

Coronavirus lockdown exposes LGBT+ people to family abuse in the Middle East

LGBT+ groups are stepping up online and phone support for people trapped in abusive homes or struggling with isolation during coronavirus shutdowns.

By Ban Barkawi

Thomson Reuters Foundation (18.03.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2QBpJA3> – With phone counselling and emergency deliveries of HIV drugs, LGBT+ groups across the Middle East are stepping up support for gay and transgender people trapped with abusive families or struggling with isolation under coronavirus lockdowns.

With more than 40 confirmed coronavirus cases in the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian Authority said on its website that it has closed places of worship, urged people to limit contact, and enforced a curfew in the city of Bethlehem.

“The environment we live in unfortunately can be aggressive toward LGBT+ people,” said Omar Al Khatib of the Palestinian LGBT+ group alQaws, which is based in Jerusalem where gay and trans people often live with families that do not accept them.

“Staying at home can eliminate their access to private spaces

and increase bullying,” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Acceptance of sexual and gender minorities is low across the largely conservative Middle East. Same-sex relationships are illegal, often risking fines, jail or even the death penalty, according to Human Rights Watch.

As coronavirus restrictions push more gay, bisexual and trans people into lockdown and close off social spaces that usually offer some respite, like coffee shops and clubs, escaping the pressure at home is no longer an option.

As businesses have been forced to close, money worries are also on the rise for LGBT+ people who live alone – often because they have been rejected by their families – Al Khatib added.

“The state of quarantine creates a feeling of isolation and fear, and that they are completely on their own so it’s not safe for them,” said Khatib, whose group used Facebook on Monday to urge people who were lonely and anxious to call its hotline.

The hotline is open on Wednesday and Sunday evenings and usually receives about 500 calls a year, with noticeable spikes during times of crisis, alQaws said.

Frustration

Further north, Lebanon – the first Arab country to celebrate Pride in 2017 – has recorded about 130 coronavirus cases. Lebanon announced this week that it would shut its borders, banks and most public institutions until March 29.

The advocacy group Proud Lebanon has organised a task force of volunteers to deliver medication to people with HIV who cannot or will not leave their homes.

“They are afraid to come take their medication,” said the organisation’s director Bertho Makso in the capital Beirut.

“They are afraid there will be shortage of medication and they can’t go out because there is no public transport.”

Remote support has been ramped up in Tunisia, which had its first openly gay presidential candidate last year, although he was later forced to flee the north African country after death threats from Islamist elements.

With about 30 cases of coronavirus, authorities have suspended prayers at mosques, closed cafes in the afternoons and banned all cultural, sports and economic gatherings.

The LGBT+ group Mawjoudin has stopped giving face-to-face counselling services and closed the common room at its centre in the capital Tunis where people usually spend their free

time or meet with friends in a safe setting, away from the public eye.

Calls to Mawjoudin's hotline have increased in recent weeks, said Hana, who declined to give her full name as LGBT+ activists face harassment in Tunisia where gay sex is punishable by up to three years in prison.

"They have been expressing their frustration," she said.

"When they go out alone, they have the freedom to not lie anymore to their families and now they don't have it."