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"STRAIGHT" FROM THE HEART?

ADAPTATIONS TO SOCIAL STIGMA AMONG GAYS AND LESBIANS IN LEBANON

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ABSTRACT

LGBTs (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) in Lebanon have for a long time been a target of oppression were legal, economic and social factors have contributed to their historical marginalization. While the Lebanese Penal code in article 534, is criminalizing homosexuality the law is rarely applied and is primarily used to violate the privacy of gay and lesbians by denying them basic human rights. Helem and Meem being the only organizations working explicit with these rights believe that the only way to help is through visibility. One consequence of this visibility of gay and lesbians is a growing homophobia in the society and reluctance towards the subject in hand. By using a conceptual framework the thesis attempts to provide a structure for better understanding of the interactions of gays and lesbians in different levels of the society in Lebanon as well as highlighting the coping and adapting mechanisms that follows marginalization and stigma. The analysis shows that a large part of the target group chooses to live their life in secrecy, fearing exposure. They try to get around the stigmatizing eyes of their fellow citizens by acting "straight" in public while living a "gay life" behind close doors. The study is built on several interviews and observations conducted in Beirut, Lebanon between September and December 2007. Theoretically the thesis conveys and relates to several thoughts within queer theory and discourses concerning identity.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Gay, Lesbian, Stigma, Deviance, Queer, Identity, Homophobia, Lebanon.

Contents

1. Introduction

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender[1] people (from now on referred to as LGBT) in Lebanon have for a long time been marked by oppression, legally, economically and socially which have contributed to historical marginalization. While the Lebanese Penal code in article 534 is criminalizing homosexuality the law is rarely applied in its full capacity but is primarily used to violate the privacy of LGBT persons by denying those basic human rights (Helem C). Helem and its female branch Meem, as the only organizations working explicit with LGBT rights in the region, believes that the best way to help is through visibility. One consequence of this increasing visibility of LGBTs in the society is a growing homophobia and reluctance towards the subject in hand. Therefore, a large part of LGBTs in Lebanon chooses to live their life in secrecy, fearing exposure.

In Lebanon, people that engage in same-sex activities do not necessarily regard themselves as gays or lesbians, mostly because the limits of sexuality are less clearly defined than in other parts of the world. The differences are that in most parts of the world, sexual orientation is not regarded as a conscious choice or anything that can be changed voluntarily. In most Arab countries many still regard it as a sin, a symptom of mental illness or even a "western" perverse behavior (Whitaker 2006:9). By claiming that sexual orientation is a choice e.g. a sin, it can be corrected. Therefore many homosexuals may seek to change their sexual orientation through therapy, often pressured by their families or religious groups in society. But more commonly gays and lesbians try to get around the stigmatizing eyes of their fellow citizens by acting *"straight"*[2] in public while living a *"gay life"* behind close doors.

The topic of homosexuality in the Arab world is largely unexplored, because its mainly hetero normative traditions has determined the sexual morality and silenced the debate about the topic (Siraj, 2006:202). Present and past research is mainly

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[1] The correct term here should be LGBTQI, adding Queer and Intersexual (former known as hermaphrodites). But since this study does not explicitly explore the lives of intersexuals the acronym has been reduced to LGBT. A longer explanation on terminology can be found in section 2.5
[2] Straight in this context means heterosexual

focusing on the historical perspective (discussed further in section 4.1.1), exploring the relation between the Arab civilization and male love, same-sex relations and religion. This is why it is important to look at the contemporary lives and struggles of gays and lesbians in the Arab world.

Queer theory has also been underused in development studies. This thesis will attempt to challenge the materialism on which much of development research is based by highlighting the importance to include non-material factors such as sexuality into development studies that often is centered on the consolidation of the family and on economic self-interest which stresses primary economic, reproductive and social commitment to the family (Kleitz, 2000:2). Queer theory will thus be used to challenge the notion of identity and self-realization as only being a western privilege. This will be discussed further in the section Queer Theory and Development (2.2)

The Swedish aid agency SIDA has in a recent report stressed the importance to include LGBT rights in development practice. Recommendations to SIDA include that LGBT issues should be treated as a human rights issue and be included in programs on gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, HIV/AIDS, poverty reduction, education, freedom of speech and other relevant areas. So far, LGBT issues have accessed the international political arena much due to the HIV epidemic and rapid spread of HIV infection among men who have sex with men (MSM) and have mainly focused on HIV prevention programs with only MSM as a target group, leaving lesbian and bisexual women even more invisible and marginalized (Samelius & Wågberg, 2005:9). Therefore, SIDA suggests that greater awareness should be put on the linkage between gender identities, sexuality on one hand and core development issues as poverty reduction, the protection and exercise of human rights and combating gender based violence on the other hand. This thesis therefore anticipates raising awareness about international LGBT issues and its importance in development studies and practice.

In the framework of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948, LGBT issues are now often discussed along with other Human Rights as basic standards that people need to live in dignity and are viewed as equally important to all other rights (Samelius & Wågberg, 2005:6). In Lebanon however, the human rights community has just started to include sexual orientation and gender identity in its agenda.

MIRSAD, a human rights organization, was the first NGO to advocate for the human rights of the LGBT community in Lebanon when defending the website gaylebanon.com in a case of freedom of expression in 2000. Other organizations such as Hurriyat Khasa (Personal Freedoms) and Helem are now actively lobbying and working for the decriminalization of homosexuality in Lebanon by a reform of the Penal code. Thanks to these organizations gay rights are now part of a national agenda for the implementation of human rights in Lebanon (Helem A). But still, most countries in the world lack the needed laws to protect LGBTs against discrimination on grounds of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This is why more attention and research is needed to battle the discrimination and homophobia against LGBTs (Samelius & Wågberg, 2005:5)

1.2 Aim of Research

The overall aim of this research is to provide a structure for a better understanding of the interactions of gay and lesbians in different spheres of the society in Lebanon as well as highlighting the coping and adaptation mechanisms that follow marginalization and stigma. An examination of different levels of homophobia within the Lebanese society and an assessment of the work of Helem and Meem will also be a part of the study as they struggle against homophobia with their main goal to abolish the penal code criminalizing homosexuality. The focus will be on how gays and lesbians in Lebanon are dealing with their sexual orientation in their religious, familial and social lives. The study will build around two research questions, which covers both the historical aspect and the empirical knowledge of the study.

What is the cultural and religious, historical and present, background to the legal and practical attitudes towards gays and lesbians in Lebanon?

How do gays and lesbians cope with their situation, individually and as a group and what forms of adaptation does this take?

The study will also investigate how the society, family and religious groups are responding to the LGBT communities struggle for their rights and how homophobia and heterosexism is manifested in a predominant hetero normative traditional context.

1.3 Contextual setting

When Lebanon achieved independence from the French in 1943, Beirut became its capital. It was seen as the intellectual capital of the Arab world as well as a major commercial and tourist center until the Civil war broke out in 1975. During the war, the city was divided into a western part mostly Muslim and an eastern part which was dominated by Christians. The city center, which plays a central role in the Lebanese economy, was kind of a no man's land with the so called "green line" dividing east from west. Although several attempts has been made to rebuild Beirut since the end of the war in 1990, in order to gain its former status as a tourist, cultural and intellectual center in the Middle East, many would say that the city has lost its premier status due to competition from other places in the Middle East (Zeidler-Blomberg & Persson, 2008). However, Beirut is still regarded as cosmopolitan city with its mix of Arab and European influences, which probably is one strong reason why "gay life" is a bit easier there compared to other parts in the Middle Eastern region, and why groups like Helem and Meem could emerge.

Since the Lebanese society is based on various religious groups it is important to handle the topic of homosexuality within the context of a traditional and religious society which relies on traditional values rather than strictly religious rules and restrictions. There is not only a variety of religions[3] but also a great diversity in how religion is viewed and experienced by different people. Religion is sometimes referred to as a certain culture or tradition whereas others view religion as a practice or set of rituals. Some uses religion to refer to the law or a certain type of political viewpoint. Different directions like the Sunnis and Shia's in Islam can have different interpretations of the traditions and locally there can be differences in expressions and traditional bounds. It is therefore important to define what is meant by religion and

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[3] Beirut has 1.2 million inhabitants and a mix Sunnis, Shia's, Druze's, Christians, Palestinian refugees and other Arab immigrants. This study covers all religious minorities above.

not only view religion as the main obstacle to the problem. The patriarchal structure in the country is for many of the informants the main reason for the homophobia in the country. Religion per se is thus not viewed as being the main obstacle to the problem, rather the power of its traditions. Therefore religion will, in this thesis, be treated as an integral factor in many gay and lesbian people's lives that influences the choices and opinions of the targeted group and the public alike. Within this context, the climate for debate about the topic is rather cold and gives no or little room for discussions about homosexuality as a behavior or as an identity.

2. Theory

In the following section several theoretical frameworks will be explained starting with a research frontier (2.1) on past and present research on the topic followed by an explanation on the conceptual framework (2.2) that will be used as an attempt to provide a structure for better understanding of the interactions of LGBTs in different levels of the society in Lebanon as well as highlighting the coping and adapting mechanisms that follows marginalization and stigma. The conceptual framework will also be used to highlight three levels of homophobia – Institutional, individual and internalized, within the Lebanese society. Further the thesis will convey and relate to several thoughts within queer theory and its relation to development studies (2.3) and a discussion about LGBT issues and Human Rights (2.4). Lastly, there will be a discussion concerning social identities, deviance and stigma that have its roots in sociology and the thoughts of Howard S. Becker (1928) and Erving Goffman (1922-1982) (2.5).

2.1 Research Frontier

The research on the topic at hand is sparse and particularly research concerning female homosexuality. The majority of research examining homosexuals focuses on males such as the book *Sexuality and Eroticism among males in Moslem Societies* (Schmitt and Sofer ed, 1992) and Stephen Murray and Will Roscoes *Islamic Homosexualities* (1997) which both puts focus on the relation between religion and sexuality. Further, contemporary sociological and historical research on the impact of religion on the identity of homosexuals has been limited to Christianity giving only fragmented pieces of the lives of Muslim homosexuals (Siraj 2006:202). But still, homosexuality in Islamic countries remains largely unexplored, primarily because the Muslim traditions manifested in the Qur'an, Ahadith[4] and Shari' a, as hetero normative sources, has determined the sexual morality and silenced the debate about

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[4]Ahadith are Islamic collected oral traditions and statements regarding Prophet Muhammad's deeds and words.

the topic (ibid). It is not until recently that contemporary studies on Islam and homosexuality, as a source of conflict, have expanded much thanks to the lesbian and gay historians that has put the topic on the research agenda (Schmitt & Sofer 1992: *ix*). Still there is a lot more to explore, especially regarding lesbian studies.

The limited research about female homosexuality, especially within a religious context could be explained by the male dominance and patriarchal structures in the region. Another explanation could be that it is difficult to get an insight into the female world since it has been very controlled and closed throughout history. Recently, a book by Samar Habib was published about female homosexuality. *Female Homosexuality in The Middle East – Histories and representations* (2007) is the first book of this kind which covers both a historical discourse and a contemporary study on female homosexuality. Similarly, few studies are evident in the topic of homophobia and the recognition of the relationships between homophobic attitudes, feelings and behaviors, and they are often restricted to an American context (Sears & Williams, 1997:22)

It is of great importance to highlight that the acceptance of homosexual identities in other parts of the world is a fairly recent development and that homosexual behavior is not a new phenomenon in the Arab world. Looking at previous research on sexuality in Arab/Muslim countries and homosexuality in particular, theories are often explaining the relation between power, religion and sexuality. However in this thesis the attempt is rather to look at the coping mechanisms and ways of adaptation among LGBTs in a society that still is criminalizing homosexuality.

My own bachelor thesis *"Kring könet råder tystnad" – Makt och sexualitet mellan män i muslimska traditioner* treated the discussions around the subject of power and sexuality among males in Muslim traditions (Lundqvist, 2005). Power in relation to sexuality has been a visible factor in both Islamic traditions and theology. Nevertheless it has been treated with silence and ignorance i.e. if you don't talk about it does not exist (ibid). The same is true for today. The climate for debate is rather cold and gives no or little room for discussions on homosexuality as a behavior or as an identity. But things are about to change in some Muslim societies today, not least in Lebanon.

Brian Whitakers book *Unspeakable love – Gay and Lesbian life in the Middle East* (2006) shows the topic from a different point of view when describing the difficulties and dangers that gays and lesbians are facing across the Middle East today. His book reveals the deeply repressive prejudices and stereotypes that gays and lesbians deal with and he does it by combining personal accounts from individuals with current Arab films, literature and other forms of media. But more research is needed that puts extra attention on the lives of homosexuals, their daily lives, and struggle for acceptance.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is used in this thesis to get a clearer picture of the interactions of gays and lesbians in the Lebanese society by dividing the society into three levels (Tully, 2000:90). Every conceptual framework is built on assumed basic principles. In this research these principles are based on the concept of identity, stigma, and deviance and the coping mechanisms that follows marginalization, but it will also be used to reflect three levels of homophobia – *Institutional homophobia, individual homophobia* and *internalized homophobia* (Tully, 2000:86).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

NON-GAY DOMINANT CULTURE

LESBIAN AND GAY PERSON IN ENVIRONMENT

GAY AND LESBIAN SUBCUL-TURE
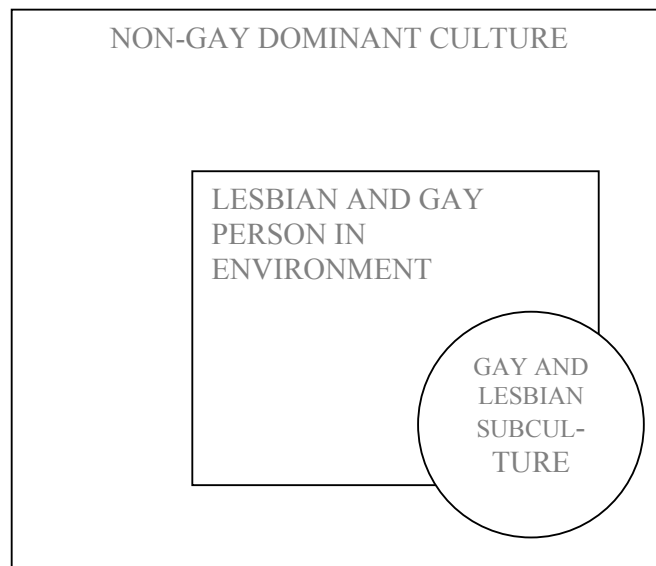
Source: Tully, 2000:91

The first level in the figure, as shown above, can be described as *the non-gay hetero normative dominant culture*, the one setting the rules and norms and has been historically defined by predominately non-gay males. Within this level, major societal institution as economic, political, educational, familial or religious works as norm setters (Tully, 2000:92). Gays and lesbians have through out the history learned to exist in this often hostile traditional dominant culture. They negotiate their existence in this environment through the construction of subcultures that coexist within the non-gay hetero normative culture (ibid). This *gay and lesbian subculture* is thus the next level in the conceptual framework. The last level can be described as the level where lesbians and gays are in social interaction with the non-gay environment. These different levels are all interrelated as showed in the figure below (Tully, 2000:91). Throughout the study this framework is reflected in theory, methodology, data collection and analysis.

2.3 Queer Theory and Development

Queer theory will in this thesis be used as a theoretical framework when discussing the terminology and construction of identities. Historically the word queer is a term referring to broad spectra of theories concerning gender, identity and sexuality or sexual orientation. Queer can thus be used to describe a sexual orientation and/or gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to hetero normative society (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood 2007:307). But the term queer can also be used as deconstructive, hence it could, in this context, oppose the hetero normative value system on which society and development rests, thus challenge the notion of fixed identities and the use of language (Jolly, 2000:2). The theoretical edge of queer studies often opposes the idea of identity and the problem of classifying every individual by gender.

Michel Foucault, as being the first "queer theoretian", centered his discourse on the way that knowledge of sexuality was structured through the use of language. The hetero normative society was in his studies the main focus of discourse, where heterosexuality was viewed as normal and any deviations, such as homosexuality as

abnormal or "queers" (Foucault, 2004). This is further discussed in the section Deviance, Stigma and Self-identity (3).

In development, sexuality has been looked upon as something causing problems often related to over-population, STDs or sexual violence. The disregard for sexual rights and its consequences needs to be acknowledged and a more positive view on sexuality is important in order to identify and solve problems such as homophobia and hate crimes related to sexuality. During summer 2000 and 2001, The Institute of Development Studies[5] (IDS) organized a series of seminars on the topic "Challenging Dominant Models of Sexuality in Development". These seminars give good examples on how queer theory can contribute to development and challenge the view on gender roles. In one of the discussion papers "Why is development work so straight?" from the seminar "Queering Development", Kleitz (2000) identifies and discusses four levels of homophobia within development theory and practice. The first level is in *the development narrative, its institutions and morals"* which Kleitz argues are built on homogenous functional, policed and predictable identities, leaving no room for any variations leading away from reproductive heterosexuality (p 3). The second level is about *the imagined nature of the underdeveloped* which rests on the belief that sexuality is a privilege of the rich western countries, thus denying the poor sexual identities. The third level that Kleitz discuss is *the local context, its institutions, narratives of progress, and moralities.* Witch inhabits a combination of patriarchal legacies, post-colonial moralities and populist governments creating homophobia among institutions. The problem of institutional homophobia is discussed further in chapter 4.1.3.

These negative attitudes to diverse sexualities have their roots, as Kleitz (2000) describes it, "in the incapacity of development theory to imagine a functional role for sexual minorities in its structuralist and mechanistic path to a better future" (p 2). By this he means that modernist and liberal identities are centered on the consolidation of the family and on economic self-interest, which stresses primary economic, reproductive and social commitment to the family. "The poor can't be queer, because sexual identities are seen as a rather unfortunate result of western development and

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[5] The Institute for Development Studies is a leading global organization for research, teaching and communications on international development.

are linked to being rich and privileged. The poor just reproduce." he argues (Kleitz, 2000:2). *Queer theory can in this case therefore be used to challenge development norms, especially the materialism and sex-gender division on which much of development is based* (Jolly, 2000:2).

2.4 Deviance, Stigma and Self-Identities

The definitions of deviance can be many and more or less complex. One can in simple terms define everything that differs from what is most common as deviance, where in this context, heterosexuality is normal and any deviations, such as homosexuality can be described as abnormal.

A society has many groups and people can belong to many groups simultaneously, each one with its own set of rules and people support a standard of judgment that does not directly apply to them (Becker 1966:8). These rules and attitudes that the different groups in the society creates, often define situations and appropriate behavior within certain groups when specifying actions as right or wrong (Becker 1966:1). Deviance can thus be the failure to obey these sets of rules, where individuals are being disqualified from full social acceptance (Becker, 1966:8). Another view of deviance can be about revealing the presence of a disease (Becker, 1966:5), for example when people think of homosexuality as a product or symptom of a mental disease. Since homosexuality is criminalized in Lebanon, most homosexuals therefore try to obey the rules of the society and these of the different groups by hiding an important part of their identity. These gay and lesbians do not take his or her deviance with them into social situations, although the stigma remains. This group has instead their own set of rules as they share the experience of being labeled as an outsider. The creation of deviance often depends on how other people react to it (Becker, 1966). Homosexuality is viewed by many Arabs (living in the Middle East) as a sexuality that does not fit the public concept of normal and therefore does not fit the norm for legal rights.

This is where the *stigma*[6] comes into the picture, as a public accusation, since deviance is not a quality that lies in behavior itself, but in the interaction between the people who commits an act and those who respond to it. This does not mean that acts regarded as deviant by others "really" are deviant (Becker, 1966:19). What will be discussed in this study is how a stigmatized person is responding to his or her situation and not so much how they obtain the stigma. One possible solution could be to try to correct what he believes is a failing of his being with treatment such as psychotherapy or to cure with faith (Goffman, 1986:9). Another more common way is to hide that part of the identity that is causing public accusation by acting "normal" or "straight" in public.

Further, Becker identifies in his book *Outsiders – Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1966) several categories of deviance.

Table 1: Types of Deviant Behavior

	Obedient Behavior	**Rule-Breaking behavior**
Perceived as deviant	Falsely accused	Pure deviant
Not perceived as deviant	Conforming	Secret deviant

Source: Becker (1966), *Outsiders – Studies in the Sociology of Deviance,* p209

The *conforming behavior* is explained as a deviant that is obeying the rules and of course is perceived by others as obeying the rules. The *pure deviant* on the other hand is the one disobeying the rules and is perceived as doing so. Further, the *falsely accused* is perceived as someone who has committed an inappropriate action, although he has not. And lastly the *secret deviant* is a person who commits inappropriate acts yet nobody knows about it (Becker, 1966:209). In this thesis, according to Becker's categorization, all gays and Lesbians in Lebanon are within the category Rule-breaking behavior since homosexuality is criminalized. However there is a variety in how gays and lesbians are responding to their deviance and how the society is responding to them.

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[6] Stigma has historically in Christian traditions been referred to as bodily signs of holy grace or bodily signs of physical disorder. The term Stigma used here is more linked to its original meaning that originates from the Greeks, referring to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier (Goffman, 1986:2)

2.5 Terminological Clarifications

In this section definitions of sexual orientation and identity will be discussed based on the specific context in which the fieldwork took place and will in the analysis be investigated in relation to the construction of identity and social stigma. Some questions concerning terminology that came up during the field study, important for the understanding of constructing identities were:

- *Is gay a self-defining word or is it a stigmatizing word used by others to separate the deviants from the normal?*
- *Is homosexuality viewed upon as a behavior or an identity?*
- *Can people who engage in same-sex activity be "straight"?*

Our understanding of sexual identity depends greatly on the language available to us, since it is the language that shapes our self-identities. The development of new language to express self-identity is important in order to claim one's rights and recognition. For example is the emergence of the word gay in the early 1970s an important step for the legitimization of homosexuality as a sexual identity (Ritchie & Barker, 2006: 585). The same is true for the word queer. It was from the beginning used as a word of insult to marginalized sexualities or deviants but was reclaimed during the 80s in America by the gay and lesbian community and was used as an expression of pride and to describe a sexual orientation and/or gender expression that does not conform to the heteronormative society (Jolly, 2000:2). In an activist or political context it is used as an expression of pride in sexual diversity and variations of gender identity. Queer in this context challenges the notion of fixed identities and tries to dissolve definitions set by others than the people themselves.

In Lebanon, self identified homosexuals have adopted the word gay or lesbian, although it differs between generations. There was no positive word in Arabic for homosexuals before and the word homosexual or homosexuality is not often used by the community because of its negative overtones, especially in a historical context referring to effeminate males or a clinical description of men who show sexual desires to other men. In modern language the term is used to ascribe both male and female

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same sex behavior. Today, the homosexual term has diversified in to a plurality of sexual identities such as gay, lesbian queer etcetera (Samelius & Wågberg, 2005:11). In the Lebanese context the creation of these identities are intricate since it is part of a modernization process often associated with western imperialism.

There is an ongoing debate among LGBTs around the world about how homo-and bisexual persons should be named. Unfortunately this is not a debate that LGBTs in Lebanon take part in. Generally, they have adopted a "western" terminology" when lacking a debate of their own. But it is important to note that no definition is universally recognized, and the discussions are dynamic (Samelius & Wågberg, 2005:11). Self –definition among LGBTs in Lebanon will be discussed further in section 4.2.2.

In this thesis the term LGBT is used instead of homosexuals when talking about the target group as a whole. The correct abbreviation should include queer and intersexual (LGBTQI) but since no intersexual took part of the study, restrictions where made to only LGBTs. Further, homosexuality is used as a term explaining sexual acts and feelings between people of the same gender, whether male or female, or whether they regard themselves as gay or lesbian (Whitaker, 2006:14). Gay and lesbian is used when referring to a person who has adopted this word as their sexual orientation regardless of their openness. The word "straight" is used when referring to heterosexuals and the heteronormative society. This is also the word used by the target group themselves, sometimes because of lack of knowledge about the meaning of heterosexuality as opposing homosexuality. The definition of bisexuals are more complex since many regard themselves as bisexuals but label themselves as gay or lesbian. In this thesis they will be referred to as gay or lesbians since this is how they label themselves.

However, it is important to remember that there are two aspects of gender identity, the self defined and the ascribed or imposed gender identity based on appearance of reproductive tracts and organs (Samelius & Wågberg, 2005:12). The use of gender categories can be questioned if they are used in a mechanical way and attention should always be put on how gender relations and patterns are constructed and understood in different cultures and societies and how they change over time (ibid).

This will be important for the discussion about deviance and social stigma when investigating how gay and lesbians find ways of adaptation in a society that is still condemning homosexuality, both legally and morally.

3. Methods

In the following section the ambition is to give an overview of the data collection methods and material used for the theses as well as discussing the validity and reliability of the sources and the data collected. First there will be a section providing an insight in the field methods used (3.1). Since most of the theories and methods used have the characteristics of what Desai and Potter (2006) define as a humanistic approach, emphasizing the importance of the individual and the ways of perceiving, thinking and doing (p.8), this study has adopted a qualitative approach using methods such as participant observations, open-ended semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to investigate people's day to day lives and struggles. The strengths of such methods lie in the flexibility to bring out different aspects of the research problem and to understand a specific phenomenon or event from the target group's perspective. All these methods, it's pro and cons will be described separately in the sections below. Lastly, an ethical discussion (3.2) can be found accentuating the moral implications of fieldwork.

3.1 Methodology

Empirical material was collected in Beirut between October and December 2007 during a period of political instability due to the deadlock in the presidential election. 22 interviews where conducted, mostly with gays (8) and lesbians (5) although some bisexuals (2) and transsexuals (1) were part of the study, all with different degrees of openness regarding their sexuality. A few interviews were also conducted with friends of gay and lesbians (3) This subgroup of sexual minorities (LGBTs) consisted of a wide range of age groups, the youngest being 16 and the oldest 43, and different religious belonging (Druze, Christian, Sunni and Shi'a), which captures well the Lebanese diverse culture. Further, key informant interviews with Helem and Meem staff (3) was conducted as they are the only organizations in Lebanon working with the liberation of LGBTs from all forms of legal, social and cultural discrimination

(helem.net). These interviews gave a wider perspective on the work against homophobia in Lebanon and helped to get in contact with further interviewees. In order to identify and get in contact with more informants, observations were undertaken in known gay places such as nightclubs, cafés and other cruising areas around Beirut. Focus group discussion, informal discussions and information gathering through Internet sites, blogs and forums where all part of the field study.

3.1.1 Interviews

Interviewing is not only about well formulated and organized question asking, it also requires good listening and interpretation of the information shared between the interviewer and the interviewee. Since interviews where loosely structured with no fixed questions, the challenge was to create a good environment in order for the interview to construct meaningful knowledge (May, 2002:227). To create this environment, interviews often started out with an open conversation, sharing experience of the topic with the interviewee. This allows the interviewee to be more relaxed and reflective upon his/her own situation in relation to others and gives an opportunity for narratives to emerge (ibid). If questions where asked, they had a more biographical orientation since the issue of sexual orientation/identity is a process that develops over time. This is also one of the reasons why interviews sometimes took longer than planned[7].

As my experience increased, interviews also tended to become more informative, since the knowledge of the interviewer about the topic in hand is an important criterion for good interviews (Kvale, 1996). The interview situation differed a great deal depending of the age and maturity among interviewees. The interviewees that have completely accepted their sexual orientation could sometimes, with a great portion of self-esteem, take over the whole interview session, making it difficult to guide the discussions into the "right" topics again, yet among less experienced gays or lesbians, the interview situation tended to become more therapeutic.

Out of request from the interviewees, no recording device was used while conducting interviews. Instead note taking during and at the end of each interview were done to

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[7] Approximate time per interview was 40 minutes

remember the most important things. In this way, the researcher/interviewer has to rely heavily on his or her empathy and memory during and after each interview (Kvale, 1996:161). The flaws with this approach might be a restriction to use direct quotes and that some nuances of the discussions might get lost along the way. On the other hand, Kvale (1996) makes an interesting point about this in the book *Interviews – An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* saying that:

> The interviewer's immediate memory will include the visual information of the
> situation as well as the social atmosphere and personal interaction, which to a large
> extent is lost in the audiotape recording (p. 161).

Language was sometimes a hindrance although not a major obstacle for the research. No interpreter was used during interviews or observations since people are quite good in expressing themselves in English. Some confusion and misunderstandings are of course still a risk since the researcher is in an unfamiliar cultural context where specific cultural expressions may cause misinterpretations.

In addition, the relatively small number of interviews raised concerns whether if it was possible to construct a full portrait of the community. But as Ragin (1994) put it, the number is not what matters, "it is the soundness of the portrayal (...)" (p.87). Even so, the small amount of interviews makes it difficult for comparison with other cases. This also brought up the question of authenticity in the study as explained in Brymans' *Social research Methods* (2004). As the study revolves around the lives of a small group of people, can the research fairly represent different viewpoints among the people of this specific social setting and does the research help to arrive at a better understanding of their social milieu? (Bryman, 2004:412) I.e. can generalizations be made into to a wider context? According to some scholars, emphasis should be put on the educative authenticity of the study, as it questions if the research helps the target group to better understand and appreciate the perspectives of other members of their community. It is also important to identify if the study has been a motivation and if it had an empowering effect on the target group, engaging them to change their conditions. All these questions are, as Bryman (2004) describes it, mostly used as evaluating criteria to measure the reliability of qualitative research and can in some cases be provocative as the wider impact of research is controversial (p.413). For this

reason, I believe it is better used as criteria for data collection methods and ethical issues as it puts the methods in better relation to the theories applied and vice versa.

3.1.2 Observations

The fieldwork started out with participant observations which Dewalt & Dewalt (2002) declare is "a method in which a researcher takes part in daily activities, rituals, interactions and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture." (p.1). Observations were made mainly in gay clubs and cafés. These places are not officially recognized as gay clubs even though they are known among the people to be "gay friendly", which means that gay and lesbians are welcome. These places are not illegal clubs, they are just places where gay and Lesbian can hang out without being judge by their appearance or sexual orientation. These observations gave an opportunity to collect data on a wide range of behaviors and capture a great variety of interactions. This observational approach provides an opportunity to experience things that the target group may be unaware, unwilling or unable to discuss in an interview or focus group.

As an open observer, gaining access to the gay community was easy in comparison to the lesbian community although it helped to have a supporter that vouched for me and the value of the research and that later also helped me to get access to the lesbian community. I experienced that gender was not the main problem for getting access as they put more emphasis on sexual orientation. In order to get the target group's full support I had to reveal my own sexual orientation (as being bisexual or queer) as they tend to be suspicious of "straight" people and especially the intentions of a "straight" person doing research on homosexuals. This is discussed further in the ethical part (3.2).

As participant observations require a particular approach to the recording of observations, field notes of observations, conversations and interviews were done carefully on a daily basis (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002:2). In the good old days diaries and letters to friends and family was used as field notes as it can contain good information about the research process. Today, with Internet as a main tool for the spread of information, letters and diaries are now exchanged for blogs and emails. These new

types of field notes can be used as material for understanding the researchers own relationship to various field sites and people. Keeping a diary, or in my case a Blog, can also be important for both personal and analytic reasons (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002:153). After hearing or seeing something interesting that was linked to the research questions, I always wrote down some notes on a piece of paper (jotted notes), and if in a night club or at some other place where I didn't have my paper and pen, notes were taken on the mobile phone. The mobile phone was also a good tool for taking pictures (visual notes), thus it is more discrete than a camera.

3.1.3 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussion as a complement to interviews was a good tool to gather information about the interaction between individuals and to explore group behaviors and norms (Desai & Potter, 2006:154). One focus group discussions with Gays was carried out among a group of friends in the safety of their homes since the topic is very delicate and many feel unsafe sharing personal information with people that they don't know. The focus group discussion with lesbians was carried out in a crowded bar where loud music sometimes made it difficult to follow discussions. And as no recording device was used during the discussions I had to rely heavily on my memory and perceptive ability. This may not be the ideal way of conducting focus group discussions but as it was the same people that I have already had individual interviews with, it was more an opportunity for the subjects to revise their views when challenged by others and for the interviewer to grasp the range of opinion (Bryman 200:508).

3.1.4 The use of Internet

When using Internet as a source of data one has to pay extra attention to the authenticity of the data since almost anyone could set up a webpage these days. But as Helem's web page is mostly used for gathering information about their work against homophobia and collecting narratives through their forum, it was not considered a problem. Through their forum and chat service, Helem's webpage provides a good number of narratives from gays and lesbians about topics as "coming out" or general discussions on the topic. Their webpage is thus an important source for data collection

since Internet is a big meeting place for Gay and Lesbians that want to discuss different problems or issues in an anonymous way without exposing themselves to the public.

3.2 Ethical Issues

The moral implications of fieldwork can be many but mostly it focuses on guidelines like informal consent, confidentiality and consequences (Kvale, 1996: 153). Given that homosexuality is criminalized in Lebanon, safety issues related to my target group became important. Even if the law is rarely applied, it is critical not to reveal the identity of the subjects. Confidentiality must be guarantied so that no identifying information is written in the final report (Kvale, 1996:114). Many of the informants wanted to make sure that no names and photos were going to be used in the thesis and therefore, through an informal consent, all important features of the study was shared to make it clear for the subjects that it is not the purpose nor is it necessary for my study to use real names and photos. Therefore only the age and their sexual orientation will be used throughout the thesis.

Further, the role of the researcher and the relation to the subjects was brought up during the field work, as my close involvement with my informants made me question the effect it might have on my research and on the subjects. On the positive side was the fact that by not only being a researcher but also a good friend, I manage to get a deeper knowledge about the topic at hand and thus give something back to the informants. This empathetic stance is important in order to be able to see through the eyes of the people being studied. But it does not come without problems. The main critique against qualitative research is that of being too subjective, because of the researcher close personal relationship to the people studied and that the study might therefore end up being a biased product (Bryman, 2004:424). But, as it sometimes can be hard for the researcher to interpret the actions and the social world of their informants, especially from the view of the subjects under research, the close relation to the subjects became an advantage as it gave access to a deeper knowledge about the lives and thoughts of the target group.

Another ethical assumption is that it is more appropriate for women to conduct research with other women. This rests upon the belief that you are either an 'insider' or 'outsider' depending on your gender (Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000:122). In my case, gender was not the main concern, although I felt that being a woman might have given me an advantage in the gay community as well as the lesbian community. One reason for this could be that I was not considered a threat to other gays in terms of sex and love. And by also being an "outsider", not from within the community or from inside the larger context, it became easier for the subjects to express feeling they might otherwise be afraid of telling a fellow Lebanese. Their might also be doubts on whether it is appropriate for western researchers to carry out research outside of their own culture before exploring the power relations, inequalities and injustices upon which differences between ourselves and those we study are based on (Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000:119). But for this study the advantage as a foreigner became evident regarding religious differences between my informants, as you in general don't discuss your religious belonging in order to avoid any political or ideological indifference that might cause conflict.

4. Analysis

By using the conceptual framework explained in section 2.1 the next section will be divided into three societal levels which are all, more or less interrelated to each other. This framework will provide a structure for better understanding of the interactions of gay and lesbians in the society (Look at page 12 for a figure). The first section looks at *the non gay dominant culture*. The word *"non gay"* is used here to refer to the *"straight"* heterosexual dominant culture. In the first level there will also be a short historical and present overview of attitudes and legislation concerning homosexuality. The second level will describe and analyze *the gay and lesbian subculture*, exploring the concept of sexual identity and level of openness regarding sexual orientation. The last level has been given the name *Gay and lesbian in environment*. This is where the two previous levels meet, were gay and lesbians interact with the non gay dominant culture. An assessment of the work of Helem and Meem will be done here followed by an analysis of the coping mechanisms and forms of adaptations that follow marginalization and stigma. In all sections there will also be a discussion about homophobia – *Institutional, Internalized and Individual.*

4.1 The Non Gay Dominant Culture

4.1.1 Historical Perspectives and Jurisdiction

Most of the modern attitudes toward homosexuality in Lebanon have religious, legal, and medical underpinnings. To understand these it is important to go back in history and look at both Christian and Muslim traditions and its relation to homosexual acts. What all of the above keystones have in common is the condemnation of homosexual acts and other non-procreative sexual behavior which are viewed as "unnatural", something that does not fit the norm (Whitaker, 2006:9). In Muslim and Christian traditions, the consolidation of family is build upon strong patriarchal structures. The moral and religious values, including marriage, is an ideal for building a society and regulations and rules deciding right from wrong within the matrimonial constitution

are determined and the sexual limitations that follows, expresses the holy union between man and woman. Marriage is thus seen as a protection against any temptation (Whitaker, 2006: 164).

Using the family as an institution to control sexuality is the core of both Muslim and Christian belief. Acts violating these regulations like infidelity and homosexual acts are condemned both legally and morally. During interviews with the informants and thru observations it became clear that boys are under greater pressure than girls when it comes to living up to parental aspirations, because of the assumption that being gay destroys "the image of the man" (anonymous information). This is a characteristic feature of a male-oriented society in which the hopes of traditional families is put on the male offspring (Whitaker, 2006:23).

In almost all religions, homosexuality is a great sin, maybe even the worst. A known story that one of the informants shared during an interview says, *"every time two men are having sex the chair of God is trembling"* (gay 24). These views have great affect on the LGBT community's ability to cope and build their self-identity which will be discussed further in section 4.2.2. All Arab states except Lebanon, declares Islam to be the state religion and the law of Islam, *Shari 'a*, is the main source of the law. Even so, most of these countries have or had a penal code strongly influenced by West European law (Sofer, 1992:131). According to Helem, Article 534 of the Penal code in Lebanon is of Ottoman origin, declaring homosexuality to be an *'unnatural sexual intercourse'*. This sodomy law is in fact an artifact from the French colonial time (Nadine, Meem). The article stipulates the following: *"Any sexual intercourse against nature is punished with up to one year of imprisonment"*. But the law can only be applied when the accused is "caught in the act" (Helem B). This makes an actual arrest almost impossible and cases were LGBTs have been prosecuted according to article 534 are rare and only applied when special circumstances like theft, murder, prostitution or drugs are involved (gay 24) Although using the law selectively and in combination with other crimes is a way to show the society that homosexuality is still forbidden and to sustain the good moral. More examples of this will be discussed in the section Institutional homophobia (4.1.3)

There has been a debate whether lesbians are included in this law. According to article 534 it should only apply to gay males since 'sexual intercourse' between two lesbians is practically impossible, and because what determines a sexual act is penile penetration. The term Homosexual is actually not mentioned at all in the Lebanese Penal Code. When practiced, however, the law is used to prosecute all same-sex sexual behavior. Consequently, the law is used to criminalize any kind of sexual activity between two persons of the same sex although relations between women does not seem to threat the dominant heterosexual system as much as male same-sex love (Helem B, lesbian 22).

4.1.2 Modern Attitudes and Regulations

We are good people. The only thing that sets us apart is that we like the same sex.
(Lesbian 18)

Homosexuality is a subject that Arabs living in the Middle Eastern region, even reform-minded, are generally reluctant to discuss. The climate for debate is rather cold and restricted to a view of homosexuality as an immoral sexual act rather than a sexual orientation and identity (Whitaker, 2006:10). Attitudes towards homosexuality are often deeply rooted in patriarchal structures and construction of sexuality and reproduction that ultimately constitute an aspect of power and control.

One large part of the problem is *the lack of public discussion about homosexuality,* which can be seen in the scarcity of scientifically accurate newspaper articles, books and TV programs discussing the topic without any prejudice. Many of the informants complained about this lack of debate and listed it to be the main cause of homophobia in the country. The *Daily Star* and *L'Orient-Le Jour*, two of the biggest non-Arabic newspapers, have published many articles about the LGBTs struggle for recognition and the price that LGBT people pay in Lebanon. According to Helem's webpage, these newspapers have interviewed many gays and lesbians, and the common conclusion was that homosexuality is not tolerated in the society and that LGBT people regularly suffer from physical and emotional abuse due to this lack of tolerance towards their sexual orientation. Despite these attempt to open up a debate, Arabic language newspapers still label LGBT people as perverts, deviants, sodomites

and are used in the same category as pedophilia and bestiality (Helem A). *The silenced debate about the topic of homosexuality in most parts of the Arab world makes the adaptation of deviant identities into society more difficult since it prevents many from making this part of their identity public* (Siraj, 2006:209).

Parental unawareness about homosexuality is another consequence of this lacking debate, often causing familial problems. The stigma attached to homosexuality makes it difficult for families to seek advice from their friends or other family members since they are afraid of social exclusion (Whitaker, 2006:21). Many families to gays and lesbians therefore choose to get professional help from a psychiatrist who tries to treat homosexuality as a behavioral problem or a disease. Several examples during interviews were given were family members send their son or daughter to a psychiatrist. None of them were successful. By claiming that homosexuality is a choice or a disease; it takes away the empathy and understanding of being homosexual. It is assumed that any disease or behavioral can be corrected or treated and those who still insist on perusing this "lifestyle" are discriminated and marginalized.

However, young people living in Beirut are more open and liberated today which hopefully will lead to a more tolerant society in the future. Homosexuality is more accepted today much due to media, Internet etcetera. *"Before you could not even say the word gay",* one informant declares (Gay 23). Still, among some of the interviewees, mostly friends to gays and lesbians and older gays, there is a view that being gay is a trend that will decrease in the future, living a gay life will not be as fashionable as it is now (Joelle), *"It is a showoff, a very exhibitionist society. It is the new Lebanese mentality"* (Gay 38). But in reality the society is becoming more open with more cruising areas for gays and lesbians like malls, restaurants and gay clubs. Nonetheless, *homophobia towards LGBT persons in Lebanon is a leading cause of violations of the rights of LGBT persons*. Political and religious leaders often justify it as an important cornerstone to defend morality and social order in the society. LGBT persons are therefore used as scapegoats for crimes, corruption and health problems and made to represent the evil deviating from religious, moral and family norms and values (Samelius & Wågberg, 2005:9).

4.1.3 Institutional Homophobia

The term homophobia can be explained as prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or acts of violence against sexual minorities (LGBTs), indicated in a fear or hatred of same-sex love and desire. This is manifested in the exclusion of gay and lesbians from example mainstream media with the assumption that heterosexual lifestyles are preferable and including homosexuality only in discussions about HIV/AIDS (Sears and Williams, 1997:16). LGBTs, mostly gays and transsexuals, are being portrayed in a bad way in media. By ridiculing their appearance, people with less knowledge about the topic obtain a very negative image, which further fuels homophobia. This is why it is critical to have an open debate, where the information shared is not build on prejudice.

Institutional homophobia or "cultural homophobia" can be explained as the stigmatization, denial, or condemnation against homosexuals and homosexuality in all levels of society, economic, political, familial, educational, social welfare and religious institutions. It is these institutions that set the moral standards in the society and thus becomes the main cause of the marginalization of LGBTs throughout history (Tully 2000:86). The ignorance toward the subject of homosexuality by authorities can be seen as a defense against the problem, because denial requires no action (Whitaker, 2006:57).

In Lebanon, religious leaders have great power and respect within their respective communities and most often they do not tolerate homosexuality. Helem give on their webpage several examples were religious leaders and other non- state agents have been involved in campaigns against homosexuals. In August 2003, a leading Shiite cleric emphasized the importance of the death penalty in "deterring criminals and pacifying societies" (Helem A). Referring to the Islamic law, he counted three cases where the death penalty should be imposed, one of them being homosexuality as it goes against the natural relationship between man and women, which will have a negative impact on society at large. Another report states that in May 2003, members of Hezbollah kidnapped five suspected gay men and handed them over to the police who arrested them (ibid).

Other examples where LGBT persons have been a target of Institutional homophobia is taken from the interviewees own experiences. Several have come across negative attitudes against homosexuals from teachers or other authoritarian persons. One young gay man explained that during a lecture in his university, the teacher talked about homosexuality, stating that *"among all bad things in life the worst is to be gay /.../ even a murderer is a better person"*, the teacher claimed (gay 24). Helem also reports about how two gay schoolteachers where fired upon knowledge about their sexual orientation. Further example is Dunkin' Donuts, a famous hangout for gays in Downtown Beirut, when they changed their policy to not let "gay looking" men in with the argument that these clients are trouble-makers and that their external appearance would compromise the place's family environment (Helem A).

Even at Gay clubs, there have been cases of discrimination, denying entrance to feminine looking gays. One example is with a transsexual that was coming on a regular basis to a very popular nightclub in down town Beirut. At one occasion she came in a controversy with a gay man that thought that she was flirting with his boyfriend. There was a fight and the transsexual woman (MTF=Male to Female) was thrown out of the nightclub and are no longer welcome. She claims that she was not the one starting the fight and that she was not flirting with the boy in question. When asking the owner of the club on what grounds she was blacklisted from the club he said that it is for the common good, because many people get provoked by transsexuals and that they are always the ones making trouble (transsexual 43, anonymous information).

The famous Acid Club in the Sin el-Fil district, supported by the son of the former president Lahoud, is the only publicly known gay club in Lebanon and the first in all Arab countries (Gay 24). The police have raided there twice, the first time being drug related and the other one a Christian and Muslim cruise against suspected devil worshipers but at both occasions, the hunt was also targeting gay and lesbians, linking both drug use and satanic worship with homosexuality (Helem A, Gay 24).

Other gay clubs have a more underground approach, often in a place that have mainly a *"straight"* audience. In one night club called MILK[8], Thursdays and Sundays are reserved as "Gay nights". On these nights the advertisement is sparse, mostly through member lists on internet and mobile phones in order to avoid any suspicion. On gay nights the place is crowded and there is a feeling of joy and freedom when you enter the big open white room. After midnight, men are dancing on the bar, more or less refreshed by the free drinks that were included in the entrance fee. A guard is walking around the dance floor making sure that no inappropriate behavior is carried out. In any club, straight or gay, kissing and touching or drug use is forbidden. And in most of the gay clubs, someone for the authorities comes every night to ensure that no immoral actions are carried out and if they see something they don't like they can close down the place immediately. This is why many of the gay clubs have security guards of their own to avoid this (observations at Milk).

4.2 The gay and lesbian subculture

4.2.1 "Coming out" – Openness regarding sexual orientation

Most of the people interviewed for this theses, regardless of their religious belonging or sexual orientation, have struggled to come to terms with their sexual attraction towards the same sex, which has caused them a great deal of guilt and conflict. There is a sense of duty that gays and lesbians feel towards their family that is extremely powerful; making them put family loyalty before their sexual orientation. *The difficulties about the coming-out process is on one hand fear of loosing status and respect from the society and on the other hand fear of exclusion from family*. Most of the interviewees felt that their family would not understand, thinking of it as a disease or as "wrong behavior". For those whose choice was to "come-out" to their family and friends, examples were given where family members send their homosexual son or daughter to a psychiatrist for "correction". This however did not work in any of the interviewee's cases. A young gay man told a story about his friends taking him on a trip to Bulgaria, *"the country of prostitution",* because they believed he could be treated there. While in Bulgaria, his friends forced him to have sex with prostitutes,

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[8] This club was recently closed down because the owner of the place did not want to have gays in his club anymore.

three times a day for a week. His friends paid all the bills and after spending a week in Bulgaria he returned to Beirut and continued his life as before. Some of the friends turned their back on him when they realized he was not going to change. Only a few accepted his sexual orientation (bisexual 23). Another example is when the parents of a young gay found out about his sexual orientation and send him to USA to get cured. He came back after some years and everyone believed he was cured, and so did the gay in question for a while. He got married and had kids but one day his wife caught him with another boy (gay, 23).

This is why, *a large part of the target group chooses to keep their sexuality as a secret, to avoid being stigmatized and labeled as a sick person.* Some gays and lesbians even have problems entering the gay community since they think that they can change and become straight or that it is just a phase in life. *"If you think clearly and resist your feelings you can turn normal again"* like it is an addiction one said (Bisexual 23). Another claimed, *"No person is created as gay. A gay person creates himself"*. He believes it is not biological but a choice that you have to live with and thus take the consequences of. He claims that his experience with boys was not because he wanted to; it was because he had the chance (Bisexual Male, 26).

Since the coming-out process is all about the sharing of information, acceptance and lastly disclosure with yourself and others it can be extremely hard if you live in a society where LGBTs are a stigmatized minority (Sears and Williams, 1997:66). The coming-out process is therefore often restricted to self-acceptance, leaving out the sharing of information to others, with exception to close friends and people from within the gay community. This also means that there is no room for total disclosure (Sears and Williams, 1997:67). Even if many gays and lesbians are well informed about the topic, their parents are not. Sometimes their knowledge comes from older, more experienced gay friends, but mostly it comes from searching the internet.[9] But this might not be enough if you don't have the support from friend and family. *"I'm like this but I don't want to be like this"* a young gay man said during an interview (Gay 23). He had often refused the idea of being gay although he repeatedly is having sex with men. Accepting your sexual orientation and identify with it is hard and a

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[9] Most frequent used internet sites among gays are gaylebanon.com, gaydar.com and facebook.com

long process. Many believe they can live double lives but suffers from depression and guilt as a cause of this. *Self-acceptance is the first step in the coming-out process but in order to fully take this step it is of great importance is to get acceptance from your close ones* (Sears and Williams, 1997:67). On Helem's webpage a gay called Mr-gigolo wrote:

> From my puberty period, things within me were different from the most of other boys that I knew. I had difficult times to accept myself; for that I had a tendency towards my own sex. I didn't know what to do and how to react to this thing but I was sure that at a certain point I had to tell my parents about it… I knew the reactions that I will receive towards this subject and that made me wonder for how long will I follow this double life and will carry on bottling up this secret ?! (Mr-gigolo, 2007)

But the experience most encountered when they told a close friend or a family member was negative often leaving them with regret they ever spoke out. For these people it just becomes more uncomplicated to live a life "in the closet", safe and far away from any homophobia and stigma. This is why many seek assistance from Helem or Meem when they have problems managing their sexuality their low self-esteem and paranoia. *By reducing negative attitudes and acts of prejudice against sexual identity minorities and provide support, the effect of the "coming out" process and the well being of the target group can improve* (Sears and Williams, 1997:65).

4.2.2 To be an Outsider – Deviance and Self-identity

Self-identity can be described as a "view of one's self in relation to specific social situations" (Tully, 2000:116). People can have several identities, more or less important or dominant. But since gay and lesbians in Lebanon are members of a stigmatized minority group they must learn and develop their self-identity within an often hostile environment". *Since deviance is something that is created by society deviant activities are often carried out in private or within the gay community or simply denied by actively taking roles and behaviors associated with the non-gay dominant society* (Tully 2000:117). However, some gays and lesbians that were interviewed explained that they had trouble entering the "gay life" since they thought that there is no turning back if they do. They believe that there is still a chance to

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change and become straight if they just resist their needs and attractions towards the same sex. But there is also a fear of being caught if you expose yourself to the gay community, a fear of being labeled. As a consequence, some gays and lesbians are afraid of being seen in gay clubs. To solve the issue of being labeled as a homosexual if entering a gay club a young gay man practiced to be a bartender and applied for a job in a gay club. By this he was safe, protected by his profession. He got to know many gays visiting the club and felt stronger and surer about himself as he got to know other gays (gay 27).

Many share the same experience of belonging when entering the gay community. Before knowing people in the same situation, gays and lesbians feel more like an outsider. But knowing that you are not alone makes them feel more at ease with themselves and they slowly begin to accept their sexuality and begin to share experiences with each other. This is what makes the LGBT community so strong (observations). Gays and lesbians that were interview explained that their gay friends are like their family. They love some of them more than their own family, maybe because they know thing about them that their real family don't.

But still, many feel a need to leave the country and migration is getting more common among LGBTs in Lebanon, especially among Gay and lesbian couples wanting children. Meem and Helem are working on this issue since they hope to create a second option to emigration, making LGBTs feel safe and happy in their home towns. They want their members to make their emigration decisions thoroughly, not because they want to run away or because they are disillusioned with the West as a perfect world. *"If everybody leaves, who is going to make a change?"* (Meem A)

4.2.3 Internalized Homophobia

During an interview with a 25 year old gay about the topic of homophobia he started the conversation by saying: *"I was the first homophobic I met"* (Gay 25). Negative feelings towards one self's sexual orientation is often imbedded in fear of discovery, denial or discomfort with being homosexual and is what defines Internalized homophobia (Sears and Williams, 1997:15). The 25 year old boy could easily identify with other people's homophobia since he had trouble accepting his own sexual

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orientation at first. He claimed it to be the insecurity and ignorance about the topic that fueled these feelings. One reason could also be an institutional homophobia that is reflected in school curriculum etcetera, fueling young gays and lesbians self content and internalized homophobia.

Further, the 25 year old gay explained that even after accepting his sexuality as something that is not abnormal or sick, he can still sometimes resent other gays that makes problems for other gays by dressing feminine or acts like girls, *"it's ok to take the female role in bed but not on the streets"*, he said (Gay 25).

Negative feelings such as contempt and self-loathing towards ones own sexual orientation is common and can cause a lot personal problems for gays and lesbians. Guilt towards family is common and can be seen as a cause of growing up in a country with a lot of restrictions, laws and traditions saying it is wrong. It is understandable that there are gays and lesbians that dislike their sexuality when you live in a society that produces homophobia both institutionally and individually. *"The problem is that if you are not comfortable with yourself, how can you expect the people around you to be comfortable with you?"* (Gay 25)

Tension between the religious identity and sexual identity is also a reality determining the openness about sexual orientation. For many of the respondents faith was of considerate importance, regardless of religious belonging. To deal with this issue, many choose to separate their religious identity with their sexual identity while others where struggling to reconcile the two conflicting identities. For these people there are a strong need to fix what their religion tells them is wrong. They struggle with guilt because they grew up in a country with traditions, laws and restrictions saying that it is wrong. *"Are you born gay or not?"* one asked during an interview. For him the only comfort is to believe that God created him like this. But still he fear God and is really afraid what the consequences of living a gay life would be (Gay 23). And if God didn't make him this way the other explanation is that something happened in his childhood that made him this way. He doesn't se himself as sick yet everyone have some kind of problems that need to be fixed and everyone should meet a psychologist to fix this (Ibid). A lesbian girl of age 18 shared the same experience of feeling sick. But after accepting her sexuality as something that is a natural part of her she feels

less guilty towards God and she claims that in her religion *"being a liar and a hypocrite is a big sin"* and if she hides her sexuality she would become one. This was the biggest reason for her telling everyone about her sexual orientation (lesbian 18).

Several of the informants also believe that being gay is just a phase. They still have a wish to get married and have children in the future. Therefore they want to see a psychologist that can tell him what he can change in his life and to get a neutral persons opinion, someone that will understand and not blame (bisexual 26). It was moreover a common belief that marriage could be the cure, although most wished to have both a happy marriage and a gay life on the side.

4.3 Gays and Lesbians in Environment

4.3.1 Helem and Meem – LGBT Rights and Work against Homophobia

LGBTs in Lebanon, as a stigmatized minority, have for a long time lived with the inflexibility of heterosexual gender roles within the society. To challenge the cultural attitudes and regulations discussed in previous sections, Helem and Meem has given a voice to the LGBTs living in Lebanon. Helem is the Arabic acronym for *"Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders"* and is a non-governmental non-profit organization working on various human rights issues (Helem C). Their work has created space for discussion about LGBT rights but is also a place where LGBTs can come for support regarding health or other personal problems and thoughts. Helem has survived partly by not limiting its attention to gay and lesbian activism alone but also because they seek allies among other organizations who work on sexual and reproductive health or human rights and other professionals such as lawyers, doctors and teachers (Whitaker, 2006:213).

Helem is mainly targeting the hetero society such as the Ministry of health and ministry of social affairs with advocacy and awareness campaigns and supports gays and lesbians with services such as Health centers which offers free, voluntary and

anonymous HIV testing, psychologists and cooperation with human rights lawyers (George, Helem). They also work hard to get exposed in media and they make a lot of noise if the police harass any LGTBs, do raids or close down gay bars. By making them heard in media, Helem has managed to prevent much of the above. Helem has a large network of NGOs working for the same cause and they are constantly cooperating to get support from decision makers to change the law. Their work depends mainly on voluntary work and funds from international organizations (George, Helem).

Meem (short for "majmu'a mu'azara al-mar'a al-mithliyya" meaning Group for the support of women that are lesbian)[10] started out as a female branch to Helem, but is now an independent community for lesbian women in Lebanon. The group was created on the idea that women should be encouraged to empower themselves and each other through mutual support. It is a closed, private group, not out of fear they claim, but because they want to protect the safety and security of their members. Nadine, the coordinator of Meem says: *"We are not quiet because we are afraid, it is our strategy. This is the best way to create a movement"*. She believes in the strength of a person's own ability to change their life. *"Start with yourself and then it will ripple off"* (Nadine, Meem). She claims that international organizations do not understand this stance and pushes them to do advocacy work. Nadine thinks it is enough that Helem is doing awareness campaigns and that Meem's focus should be on individual and personal empowerment. Their goal is to create a safe space in Lebanon where lesbians can meet, talk, discuss issues, share experiences, and work on improving their lives. Meem started with 4 members and has today a total of 194 members. It is the only lesbian group in the Arab world except from Palestine but they work under Israeli law (Nadine, Meem). Like Helem, Meem relies on grants and individual donations to keep their programs running.

Even if Helem and Meem are working against homophobia in Lebanon, many gays and lesbians are afraid to be open about their sexual orientation. The level of openness as discussed in previous section is often restricted to close friends, mostly from within the LGBT community. For these people, Helem and Meem is more like a media

[10] Meem is also the name for the letter M

center that puts attention on the existence of gay people by increasing knowledge and not pushing LGBTs to form their sexual identity (psychologist, Helem). Some gay people that were interviewed, had a conviction that Helems' and Meems' work might have an negative impact on gays and lesbians, thinking that they push gays and lesbians to continue to stay gay even if they had the chance to change, by telling them it is normal and part of their identity and nothing to be ashamed of. This is a complicated matter since *the paradox lays in the struggle against homophobia through visibility on one hand and on the other the increasing homophobia that follows this visibility of gay and lesbians in the society*. Nevertheless, Helem and Meem have put a lot of effort in changing the law and on improving the lives of LGBTs in Lebanon.

4.3.2 "Straight" Appearance – Adaptations to Social stigma

There is a variety of ways young gays and lesbians cope with their situation as being a stigmatized minority. Some simply deny their same- sex feelings or activities, others try to fix it by treatment which in most of the cases is unsuccessful. *But most common gay and lesbians choose to hide their sexual identity by actively taking on roles and behaviors associated with the non-gay dominant culture and engage in heterosexual behaviors as a "cover" (Tully 2000:118). This kind of adapting behavior is caused by the stigma attached to their identity as LGBTs* (Goffman, 1989: 3). On Helem's forum a gay called AvY wrote:

> "I wake up in the morning and put on my other face... I was dreaming about my boyfriend throughout the night. I was safe in my dreams, but now I'm back in the real world, and mum is outside making breakfast for me. /---/ I live a double life. I'm gay, but I am also straight... for those who don't know. I don't like the way I am living, and I don't think things should be this way. Sure, I am proud of who I am, and I, along with many others, accept myself to be what I truly am. And yet I feel such reluctance in even sending out signals to my parents about my sexuality. I cover up, and pretend that one day, they will be able to put up a portrait of me with my wife and kids... God knows that's never going to happen. I won't let it. I will not be like those whom I despise... I will not live a lie. But am I already living a lie?" (AvY, 2008)

Although Lebanon, compared to other Arab states, has come much further when it comes to LGBT issues, many still live in shame and in fear for scandals and social exclusion. They are forced to live a double life, and those choosing to *"come out"* are a minority and they have taken the risk of being "caught" by the law or being rejected from their family and friends. Some choose to marry, have children and give up their *"gay life"* or live their homosexual life in secrecy. Many of the informants had a belief that they would get married and have children in the future leaving their *"gay life"* behind. This indicates according to Whitaker (2006), *"a growing gap between the requirements of society and life as it is actually lived, between keeping up the tradition or respectability and the things people do in private or when away from home* (p.7)".

It became clear during my four months of observations and interviews that the LGBT community, especially the lesbian, is very much closed. What goes on inside is nothing you discuss openly. Few have straight friends that know about their sexuality and for some it is even hard to be in the straight society because they have to keep a straight appearance and hide an important part of their life as a secret. They start to lie to hide the truth and they are constantly changing their personalities to fit in to the norm. These *"Janus faced identities"*, as I call them, have two faces, one is looking in to the past and the other into the future. The past is keeping them locked to family traditions and norms while the future provides independence and freedom to choose your own life and many gays and lesbians in Lebanon are trapped between these two opposites.

On the positive side a 27 year old Christian boy said that he believes that his sexuality gave him success in life because he can understand people better, both girls and boys. He claims to be more open-minded towards people since he has *"experience and access to two worlds"* (Gay 27). Nevertheless it is difficult to separate these two lives. At some point the two worlds convene and you have to deal with the possibility of getting caught. On Helems forum one called Raja wrote:

> "I quickly began having two groups of friends: the gay group and the
> straight group. My heart beat at an incredible pace every time there was a
> chance encounter between the two groups". (Raja, 2007)

[40]

The belief in acting "straight" in public also rests on gays and lesbians own thoughts and stereotyped conceptions about gender and sexuality even if deviance is a product of a transaction that takes place between some social group and one who is viewed as a rule-breaker (Becker, 1966:10). Many of the informants have few straight friends. This can end up in a kind of heterophobia were gays and lesbians start to have trouble being in the straight society (lesbian 22). The gay community has instead their own set of rules as they share the stigma and the experience of being labeled as an outsider (Becker, 1966:10).

This is what Becker (1966) would call a *conforming behavior* where the stigmatized outsider obey the rules of the non-gay dominant culture. But there is also a break-ruling behavior when gays and lesbians are secretly obeying the rules, which Becker calls *secret deviants* (Becker, 1966:20). This is when gays and lesbians are hiding their true sexual identity to the public and does not take his or her deviance with them into social situations, although the stigma remains. A young lesbian explained it as *"The difficulty is not that I feel victimized of being lesbian, it is the stigma attached to it"*, (Lesbian 17).

4.3.3 Individual Homophobia, violence and hate crimes

Psychological heterosexism or Individual homophobia, as called in this thesis, is a belief in the superiority of heterosexuality and heterosexuals, which can erupt into antigay prejudice. But people are not born homophobic. These attitudes are acquired through interaction with others such as family members, teachers, friends or other authoritarian persons (Sears and Williams, 1997:49) *Homophobic and heterosexist attitudes are learned, shaped and maintained through communication and it is also through communication that these attitudes can be eradicated* (Sears and Williams, 1997:50). Stigmatizing and discriminating words such as *"pervert"* and *"faggots"* is mostly based on an assumption of his inferiority and a danger of what the stigmatized person represents (Goffman, 1989:5). In a letter to the lesbian support group Meem one anonymous wrote:

"You are so fucking disgusting. stay in the goddamn closet and lock yourself in it until you rot and die. what a fucked up specie! lesbians and faggots should be skinned and burned alive ! YOU MAKE NATURE PUKE. and the most disgusting part of it all is the fact you want to get married to each other and adopt children. whoever gives you a child is as condemned as you are, you selfish immoral fucks." (Meem B)

Meem and Helem have on a regular basis had to deal with individual emergency cases of lesbians and gays facing discrimination from family, workplace, and social surroundings. In such cases they provided legal, financial, and moral support (Nadine, Meem) According to both Helem and Meem, violence against LGBTs are mostly common within the family, although violence in the cruising areas happens even if it is more common with robbery (George, Helem). There have also been many cases where guys walking out of homo-friendly nightclubs have been harassed by numerous cab drivers and various men driving by (anonymous information). Further there have been numerous cases of verbal and physical abuse among the interviewees that were just hushed or ignored because they are homosexuals. A couple of years ago, a transsexual woman was abducted by a man and taken to a place where his friend was waiting and she got beaten up and threaten with a gun to her head. They beat her unconscious and put her under ground in the sand on the nearby beach. Luckily she woke up and because they had not buried her very deep, she was able to escape. However she did not report this accident since she did not want to make a fuss about it. But the memories and the scars remains she said (transsexual 43). In Lebanon there is a regulation saying that if you change your birth sex, you are labeled as transsexual, neither a woman nor a man. This is what it says in your passport which makes it very difficult for transgender persons to be accepted. These public accusations create a feeling of shame for the stigmatized person that arises from the individual's perception of his identity as a failing even if many believe that homophobia is caused by fear and insecurity.

In Lebanon, *"honor crimes"* are committed although it is not very common. Helem and Meem has recorded several cases were family members have been involved in abuse against homosexuals. In December 2002 a young gay man was insulted by his entire family and repeatedly beaten up and threatened to be killed by his brothers and his father for ruining his family's honor. Numerous reports of murder of gay men

have been counted and multiple accounts of physical and verbal violence, death threats and exclusion by family members (Helem A). The cruising areas are especially dangerous for gay men. In 2006 a young gay man was picked up by a car on the cornice in Beirut and taken back to his own home. While at home the person that picked him up called some friends without his knowledge which later came to the apartment. The police found him dead in his apartment days later, beaten and raped by several men. They never caught the killers (Rasha).

Although Lebanon is changing for the better there is still much left to do. *"Now people can smile at us, before they spit at us"* a young lesbian girl said (lesbian 22). But still the rule of life is to get married and have kids and in order for gays and lesbians in Lebanon to live a life in full acceptance one have to overcome traditions that are deeply rooted in the society. It is true that once you accept who and what you are, you should not really be bothered by what random people on the street say or think of you. On the other hand, what the LGBT community in Lebanon is facing are not just a couple of comments here and there; it is an institutional problem that will need a structural change in order to improve. This however takes time and a lot of effort both from the LGBT community in Lebanon and its supporters. But an international agenda is also needed. In the last section, there will be a short discussion on how to work with these issues in the future, mostly from an international point of view but also how researcher can continue to put attention to these specific issues.

5. Conclusion

During the research process and the writing of this thesis the attempt has been to highlight the interactions between gays and lesbians in different levels of society as well as the coping and adapting mechanisms that follows marginalization and stigma. Further, three levels of homophobia has been discussed and its effects on the LGBT community in Lebanon and an assessment has been done of the work of Helem and Meem. In this final section I will start by summarizing some of the most important points made by reviewing the empirical material presented in the analysis followed by a section for recommendations and suggestions for further research in this topic.

5.1 Reviewing the Empirical Findings

Beirut as being a diverse ethnic and religious city is a rather open-mined city compared to other cities in the Middle Eastern region. Even so, the topic of homosexuality is something that creates insecurity. The lack of an open debate is one cause which generates homophobia. Fear of the unknown can be explained as one reason for these negatives attitudes. But changes of such attitudes may be accomplished through educative approaches and awareness campaigns. Even so, more open-minded people in Beirut view homosexuality as a fashion. Mostly because of how media is handling the topic when blaming western countries for the spread of information that is demoralizing to the youth in Lebanon, encouraging them to live a "gay life" in a "western style".

The recent increase of homosexuals in the society can be explained as a result of them feeling safer and that they are not alone in their struggle. This is much thanks to Helem and Meem and their work to overcome heterosexism in the Lebanese society and their attempts to reform article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalizing homosexuality. However, increased homophobia is also a result of this visibility,

which creates a fear among gays and lesbians to fully accept their sexuality or at least feel comfortable enough not to hide an important part of their identity in public. Few have straight friends that know about their sexuality and for some it is even hard to be in the straight society because they have to keep a straight appearance and hide an important part of their life as a secret. They start to lie to hide the truth and live a straight life as a "cover". These forms of adaptations and coping mechanisms are understandable if you want to avoid being stigmatized. But the question still remains: Are they truly "straight from the heart"?

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research and Recommendations

Given that sparse literature on female homosexuality, especially in Middle Eastern countries more focus and attention is needed on this specific topic. This thesis had an early aim to cover more female sexuality since there is a lack in this but it became evident that in order to accomplish this one need more time. Four months of field work was not enough to get the deeper knowledge you need to cover the topic of female homosexuality sufficiently. This might seem odd since one might assume that it would be easier for me as a woman to enter the lesbian community rather than the gay community, but this was not the case. Another hypothesis can be that the female community regardless of sexuality is more closed and therefore more difficult to enter due to the fact that the society is built according to patriarchal structures and is thus male dominated and controlled by men. Those who have worked with deviant subcultures often argues that long time participation in the community is the only possible way to gain enough trust from the target group in order to carry out a adequate research (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002:10). This is an important point that will be considered if I would carry out similar research in the future.

Another area of research that could need more attention is the topic of heterosexism and homophobia in an Arab context and the recognition of the relationships between homophobic attitudes, feelings and behaviors. Research like this could help to understand the underlying causes of homophobia and hopefully find ways to overcome negative attitudes towards homosexuals. However, it is important to keep in

mind when entering this field of research that definitions of identity can vary in different countries and that the focus might be on defining sexual practices rather than identities.

Recommendations to International bodies working on development issues in general and LGBT rights in particular could be to put greater efforts in the area of homosexuality in The Middle East and to recognize the consequence of their exclusion on an economical, social and human level and to se the importance and strength of deviant identities in dynamics of social change. Further recommendations could also include economic support to organizations such as Helem and Meem since their work mainly depends on voluntary work. This could help them to put more efforts in the advocacy work and awareness campaigns directed at their institutions in Lebanon. This might also be a way to overcome any direct interference with the countries authorities since it might put pressure on the already instable governance of Lebanon. Change is preferred to come from within the country and not from an international agenda, since the topic of homosexuality is something that many view as a western "pervert behavior".

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Appendix I – List of Interviews and Observations

Interviews

<u>Gays (8)</u>
Gay 24 (Druze) 2007-12-01
Gay 23 (Sunni) 2007-12-01
Gay 27 (Christian) 2007-11-28
Gay 38 (Christian) 2007-12-09
Gay 32 (Secular-mixed) 2007-12-09
Gay 25 (Christian) 2007-12-11
Gay 27 (Sunni) 2007-12-16
Gay 20 (Sunni) 2007-12-16

<u>Lesbians (5)</u>
Lesbian 18 (Sunni) 2007-12-11
Lesbian 21 (Shia) 2007-12-15
Lesbian 17 (Shia) 2007-12-15
Lesbian 22 (Shia) 2007-12-15
Lesbian 24 (Sunni) 2007-12-05

<u>Bisexuals (2)</u>
Bisexual Male 26 (Sunni) 2007-12-01
Bisexual Male 23 (Druze) 2007-12-17

<u>Transsexual (1)</u>
Transexual (MTF) 43 (Sunni) 2007-12-08

<u>Friends (3)</u>
Rasha 2007-10-23
Joelle 2007-12-09
Anonymous 2007-11-12

Key informant interviews

<u>Helem</u>
George - Coordinator 2007-12-06
Psychologist Helem 2007-12-11

<u>Meem</u>
Nadine - Coordinator 2007-12-16

Focus group discussions

<u>Lesbian</u>
Carried out in a bar/restaurant called Yabba with 8 lesbians/bisexuals in Beirut 2007-12-05

<u>Gay</u>
Carried out in the home of one of the participants with 10 gays in 2007-11-11

Observations

Acid - Famous gay club
(Visited 2007-11-03 and 2007-11-10)

Bardot- gay friendly restaurant
(Visited 2007-11-27)

**Cruising areas around Beirut mostly
down at the Cornish**
(Visited several times during the
period October-December)

Dunkin Doughnuts –café
(Several times during the period
October-December)

Graffiti - Gay friendly café
(Visited several times during the
period October –December)

Milk - Gay Nightclub
(Visited regularly almost twice a week
during October and December 2007)

Samra - gay friendly bar/restaurant,
(Visited 2007-10-17, 2007-10-26 and
2007-11-23)

Wardha - gay friendly bar/restaurant
(Visited 2007-10-17)

Wolf – Gay bar
(Visited 2007-11-03)