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KIP Documentation Project

Social Workers' Perceptions and Attitudes towards the LGBT Community in the Lebanese Context: An Exploratory Study

Soins Infirmiers et Développement Communautaire (SIDC)

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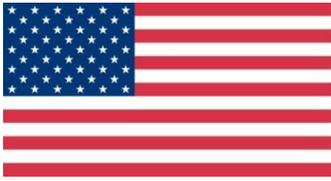
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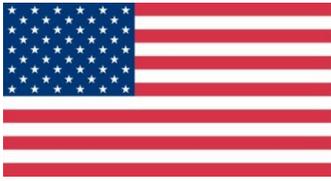
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Executive Summary

Heterosexism, an ideology which conjures heterosexuality as the normal sexual identity has fueled stigma against other sexual orientations (Herek, Gillis & Cogan, 2015). As a result of this ideology, sexual minorities, also known as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, have been experiencing sexual stigma (Herek, Gillis & Cogan, 2015). Despite the fact that some societies are becoming more aware and accepting of LGBT people, this population continues to endure discrimination and oppression, which can negatively affect their physical and mental well-being (Harper & Schneider, 2003). Consequently, due to the societal oppression, LGBT individuals experience more mental health issues and physical health problems, greater involvement in substance abuse and risky sexual behaviors, and higher incidence of harassment and violence than their heterosexual peers (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Crisp & McCave, 2007; Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Wong, Kipke, Weiss, & McDavitt, 2010).

On a national level, over the past decade, Lebanon has been undergoing an extraordinary transition and development for sexual and gender rights engagement (Mohamad, 2015). However, homosexuality is still viewed down upon by the Lebanese; whereby 80% believe that it is improper (Kohut et al., 2013). A study has shown that men who have sex with men in Lebanon experience a lot of stigma and discrimination (Rabbath, 2007). They experience “death threats, humiliations, blackmail, assaults, marginalization, rejections, depressions, suicide attempts, shame, blame, self-hatred, ruined affective lives, isolation [...]” (Rabbath, 2007). These are re-enforced by the legal context, through article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which criminalizes “unnatural sexual intercourse”.



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Social workers have a critical role in supporting this community. Social work has a distinctive mission that mandates its professionals to advocate for social justice by empowering marginalized and oppressed groups, including LGBT individuals; to embrace the dignity and worth of the client being served; and to show integrity and competence in the aim of improving their clients' quality of life (Morrow & Messinger, 2006). Experts in the field suggest that social workers should acquire the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, and skills that allow them to work effectively with sexual minorities in a culturally competent and sensitive environment (Bidell, 2005; Krentzman & Townsend, 2008; National Association of Social Workers, 2001; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). Social workers are the frontline care providers whom vulnerable population, especially LGBT individuals, seek when in need of help. To our knowledge there are no studies that examine the extent to which trainings and the educational background of social workers, in Lebanon, equip them to deal with such sensitive topics. The objectives of this study are to explore the attitudes and perceptions of practicing social workers in Lebanon regarding the LGBT community; describe their ability to provide friendly- services and to create a welcoming, safe, and respectful environment for LGBT individuals; explore their readiness/competence to support and serve individuals of this community; and propose an outline of the knowledge and training(a) that were given to social workers to properly and respectfully handle issues related to LGBT. This study adopted a qualitative methodology whereby in-depth interviews were the tool used to collect data from 16 social workers and 4 university representatives. Interviews were held six social workers who had at least 1 year of working experience with LGBT individuals, five who had indirectly encountered LGBT individuals during their work environment, and five others who had not



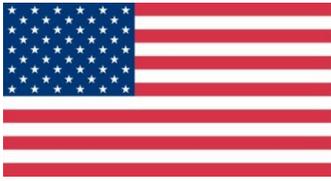
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previously worked with or encountered this community. Also, 4 representatives out of the 6 social work schools from the different universities offering this degree were interviewed. Upon the participants' voluntary approval, they signed an informed consent to participate in the in-depth interview. After carrying out the interviews, confidentiality was maintained by securing the data in a safe location, only accessible to the team of researchers. Proper coding helped ensure the reliability throughout the study (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

Several factors were found to affect social workers' perceptions attitudes and readiness to work with LGBT individuals. These included the Lebanese cultural context, societal beliefs, religious beliefs, work experience, and the educational background. Moreover, university representatives claimed that the curriculum lacks courses dedicated to the topic. The mentioned challenges included the overloaded curriculum, the low number of enrolled students, and the lack of competent instructors regarding this topic within the schools.

Many recommendations can be proposed at three different levels: the social work curriculum level, the university level, and the national level. At the social work curriculum level, suggestions included organizing thematic workshops for students, inviting social workers practicing in the field, integrating into the practicum course sites that support the LGBT community, and providing continuous education/training to social workers. At the level of universities, it is suggested to encourage the social work department or schools to revise the curriculum and integrate topics related to sexual minorities, organize seminars or workshops related to non- heterosexual groups, and hold workshops for teachers and instructors that address self- awareness on different sensitive topics including sexual minorities. Moreover, it is recommended to revise and integrate, if needed,



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policies that shed the light on respecting differences at university premises between students, staff and teachers. Finally, at the national level, in order to protect social workers and their clients from any violations to Human Rights and the code of ethics, it is important to issue a law that would regulate the social work profession in collaboration with the Syndicate of Social Workers. Also, civil society organizations need to unite their efforts to advocate for the elimination of Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code (CSOs), which prohibits having sexual relations that "contradict the laws of nature".