sexual binaries and countering stereotypes, a male homonormativity becomes the predominant discourse in the mainstream around gender and sexual rights, highlighting the "us" as different from the "them" who choose to have sex with people from the opposite sex, or the "them" who might have sex with the same sex but do not identify as LG or B. In addition to this, the LG and B are almost always represented in mainstream media by self-identified gay men, who claim to be leading organizations, movements, activism, and more for LGBT rights. This claim to leadership in relation to self-identified LGBT people not only brings with it an erasure of differences between these groups, but also pioneers the G man as the protector and promoter of rights for all LGBT people, regardless of class, age, un/documented status, and background. In addition to the erasure of dissident voices, there is also a systematic erasure of research and knowledge that challenge such dominant identity narratives, as such dissident voices are often accused of elitism and detachment from "the field". While the field for the majority of LGBT NGOs in the region is organizing conferences

and events that bring together a limited number of self-identified LGBT people, and/or is launching visibility campaigns. Unlike some grassroots community organizing, LGBT NGOs require publicity and aspire to institutionalization. The institutionalization of activism represented by LGBT NGOs is another manifestation of the economy of victimhood, which relies on victims' narratives to achieve financial gains and embraces colonialist narratives around gender and sexuality.

The NGO-ization of activism

LGBT-centric organizing brings about imperialist identity categories that are not necessarily representative of ways non-normative people have historically self-identified. There is also no evidence to suggest that, either historically or contemporarily, people have politicized their sexuality and defined it as a fixed identity at the expense of other fragments constituting their positionality. Therefore, the role LGBT NGOs play in promoting fixed gender and sexual identities reproduces hegemonic Global North discourses around the subject matter. NGO-ization refers to the systematic professionalization, institutionalization, and essentialization of social justice struggles by their incorporation into a capitalist economic system and their transformation into nine-to-five jobs (Armstrong and Prashad 2005; Choudry and Kapoor 2013). Located as intermediaries between the population and the state, sustained through a globalized capitalist economy of victimhood inserted into local settings, LGBT NGOs pride themselves in being clients of patrons, ultimately setting them on the boundary of the Global North and the Global South (Roy 2016). In this section, we argue that NGOs contribute to the maintenance of the geopolitical environment and reinforce relationships of dependence on Global North funding (Falk 1999), through producing a narrative of the Global North as saviours, and completely erasing the historical impact of colonization, particularly on gender and sexuality in the region. Acting as spokespersons or representatives of queer populations, they shape the knowledge that becomes popularized, translated, and mainstreamed on an international level, thereby engaging in the flattening of struggles. The NGO-ization of activism creates a form of imperialism that exacerbates both the nation-state on a local level and the international patronage globally.

Locally, single-issue organizing seeks recognition from the oppressive institutions of the state, and approval from politicians. It anchors itself in the structures of clientelism and opportunism. Aside from acting as intermediaries between the state and the populations they are set to represent, these NGOs further carry out the labour of the state, whereby they serve national interests. In an interview with *Slate* around the progress that these LGBT NGOs have

made in Lebanon, an activist took pride in the amicable relationship with a Lebanese right-wing Christian supremacist political party: "We have allies, such as the Phalanges",[1] she shared with a French media outlet. Whether the collective "we" indicated an organization she belongs to or a Lebanese national sentiment is not a question that concerns us: what concerns us most is how the statement reflects the hegemonic narrative of success as visibility, complicity, and institutionalization. The celebratory tone was reminiscent of the single-issue organizing promoted by an LGBT NGO during the 2018 Lebanese parliamentary elections, when voters were asked to cast a vote for "potentially gay-loving candidates" who were also racist, sexist, ableist, xenophobic, classist, and so on. And while not even once did those candidates mention trans* people, who are inherently excluded from elections in the absence of gender-affirming surgeries and related paperwork, the politicians' good-on-the-gay statements were considered a win for the so-called LGBT community. This way, NGO-ized LGBT organizing protects the state by promoting state-discourse in international arenas, and domestically by supporting corrupt politicians through the whitewashing of their crimes on account of their "gay-friendly" nature. The celebratory discourse also omits the fact that those politicians are friends with the respectable gay alone, national, rich, able-bodied, and Western inclined. Aside from protecting state structures, LGBT organizing seeks protection from the state by appealing to the police; the same police that deports migrants and incarcerates the impoverished. The opening speech of Beirut Pride "Incorporate", which is registered as a trademark debuted in 2017, is another example of complicity with state structures. The gratitude that the activist expressed to the police reveals the longing to be saved by professionals of violence. The police are part and parcel of punitive and incarceration systems that continue to target vulnerable populations; however, they emerge as the saviour of Lebanese LGBT-identified individuals. Gay bodies are manufactured as respectable citizen bodies apt to molding according to the limits allowed by nationalism and homonationalism (Bitar 2017). The affinity built on the premise of sexual orientation, as identity politics, is immediately lost when privileged pioneers of the so-called LGBT movement applaud the representatives of the system of incarceration: they are citizens first and foremost, privileged and aware of the privilege through which they benefit, thus putting migrant queers at risk of deportation and imprisonment. The alliances the NGO-ized framework creates are with state and patrons; they are with the comfortable against the afflicted.

In addition to this comfortable allegiance, LGBT NGOs often readily appropriate the labour of others in order to show funders that they are making victories, setting milestones, and transforming societies. In 2017, LGBT organizations in Lebanon celebrated what they dubbed as a victory against article 534 of the penal code, criminalizing "sex against nature"

and mainly targeting "sodomy", as a trans* woman, Rania, walked free after the judge ruled that the sex she had with a man was not "unnatural". Indeed, it was not, not even by the most heteronormative and binary standards. In this regard, the judge acted in accordance with the genders of those present in the courtroom and accused of unnatural sex. They were a woman and a man, whom he let free in light of the law criminalizing sex between representatives of the same gender. However, multiple NGOs saw otherwise, celebrating the instance with international media outlets as a milestone of their struggle to abolish the same-sex clause. Rania's womanhood was not obvious to their homogeneous LGBT framework. Their popularization of the victory as one against article 534 erased Rania's trans* identity and appropriated the achievement of the trans* community as their own.

The construction of otherness promoted by LGBT discourse does not limit itself to sexual orientation and gender binaries, but transcends them to posit cultural symbols against each other. During the crackdown on the queer community in Egypt following the Mashrou' Leila concert in September 2017 held in a gentrified upper-middle-class area, where a spectator raised the Sexual Diversity Flag, over 77 cases of mass arrest took place out of which only two to three had attended the concert (Mansour 2018). While LGBT NGOs found this an opportunity to literally rally around the Rainbow flag, other voices have criticized the push to compulsory visibility at the expense of the security of people. The class divide was clear: some people waved the flag as an idiom of sexual liberation, and others found their liberty and freedom taken away from them as they were incarcerated in the aftermath of the event. In order to amplify the divide between the "us" and the "them", and set defined group boundaries, similar to nationalisms, whose main symbols are flags, LGBT NGOs utilize the Rainbow flag in juxtaposition to "others". Utilizing the Rainbow flag, consequently, leads to the othering of those who do not embrace the flag and those who perceive the flag as a symbol of cultural imperialism. Unappreciative of the feedback, LGBT NGOs have cried out to local communities and international donors that the criticism is not constructive, and that its proponents prefer the ISIS flag to the Rainbow flag. The assumption that rejecting the Rainbow flag as a symbol of cultural imperialism implies a preference for the ISIS flag is not only logically flawed, but it also sustains anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments by dubbing criticism of single-dimensional identity organizing as extremism. This rhetoric has its economic benefits as it caters to the Global North funders, who, enchanted that the conflict is now taking a secular/religious turn, pour their money into the NGOs under attack.

Similarly, in Lebanon, the general security prevented an LGBT organization from holding its conference in a hotel after a complaint by the Muslim Scholars Association (MSA). The complaint was indeed public and available on social media; however, this group was not the only one whose peace was

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disturbed by the event. The same hotel was simultaneously hosting a missionary convening of nuns who followed trans* people present at the conference and attempted to exorcise the devil out of them. Needless to mention, the following press conferences organized by the NGO only mentioned the MSA, for it was more in line with the victimization discourse based upon being targeted by Islamic extremism. To go back to NGO promotion of the good-on-the-gay-corrupt-politicians during the parliamentary elections, there was an apparent conflict of interest in addressing the Christian right-wing presence at the conference, which further contributed to anti-Muslim sentiments on the local and global levels. Other organizations seized opportunities to increase their economy of victimhood when the Gender and Sexuality Club (GSC) at the American University of Beirut, co-founded by one of the authors, postponed a speed-dating event after a former mufti published a social media statement expressing his outrage. Multiple LGBT NGOs that had no input in or connection to the student club rushed to local and international media platforms to speak on behalf of the club. Some even opportunistically published statements before the GSC did, capitalizing on the artificial Muslim/LGBT divide. The GSC in turn distanced itself from the statements that claimed a cultural clash, and it renewed its commitment to organize on an intersectional basis (GSC Statement and Call for Action 2018).

These discourses that find no resonance among multiple queer and feminist community organizers do not remain regionally contained. Instead, they target international audiences and platforms, creating political agendas of big-scale institutions such as the United Nations. At the Commission on the Status of Women 62, OutRight Action International, a global-scale LGBT organization, presented its findings on the MENA region claiming that the biggest threat facing the non-normative community is ISIS. The lack of an intersectional analysis addressing the challenges facing non-normative people is reflective of the agenda and audience expected to consume this information. The economic implications are that large-scale, Global North donors contribute to the social mobility of rich, national, respectable gay men regionally and internationally, at the expense of everyone else working in the field. Victim-narrative, anti-Muslim sentiments, identity notions, and "victim-savage-savior trilogies" are common discourses being consumed at a global level. Such discourses overshadow global inequalities relevant to the unequal distribution of resources, hegemony, and cultural dominance. However, at a global level they are consumable and relatable particularly when there is a claim to them being manufactured by the "local" actors from within the so-called civil society allegedly concerned with gender and sexual rights.

Neopatriarchy within civil society

In addition to its previous manifestations, the economy of victimhood also reinforces neopatriarchal norms within non-governmental organizations working on gender and sexual rights issues in Arabic-speaking countries. It is not possible to assess any civil society actors without assessing the histories of the states in which they emerged. We argue that civil society represented by NGOs is neopatriarchal and reproduces patriarchal hegemonic discourses in the way they operate. Neopatriarchy as a term has been coined by Hisham Sharabi to describe patriarchal structures on the macro level (societies, state, and the economy) and the micro level (families and individuals) in Arabic-speaking countries. Sharabi and others have described Arabic-speaking countries as neopatriarchal, not ignoring the differences in their processes of formation, but analyzing the "distorted" forms of "modernisms" they have arrived at. Here, we agree with Sharabi's definition of neopatriarchy as

> a theoretical formulation as well as a socio-historical reality. In the former sense, neopatriarchy occupies the space between traditional patriarchy and modernity; in the latter sense, it is a concrete historic reality, describing a social entity neither purely traditional nor authentically modern, but a hybrid formation combining both. Neopatriarchy is a unique product of imperialism and of decolonisation, comprising the elements that characterise, in various forms and combinations, the institutions and practices of contemporary life in all developing countries, including those of Arab North Africa and the Middle East. (Sharabi 1987, 2)

We also suggest that this phenomenon has extended to some civil society actors such as NGOs. The formation of nation-states in Arabic-speaking countries was greatly influenced by colonialism, coloniality, and Western imperialism, and this formation cannot be separated from processes of dependence (Yoyo 2018). This dependence manifested itself in some cases in the adoption and replication of Western models of "modernity". Colonial histories have created not only structural hierarchies represented by "material domination", but also "cultural domination" in relation to what behaviour is deemed as the most acceptable and appropriate.

Non-governmental organizations in the region have been complicit in reinforcing both cultural and material dominations. Either through the promotion of exclusionary LGBT identity politics, or through the branding of the Global North as saviours and protectors of all LGBT people, a protection that is allegedly offered to those who fit within identity categories, and also within a binary performativity of their sexual orientation. The failure of protection mechanisms set up by international and national non-governmental organizations has been explored in detail in Nasser-Eddin, Abu-Assab, and Greatrick

(2018). By doing so, people marginalized on the basis of their non-normative genders and sexualities are only offered protection if they identify within one of the LGBT letters or if they fit within Western stereotypes associated with a gay culture that is expected to be uniform and homogeneous. This tendency towards pushing people to adopt identity categories, in order to be offered services and protections, echoes both the cultural and material domination imposed by the nation-state system. Financial support becomes available mainly to those who identify with the categories, and this support is offered to those who are also part of dominant cultures relating to gender and sexuality, reinforcing a Global North narrative around gender and sexuality.

It is important to note here that the critique we offer in this essay is mainly concerned with the NGO model that has been copied without scrutiny and contextualization and applied in Arabic-speaking countries. Civil society actors in the region have widely adopted concepts such as democracy, gender equality, women's rights, and LGBT rights without adapting them to local contexts, recycling hegemonic Global North discourses dictating how civil society must operate, what issues are considered of importance, and the activities allowed by Global North funders. Whereas these clichés have been used proficiently by those reliant on the economy of victimhood, they remain used mostly by the elites heading such non-governmental organizations, as they have not been adapted for local or regional audiences, but rather for Global North audiences, interested in funding LGBT initiatives. On one occasion, and in response to a request for support by a non-normative woman, who did not identify as LGB or T, some of the authors have reached out to an organization which allegedly provides funds for LGBT people in the region. The request for support was denied on the basis that the asylum-seeking woman based in Egypt did not mention the word "lesbian" in her request for support, even though her difficult situation was caused by her non-normative sexual practices. On another occasion, some of the authors have also received a request for support from a non-normative migrant woman in Saudi Arabia. All organizations consulted for support either said that Saudi Arabia is considered an affluent country and thus people are not entitled to support, or offered support if the support consisted of publicity around her particular case, ignoring all safety and security issues that might arise if a case such as hers received media attention.

Our experience in the field, the cases we dealt with, and the interviews we carried out all pointed towards the recreation of patriarchal structures within civil society, in relation to both cultural and material domination. The elites running LGBT-branded organizations in the region have created an economy of victimhood that (1) ensures that access to material resources is mainly offered to those who conform and fit within dominant cultural stereotypes, and (2) thus prevents social mobility and creates false consciousness. The first aspect of how neopatriarchy and the economy of victimhood

interplay is very similar to neopatriarchal state structures, which impose "uniformity and conformity" (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin 2018). The economy of victimhood, as a phenomenon, can also be understood through Gramsci's analysis of civil society and "false consciousness". False consciousness is the ideology of the ruling class, which overlooks the needs of the oppressed. Non-governmental organizations focusing on LGBT issues in the region have developed a false consciousness around gender and sexuality issues in the region, which in turn has contributed to the constant marginalization of those who do not fit within dominant cultures, those who are most in need of protection or support, and those who speak against the dominant rhetoric. Non-normative people in Arabic-speaking countries are constantly pressured to fit within mono-identity descriptors, mostly embraced by the elites dominating the NGO sectors in the region, ignoring other intersecting elements of their struggle including race, nationality, age, and class.

This ideological domination is also manifested in the ruling classes' ability to take advantage of the state, media, religious, and political groups, maintaining the status quo (Gramsci 1971) and benefiting from the economy of victimhood, which relies to a great degree on false forms of identity politics. This domination, in relation to NGOs focusing on LGBT rights, is dependent on funding, complex political allegiances, and closeness to oppressive state institutions. Discourse analysis has revealed that registered LGBT organizations in Lebanon, Morocco, and Iraq collaborate either with state institutions or with political parties and that enables them to exist in countries where the state imposes control over the gender performances, sexual practices, and bodies of others including those who do not fit within identity categories, such as migrants and refugees. Due to the sectarian nature of Lebanon, LGBT organizations' affiliation with political parties, organized along sectarian lines, is a clear example of how this false consciousness in fact contributes to the structural oppression of other social groups and other LGBT people. For instance, in the aforementioned *Slate* article, self-identified LGBT activists interviewed have stated that their allies in the country are the Maronite Christian phalanges, who committed war crimes against the Palestinian refugees and many others during the Lebanese civil war (Perrin 2018). This case demonstrates a clear link between the ideological domination embraced by LGBT organizations and complicity with other oppressive parties and structures. The only registered LGBT organization in Morocco, despite the government's continuous attacks on LGBT people across the country, never fails to mention its allegiance to the crown and to the state – the same state that only allowed it to become registered while at the same time oppressing other people with non-normative genders and sexualities. In addition to the liberal discourse promoted by the group's Facebook page, the group's posts demonstrate a clear affiliation to the state and its institutions, similar to those affiliations reflected in state feminism (Abu-Assab 2017). In essence, their existence relies on the

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marginalization of others, as they are complicit in whitewashing the state's control over genders, bodies, and sexualities and also define who passes as a "good" queer citizen and who does not. Those who pass as good queer citizens often come from economically and culturally privileged backgrounds, attaining further economic advantages at the expense of others – yet another manifestation of the economy of victimhood.

These practices are very similar to state practices which aim to reinforce specific uniform discourses in order to maintain power, creating forms of cultural hegemony and assigning values as to what qualifies as acceptable and appropriate and what does not. Civil society can play an important role; however, a politicized civil society promoting cultural hegemonic discourses is more empowering to the elites, rather than to those oppressed by the systems that impose control over genders, bodies, and sexualities. A contextual analysis of the role civil society plays in any country must always take into consideration political, social, and economic relations, "the sphere of the market-place, the arena of production, distribution and exchange" (Wood 1990, 61). Civil society is

> intended to identify an arena of (at least potential) freedom outside the state, a space for autonomy, voluntary association and plurality or even conflict, guaranteed by the kind of 'formal democracy'. The concept is also meant to undermine the capitalist system (or the 'economy'). (Wood 1990, 61)

NGOs branding themselves as LGBT, in Arabic-speaking countries, have become another locus of control and power.

NGOs have become "integral states" (Gramsci 1971, 276), imposing controls over the communities they claim to be representing. This control is also of relevance to bio-politics and bio-power, as "[t]his bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism" which made possible "the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" (Adams 2017). Therefore, the imposition of LGBT identity categories in relation to discourse around gender and sexuality is also a form of bio-power policing our genders, sexualities, and bodies and boxing them. Not only is this control and domination of identity politics another manifestation of the economy of victimhood, it also represents another locus of power – bio-power. In the words of a colleague and a co-conspirer against systems of oppression:

> the whole liberal identity discourse that has been imposed on us by colonialism is being produced and reproduced by 'local' civil society; this discourse on identities has singled out and has created divisions between people who share a political struggle for gender, sexual and bodily justice.

Conclusions

Our experiences have shaped this essay, as much as our positionalities within the "field" have informed our politics and means of organizing. Being queer migrant women operating outside of the LGBT NGO framework, and against the colonial cultural imperialism it carries, we have been systematically accused of countering progress or visibility, or dividing the queer "nation". Starting from home, from experience, as part of our attempt to contribute to the creation of knowledge based on a feminist epistemology, we aimed to outline the economy of victimhood through which class inequalities are sustained, social mobility is hindered, unfair distribution of resources is maintained, and those at the margins remain silenced. This essay presents an insider perspective of feminists who continue to organize transnationally against the joint global structures of oppression, ranging from the state system itself to the globalized capitalist system. Unlike those benefiting from the economy of victimhood, we assume no superiority in understanding oppression and stand in no representation to any other. We stand in solidarity with those who share our struggle at the expense of economic, social and political gains. We do not use intersectionality as lip service or as elitist language, and instead embrace it as the lens through which we critically position ourselves in relation to others.

Throughout this essay, we outlined the economy of victimhood, which sustains and maintains the cultural and economic dominance of LGBT NGO narratives in Arabic-speaking countries. LGBT identity politics act as exclusionary group markers, which impose uniformity and conformity, similar to state structures. By doing so, such organizations maintain economic and cultural dominance over others, who do not conform and who represent dissident voices. We have used the three main examples of its manifestations; however, we are aware that it also manifests itself in other ways yet to be analyzed. Markers of success as a good queer citizen are clear and the resemblance between the ways LGBT NGOs operate and nation-states operate is striking. Complicity with both state structures and imperialist discourses around gender and sexuality is evident in the way LGBT NGOs operate as they depoliticize our struggles. Nonetheless, despite their broad outreach, these efforts find limited resonance, as they are only effective with their intended audience – Global North funding states. On the other hand, others including some feminists, queers, and community organizers continue to forge transnational solidarities and find ways to collaborate that emphasize processes, not milestones. Their fight for a just world, based on shared struggles rather than identity politics, continues despite funding limitations and lack of economic resources.

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