



Statement concerning the closure of Helem's Services Department

21/12/2022

For the past three years we have been allies and teammates in the challenging task of providing protection, support, and aid for members of the LGBTIQ community in Lebanon. It has been, and continues to be, our calling and our mandate and have found your partnership, allyship and/or support to be vital in continuing this important work. These past three years have fundamentally altered our realities and the landscape of human rights and humanitarian work in Lebanon. They were sometimes brutally tough and stretched our resources, energy, and well-being beyond its limits; but they also taught us a lot of hard lessons and significant realizations. Therefore, we wanted to share with you an important announcement which we feel is a vital and necessary step in our current and future work.

Since its inception, Helem has always provided protection and safety for individuals targeted by state and non-state actors for having non-normative SOGIESC. We have provided safe spaces, knowledge creation, access to information, legal representation, emergency intervention, and pushed for reform in policy, legislation, and the judiciary in a two-decade mission to defeat institutionalized homophobia and transphobia and ensure access to justice for those experiencing violence and discrimination.

In recent years, due to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis, and the Beirut blast – Helem saw that the main priorities of the community had shifted from civil and political rights violations towards social and economic violations – including a massive uptick in humanitarian and crisis response needs. As a result, we adapted by not only expanding our policy focus towards topics such as labor, housing, and access to healthcare, but also worked on expanding our services department to quadruple its size to offer new services including mental health services and humanitarian aid as the

number of applicants to our organization grew exponentially from around 500 individuals at the beginning of 2020 to more than 2500 in 2021. At the end of 2022, we expect that number to be even higher.

This massive rise in demand for services, especially cash-based assistance for basic needs, has put an extremely strenuous pressure on our resources and ability to not to meet exponentially increasing demand but also fulfill our original mandate of advocacy and community building and mobilization. The community's needs for protection and legal aid have been dwarfed by demands for necessary humanitarian assistance to cover shelter, medical, food, and transportation costs. This shift has had multiple serious ramifications (outlined below) and has led us to have an extremely serious and focused re-evaluation of our work and our role in advancing LGBTIQ rights and protection in Lebanon where our interventions would be beneficial and sustainable to resolve chronic problems.

After careful and meticulous analysis, reflection, and consultation with experts in the field, Helem has decided to stop its direct provision of humanitarian aid effective January 2023. We did not reach this decision lightly, as it was an extremely difficult one to make given the needs of the community and how many individuals have come to rely on humanitarian aid for basic survival, but it remains nothing compared to the difficulties facing our community on the ground. The reason why we have reached this conclusion has nothing to do with fatigue or exasperation in working on humanitarian aid as that has been one of the most rewarding and impactful endeavors we have undertaken. On the contrary, it has everything to do with a serious and alarming realities and developments which convinced us we need to act quickly and decisively to address a worsening situation. To communicate our conclusions more effectively, we summarized our reasons as follows:

Lack of Resources

The vast majority, over 90%, of our applicants have not been coming to Helem for case management or legal and social protection for the past 2 years. Since the beginning of 2020, applicants have come to demand cash-based assistance only to cover their basic needs. The absolute majority of these cases have come to call on Helem on a monthly basis to provide this aid when the resources we were able to acquire cover less than 10% of adequate monthly stipends. Sadly, both local and international funders have not prioritized humanitarian cash aid in their calls for proposals and have not encouraged sustainable programming such as protection-based shelters, nutrition centers, and inclusive medical clinics as alternatives to cash based assistance. Much of the aid that is provided is earmarked for specific communities according to their nationality, gender identity, or other factors that do not necessarily reflect the actual distribution needs on the ground. Currently, Helem's protection officers work with more than 90 active case files at any given time, 4 times the recommended universal standard of casemanagement of 30 active cases per protection officer, signifying the need for more resources in both available cash and human resources.

Lack of Support Mechanisms

Helem is not considered eligible to apply for humanitarian aid grants, not due to concerns about its efficiency or professionalism, but due to existing rules and practices that prohibit non-registered organizations from receiving funding or require they be registered for a minimum of 4 years. Existing humanitarian funders and most UN agencies demand that an organization be registered for more than 4 years before being declared eligible, which was not possible for us due to continuous targeting by the Lebanese Ministry of Interior due to our mandate. Helem's small size and lack of larger finance and MEAL departments also made it ineligible for humanitarian-based grants which require significant pre-existing infrastructure available only to large organizations. Unfortunately, funders in this field did not have any mechanisms with which to assist organizations like ours to become eligible to serve a larger segment of our community, nor did they make any significant effort to ensure existing organizations fill in that gap through LGBTIQ-

inclusive aid and service provision as many organizations in the field still refuse to serve our communities despite their mandate and funding sources saying otherwise.

Lack of Inclusion in National Strategies

The lack of funds and mechanisms has forced smaller organizations like Helem to stretch their available resources to the point each individual aid transaction became completely insufficient to serve the needs of an applicant. The vast majority of this funding also came with caveats on the type of aid provided and the nationality and identity of those eligible. Not only have smaller organizations like Helem been left to explain to applicants why they could not provide adequate funds, they also were left to bear the extreme frustration and disillusionment of the community who would misconstrue the forced implementation of donor driven protocols as favoritism, selectionism, and to go as far as to make accusations of fraud. This has been especially damaging to our intra-community relationships, especially between host applicants and refugees which we had worked very hard in previous years to build through solidarity and community work. The other damaging side-effect is that it led to heightened community criticism of our organization which has compromised our efforts at community engagement and advocacy efforts, and has led to several extremely dangerous attacks on the center with weapons intended to physically harm staff members who could not fulfill expectations of extremely frustrated applicants. We do not blame our community in the slightest for these developments, but neither can local front-liners like Helem still continue to bear the brunt of this dissatisfaction on their own and to become accomplices in furthering this harmful system. It is worthy to mention that not a single funder agreed to provide us with funds for security infrastructure or personnel, and we were forced to fundraise for cameras, iron doors, and security guards by ourselves.

Despite being invited to renew our partnership with all of our existing humanitarian funders, we have decided not to renew any of them in 2023 considering the terms have remained reflective of the same problematic frameworks and the funds remain unsustainably limited. Moving forward, we

perceive our role is to engage with and change this exploitative system, not perpetuate it and allow it to continue as is.

Institutionalized Homophobia and Transphobia

The vast majority of existing large-scale humanitarian actors in Lebanon, those who receive multi-year grants and have been in operation for decades, have been refusing to take on LGBTIQ cases in increasing numbers. All of these organizations have operating budgets that dwarf that of Helem and are specifically set up for larger scale humanitarian operations. Many have also been refusing LGBTIQ applicants, referring them instead to LGBTIQ organizations like Helem instead of providing aid themselves as their mandate, public messaging, and commitments to their funders require. The main excuse we hear is the lack of resources and the necessity to prioritize the most vulnerable, which is perplexing since LGBTQ+ individuals fulfill this requirement. This has created a massive strain on our resources and also contributed to increased segregation and further isolation of the LGBTIQ community from mainstream populations as each is encouraged or filtered to get services in isolation from the other. This discrimination continues with impunity even as we speak, especially with organizations that operate shelters, fund clinics, and provide aid but consistently refuse to allow in LGBTIQ applicants under the guise of security or lack of resources. We believe it is our role as an organization to aid or push these organizations to fulfill their mandate towards ALL human beings, and to ensure that accountability and justice to members of the community is achieved instead of attempting to fill the impossible gaps in service provision they create.

Declining Levels of Safety and Security

For the past three years, Helem has been attempting to balance its work on public advocacy and policy reform with its humanitarian and aid services. We were successful in processing data from our services department to be able to achieve significant policy reform and increased public awareness on the issues facing LGBTIQ people in Lebanon – and have achieved landmark victories including recent rulings against the MOI in the Lebanese courts. This comes within a state of heightened scrutiny and targeting of LGBTIQ organizations by

state and non-state actors which has risen most acutely in the latter 6 months of 2022 with unprecedented attacks by religious leaders, extremist groups, and several ministries. These attacks have compromised our ability to deliver safe and secure services – including especially our mental health support program. Applicants have started to be afraid to come to Helem's premises out of fear of the organization being raided or attacked by state or non-state aggressors, compromising their treatment and well-being as a result. It became clear that organizations with limited size and funding cannot do both humanitarian aid and services as well as advocacy work simultaneously. Considering that other organizations are better equipped and funded to do the former, and that few, if any, organizations are willing to do the latter; our decision was difficult but clear.

Despite its decision to halt humanitarian aid programs, Helem has not ended its engagement on working to secure the availability of these programs to our community. We have redesigned our work to be more strategic and impactful at inducting this needed change. Moving forward, Helem's work will instead focus on the following key priorities that are designed to solve chronic problems at their core for longer-term and sustainable benefit:

1. We have successfully relocated the ongoing case files of applicants to other organizations we have been engaging and cooperating with for the past 6 months.
2. We have created and expanded a detailed referral program for community members seeking a variety of services from trusted partner organizations that are part of the UN Portal.
3. We have secured and expanded programming to build the capacity of 17 existing partners and identified 20 new partners to target for expansion in LGBTIQ service provision in the fields of case management, mental health provision, healthcare provision, and crisis response – especially outside of Beirut.

4. We have expanded our legal aid department to include a dedicated lawyer and a team of paralegal officers to assist applicants in ensuring adequate and inclusive service provision and access to justice both within and outside the courts.
5. We are setting up a complaints mechanism and expanded our human rights violations documentation parameters to include discrimination by organizations, individuals, and the employment sector with dedicated personnel for investigation and follow-up.
6. We have expanded efforts at economic rights reforms including labor law reform, union reform, vocational training for employment, and workplace equality.
7. We have expanded efforts to identify and address discrimination in the healthcare sector and build the capacity of 20 new healthcare providers across the country to safely and securely receive LGBTIQ patients.

It is our belief that constructing accountability mechanisms and building the capacity of the humanitarian, development, and crisis response sectors is the most pressing and relevant intervention we can do to ensure that LGBTIQ individuals get the support and protection they need while simultaneously combatting entrenched discrimination and exclusion in these sectors. The more energy and time we spend attempting to fill these gaps ourselves without significant support, the more we allow them to continue and the less we can dedicate to combatting other forms of homophobia and transphobia in Lebanon. We decided to author this lengthy letter because we believe in learning publicly, and in being transparent and communicative in how we learn the hard lessons.

Moving forward, Helem will continue to protect individuals from violations of their rights through legal and paralegal interventions, build partnerships to increase the scope and availability of resources and LGBTQI+ inclusive services through capacity building and knowledge production, fill in knowledge gaps

in social and economic rights of LGBTQ individuals for better policymaking, and concentrate on community mobilization for sustained public action. We welcome any suggestions, concerns, or feedback you may have for us and will be in touch with many of you in the coming months to further grow and solidify partnerships to address the needs of our communities comprehensively and sustainably.

In solidarity,

Tarek Zeidan
Executive Director

Helem