

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Lebanese people deserve to have sex. Everyone should have the right to sexually express oneself, with whoever, whenever and however one wishes, without political, social, or cultural consequences, given there is consent. And yet in Lebanon, sexual freedom is by and large a privilege for the happy few.

Who among the Lebanese population are able to enjoy sex, other than those who can afford it? Socio-economic class structures, the state, and religious authorities make it virtually impossible for the Lebanese to have sex freely and safely.

First and foremost, Lebanon has no civil personal status law. For personal matters such as marriage, divorce, and death, the country relies on some 15 religious personal status laws, which do not place women on equal footing as men.

Civil marriage is an option, but only for those willing and able to fly abroad. Both types of marriages require money, a lot of money even, if one is to throw a party to celebrate what is considered for many the most important day of their lives. Yet, the sad reality today is that more and more Lebanese have less and less money.

Meanwhile, the socio-economic barriers are compounded for members of the LGBTQ+ community through work and housing discrimination, lack access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, and absence of gay marriage. Worse, the Lebanese Penal Code still criminalizes what it calls “unnatural sex,” which can be used to prosecute same-sex relations and empower vigilante violence and fear against the gay community.

Although there is still the taboo of “no sex before marriage,” there are ways around that. People tend to become very creative when it comes to sex and desire, and the Lebanese are no exception. However, it is a whole lot easier being creative with means than without.

If one lives alone, they are the advantaged minority. After decades of real estate policy choices that have favoured developers over affordable housing. No wonder buying or renting an apartment is out of reach these days for most Lebanese, especially the youth. The same is true for a night of passion in a hotel room. When it comes to sex and romance, most young love birds are likely confined to inside the car and outside the law.

Finally, prices for contraceptives have skyrocketed, while affordable sexual and reproductive healthcare resources are dwindling, making safer sex a luxury. More and more young adults turn to NGOs for their sexual healthcare and education needs as they are more affordable and protect patients’ privacy compared to public and private hospitals and clinics. According to health professionals, the number of abortions and cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STI) are on the rise compared to pre-crisis levels.

In the midst of the current economic crisis, sexual freedom and expression should be supported, rather than curtailed by the state and religion. Instead of harassing lovers in cars and persecuting the LGBTQ+ community, a national personal status law, sex education curricula, provision of affordable housing, and access to sexual and reproductive health are among some of the chief policies that the Lebanese state and its people need to pursue. It’s time to get the clergy and the state to get out of Lebanon’s bedrooms and back into the halls of prayer and government.

INTRODUCTION

Just as food and shelter are critical to physiological needs, so too is sex. ¹ Sex is a basic human need that has become a luxury for most Lebanese. The current economic crisis not only locked depositors out of their savings and plunged over 80% of the population into poverty, but it also turned sex into a privilege for those who can afford it. ²

While acknowledging the liberties enjoyed by some, the country's housing, marriage, penal, and healthcare policies severely hamper sexual freedom for most of Lebanon's residents. Having sex in Lebanon has always been a costly affair and the current crisis only exacerbates the country's deeply unequal political economy when it comes to sex.

It has long been clear to scholars the affect sexual expression has on economic status, with emphasis on non-conforming sexualities being excluded from formal economies, however the ways economic status affects sexual expression can be a bit more abstract. "Economic status affects how people negotiate sexuality norms," the Swedish International Development Cooperation (SIDA) stated in its 2010 report *Poverty and Sexuality*. "Poverty is one of the structures which regulates people's sexual practices, setting constraints on space, social status, sex to be had [...] Poorer people in all countries are disproportionately constrained in their ability to determine their sexual life. They are also particularly affected by policies criminalising sexuality." ³

In short to have sex, certain (material) conditions must be met. For example, having an apartment or being able to rent a hotel room helps enormously. The same is true for having a job and access to proper sexual

and reproductive healthcare. The traditional route to sex, which in Lebanon is through marriage, comes with considerable costs. This paper explores how economic status determines access to sex, relationships, and marriage in Lebanon.

YOUR (PARENTS') PLACE OR MINE?

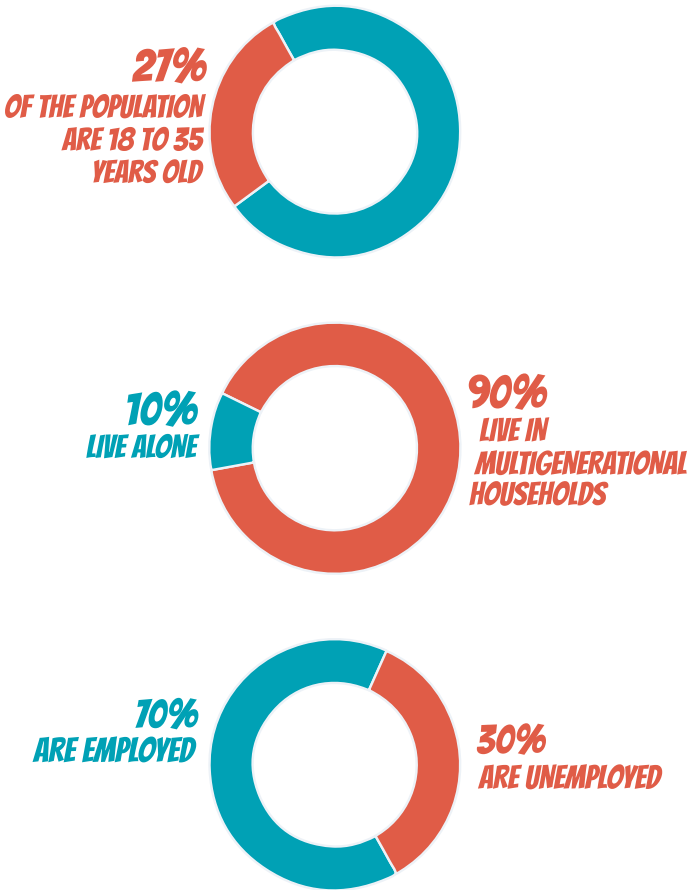
Arguably the most important factor affecting one's chances of having sex is having access to a private space. Most young Lebanese adults do not live alone, as many live with their parents until they get married.

As in many Arab countries, pre-marital sex in Lebanon is considered taboo. Bringing someone to the family home to have sex is virtually impossible. Living alone or in a shared apartment with like-minded flatmates is almost a prerequisite to having sex in Lebanon.

It's not only social norms dictating young people to stay with their parents. Over the years, a lack of social housing policies has helped create an exclusionary real estate market. Owning a home, and even renting an apartment, is increasingly out of reach for most young Lebanese.

The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Beirut currently amounts to around US\$400 a month, which is an exorbitant amount given that the minimum wage still stands at LBP 675,000, which is less than US\$20 at the parallel market rate, while the average salary is about US\$75 (LBP 2,840,100).⁴ Beirut's apartment vacancy rate reflects the unaffordable real estate market. In 2019 vacancies stood at a whopping 23%, jumping to almost 50% for high-end properties.⁵ It is widely thought to be even higher today. Meanwhile, unemployment sits at some 30% with LGBTQ+ unemployment over double that at 78%. ^{6,7}

FIGURE I
STATISTICAL PORTRAIT OF THE LEBANESE ADULT



Source: United States Census Bureau, 2022, "Population by Age,"
 Online at: https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/idb/#/popCOUNTRY_YEAR=2022&COUNTRY_YR_ANIM=2020&FIPS_SINGLE=LE&ANIM_PARAMS=2022,2100,5&menu=popViz&FIPS=LE&popPages=BYAGE&POP_YEARS=2022

Single-person households represent only 10% of homes in Lebanon, half of which are elderly people above 65 years of age who are likely widowed.⁸ The housing crisis is worse in the LGBTQ+ community.

"Our cash-for-living support program is mostly used for shelter, one of the biggest challenges facing the community," said Tareq Zeidan, Director of Helem, the region's first organization to fight for LGBTQ+ rights. In 2021, Helem registered 405 cases of housing violations, whereby LGBTQ+ people were harassed

by neighbours or illegally evicted by landlords, compared to only five housing violation reports in 2019.^{9, 10}

"Most problems stem from unemployment," Zeidan said. "Going back to live with the parents is out of the question and thus people become homeless."

Without access to a home or apartment, a couple may opt for a hotel room, but that too has become increasingly unaffordable. Renting a room will set you back some \$50 to \$150 a night. Cheaper hotels come with fears of cleanliness, while some hotels refuse unmarried couples.

If a hotel too is off the table, there is always the car. Lebanon boasts one of the highest per capita car ownership rates in the world with over 250 cars per 1000 people.¹¹ In Lebanon, a car is more than a status symbol. Especially, for young Lebanese, it can be path towards sexual freedom.

SEX WORK

For people who cannot afford the wining and dining and want "a quick fix," there is always the option of "the world's oldest profession." It is not uncommon for some Lebanese men to have their first sexual experience with a sex worker.

At one point in time Lebanon legalized prostitution for women, with brothels operating from licenses granted by the state.^{xii} However, the last license granted was in 1975.¹²

Naturally, prices for paid sex differ from tens of dollars on the street to hundreds of dollars in clubs or hotels. Estimated prices can vary from "US\$26 to US\$450 with an average price of US\$100."¹³

At this rate, sex work offers a more affordable option when compared to prices associated with traditional and even non-traditional pathways. In fact nearly 100% of male buyers cited convenience and ease as one of the reasons they turn to purchasing sex.¹⁴

POLICING SEX THROUGH MARRIAGE

The most conventional route to having sex in Lebanon is through a religious marriage. Home to 18 recognized sects, Lebanon has no civil code dealing with personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, and child custody. Instead, it relies on 15 religious personal status laws and courts.

Civil marriage, a secular marriage licensed by the state, does not exist, while a religious marriage can only take place between two heterosexual members of the same sect. If not, one of the two will have to convert.

A religious marriage is relatively affordable. Costs vary, even within the same sect, but on average couples will spend some US\$90 to \$180 (LBP 3 to 6 million). This can include costs such as registering the marriage at the local *mukhtar* (mayor), changing the woman's residency, and a blood test that, among other things, screens for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI)—Lebanon's religious authorities wish to be aware

of any medical conditions that, indirectly, may affect their future flock.

Pre-marital classes on the blessings of marriage offered by a cleric are usually for free. Likewise, the sheikh or priest concluding the marriage normally does not take a fee. However, it is customary to tip the priest or sheikh or offer him a gift after the ceremony.

While the basic costs of a religious marriage normally amount to a maximum of some US\$180, it becomes a whole different ball game when the wedding party comes into play. Naturally, wedding costs vary greatly. Disregarding the Lebanese elite for whom a one-million-dollar party is not unheard of, weddings do not come cheap. Food, drinks, clothes, the occasional display of fireworks: everything comes at a price. With wedding parties ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars, it is fair to say that sex through marriage comes at a hefty price, when it requires a wedding party to do so.

CIVIL CYPRUS

Instead of a religious marriage in Lebanon, couples can opt for a civil marriage outside the country. While the Lebanese state does not allow civil marriages within the country, it does recognize civil marriages performed abroad. Most couples will hop on a 30-minute flight to

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TABLE 1

Average Cost of a Civil Marriage in Cyprus*
(based on a one-night stay)

Item	Price (USD)	Total cost (USD)
Flights (2)	200	400
Hotel	90	90
Food	150	150
Ceremony	282	282
Wedding certificate (3)	14	42
Documents (2)	20	40
Registration at embassy	17	17
Stamps	25	25
Courier	25	25
TOTAL	≈USD 1,100	

*Badil figures are conservative estimates based on interviews with a number of couples that recently got hitched in Cyprus. They also represent conservative estimates on the lower end of the possible options for variable costs such as hotels, food, etc.

Cyprus, others travel to Greece or Turkey. In 2016, Cyprus registered nearly 850 Lebanese civil marriage contracts.¹⁵ A civil marriage ensures that both partners are on equal footing before the law, which is not the case with a religious marriage. Under Lebanon's many personal status laws, women enjoy limited rights, for example, with regards to nationality, inheritance, marital support, and child custody. Across Lebanon's many sects, women face systematic inequality.

Including flights, accommodation, visas, and administrative fees, a civil marriage in Cyprus can cost at least US\$1100 (see Table 1).

Some of the required documents include a stamped bank statement, civil and family registries, and proof of employment, which can be more complicated than

usual to obtain given the crisis Lebanon finds itself in. Many people simply no longer have a bank account or job.

When civil marriage in Cyprus proves a bridge too far, the only option left is a religious marriage in Lebanon.

UNCIVIL LEBANON

In July 2022, a Druze-Shiite couple residing in Lebanon found a way to have a civil marriage in the United States, when a judge in Utah united them in an online ceremony. Following the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, the state allowed for virtual marriage ceremonies⁷, even for couples outside the country.¹⁶

Whether Lebanon will recognize the Utah marriage contract remains to be seen. If so, it would set a groundbreaking precedent on how to bypass the country's archaic marriage arrangements, guarantee an equal standing between partners, and save young couples a considerable amount of money.

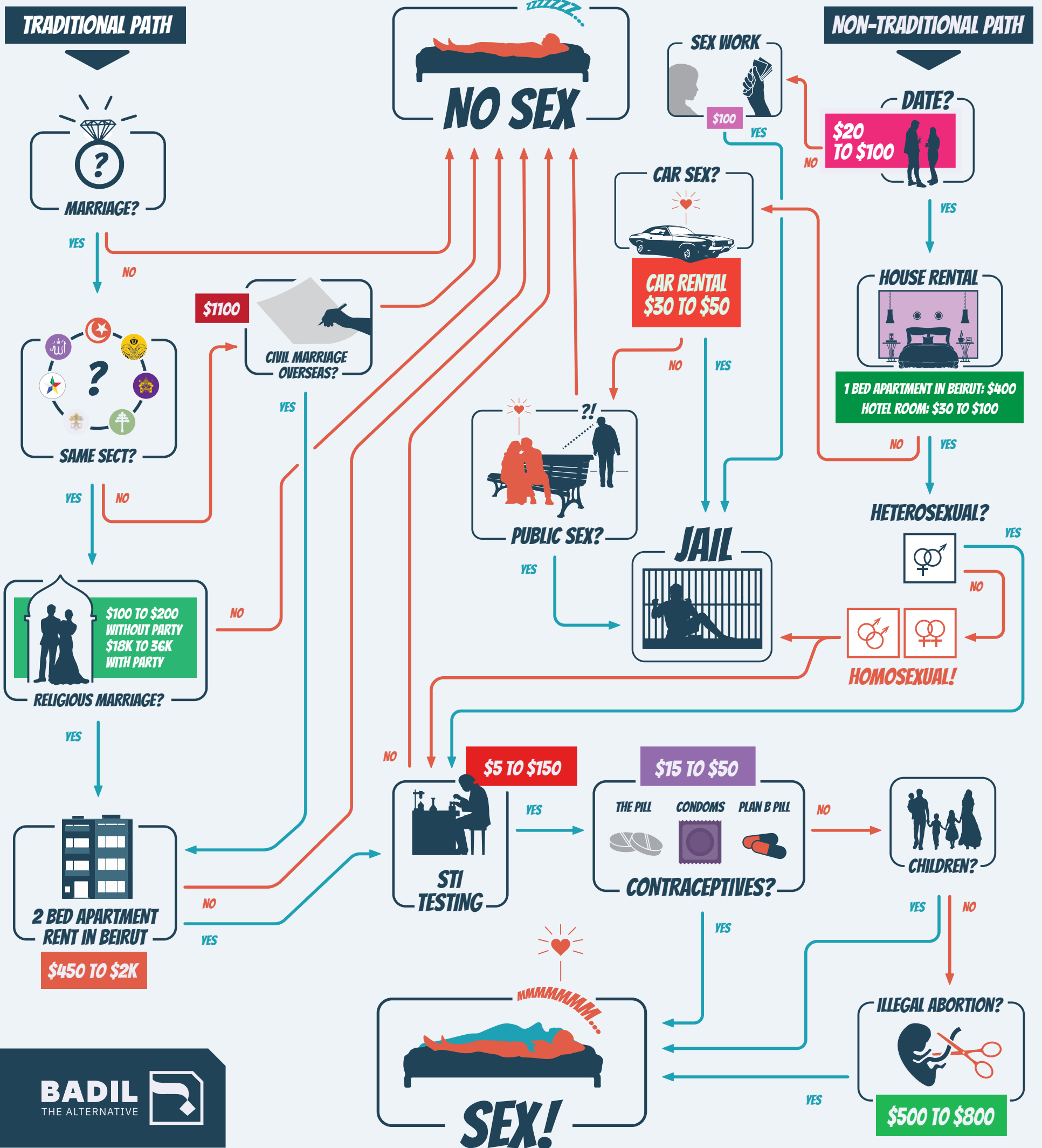
Legalizing civil marriage in Lebanon has been a topic of national debate since at least the 1950s. The debate took centre-stage during the October 2019 popular

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uprising. Yet religious authorities have always resisted change — which is not entirely surprising seeing that the 2018 state budget allocated religious courts with US\$41.3 million, over quadruple the amount the Ministry of Environment was given.¹⁷

Legalizing civil marriage in Lebanon would not only offer both partners equal rights, but would also contribute to the economy, as couples would organize wedding parties in Lebanon rather than in Cyprus or Greece. Cyprus registers around 7,000 marriages a year, which contributes to an estimated US\$1.1 million to the Cypriot national economy.

COSTLY BREAKUP

The link between economic status and sexual freedom also applies to divorce, which often represents a financial and legal barrier many couples cannot overcome. The lack of a national personal status code allows for great variations when it comes to divorce.

For some women, it is relatively easy, while for others it becomes a strategic game of chess that can take years. Generally, sectarian barriers make it much harder for a woman to get out of an unwanted marriage than a man. Cases regarding marital support and child custody are particularly tricky.

In 2020, Parliament passed a bill criminalizing sexual harassment and expanding the scope of a law penalizing domestic violence.¹⁸ While a welcome step in the right direction, the bill has been criticized for failing to protect victims of sexual violence. More so, the Lebanese penal code still allows for a husband to avoid punishment for marital rape if he can show a valid marital contract.

The cost of getting a divorce varies across the different sects. The main expense tends to be hiring a lawyer, given the couple in question does not agree on the divorce terms. In Christian courts, although lawyers are required to sign a contract stipulating legal fees cannot exceed US\$5,000, the bill at times can amount up to US\$25,000. Unofficial costs include bribes to move the divorce case forward.

Sunni, Shia, and Druze laws offer men an absolute right to divorce, while women only have that right under certain conditions. For Christians, it is difficult for both men and women. Most of them will ultimately end up in a religious court. Even if both partners agree to have a divorce, the religious authority has the ultimate decision. At times, the case may be transferred all the way to the Vatican to be resolved.

THE CRIME OF “UNNATURAL SEX”

While the state leaves marriage and divorce proceedings to the country’s religious courts, it does involve itself in the policing of non-normative sexual behaviours, adding further layers of oppression, especially for the LGBTQ+ community. Queer people can be prosecuted under Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which does not specifically criminalize gay sex but prohibits “sexual intercourse against nature.”¹⁹

Recent rulings have set a precedent for decriminalization. There have been at least six cases, in which the judge ruled that “unnatural relations” do not include same-sex relations.²⁰ However, as long as Article 534 exists it can be used to target and prosecute queer people.

The latest incident of state-sanctioned violence came in June, widely known as Pride Month, when Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi wrote a letter banning assemblies that “promote homosexuality.” The minister sent the letter to the

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Internal Security Forces (ISF), which promptly raided one of the few *free* safe spaces for queer people in Beirut.

There are a handful of safe spaces in Beirut where queer people can meet openly. Many queer spaces have either closed due to the economic crisis, or have been damaged by the Beirut port explosion, raising concerns that these spaces may never recover. Of the few remaining, most are bars or nightclubs with high entry costs. As a result, such privileges and pleasures remain out of reach for most queer Lebanese. Going on a date in a *free* public space may not be an option for some, out of fear of being outed (i.e., having one's sexual orientation revealed publicly).

Another way for people to meet is through online dating apps such as Tinder, Grindr, or Bumble. However, for LGBTQ+ people this too can be risky due to the same reasons as cited above. Regarding Grindr, Lebanon's Ministry of Telecommunications banned the gay dating app in January 2019, which constituted a state-mandated step backwards for LGBTQ+ rights. ²¹

Apart from that, people need a smartphone and internet access to access online dating apps, all of which are today priced in dollars. Telecommunication tariffs sharply increased in July 2022 when the Council of Ministers changed the pricing structure in their final session before entering caretaker mode.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTHCARE

Access to Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (SRH) is a fundamental right, essential to a person's well-being. About half of the Lebanese have health insurance (public or private), yet even for those insured, there is an alarming lack of coverage. ²² Private hospitals, since May 2022, have started to only accept patients able to pay in dollars. Insurance companies have followed suit, with all insurance packages now priced in US dollars. ²³

Women and the LGBTQ+ community face significantly more barriers in accessing SRH. For example, many LGBTQ+ individuals are reluctant to open-up to healthcare professionals about their sex life out of fear of discrimination, being outed, or blackmailed.

"After receiving a HIV+ diagnoses, some patients deny their status and treatment," said a medical professional who wished to remain anonymous. Although HIV treatment is covered by the National AIDS Control Program, patients fear the socio-economic repercussions if their status would be revealed.

Antoine* (pseudonym) described to Badil his experience of being diagnosed with HIV and the secretive process of getting treatment. Having been tested positive by a local non-governmental organization (NGO), he was sent to a doctor for additional testing. The latter only wanted to see him after closing hours.

TABLE 2

Cost of STI testing and health consultations*

Item	Cost
Medical Consultation	LBP 50,000
Hepatitis B, C, and Syphilis testing	LBP 30,000 total (LBP10,000 each)
HPV testing	US\$50
Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea, Mycoplasma, Ureaplasma, and Trichomoniasis	US\$50
Liquid nitrogen treatment for genital warts	LL50,000
Pap smear	LL100,000

*Badil figures are based on quotations from a sexual health NGO that provides these services at a subsidised rate.

TABLE 3

Average Cost of Contraceptives**

Item	Cost in 2018	Cost in 2022
Condoms (Pack of 6)	LBP 20,000	LBP 570,000
Plan B Morning After Pill	LBP 75,000	LBP 850,000
Oral Contraceptives (1-Month Supply)	LBP 21,000	LBP 480,000

**Badil figures are estimates based on quotations from pharmacies.

“Only the secretary and doctor were still in the office. It felt as if I was doing something illegal,” Antoine said. Antoine was then sent to the Ministry of Health where he used a backdoor entrance to receive a three-month supply of antiretroviral (ARV) medication. Antoine explained to Badil that he is worried the ministry will run out of funding for the drug. A one-month supply of ARV once retailed at over US\$1,200, but with generic versions can averages at US\$100. ²⁴

However, according to Nadia Badran, Executive Director of the Society for Inclusion and Development in Communities (SIDC), which works with people living

with HIV, there is little risk that the Ministry of Public Health’s National AIDS Control Program loses funding, as the “[antiretroviral] medications are funded by UN agencies.” In other words, the programmes will run until donor money runs out.

PRICE HIKES IN SRH

Having safer sex in Lebanon has become even more inaccessible since the pre-2019 crisis days. All of the medical costs associated with safer sex (including STI testing, treatment, and contraceptives) have seen significant price hikes in recent years and are increasingly out of reach for most (see Table 2).

Prices of oral contraceptives have increased by nearly 750% since 2019. ²⁵ The price of one well-known birth control pill (Yaz) went up from LBP 21,000 to 480,000. The prices of trusted condom brands also skyrocketed (see Table 3).

The increased inaccessibility of contraceptives has had an impact on unwanted pregnancies and led to a rise in abortions, according to Faysal El-Kak, Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Clinical Associate, Department of Obstetrics Gynecology at AUB Medical Center, as quoted in L’Orient Today. ²⁶

“The compounded crisis in Lebanon has affected almost all facets of life, including women’s and adolescent health, and in specific reproductive health,” El-Kak said in an interview with Badil. He also explained that for the last three years, “Lebanon witnessed an interruption of contraceptive supplies [...] that affected access and affordability in the face of expensive pregnancy care.” Amid economic turmoil, “pregnancy intentions change,” explained El-Kak.

Unless the mother's life is in danger, abortions in Lebanon are illegal and are not covered by insurance. Abortions still occur under the table and can range from US\$500-700, at the minimum.

BOX I: Sexual Education

Sexual education was introduced in Lebanese public schools in 1995 but withdrawn in 2000 following fierce criticism by various religious figures. There have been unsuccessful attempts since to reinstate sexual education in public schools, most notably through a reproductive health and gender curriculum developed by the United Nations Population Fund and approved by ministerial decree.²⁷

The lack of sex education is a major reason not enough Lebanese have adequate information about sex and sexual health. A 2021 assessment of sexual and reproductive health knowledge and awareness among 491 single women in Lebanon aged 17 to 55 revealed that only 8.8% had "adequate knowledge" on topics ranging from contraceptives and STI to pregnancy and menstruation. The topics of which they had most knowledge related to pregnancy (88%), while they knew least about contraceptives (13.5%).²⁸

CONCLUSION

Everyone has the right to sexual freedom and to express themselves however they choose to. However, socio-economic status, as well as societal norms and values greatly influence people's ability to have sex. There is no doubt that poverty closes many doors, and sex is no exception.

The recent collapse of the Lebanese economy has had crushing consequences for people to form meaningful relationships and sexually express themselves. Constrained by a decades-long lack of social housing policies, lack of personal status laws, archaic penal codes, and underfunded SRH, Lebanon's residents simply cannot afford the material resources needed to have safer sex.

Most young Lebanese cannot afford to buy a home or rent an apartment and, hence, lack access to much needed privacy.

The conventional route to sex has always been marriage, yet this too is often a very costly affair, certainly when a wedding party is involved. Lebanon's archaic personal status laws only allow for a religious marriage between two parties of the same sect.

For a civil marriage the road leads abroad, which immediately entails extra costs for plane tickets and hotels. Gay marriage does not exist in Lebanon. Worse, the Lebanese Penal Code until this very day criminalizes "unnatural sex," which can be used to prosecute same-sex relations.

As prices for contraceptives have skyrocketed, and many hospitals and insurance companies only accept payment in dollars, safer sex too is increasingly out of the reach for most Lebanese. One thing is certain: economic and sexual justice are intimately linked and the current financial crisis is aggravating both. Yet instead of opening up the sexual space, the state and the clergy who stand with them think it's their job to interfere in the most personal of Lebanese affairs. It's not. It's in fact time to get the clergy and the state to get out of Lebanon's bedrooms, and back into the halls of prayer and government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To promote equal standing among partners and access to safer sex, state and clerical involvement in sexual affairs will need a complete shakeup.

First and foremost, for those who chose it, a civil personal status law, rather than religious edict, should dictate the rights of all Lebanese regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Advocates of an *obligatory* civil personal status law tend to forget the legal and social implications of such a move. The freedom to choose the regime under which one gets married should also apply to those who wish to follow faith-based rulings.

Despite outcries from the religious authorities, all public and private schools should immediately re-introduce sex education, starting in the 6th grade (students aged 12 to 14). Health professionals too should receive training on safe and consensual sexual behaviour, as well as on topics related to sexuality and gender identity.

Too often, sexual violence goes unreported and unpunished, creating a culture of impunity for the perpetrators and fear for the victims. As a result, informal avenues such as family and community leaders are forced to intervene because of the state's lack of enforcement. If the recent uptick in sexual violence is anything to go by, the entire support system for victims needs revamping — from safe referrals and shelters to training for security forces on how to deal with sexual assault cases.

The provision of affordable (even free) contraceptive options should be made a priority. This needs to include contraceptives, morning after pills and abortions, as well as access to counselling for planned parenthood.

Obviously, the legal right to abortion should be placed high on the agenda by the progressive movement, as it is every woman's right to decide over her own body. Nothing less than an immediate and outright appeal of articles 534 and 523 of the Penal Code will do, as they are used to criminalize members of the LGBTQ+ community and sex workers.

In addition, the labour law needs to include measures to protect anyone from being fired on grounds of sexuality or gender identity, as well as threats, blackmail, and other forms of discrimination. Progressive forces should champion the right to "own" one's body and promote sexual freedom and expression in legal texts, including the constitution.

Access to housing is always intricately connected to sexual freedom and expression, as well as the constitutional right to privacy. With no public housing policy in sight, the current situation characterized by a lack of access to affordable housing will likely remain. Urgent action that ought to be taken include the provision of housing for marginalized groups. On the longer term, taxes on empty residences and the application of the rental law could change the market's supply-demand dynamics and make housing more affordable.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Triangle would like to express its heartfelt thanks to the healthcare workers, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and activists who anonymously contributed to this policy paper.

Triangle's new media project Badil aims to promote a more informed democratic discourse in Lebanon, one which prioritises political accountability and common sense over sectarian slogans" and fear-mongering.

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