



LUND UNIVERSITY
Center for Middle Eastern Studies

“We don’t strive for Gay Parades!”

The Conceptual Anorexia of Female Sexual and Bodily Rights in Beirut
Analyzed from a Queer Perspective

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Author: Laura Björck
Advisor: Torsten Jansson
Examiner: Dalia Abdelhady
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Abstract

This thesis aims to analyze female sexual and bodily rights in Lebanon from a queer perspective, focusing on issues such as space and visibility and the strategically neglecting of historical existence of female narratives, referred to as conceptual anorexia. The thesis was preceded by a field work conducted in Beirut where observations of the field and interviews with LGBTQ- and/or feminist activists constitute the main empirical data. Queer theory and methodology is permeating the thesis and identifying some core assumptions on which this thesis relies, such as the understanding of gender to be socially constructed and performed. The findings suggest that patriarchal structures and a heteronormative gaze exist even within the LGBTQ communities, which is causing internal marginalization of women and trans individuals. However, the general taboo surrounding female sexuality in Lebanon is indeed limiting women but is similarly being used as providing a somewhat opportunity to escape the heteronormative gaze. Criticizing the Western domination of queer politics, the informants of this study all strive for an Arab interpretation of queer concepts and identities.

Keywords: LGBTQ, conceptual anorexia, queer, Lebanon, Beirut, feminism

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1. Introduction

We met friends here, we met soul mates here. We expressed ourselves here, we celebrated culture here. We remembered love, do you remember love?

(Invitation to an event at a night club in Beirut)

Beirut, the vibrant and cosmopolitan capital of Lebanon, scarred by its brutal history of sectarian conflicts and bloody civil war, is commonly viewed as the more tolerant city in the Middle East regarding the situation of LGBTQ¹ persons (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Queer). But beyond the tourist pictures of a sun drenched Corniche and busy night clubs crowded with seemingly carefree youngsters, lies a yet more complex and multifaceted reality.

It is true that in Lebanon organizations promoting LGBTQ rights exist and operate in public. There are bars and nightclubs more or less commonly known for being gay-friendly, and in recent years even doctors and lawyers have spoken out against stigmatizing homosexuality. But it is also true that the LGBTQ communities are under heavy pressure, both legally and socially, and that people with non-normative sexual identities and gender expressions are facing harsh discrimination and even criminalization of their sexualities and gender identities (Wael 2014). Being slightly safer than Cairo does not make Beirut a safe haven. It might still be very difficult, and even dangerous, to be out as non-heterosexual in Lebanon, and LGBTQ individuals are living under a constant risk of facing harassment in the public sphere and by the legal system (Human Rights Watch).

This thesis is based on a field study conducted in Beirut in autumn 2014 on female sexual and bodily rights focusing on the LGBTQ communities. By interviewing queer and/or feminist activists and analyzing the political LGBTQ organizations in Beirut this thesis aims to identify some of the main issues in the struggle for LGBTQ rights, focusing on female members of the communities, and to analyze them using a queer theoretical and methodological framework. The main LGBTQ organizations in focus are Helem, a broad organization working to create awareness about LGBTQ issues; and Meem, a female and

¹ LGBTQ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender and Queer and it is commonly used as an umbrella term for non-normative sexual preferences and gender identities and expressions. Non-normative in this context refers to non-heterosexual sexualities and gender expressions that are not confirming to the normative male/female gender dichotomy that divides humanity into either men or women.

trans² separatist organization originating from Helem but now working independent and often anonymously.

To understand the social stigma related to non-normative sexualities and gender identities that contest the male/female, man/woman dichotomy it is of great importance to look at the norms regulating gender and sexuality in society. In this study queer theory and methodology will be used as a tool to understand and explain why homosexuality is socially stigmatized and even criminalized in Lebanon and to analyze how patriarchal structures are interlinked with the heteronormative understanding of gender. Thus this thesis relies on the core assumptions that gender is socially constructed and performed and that transgressing normative boundaries is commonly met with stigmatization.

Patriarchal structures and misogyny exists worldwide and Lebanon is not an exception to this. Women in Lebanon, as elsewhere, are subjected to structural oppression and discrimination based on their assigned gender. It will be argued further in this thesis that heteronormativity and patriarchy are intertwined with each other and that this puts female LGBTQ individuals in a particularly vulnerable position. Subsequently, LGBTQ females are not only facing discrimination based on their non-heteronormative sexuality, they are also (as are women in all groups of society) being subjected to gender based discrimination for being females. One aim of this study is to explore how these patriarchal structures are reflected within the Lebanese LGBTQ communities. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to explore and expand the concept of conceptual anorexia as an analytical tool to identify institutionalized oppression.

1.1 Purpose of Study

The aim of this research is to analyze activism for female sexual and bodily rights in Beirut from an LGBTQ perspective. With inspiration from a queer theoretical framework, this thesis is based on the assumption that gender binary and heteronormativity are social constructions which are upholding a patriarchal regime. These are central tenets in the thesis. The main analytical tool employed is the concept of conceptual anorexia which is used to analyze the deficient representation of female narratives in society and women's limited accessibility to spaces. Building on the assumption that patriarchy is penetrating all levels of

² Transgender refers to a gender identity that transitions from what was assigned to a person at birth to another gender or to another understanding of gender (Tate 2012, 18). Trans is being used here as an umbrella term for various trans identities.

society, this thesis argues that sexism and heteronormativity are also reflected within LGBTQ communities which put LGBTQ females and trans individuals in particularly vulnerable positions. A further important approach in this thesis is a critical understanding of Western self-proclaimed right to define and interpret concepts connected to LGBTQ and queerness, and what impacts that has on Lebanese LGBTQ issues.

The empirical data has been collected through interviews with queer and/or feminist activists combined with my own experiences from the field. I want to stress the fact that the findings of this study are not representative for the entire Lebanese LGBTQ communities. They are only representative for the persons participating in this study. The intention of this research is not to draw a complete picture of the Lebanese LGBTQ communities, nor do I think that this would at all be possible or desirable. The intention is to explore some aspects of sexualities in Lebanon; to discuss power structures and resistance against them.

1.2 Research Questions

The main research questions that are laying ground for the analysis are:

- 1) How can female sexual and bodily rights in Lebanon be understood through the concept of conceptual anorexia?
- 2) What key issues are identified by queer activists and how do they address those in their struggle for female LGBTQ rights?

1.3 Choice of Topic, Justification and Limitations

The focus of this study is female sexual and bodily rights viewed within the LGBTQ communities in Beirut. In line with an overall trend, most of what is written about LGBTQ communities in Lebanon, as in the Arab world in general, focuses on males, a tendency that echoes the general treating of male experiences as representing the universal. Samar Habib (2007) confirms that:

The study of male homosexuality, at any rate, is a much easier one to achieve... To the contrary, studies on female homosexuality in this region [the Middle East] are relatively unknown, which resonates with the neglected history of female sexuality in general. (3)

This study focuses on tactics used by a sample of activists to advocate for female sexual and bodily rights in Lebanon as well as various limitations of female access to spaces within and outside of queer contexts. The field work precluding this study was conducted in Beirut and that is also the place of focus for the analysis. Lebanon was chosen on two main grounds. First of all there is an official LGBTQ scene in Beirut, with organizations working more or less in public, something that is not the case in neighboring countries in the region. Additionally, there is an active and present debate about patriarchal structures and sexist discrimination within the LGBTQ communities in Beirut which is a central theme in this thesis. The second reason is simply related to security and accessibility. Because of the danger and social taboo regarding non-normative sexualities in the neighboring countries, the LGBTQ communities are hidden, prevented from working in public, and hence very hard to reach for an outsider (like me). I decided that it would be too difficult and too dangerous (for me but even more so for potential participants) to conduct this research elsewhere in the region than in Lebanon, given the limited amount of time and resources I had at hand doing it.

The greatest obstacles that I have faced during this field work have been to find people to interview. As far as I see it there are two main reasons for this. Firstly, due to the sensitivity of the topic, it can be difficult to find individuals who are willing to talk to a stranger about issues concerning LGBTQ rights, especially female such. It was very difficult for me to even get in touch with the female and trans separatist organization, Meem, and when talking to a former activist of Meem she told me that she could not talk about the organization to an outsider. The second reason is that during the specific time that I conducted this field work, Nasawiya³ – one of the main organizations of interest after Meem – was undergoing fundamental changes in their organization and as a consequence many of the activists was simply too busy to have time for an interview. These are, of course, factors that a researcher has to deal with; information is not always easy accessible.

The interviews were all conducted in English, which is not the native language of either the interviewer or the interviewees. There is hence a possibility of language confusions or misunderstandings during the interviews which could be a limitation for the data collection.

³ Created in 2010, Nasawiya, which means feminism in Arabic, is “a collective of feminists working on gender justice in Lebanon.” (Nasawiya). Nasawiya is a flat and broad feminist movement with many issues on the agenda. In their advocating for the rights of marginalized groups in society and to end all discrimination, LGBTQ has a given place at the agenda among other issues.

2. Contextual and Academic Background

In this chapter a brief background will be presented to put the thesis topic in a context. The first section provides an insight in the queer scene in Lebanon where some general comments on queer life and organizing is functioning followed by a short comment on the legal system and how it is applied on LGBTQ issues. After this contextual background I will go through some previous research relating to the topic starting by criticizing academia for being male dominated and arguing for the importance to challenge this, followed by an examination of existing queer research in Lebanon and finally a putting this in an activist perspective highlighting the intersectionality of Lebanese queer activism.

2.1 The Queer Scene in Lebanon

Shia', Gay and Proud of it!

The queer scene in Beirut is vivid, varied and dynamic and it is often received by the surrounding society with much contradiction. An informant stated without hesitation, when she told me how she deals with her lesbian identity in relation to her religious background, that she is “Shia', gay and proud of it!”⁴ but when visiting her family she introduced her girlfriend as a close friend since she could not be open about her sexuality in front of them. During my time in Beirut I have been told stories about harassments, fear of family rejection and police brutality and violence. But I was also told (and experienced myself) stories about supporting families and friends, about love, sex and relations and about activism, pride and resistance against a hostile surrounding. The LGBTQ communities in Beirut are very complex and cut across a range of different spectra of the Lebanese society.

The political LGBTQ movements and organizations are all based in certain parts of Beirut due to the difficulties to carry out such activism elsewhere in the country. In some selected parts of Beirut where the LGBTQ struggle is based, LGBTQ activism can be carried out relatively open, as stated by the activists interviewed. Helem, which means “dream” in Arabic and is also translated by the organization as an acronym for “Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders” (Helem), is the first organization of its kind in the Middle East. Helem was preceded by an internet community founded by a couple of

⁴ Shia' is one of the main Muslim orientations and the Shia' community constitutes one of the many religious groups in Lebanon.

friends in the end of the 1990s called GayLebanon, which later was transformed into a social movement under the name Club FREE (Farah 2012a). Out of this engagement, Helem was officially founded as an organization in September 2004. As explained by an interviewee, “Helem was created from a movement [...] and it works mainly from two levels; the legal aspect and social support [...] the work is built on experiences from the community” (N⁵). Meem, a women and trans separatist breakaway group from Helem, has chosen invisibility and anonymity as a tactic rather than operating in public like Helem. Hence, it is an organization that is very difficult to get in touch with for an outsider as myself. One former Meem activist told me that to preserve the anonymity of the organization she did not talk about Meem to non-members. While discretion remains the tactic used by Meem, there have been some public announcements by the organization. The launching of the online magazine *Bekhsoos* and the publishing of the book *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories* are examples of such public visibility in the name of Meem.⁶

Although the Lebanese Psychiatric Society dismissed homosexuality as being a mental disorder in early 2013 (Wael 2014), it remains implicitly illegal, depending on the opinion of the police and judges. Introduced by the French colonial rulers during the mandate period, (Lundqvist 2013, 75-76), article 534 states that “‘sexual intercourse contrary to nature’ is punishable for up to 1 year in prison.” (Abbani). It is not further specified what “sexual intercourse contrary to nature” means and cases of conviction under article 534 remains few. Thus it seems like the purpose of the law is rather to serve as a deterrent for people holding non-conforming sexualities. “On the psychosocial level, homosexuals remain in a constant state of anxiety and fear. At the community level, criminalization of homosexuals leads to the isolation and marginalization of a large section of society, denying them the right to exercise their role in the political, intellectual, cultural, and social life.” (Abbani).

In a report from 2013, Human Right Watch reveals that police brutality against LGBTQ individuals is routinely carried out as a kind of informal punishment justified by article 534. In addition to physical beating and torture, humiliation and verbal abuse as well as threatening to out LGBTQ individuals or individuals accused to be LGBTQ are not only frequently used, it is even routine at police stations. Furthermore, arbitrary arrests of people solely based on their appearance are common and due to marginalization and criminalization:

⁵ The interviewees will be introduced in section 4.2.

⁶ Bekhsoos is currently inaccessible and inactive and has been since spring/summer 2014 due to unclear reasons.

[...]members of these groups [are] reluctant to file complaints against police members, which creates an environment in which police can abuse them with impunity. [...] Victims sometimes choose not to file complaints due to direct threats from the police and other times due to fear of retaliation – police can arbitrarily re-arrest them at any time. (Human Rights Watch 2013, 10)

2.2 Previous Research

2.2.1. Locating Women in a Men's World

As will be elaborated further in the theory section below, men and male interests and experiences in general are representing the normative, and are thus considered the universal:

...for all its pretention to being universal, what has been until now considered 'human' in our Western philosophy concerns only a small fringe of people: white men, proprietors of the means of production, along with the philosophers who theorized their point of view as the only and exclusively possible one. (Wittig 1992, 46)

The general tendency of ascribing the masculine as universal results in the existing gap in research on female sexuality and queer women, and alienates those from representation. By not considering the existence of women and the generally different situation they might have in relation to men brings about an insufficient image of societies and social phenomenon (Mohanty 1988). Considering the general underrepresentation of a gender perspective in queer research in Lebanon this thesis strives to offer one piece of that missing puzzle. Above all I argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to engage in the discussions of LGBTQ rights and existence in Lebanon without considering the female parts of those communities. Especially given the current debate about visibility and representations within the LGBTQ organizations in Beirut (which will be elaborated further below) in which internal patriarchal dominance is being brought to the agenda. By maintaining a male perspective and allowing it to be viewed as universal such debates, which are currently resulting in a restructuring of the queer struggle, are at risk of being overlooked.

Adrienne Rich (2003) among other argues that the academic gap of female representation, particularly regarding sexualities, is a patriarchal strategy to keep women subordinated to men. Her reasoning of a male fear of losing access to female sexuality and control of women's bodies is inspiring the understanding of *phobia* and the way it is being used in this thesis for addressing for instance homophobia, femophobia and transphobia.

I question the more or less psychoanalytic perspective [...] that the male need to control women sexually results from some primal male "fear of women" and of women's sexual insatiability. It seems more probable that men really fear not that they will have women's sexual appetites

forced on them or that women want to smother and devour them, but that women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional—therefore economic—access to women *only* on women's terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix. (Rich 2003, 22)

Thus, phobia in this context is not translated to fear of the subject to whom the phobia is being directed, but it is understood as the fear of the privileged group to lose privileges to marginalized groups if power structures are being challenged.

Dissertations about historical, social and cultural events that claim to represent a universal view of the topic covered are commonly examining a more or less exclusively male perspective. Subsequently, books like *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Cleveland 2013) and *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Gelvin 2011), despite the universal claim of the titles, are almost exclusively examining male experiences. Contrary to this, historical, social and cultural documentations that aim to present either a female perspective or a broader gender inclusive perspective tend to point that out already in the titles. Nikki Keddie's exposition of Middle Eastern history in a women's perspective is accordingly titled *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (2007). Examining women's lives and situations, and analyzing gender relations, religious influences and women's movements, Keddie is presenting an ambitious historical overview of women's existence in the Middle East from the rise of Islam to contemporary Middle Eastern societies. Additionally she is critically discussing approaches in the studying of women in the Middle East. She touches on the issue of female sexualities, although not providing a deeper analysis on female queerness, but her book constitutes an informative overall historical overview of Middle Eastern women.

In her introduction to the anthology *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East: Challenges and Discourses*, Ilkcaracan (2008) provides a gendered examination of sexuality discourses in the Middle East both viewed in an international and a regional context. She argues that "In the Middle East, policies and practices that aim to control sexual autonomy and confine sexuality within the framework of marriage, leads to human rights violations of women, young people and those with non-conforming sexualities." (9). That said, she also highlights the many internal initiatives to address those issues in the region. According to Ilkcaracan, it is of great importance to engage in debates about sexuality in the Middle East since "the collective mechanisms aimed at controlling women's bodies and sexuality continue to be one of the most powerful tools of patriarchal management of women's sexuality, and a root cause of gender inequality in the region." (3).

Samar Habib (2007) provides a deeper analysis of female homosexuality in the Middle East, although almost exclusively the Muslim, Arab Middle East, particularly focusing on Lebanon and Egypt. Her discussion is centered on representations, and the lack of such, in Arab societies, historical narratives and popular culture. Habib is analyzing literature and movies that in some ways touches upon the issues of, in Rich's (2003) terminology, lesbian existence which refers to female same-sex eroticism, and lesbian continuum that is women's relations to one another, whether sexually or platonic, in terms of friendship, family ties, sentiments of solidarity and shared experiences of discrimination. She is concluding that there is an overall lack of female sexuality represented in Arab popular culture particularly regarding female homosexuality, something she refers to as conceptual anorexia, a term that will be elaborated and frequently used as an analytic tool in this thesis.

2.2.2 Queer Lebanon

The existing research on homosexuality and/or LGBTQ issues in the Arab world at large is generally focusing of the experiences of gay men. This also applies in the case of Lebanon. Examining homosexuality and masculinities from an islamological perspective, Erica Li Lundqvist's book *Gayted Communities: Marginalized Sexualities in Lebanon* (2013), provides an insight in the lives and thoughts of eight young, Lebanese, men that identifies as homosexual or bisexual and that, in different ways, engage in the gay communities of Beirut. Focusing on masculinities, sexuality and identity, the book highlights many obstacles and discriminations that gay men face because of homophobia in the Lebanese society. Though the title suggest that this book is about marginalized sexualities in general it is solely focusing on male (homo)sexualities and masculinity constructions. The same is true for the ethnography *Queer Beirut*, written by Sofian Merabet in 2014. By strolling the streets of Beirut and socializing with gay men, Merabet is exploring queer spaces in the city and observing how gay men are negotiating their non-conforming sexualities in a heteronormative society. Despite the usage of the generally inclusive term *queer* in the title, this book is only focusing on queer men and male homosexuality. Merabet is making some attempt to problematize the marginalization of queer women and trans persons within the broad LGBTQ community but he fails to give it a deeper analysis and overall he is not giving it much attention in his study.

These two books, *Gayted Communities* and *Queer Beirut*, both point out difficulties and everyday encounters in living as a gay man in Beirut, as well as how power structures are negotiated with. In this study I have turned focus to LGBTQ females and female sexualities in Lebanon. As the analysis will show, although there are some shared experiences of discrimination, the general situation for queer women is to some extent different. Generally higher social control of women, in interaction with taboo surrounding female sexuality, excludes women from certain contexts and limits them in other. But, as will be elaborated, this taboo might also potentially offer somewhat sexual freedom, although restricted. Due to the stigmatization of female sexuality women's gender performances and heterosexual confirmations are not under as close scrutiny as men's and their required masculinity. On the other hand queer women and trans individuals are exposed to gender based oppression, even within LGBTQ contexts, which positions them in a different situation than their male counterparts. Thus this thesis aims to add a gendered perspective to existing research.

The social expectation of men to manifest masculinity and, but often through, heterosexuality is further discussed by Seidman (2012) in his essay "The Politics of Cosmopolitan Beirut: From the Stranger to the Other." Though the essay is dealing with the broader issue of the politics of othering in the context of the Beirut neighborhood Hamra, one central theme is regarding gender and sexualities. By applying a gender perspective to the accessibility of the streets of Hamra, Seidman argues that the pressure on men to perform masculinity is related to the male control over women's bodies and sexualities. Failed masculinity means the loss of power and a great risk of being ridiculed and even discriminated. This Seidman puts in relation to the honor related to women's bodies and the gendered harassment that women are exposed to by men when moving in the public sphere.

The anthology *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories*⁷, which was published by Meem in 2009, is as varied as it is ambitious, and in my opinion, it is an important voice in narrating the past and present of LGBTQ existence in Lebanon. Based on interviews with over 150 "lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women and transgendered persons" (2) which are presented in 41 stories about all-covering topics such as; family, coming out, discrimination, hate-crimes, religion, self-identity, etcetera; "(t)his book is primarily targeting the Lebanese

⁷ This is an Arabic name written with Latin letters and it is a common phenomenon to use numbers when transcribing Arabic letters that does not exist in the Latin alphabet. The authors comment on the name in the introduction of the book as follows: "Barred Mista3jil' has a very close meaning to 'Express Mail,' but a better translation would be 'Mail in a Hurry.' It reflects both the urgency of getting these stories across and also the private nature of the stories – like letters written, sealed and sent out to the world." (10).

heterosexual and homophobic societies” according to the editors, and it also intends to “be of value to girls and young women, in schools and universities, who are starting to question their sexuality, or whose sisters seem to be undergoing this process of questioning” (7). Furthermore it also “seeks to question and challenge the common misunderstanding that the only alternative to heterosexuality is homosexuality. We tend to label people as either straight (heterosexual) or gay (homosexual).” (2). The varied stories in *Bareed Mista3jil* provide a good insight into many issues related to the everyday lives of female homosexuals, queers, and transgendered people in Lebanon, the hardships, discriminations and hate crimes, as well as romances, activism, and joy. It is not an academic research but rather an activist attempt to give voice to marginalized groups in a heteronormative surrounding.

2.2.3 Queer Activism and Intersectionality

Though much existing research about queerness and LGBTQ issues in Lebanon is focusing on identity constructions and the concept of being closeted or being out, some research is also touching upon queer activism. In a recently published essay Moussawi (2015) places Lebanon’s two main LGBTQ organizations in the center of an analysis on queer activism at a global and local level. He argues that though certain common traits could be identified in queer struggle and organizing from a global perspective there are still major local differences that need to be recognized. While criticizing researchers that equals global with Western he rightly stresses that progress does not equal Westernization. In his analysis of the tactics of Helem and Meem as communicated by the organizations themselves he finds that they both simultaneously rely on, seek support and solidarity from as well as criticize and distance themselves from global (and particularly Western) LGBTQ contexts.

Helem does not publicly challenge LGBTQ categories, though it still resists them in the global context while strategically employing them locally for its intended goals. Meem, however, openly resists and rejects what it sees as a Western model of sexual identities, primarily by refusing the binary of the closet and outness. (Moussawi 2015, 19)

In the early days of Helem, the question of whether or not the organization should be openly LGBTQ was frequently debated. In an email from 2005 which is later published on a blog, Shax, an early member of Helem, is elaborating her view of the visibility question through a gender perspective. She emphasizes that the common social denial of female sexuality in general is in fact offering queer women a possibility to act out their queerness in

secrecy. This possibility is strictly limited but can nevertheless provide some extent of freedom.

Despite Helem's ambition to be inclusive and promote gender equality, the work and structures of the organization has been (and is currently) subjected to criticism. In addition to the gendered debate on visibility it was also reported that female and trans members of the organization were excluded and marginalized and that Helem in this sense had failed to be an inclusive and safe organization (Shax 2012). In a blog post, one of the founders of Helem is criticizing the approach of the organization stating that: "The truth is the space [of Helem] has never been a safe space for women, bisexuals, or trans people." (Farah 2012a). As early as 2005 a women-only mail list was established for the female members of Helem, as an initiative to discuss the situation of women but this this was met with much suspicion from the male members:

Panic spread among the ranks (why do the women want their own space? What will they do? What's going on??), followed by anger (you're being separatists! You're discriminating against men!), and then a final reaffirmation of control by insisting that there be one male member of Helem present on the women-only list to make sure that the uppity women know their place. Big Brother is watching. (Shax 2012)

Two years later, in 2007, another attempt to respond to the male dominance and create a safe space for female members was made in the establishing of Helem Girls, a separatist group "by and for women. And they flocked to it. There was clearly a need out there that this sort of space tapped into." (Shax 2012). Eventually Helem Girls broke off from Helem and Meem was established as a clandestine women and trans separatist group (Shax 2012).

The tactical invisibility employed by Meem is not without friction. Engaging in that discussion, Al-Ghafari (2012/2013) is critical of the anonymousness of the protagonists in *Bareed Mista3jil*, claiming that it "embodies a new split between the lesbian body and the voice" (15). Responding to such critique, Lynn (2010) a Meem activist, argues that this tactic is necessary due to the circumstances that resulted in the creation of Meem in the first place. Furthermore, according to the Lynn, the intersectional approach that characterizes Meem requires the focus to be moved from the individual activists to the broader contexts where activism is being carried out. Hence, the anonymity is to be viewed as a consciously chosen tactic to avoid the stereotyping act of coming out:

What I want to ask is: Had our visibility at Meem been constructed differently, had we tagged our foreheads with the words "lesbian", "queer" or "transgender" and went on national TV shows and discussed our own sexualities and genders, our own struggles, had we publically

linked our first and last names to our sexual identities, had we exposed our faces as “leaders of the LGBT movement,” would we have been able to be as effective in our community and movement building as we have been so far? Would coming out, in the most mainstreamed sense of the word, have served our movement as much as removing ourselves from “the discourse of coming out” did? (Lynn 2010)

Considering the conditions in which Meem was once originated, that is as a reaction against – and a solution to – patriarchal structures and sexist discrimination of women and trans individuals within the political LGBTQ environment, it should be stressed that this group was created to be a safe space for people living in a hostile society in which anonymity was considered necessary (El-Hage 2012/2013). Hence the question whether to carry out activism in public or to keep it underground is very much dependent on the objectives of the activism but also on the character of the organization.

As will be shown throughout this thesis Lebanese LGBTQ activism is varied and often intersectional. This is rightly emphasized in Naber and Zaatari’s (2013) study “Reframing the War on Terror” in which they analyze feminist and queer activism in the wake of the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Through interviews and conversations with queer and feminist activist the authors are placing politics of sexuality and gender within a war zone and exposing the gendered characteristics of war, a war justified by Western orientalist imaginations of saving an oppressed and voiceless Arab people from terrorists and despots. Contrary to saving Arab queers from an inevitable homophobic society, as perceived by this dominant Western discourse, it is rather responsible for creating more obstacles for LGBTQ individuals and queer activism in the Arab world by fueling the perception that homosexuality is not Arab but a colonial import from the West (Habib 2007, Amer 2012). As a counterargument Habib (2007) calls for a reclaiming of Arab queer historical heritage. By bringing to light and analyzing Medieval Arabic writings about (female) homosexuality and female homoeroticism she wants to bring to awareness the existence of queerness in pre-colonial Arab history. Although not claiming that Medieval Arab societies were all gay-friendly, she argues that the issue of homophobia in the current Arab world, with its lack of knowledge and representation of homosexuality, is a relative modern phenomenon in comparison with medieval writings.

The central tenets in Naber and Zaatari’s (2013) study is concerning family constellations (nuclear and heteronormative) and sectarianism. They find that the contributions of LGBTQ activists and organizations in helping victims of the war brought two major achievements. One is the presence of queer individuals that were in different ways

helping people and resisting the war in places where such presence is not usually seen openly might have contributed to awareness about LGBTQ existence and issues and perhaps increasing tolerance. Secondly, the queer activism in the war forced LGBTQ organizations to intersect their agendas with other issues such as war, class and sectarianism, and simultaneously to impose queer to these issues.

The intersection of class in the queer struggle becomes evident when scrutinizing the legal system in Lebanon and especially, when dealing with LGBTQ issues, article 534 in the Lebanese penal code. In 2013, Human Rights Watch published the report: “It’s Part of the Job: Ill-treatment and Torture of Vulnerable Groups in Lebanese Police Stations”. The vulnerable groups referred to in the report are drug users, sex workers and LGBT⁸ individuals all constituting stigmatized groups in Lebanon, thus an easy target for abuse. One main conclusion put forward in the report is that “[p]hysical violence was not just used to extract confessions but also as a form of punishment, discipline, and behavioral correction.” (2). However, the report also finds a clear pattern of class discrimination in the arbitrarily arrests of LGBTQ individuals as well as the level of brutality they are subjected to by the police during their detention, in which poor people are more likely both to be arrested and to be beaten and tortured than rich people. Added to the class perspective, Moussawi (2015) points out that also LGBTQ individuals from other stigmatized groups such as refugees and migrant worker are facing a greater risk of police brutality than privileged individuals (8).

This examination of previous research has touched upon several issues related to queer activism, LGBTQ issues and the general marginalization of women and female sexuality in society, history writings and academia. By intersecting these categories this thesis seeks to provide an insight in the current debates on visibility and access to space that has been going on for some years within the organized LGBTQ communities in Beirut as well as the issue of female sexuality from a queer perspective.

⁸ LGBT is the acronym used in the report.

3. Theory

This chapter will introduce and elaborate the theoretical framework used for analyzing the data of the study. In the first section the term *conceptual anorexia* will be explained and put in context of general representation of homosexuality in Lebanon and a discussion of queer vocabulary. It is a main tool for analysis in this thesis. This will also be discussed in relation to visibility as a political concept which touches upon the debate about visibility within the LGBTQ organizations in Beirut. Following this queer theory will be discussed as it constitutes the main theoretical framework of this thesis. It will be presented in relation to lesbian feminism, which is functioning as an inspiration to the analysis, and the queer criticism of lesbian feminism will be discussed. Finally a postcolonial critique of queer theory will be provided.

3.1 Conceptual Anorexia and the Politics of Visibility

Small wonder that lesbians are reported to be a more hidden population than male homosexuals

(Rich 2003, 35)

As argued in the section of previous research there is a lack of documentation of queer women both globally and on a Lebanese level. I argue, in line with many of the theorists used in this thesis, that this lack is reflecting a patriarchal reality in which several strategies are employed to keep women subordinated to men and to maintain the heterosexual matrix. Denying women historical and cultural representation or deeming female related issues uninteresting to explore are examples of such strategies. To address and problematize the issue of underrepresentation of female narratives and of female (homo)sexuality in the public space, and popular culture and mind, this thesis is employing Habib's (2007) term *conceptual anorexia*. According to Habib, there is a "conceptual anorexia surrounding representations of the sexes and sexual orientations" (104). In Arabic popular culture Habib points out that even though homosexuality in general is underrepresented "[t]he number of male homosexual characters [in Arabic movies], however, far exceeds the number of women, and, in this respect, the scarcity of images representing female homosexuality speak of the general oppression of women in patriarchal societies." (119).

Monique Wittig (1992) argues that social norms are invisible because they are viewed as the normal, the natural, the general. The norm-breaking, on the other hand, is visible for being alien. Hence, according to Wittig “[t]here is only one [gender]: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general.” (60). As a consequence of making the masculine normative, contemporary female existence is marginalized and female historical existence is subsequently ignored. Gay male existence is indeed subsumed to homophobic marginalization but, in Wittig’s (1975, 9) words, lesbianism is “a theme which cannot even be described as taboo, for it has no real existence in the history of literature. Male homosexual literature has a past, it has a present. The lesbians, for their part, are silent – just as all women are as women at all levels.” Rich (2003) argues that conceptual anorexia is a means with which patriarchal power is enforced on women to ensure male dominance and to subsume women to heterosexuality. “The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women [...]” (27).

Habib’s discussion on conceptual anorexia also applies to the absence of a queer Arabic vocabulary. For instance, even though the book *Bareed Mista3jil: True Stories* was produced in Lebanon by Lebanese editors and participants, it was originally written in English and not in Arabic. The editors are commenting on this in the introduction where they are discussing the difficulties to write about sexuality - and especially non-conforming sexualities that is the subject of this book - simply because, according to the editors, the Arabic language lacks words to describe certain feelings and identities related to these issues. They state that:

It was hard to translate terms like “wetness” or to translate a gender-neutral English text into Arabic without using gendered terms. Sadly, and for the lack of Arabic expressions, queer people in Lebanon are more likely to frame their identity in English or French because that’s where these words exist more freely and where we find internet pages and papers written about sexuality. So the struggle to define oneself as lesbian and Arab becomes increasingly difficult. (Meem 2009, 6-7)

The issue of labeling sexual and gender identities and experiences in Arabic is further addressed in an essay by Sahar Amer (2012) where she suggests that Arab homosexuals should make use of medieval writings about homosexuality and homoeroticism to claim that non-heterosexual identities have a historic origin in the Arab world. Like the editors, and some of the interviewees, in *Bareed Mista3jil*, Amer emphasizes the linguistic obstacles in expressing non-confirmative sexual experiences and identities in Arabic. Instead of using English and French words, which is often done among Arab LGBTQ persons, Amer calls for the adoption of existing Arabic terms from the medieval literature as well as reclaiming words

that are currently used but with a pejorative meaning. Just as the term “queer” was reclaimed from being an insult into having positive connotations, Arabic words, such as “shādh” (literally meaning queer or deviant, from now on the transcription “shazz” will be used)⁹ could undergo the same transformation. This, she argues, could serve not only to empower Arab LGBTQ persons but also to refute the common picture in Arab societies that homosexuality is a Western influence (393). Like Amer, Habib (2007) warns for the “dangers inherent in the calls for a replication of the Western gay and lesbian rights movement in the Middle East” and suggests that “[w]hat is needed is a new strategy, better suited to different cultural and social conditions[...].” (103). However, I want to add a further angle to this argument to make it more representative for the complex reality of Arab queerness and suggest that using foreign words to describe non-conforming identities does not necessarily translate to copying a Western understanding of sexualities, nor does it have to imply self-censorship in Arabic. As the findings will show, queer and questioning individuals in Lebanon are using both Arabic terms and English/French terms as more or less deliberate tactics to linguistic self-empowerment.

As a contribution to the understanding of conceptual anorexia I argue that it is not limited to concerning only theoretical and academic fields but that it can also be used to marginalizing women and non-conforming individuals in practice. In this thesis I will demonstrate this by looking at accessibility to public spaces from a gender perspective, a discussion that is also connected to the debate over visibility, as elaborated above.

The public sphere is a male territory and this is evident at every level in Lebanon and as clearly notable manifestation of this sexual harassment of women functions as an expression of male dominance over the public sphere to which females are constantly in risk for being subjected to if and when they challenge that dominance by entering the public sphere. This impending threat is limiting women’s access to public spaces, making access to spaces a gendered question (Seidman 2012). Excluding women from accessing the public sphere and harassing them if they do, is a patriarchal strategy to keep women in their subordinated position as protected objects. Moreover, male heterosexual gaze is reducing women to sexualized object to be consumed by men (Al-Ghafari 2012/2013). Male dominance of the public sphere rules at the streets, bars, cafés and public transportation, in short; it penetrates all public areas, but even the private is influenced by this due to the common practice of

⁹ When transcribed to the Latin alphabet this Arab word can appear in some alternative variations. I am using “shazz”, as is used in *Bareed Mista3jil* and I am using the same translation as is used in that book.

having men as the head of the family. Attached to this is the honor related to women's bodies and sexualities which the male family member is obligated to protect (Seidman 2012). Affected by these structures queer women and activists are negotiating places to be able to express themselves which is evident in the debate between Helem and Meem over visibility. According to Meem activist Shax queer women cannot easily revolt against male authority in public or private but they might find a potential relief in the silence surrounding female sexuality.

This is why women get away with being lesbians, because they are not required to physically prove their heterosexuality, it is automatically assumed, but the irony is that you're actually in trouble if you decide you want to follow through with it. So in that respect, young women get away with a lot because anything they do, be it gay or straight, is required to be hidden anyway. Pushing for lesbian visibility would take away that freedom because it would put them in the spotlight. The more the word 'lesbian' is out there, the more I am suspect, the more I am vulnerable, and the more my lifestyle is threatened. Sexuality is a very personal thing for many women because it is simply not allowed to be made public. (Shax quoted by Farah 2012b)

Hence some might argue that the employing of visibility by queer activism is in fact doing female LGBTQ individuals a disservice.

To understand why female sexuality, especially non-heteronormative, is such a sensitive and tabooed topic I will apply queer theory as a main tool and also draw inspiration from lesbian feminism.

3.2 Lesbian Feminism and Queer Theory

It is certainly true that without a concept of gender there could be, quite simply, no concept of homo- or heterosexuality.

(Sedgwick 1990, 31)

The academic field of Lesbian and Gay Studies emerged in the 1970s as a consequence of the growing public visibility of homosexuality in the Western world. There was, however, a tension within the gay community where sexual politics cut across gender politics in which, quoting Steven Seidman (2013, 241): "Lesbian feminism was a response to the perceived sexism of the gay movement and to the heterosexism of feminism. Lesbian feminists aimed to separate lesbianism from male homosexuality and align with the women's movement."

Lesbian feminism identifies patriarchy as men's oppression of women which is ultimately concealed in the heterosexual matrix in which men own access to women's bodies, reproductivity and sexuality. As an act of resistance women must turn away from men by refusing heterosexuality, thus constructing lesbianism as a political identity with subversive potential and even as disengaged from gender binary (Rich 2003, Wittig 1992).

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct and indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. (Rich 2003, 27)

While agreeing that mainstream feminism has failed so far to address heterosexuality as a coercive and institutionalized expression of patriarchal power queer theory is also criticizing lesbian feminism for acknowledging gender binary and thus contribute to reinforcing it. Queer theory rejects the essentialism of gender binary altogether and argues that it is in fact socially constructed. Sedgwick (1990) points out that lesbian theory is commonly relying on a polarized understanding of gender and is ascribing lesbianism, not only political status, but also the most pure feminist identity (36-39). Queer theory strives to contest fixed identities and broadening the understanding of genders and sexualities.

According to one of the most renowned queer theorists, Judith Butler (1999), there is nothing natural attached to sex and gender. Instead of being biologically born into a gender identity we learn how to perform an assigned gender, not because we *are* that gender or to eventually *become* that gender, but we perform it as *if we were* that gender. Hence, she argues that as much as heterosexuality is a social construction, all sexualities and gender expressions are socially constructed and performed. These performances have no original character of which they are a copy; in fact they are all copies of a myth of the true essence of gender. Hence, to Wittig's and Rich's view of lesbianism as a political resistance, Butler (1999) replies that "lesbian sexuality is no more and no less constructed than other modes of sexuality", (158). Instead Butler argues that by breaking gender binary - by failing to perform one's gender as it is expected, whether deliberately or not – the patriarchal construction of heterosexuality as compulsory is challenged. Herein lays the danger that the upholders of the heteronormative society ascribe non-heterosexual identities, since the normative understanding of gender also requires heterosexuality. Butler coined the concept *gender*

trouble to describe this phenomenon to which she uses drag performance¹⁰ as an explanatory example, but to which the political lesbian subject of Wittig and Rich also contributes.

Moreover, queer theory does not search for tolerance or to normalize gay identities in a heteronormative context but to topple the entire regime of normativity. Even individual cases of acceptance of non-conforming identities, like open minded family members and friends of an LGBTQ individual, does not translate to a changing of the heteronormative order as long as heterosexuality is institutionalized (Seidman 2001). However, Butler's concept of gender trouble presumes that if too many people diverge from a norm, or fail to obey to it, status quo becomes threatened. Hence non-conforming people are punished by alienation, discrimination, harassments and exclusion, which make them visible in the public mind. Invisibility could thus be regarded as a privilege, or even reward, to norm-confirming people, however, as the findings will show, invisibility is also used by some queer women in Lebanon as a tactic to avoid the heteronormative gaze by performing heterosexuality.

While to a large extent agreeing with queer theory that sexualities and gender identities are socially performed and hence such labels should be contested I nevertheless acknowledge the strategic importance to identify oppressed groups, even with contested labels, to which I in this thesis turn to lesbian feminism. However, in this thesis the term "woman" is not restricted to those individuals that were assigned a female gender by birth – ciswomen¹¹ – but it can also refer to other gender identities, such as transwomen. Furthermore, all individuals that identify as female or feminine do not necessarily identify as women. This is also how such terms are used and understood throughout this thesis.

That said, it is also important to bring to discussion postcolonial critique of queer theory. As queer theory is criticizing lesbian feminism for being cis-oriented, postcolonial feminism is problematizing the white Western nature of queer theory which is marginalizing people of other colors and cultures. This brings the discussion to a conceptual anorexia within Western mainstream application of queer theory.

¹⁰ There are many definitions of drag but what Judith Butler refers to here is a person that performs the opposite gender, usually in a flamboyant manner. Drag queen is the term used for a person, usually with a male associated body, that performs femininity, and drag king is usually a person with a female associated body, that performs masculinity. Butler argues that drag queens usually represent a hyper-femininity, thus being more feminine than "natural females" and by doing so are contesting the idea of gender binary as natural and normal.

¹¹ Cisgender refers to a gender identity that remains the same as what was assigned to a person at birth. The normative nature of a cis identity results in its invisibility since most cis identified persons do not refer to themselves as cis-women or cis-men but simply as women and men (Tate 2012, 18).

3.3 Postcolonial Critique: Understanding the Racialized Queer

...the homosexual other is white, the racial other is straight.

(Puar 2007, 32)

Notions of Western academic hegemony and self-appointed right to interpret concepts such as queer, LGBTQ, gay and being out is posing a delicate dilemma on queers and queer activists in the Middle East. Not only is the Western understanding of such concepts highly exclusive and problematic even within Western cultures, but perhaps even more so when enforced on other cultural contexts, such as Lebanon. Considering this Western academic, political and philosophic hegemony, I argue that it is necessary to precede an analysis of LGBTQ issues in any non-Western society with a discussion of the Western construction of queerness along with its impacts on other cultural and academic contexts.

Jasbir K. Puar (2007) is providing an accurate analysis of the creation and identification of the Muslim/Arab¹² other by the hegemonic Western discourse. Puar is arguing that the Western creation of this Muslim/Arab other is sexualized through “the Orientalist wet dreams of lascivious excesses of pedophilia, sodomy, and perverse sexuality” (14) and that the identification of the terrorist with the Muslim/Arab other is similarly queering the terrorist body and ascribing the Muslim/Arab other as being homophobic yet homoerotic. As also emphasized by Naber and Zaatari (2013) Western nationalism has also constructed the concept of the “third world woman” and the “third world queer” that needs to be saved and protected. The savior is personified as “Western civilization” and the protection is directed against the pictured threat of the allegedly barbaric, sexist and homophobic “third world” cultures (Puar 2007, 1-36).

According to Puar (2007), the Western self-image is one of tolerance and liberal values of inclusion. This is put against the depicted image of Muslim/Arab societies as being backwards, uncivilized and intolerant, thus inherently and inevitably homophobic and sexist. This image makes a Muslim/Arab identity incompatible with being queer, gay, LGBTQ or feminist, and also to apply a Muslim/Arab understanding and interpretation of such concepts. Hence, as put by Puar, the common misconception that leads to the question: “Are you

¹² I am using this expression in line with Puar’s argumentation of the Western generalization of people from the Middle East, which is commonly equalizing Muslim with Arab and vice versa, thus reducing inhabitants of a broad and diverse region into one homogeneous and extremely simplified identity.

Muslim, or are you gay?” (21) is making non-normative sexualities suitable to an idea of normativity.

The Western self-image of being advocates for tolerance towards homosexuality does not, as mentioned, represent an inclusive attitude towards *all* non-normative identities. These societies are nevertheless heteronormative, and homosexuality and queerness is only tolerated to a very limited extent; it merely includes individuals that do not challenge the normative order and thus reproduce heteronormativity as a nationalistic project. Puar (2007) refers to such a compromising homosexual identification as homonormativity and notes that it excludes a vast majority of queer and LGBTQ individuals and even contributes to heterosexualizing homosexuality.

The common Euro-American tendency to label Beirut as a gay haven and as such distinct from other Arab cities has created a queer orientalism that is at the same time self-indulgent and exotifying and contributes to an imperial project of importing Western queer values and interpretations to Lebanon. Having studied gay travel reports and agencies that promote gay tourism in Beirut Moussawi (2013) argues that the common Western wish to categorize Beirut as gay friendly goes in line with an understanding of progress as a fixed and linear trend towards increasing tolerance to homosexuality as it is perceived in a Western terminology. Moreover, quoting a speech from a Helem activist regarding the phenomenon of gay tourism in Beirut he emphasizes that the openness and liberty, as frequently reported by Western gay tourists, tends to be limited to just those Western tourists and not enjoyed by the local queer crowd (Moussawi 2015).

Nevertheless, if, as stated by John C. Hawley (2001, 3), “[t]he central tenet of queer theory is a resistance to the normativity which demands the binary proposition, hetero/homo”, queer should not, and perhaps cannot, be normative. Homonormativity is still highly exclusive in its nature since it implies the normalization (and perhaps un-queering) of some gay identities, leaving other gays and queers marginalized, and is thus not challenging the hierarchical and binary system. Furthermore, according to Hawley, the gay and lesbian establishment is generally Western, white, and bourgeois and is hence not covering a wide spectrum of difference in class, ethnicity, culture or cultural context, factors that are indeed represented by different LGBTQ individuals and communities which is constituting the core of postcolonial criticism of queer theory.

As noted by Dennis Altman (2001), the homonormative gay identities that are constructed and promoted as universal by the Western self-appointed right to interpretation are commonly associated with a (white) Western, middle class, consumerist lifestyle which in itself is exclusive to people who cannot afford to – or otherwise do not have the possibility to achieve such a lifestyle – or who do not wish to adapt to it. Altman is referring to this phenomenon as “internationalization of gay identities” and he adds that “[m]oreover, attempts to use Western terminology [...] often block us from understanding the different ways in which people understand their own sexual experiences and feelings.” (24). I identify this as the same kind of conceptual anorexia that women are exposed to by patriarchal structures where the recognition of the male as universal is depriving women from cultural and historical representation. In the same fashion the white supremacist tendency of regarding Western ideals as universal is, in this case, depriving Arabs from employing queer theory in other contexts than a Euro-American.

Conclusively, the theoretical framework of this thesis is based on a critical queer understanding of sexualities and gender identities with inspiration from lesbian feminism. Conceptual anorexia is used as a key analytical tool and the central tenets of the thesis is to explore female sexual and bodily rights by analyzing different activist tactics and accessibility to space. That said, as one of the power structures that are subjected to scrutiny, critical awareness about the Western gaze will permeate this thesis as an addition to queer theory. One aim of this thesis is to provide an insight to the consequences that Western dominance of interpretation has for the activists participating in the study and to understand their construction of Arab and Lebanese queer.

4. Methodology

This chapter will sketch out the methodological framework in which the underlying study of this thesis was conducted, and which has been used as an inspiration during the process of analyzing data. As will be argued, queer researches require a maintaining of a queer thinking throughout the whole research process. The first section of this chapter provides a discussion about how to do queer methodology, followed by a section contributed to introduce the research interviewees and how the interviews have been conducted. In the last section of this chapter I am critically scrutinizing my own role as a researcher and my relation to the field.

4.1 Queer Methodology

'Queer research' can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulted power relations.

(Browne and Nash 2010, 4)

As elaborated in the theory section above, queer is a mindset, a way of understanding humanity, to define and deconstruct norms and power structures. Queer theory is a tool to analyze as well as challenge current existing discourses on gender, sexuality and identity, to seek to understand the surrounding world, the interactions and behavior of people with the basic assumption that sex, gender and sexuality are social constructions. Consequently, when engaging in queer researching, it is fundamentally important to keep the queer mindset present at all stages during the process of researching, including the methodological section. Since queer theory is about questioning norm-confirming identities it is necessary to consider how to translate queer theory into the methods and how to practice queer in the field work and data collection process.

In her essay about conducting queer ethnography research, Alison Rooke (2009) argues that doing queer research is not just doing research about queer people but to actually take queer theory into consideration, to keep it in mind and action, both when conducting the study and when analyzing and interpreting the data. Similar arguments are discussed by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (2010) in their introduction to an anthology about queer research methodology. In this introduction they are discussing how to transform queer theory

into methodology. Their concerns are much centered on one key question that they pose to themselves as much as to the reader:

If, as queer thinking argues, subjects and subjectivities are fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming, how can we gather ‘data’ from those tenuous and fleeting subjects using the standard methods of data collection such as interviews and questionnaires? (1)

According to Browne and Nash, queer should not be defined and put in a box but “remain unclear, fluid and multiple”,(7) and they go even further stating that “queer is a term that can and should be redeployed, fucked with and used in resistant and transgressive ways...” (9).

The methodological approach to this study is inspired by grounded theory.¹³ Grounded theory is a research methodology that was founded as a reaction and critique of already existing research methodologies which, according to the founders, contributed more to “confirm existing theory rather than to test or challenge it[...]” (Engward 2013, 37). Thus, it aims to create theory out of data and as such requires the entering of the field without preexisting conclusions about the outcome of the research. This methodological approach is suitable for this study since it focuses on a very sensitive and, hitherto in academia, relatively unexplored issue. It is not about proving or falsifying already existing hypotheses but rather to gain understanding by analyzing data.

Although this is not an ethnographic research project, it is methodologically useful in this thesis to draw inspiration from the field of ethnography. Ethnography research is centered on cultural practices and events in people’s everyday life and preferably focuses on a rather small sample of people or groups. Frances Julia Riemer (2012, 205) clarifies that “ethnographers collect data in natural settings. Basic to the fieldwork approach is the belief that what individuals believe, understand, and act upon cannot be detached from their context.” However, one must always keep in mind that a researcher is also an individual and is never a completely neutral observer of things. Riemer continues by stating that

[...]because seeing is always filtered through our own ideas, capturing the insider’s perspective is neither straightforward nor easy. We bring our cultural selves with us wherever we go, and even with the best of intentions, an ethnographer can never see life completely through another person’s eyes. In a similar fashion, the ethnographer is never able to completely write him or herself out of the ethnography. (205)

¹³ For more information about grounded theory see for example Glaser, Barney G. & Strauss, Anselm L. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine, 1967.

Ethnography research, however, not only strives to explore and understand cultural phenomena or expressions from the inside perspective, but should also intend to explain it to an outside audience. To get an inside perspective of the subject of focus of an ethnography research, the researcher may practice participant or nonparticipant observation. Participant observation includes spending time in the environment where the research is carried out as well as interacting with the people constituting the social group of interest. Nonparticipant observation, on the other hand, is observing from the outside, not being personally involved but merely serve as an audience (Riemer 2012, 206-07). Both these techniques are sufficient in different kinds of studies and both have been used when conducting the field work that lay ground for this study.

The data collection for this thesis has been conducted using qualitative research method. Essential for qualitative research is the importance of a theoretical framework as theory is a fundamental part of the research at all stages of the process. In qualitative research, according to Alan Bryman (2012, 384), “theory is supposed to be an outcome of an investigation rather than something that precedes it.” Qualitative method is suitable for this kind of study that deals with social and cultural phenomena pictured through emotions, personal experiences and individual opinions of the people represented in the study.

4.2 Interviews and Interviewees

This thesis was preceded by a field work conducted in Beirut from October to December 2014. During this period data was collected that lay ground for the analysis of this thesis. As a major part of the empirical material, five interviews have been conducted, of which four of the interviewees are activists. Due to confidentiality I will not mention the interviewees by name, neither will I give them fake names, but they will simply be referred to with an arbitrarily chosen letter. Actual names, even fake ones, carry a greater probability of the reader assuming specific attributes concerning the identity of the interviewee. Many names are gendered, related to certain generations and/or associated with certain cultures and even religious belonging. To avoid such assumptions as much as possible, and to let the empiricism of the interviews speak for itself, this solution was considered most appropriate. The interviewees will be referred to by their preferred pronoun, and, as will be explained, the sexual orientation of one of the interviewees will also be revealed. Apart from this, no personal information about the interviewees will be included due to confidentiality as well as

the queer methodological approach in which stereotyping assumptions could be contradicting the deconstructionist nature of queer theory. Only information concerning activism and other for the thesis relevant details will be presented.

I interviewed a total of four activists, K and N whom are LGBTQ activists, L who is a queer and feminist activist and J who is a feminist activist. L, is, among other things, advocating for women's sexual and bodily rights focusing on the right to abortion, access to contraceptives and sexual education. L was interviewed twice; first at the café run by Nasawiya, and then a follow-up interview was conducted at a bar in Badaro, a neighborhood in Beirut. When distinguishing the interviews with L from one another, an *a* will imply the first interview and a *b* the second.

J is a former activist in a feminist university organization and the interview with her was conducted in a café that she chose. J is not explicitly an LGBTQ activist but in her feminist activism gender issues cut across issues related to sexuality and hence she has been doing some LGBTQ related work as well as cooperating with feminist LGBTQ organizations. Therefor I choose to include her in this research.

Additionally I interviewed M, who is not an activist but who contributed by sharing her experiences as a gay woman,¹⁴ growing up in southern Lebanon and currently living in Beirut. That interview was centered on awareness about issues concerning sexuality and access to language to express and identify oneself.

I let the interviewees chose locations for the meetings to be sure that the interviews were carried out in a space where everyone felt comfortable. This is always important for a good interview but even more important when dealing with a sensitive topic such as the topic for this study. The interviews were prepared in advance with open-ended questions but the questions were only used as guide lines and the actual interviews were more like conversations where new questions and topics came up along the course of the conversations. As Riemer (2012, 208) points out, interviews for this kind of studies are preferably conducted more similar to conversations than strictly organized interviews. If the interviews are conducted by talking, discussing and listening to the interviewee, rather than simply asking a certain number of linear questions, the interviewer might gain information or even

¹⁴ I deliberately chose not to use the word 'lesbian' here since the interviewee referred to herself as gay rather than lesbian and specifically stated that, although she used the word lesbian in general, she did not use it to describe herself.

understanding from an inside perspective. What is being said, and not said, during such a conversation have potential to give a deeper understanding of personal experiences than a strictly structured interview will provide.

To create confidentiality between researcher and participants of the study, openness about the research and its aims have been maintained and the interviewees are granted the right to withdraw - partially or completely - from participating at any point of the process. The interviewees have been informed of this and they are also informed that in case of a withdrawal all information they provided for the study will be erased, and any request of participants not to reveal certain information entrusted to me has been respected.

4.3 Ethical Discussion – Positioning the Researcher

...there are so many of us Arab women. Let us not be taken – nor accept to be taken – in handfuls.

(Haddad 2010, 138)

The fact I - the researcher - am a Swedish citizen and a Westerner conducting research in Lebanon requires a discussion about Western gaze in academia, and its common suppositions about “Arabs” and “Arab women”.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1988) essay *Under Western Eyes* is questioning the Western academic discourse on the East.¹⁵ She critically identifies how many Western scholars picture the East as homogenous and backwards, in need for salvation by the “enlightened” West. Mohanty, and many with her, has pointed out the weaknesses in such a discourse along with the many false conceptions about the so called Third World, and Third World women, which it relies on. As for the colonialist salvation project, the Lebanese poet and writer Joumana Haddad (2010) notes that change should preferably not come from outside and “especially not by ‘outsiders’. Change is not ‘importable’ material.” (27).

In line with Judith Butler, Mohanty (1988) contests the term woman as defined as a homogeneous group, neglecting differences and power structures among those categorized as

¹⁵ Note that terms like “the East” and “the West” are very broad and blurred definitions. I use them here in the same manner as Mohanty does.

women. Similarly she warns for the inherited generalizations and power balance of concepts such as “third world women.”

[...]the resultant homogenization of class, race, religion and daily material practices of women in the third world can create a false sense of the commonality of oppressions, interests and struggles between and amongst women globally. (Mohanty 1988, 77)

Haddad is, in a similar spirit as Mohanty, critical of many Western scholars’ tendency to use the concept “Arab women” as equivalent to one homogenous group, thus lumping together a range of different women from different backgrounds, religions, classes, cultures, and so on. By doing so, these women are reduced to a single, voiceless subject of study and deprived of their individual experiences. To correct this error, Haddad (2010) wants her reader to shift focus from the (mis)concept of the Arab woman to the discourse of the viewing Westerner:

Yet before asking: ‘what is an Arab woman?’ we need to ask another question first: how is a typical Arab woman perceived in the eyes of the non-Arab? Isn’t it a perception mainly formed in the Western collective consciousness by a multitude of formulas and generalizations, generated either by a still persisting Orientalist perspective, or by a post -9/11 hostile view shaped by resentment, fear and condescension? (27-28)

While aiming at deconstructing such an orientalist approach of the Arab world, many factors are involved in creating an identity and needs to be considered in order to understand a social and cultural phenomenon. One central assumption of this thesis is that gender and sexuality are socially constructions, and keeping that in mind, another ambition is to challenge a generalizing tendency when dealing with Arab cultures. The core methodological notions in this study are thus based on the understanding of labels such as “Arab”, “woman” or “lesbian” to be simplifications and generalizations and such labels will be handled with care and awareness. The aim is, after all, the deconstruction of fixed and imperative categorizations and to suggest a more open and fluid view of identifications.

There is an academic discussion about who can and should engage in queer researching, or to be more specific: whether researchers that claim a conforming sexual identity can and should engage in queer theory.¹⁶ Although I will not enter into that discussion here, I argue that self-awareness is of great importance when doing queer research, both in terms of self-identification and in terms of the researchers’ role in the field. Since my sexual identity is not norm-conforming I had a somewhat inside perspective to the field. However, my Swedish nationality and Western academic and cultural background made me an outsider in relation to

¹⁶ See for example: Sarah Cooper, *Relating to Queer Theory: Rereading Sexual Self-Definition with Irigaray, Kristeva, Wittig and Cixous*, (Bern: European Academic Publishers, 2000).

the Arab, Lebanese society in which the study was conducted and in which I was a foreigner. As discussed by Alison Rooke (2009), the identity of the researcher, how it is viewed by the researcher and how it is perceived by those inhabiting the field, is crucial for what contexts the researcher will be able to access, what information will be revealed and how this information is interpreted. Moreover, Rooke asserts that when conducting this kind of study it is difficult, if not impossible, not to become personally involved to some extent. The personal relationship between researcher and participant should be taken into careful consideration as well as the researchers' personal engagement in the topic. Getting to know people on a personal level might deepen the understanding of the cultural and social phenomena central to the study, but it is very important to distinguish between what is revealed in trust to a friend and what is shared as an interviewee to a researcher. When conducting the field work for this research there was not really a distinction between my research and my private life since I was in a way both conducting and living my research. It is thus very important to be able to be confident in what I do include in this thesis and what will be left out of respect for my friends.

5. Findings and Analysis

Some core assumptions of this thesis are that LGBTQ individuals are stigmatized in heteronormative societies and that female LGBTQ individuals are subjected to gender based discrimination, as are women at all levels of society. While acknowledging, and emphasizing, the diversity in the group loosely defined as female LGBTQ individuals, this thesis is examining implication of these power structures which put female LGBTQ individuals in a delicate situation.

Adrienne Rich (2003, 28) writes that: “Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence though ‘inclusion’ as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again.” Also Shax (2012) highlights that women are generally subjected to stigmatization of their sexuality in a different way than men and, although it is equally stigmatized to be queer; queer women and queer men are generally facing different kinds of discrimination. The findings of this study indeed demonstrate that the general situation of gay women is different from that of gay men. However, this is not limited to gay women but female LGBTQ individuals in general as well as trans and queer individuals are similarly marginalized.

The empirical findings of this study have been divided into three main themes where findings are arranged and analyzed in subchapters. In the first theme, Norm-Breaking Narratives, marginalization of non-conforming identities by conceptual anorexia is discussed and put in relation to empowering tactics to reclaim cultural space. The second theme, Space and Visibility, deals with the gendered politics of accessing spaces, and engages in the complex discussion about visibility/invisibility as a tool for LGBTQ activism. I will argue that even this is connected to conceptual anorexia. Lastly, the third theme, Internal and External Power Structures, suggest an intersectional approach to understand the comprehensive dynamics and entanglements of power structures as brought up by the informants.

5.1 Norm-Breaking Narratives

The issue of conceptual anorexia in narratives and representations about queer existence in the broad Arab society has many impacts. Lebanon is not an exception to this. As mentioned, the Arabic language is lacking non-pejorative terms to express LGBTQ identities, feelings and experiences and the existing vocabulary for non-conforming identities and sexualities is associated with negative stereotypes and insults. By applying the understanding of how norms function in society I suggest that this is one expression of the normative discrimination against the norm-breaking; by only allowing the narratives of the normative to be told, other narratives are efficiently neglected or, as with the case of language, degraded. In the following sub-section, findings related to this theme will be presented together with a discussion on how the dominant narrative is being negotiated by norm-breaking activists and how queer individuals by different means are reclaiming a place in society.

5.1.1 Reclaiming a Queer Language, Culture and Existence

*Mar7aba, ana lesbian.*¹⁷

(Meem 2009, 165)

M, one of my interviewees, recalled that as a child and teenager, she did not have any vocabulary to express sexuality at all, particularly not LGBTQ associated such. In fact she did not have any knowledge at all about sexualities, and she did not receive sexual education more than a brief mentioning of (hetero)sexual reproductivity during biology class. She grew up in a social context where sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, was tabooed. Accordingly, as a child and teenager she did not fully understand her feelings for other girls and her disinterest in boys. Although she occasionally pretended to have crushes in boys in order to fit in she was not really concerned about her sexuality until at the age of twenty, when a friend of hers came out to her as homosexual and thus opened up a new world of thoughts and expressions for her. Once M learned about homosexuality and gained access to LGBTQ communities, she also began to come to terms with feelings she had experienced as a child.

¹⁷ Translated in *Bareed Mista3jil* (165) as: "Hello, I am a lesbian."

Butler's (1999) discussion on performativity – that we learn to perform a given gender according to the norms – not only suggests that gender is a social construction without a true essence attached to it, but also that normative gender performances are confirming heterosexuality. Thus, when M pretended to be attracted to boys she was performing heterosexuality to conform to heteronormativity. Although she was not aware of her performativity by the time, she described it more like mimicry, her later deliberate entry to queer societies could be ascribed as subversive, even though she was cautious about when and where she was openly gay. During a great part of her daily life she performs heteronormativity.

M's story is pointing out an importance deficiency of lesbian feminism as elaborated above, namely the ascribing of lesbianism (or female homosexuality, since M refers to herself as gay) as an act of resistance to the heterosexual regime. In fact, both Wittig (1992) and Rich (2003) are identifying lesbians as some kind of runaways from patriarchy. What they fail to consider is how this is to be regarded when, as in the case of M, a gay identified woman perform heterosexuality on a daily basis. Can she still be cheered as a runaway? Queer theory appears to be more accurately applicable in this case since it regards all non-conforming identities as holding potential subversion, but with the Western associated tendency of equaling pride with openness it too has shortcomings in providing a satisfying analytical tool for explaining M's situation. The postcolonial criticism of queer theory appears to be very clear in this case. I argue that M being a self-identified gay woman who frequently performs heterosexuality does not translate to betraying queerness but rather to negotiate within existing social frameworks.

M states that she never uses Arabic words to express LGBTQ identities and experiences. Instead she mainly uses English expressions for addressing issues concerning sex and sexualities, particularly non-conforming sexualities. She does use the word lesbian when referring to other people, but never to identify herself: "I am gay, I use gay for myself. I don't call myself lesbian, I don't know why, I just don't do it." (M). This has not been a given identification though, since M at first associated gay as being a male only identification which thus could not be used to address female homosexuals such as herself: "I thought gay was only for guys." (M). But she later reclaimed the G in LGBTQ and is now using the term gay to address homosexuality in general, regardless of gender, and to define her own sexuality. M's reclaiming of gay could be used to add a different angle to Amer's call for Arab LGBTQ communities to use Arab terms to express queerness. Amer is problematizing queer Arab's

usage of English and French, arguing that this is constructing queer as alien to Arab culture. Citing one of the stories from *Bareed Mista3jil*, in which the Arabic term shazz is translated to deviant, indeed confirms Amer's argument and the subversive potential in it:

I love the word "shazz!" I would most proudly love to be called a "deviant" from a society like Lebanon (or any other country on the globe for that matter). It is in being deviants that we resist all the unfair distribution of power in the world today. So yes, *ana shazze*.¹⁸ (Meem 2009, 115)

However, in the case of M, the English term gay was used in an empowering way, which I argue do not per definition contradict her from identifying as Arabic and as an Arab gay woman. Another protagonist in *Bareed Mista3jil* even include the English term lesbian in her Arabic vocabulary as an act of empowering self-identification after rejecting existing Arabic terms for homosexuality due to their degrading association:

Arabic is our language too, and languages are alive. People give meanings to words, or invent new words altogether, or simply refuse using offensive words. We need to challenge the dictionary in our heads. I will start with myself: I am lesbian. (Meem 2009, 36)

What I am suggesting here is not that Amer is wrong in her analysis, on the contrary there are obviously empowering as well as subversive potentials in reclaiming an Arab queer vocabulary. But likewise there can be significance in using and owning terms like gay and lesbian, even though they originate from foreign languages, in this case English.

L voiced critique of the very concept of LGBTQ for being just another fixed box to fit into which is rather reinforcing the LGBTQ/straight dichotomy than challenging it. According to L, queer must be reclaimed, not only in an Arabic cultural context, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in a broader and more inclusive context that is challenging power structures and categorizations altogether. This requires the deconstructions of boxes such as straight versus gay to reach a society beyond LGBTQ. She manifested her arguments by asking: "So what? If I can claim to be one of the letters of LGBTQ, what does that mean? It would just put me in a box." Accordingly she argued that "The problem with LGBTQ is LGBTQ itself!" (L a). In the light of the theory chapter above I find L's reasoning here to be clearly in favor of queer theory over lesbian feminism since she in this quote rejects identity based activism and calls for a contesting of labels altogether. In L's word even the concept of LGBTQ identification is too limiting as she questions the purpose of maintaining such categorization within queer activism.

¹⁸ Translated in *Bareed Mista3jil* (115) as: "I am deviant (queer)."

The “conceptual anorexia surrounding representations of the sexes and sexual orientations” (Habib 2007, 104) is explaining the lack of knowledge about sex, sexualities and the body as described by M. Habib also states that female sexuality is generally stronger subjected to this conceptual anorexia, which reflects patriarchal gender discrimination. Additionally, Rich (2003) argues that lesbian existence has been consciously erased from historical narratives by the patriarchal regime in order to keep women subordinated to, and sexually dependent on, men. As a parallel to those reasoning, I want to suggest that ridiculing or dismissing attempt to bring issues concerning female sexuality or lesbianism to discussion also contribute to the conceptual anorexia. Al-Ghafari (2012/2013, 6) touches upon this issue by stating that: “Even after the emergence of Arab feminism, ‘lesbian subjectivity’ is totally silenced on the assumption that sexuality is not a ‘priority’ in a male-oriented world in which ‘women’ have more vital concerns to fight for than what is seen as ‘bodily rights’, or rights to ‘pleasure’.” The activists interviewed in Naber and Zaatari’s (2013) study witness of the same attitude of being shamed when raising issues of gender equality and sexual rights during a time of war, as if such issues were merely luxury hobbies and not, as they argue, basic for addressing war-related problems.

According to women’s right activist J, it is generally difficult to bring issues of gendered oppression and sexual oppression at the agenda. Like Al-Ghafari argues, J has experienced dispute regarding the importance of addressing oppression of women and LGBTQ individuals based on the argument that there are more important issues to address and hence these issues should not be prioritized. In a private conversation with a political activist I was similarly told that “LGBTQ rights is not important, there are so many other problems in this society, I don’t care about gay rights.” (This person was eager to add though, without being questioned, that “I don’t have any problems with people being gay!”).¹⁹

J argues that such counter arguments are in fact a patriarchal strategy to reduce certain kinds of oppression which leads to further marginalization of the groups concerned. She emphasized that many factors are involved and intertwined; religion and class, gender and sects, all need to be included in an analysis of power structures and all expressions of oppression matter: “Patriarchy exists in every single sect!” (J). L too rejected such attitudes, arguing, like J, that it is not possible to isolate certain issues or grading them as more or less important since nothing happens in a vacuum. According to her, her activism for abortion

¹⁹ Notes from field work 2014.

rights is connected to the struggle for female bodily rights which is connected to sexual rights and LGBTQ rights: “Everything is connected.” Thus, she argued, “we don’t have to limit the discussion to sexuality, to talk about sexuality” (L a), emphasizing that issues regarding sexuality are cutting across many structures and are thus important to address in many contexts, without the discussion being limited or fixed.

5.2 Space and Visibility

“Space is political statement!” said L during our first interview. The issue of accessibility to different contexts and spaces is indeed highly political and it manifests power structures and hierarchies; resulting in undisputed access for dominant groups and leaving those marginalized in the periphery. Access to spaces is also attached to the issue of visibility, that as well being a highly political matter. Who and what can be present, who and what can be visible - and on the expense of whom? The theme of space and visibility will be discussed in this section beginning with a description of the clubbing culture and on what conditions one can take part in it, which will lead to a more in-depth analysis of access to spaces. Finally, the politics of space will be connected to that of visibility in a discussion centered on the gendered perspective of visibility, and the usage of invisibility as a conscious tactic to create safe spaces. By arguing that the politics of space is indeed attached to conceptual anorexia following sections point out the marginalization of women and other non-privileged groups by denying them access to certain spaces.

5.2.1 Gay Bars – for Straight People

Girls with boys. Not boys with boys or girls with girls.

(Guard at gay friendly night club)

Beirut has a reputation for being a party town and not without reason. The night life is vibrant and varied and the city never really sleeps. There are some clubs and bars that are (more or less officially) gay or gay friendly. Although I frequently went out to different bars and clubs that were allegedly gay friendly, I only found one bar where gay couple could dance intimately and kiss openly without being harassed. In the other places that are supposed to be gay friendly, guards circle the dance floors to make sure that no gay couple is too intimate

with one another. If a gay couple is caught kissing, the guard will immediately separate them, on some clubs by telling them to behave (straight) and in other places by quite literally pulling them apart or even throwing them out of the club. Unlike Sofian Merabet's (2014, 229) observation, that these guards were "separating any male dancing couple whose bodies were perceived as being too closely intertwined", this practice is used to separate any gay couple, regardless of gender.²⁰

The initial quote of this section comes from one of those guards when declaring which couple will be corrected and which couple will be left alone. By saying this, the guard is obviously somewhat expecting to encounter couples constituting of "boys with boys" and "girls with girls", it is after all a club commonly known to be gay friendly. This did not prevent him from routinely making sure that heteronormativity is maintained at the dance floor, while still allowing gay visitors and profiting on being gay friendly – or simply put; gays are welcome to spend their money here as long as they act straight. Puar (2007) is employing the term homonormativity to theorize how certain expressions of queerness are conditionally accepted in the normative society as long as they conform to it. Though she defines the term in the context of a Western national state, homonormativity could nevertheless contribute to an analysis of the power dynamics at those night clubs. There is obviously an extent of acceptance towards certain homosexual and/or queer tendencies, but this acceptance is strictly limited and exclusive, and also totally subordinated the arbitrariness of the club owners, the guards and potential police raids (Merabet 2014, 227-232). The fact that LGBTQ individuals continuously frequent those places suggests that many either conform to the rules or otherwise negotiate the situation by for example trying to avoid the gaze of the guards.²¹ By creating an acceptable gay subject that does not challenge the norms on which the heterosexual regime is based is, according to Seidman (2001), a strategy to incapacitate gayness as threat to heteronormativity, thus depriving it from subversion.

On these same clubs, however, straight couples can kiss and be intimate without facing any trouble. Many of the heterosexual guests that I spoke to at those clubs said that they enjoyed the open atmosphere at gay clubs and therefore frequented them. But all did not share this sentiment. One man once told me, at a gay bar, to be aware of a group of girls dancing close to me, "watch out for them," he said, "they are lesbians!"²² Even though these bars and

²⁰ Notes from field work, 2014.

²¹ Notes from field work 2014.

²² Notes from field work, 2014.

clubs offer a somewhat friendly space for LGBTQ persons, this safety is debatable and should not be taken for granted. A woman working at the entrance to one of the gay friendly night clubs explained to me why it is prohibited to take photos at the club by stating that “this is a gay club and we do not want to risk outing our customers against their will.”²³

Analyzing Beirut’s club culture from a queer perspective is clearly complex as it describes a multifaceted reality permeated with structures, customs and social codes. Nor is there a clear distinction between gay friendly and homophobic, the situation is rather a spectrum than strictly polarized. Indeed, some allegedly gay friendly places are manifesting homophobic tendencies at the dance floor and transphobic discrimination at the entrance. On the other hand, not all the mainstream clubs and bars express homophobia, although this does not necessarily mean that LGBTQ individuals will feel comfortable being open there, as many would argue that they are rather safe than sorry. As will be elaborated in next section, accessing spaces and be able to feel comfortable in certain contexts, is bound to privileges and is a highly political nature.

5.2.2 Access to Spaces – Gender and Class

Space is political statement!

(L a)

As discussed, the alleged gay friendly clubs are equipped with male guards whose main task is to prevent guests from being too homosexually intimate with each other. In addition to, in Merabet’s (2014, 229) words, “trying to make sure that general amusement did not spill over into some immoral debauchery”, many female costumers were also subjected to sexual harassment by these guards. In line with Al-Ghafari’s (2012/2013) discussion of the public gaze, in which female bodies are consumed as objects for male heterosexual desire, those male club guards seemed to view all women at the club as potential targets for their sexual objectifications and harassments. As argued by Eduards (2007, 51-54) the female body is constructed as an object in need of male protection, but it is also subjected to punishment if (or when) transgressing the patriarchal order. Since the public sphere is a male domain, women are violating the order only by entering it and are thus punished by sexual harassment, which is limiting women’s access to the public sphere. Added to the male dominance of the

²³ Notes from field work, 2014.

public space, generally higher social control of female family members, compared to their male counterparts, also poses a higher risk for LGBTQ women of being outed. This limits women's movements in general and makes access to safe spaces for LGBTQ women even more complicated (N, K and L).

Since this attitude is not limited to the streets but is expressed in all public areas, bars and clubs included, women's access to gay hangouts is restricted. No wonder then that in bars and clubs – gay and straight places alike – the crowd is usually overwhelmingly male dominated, with few exceptions. Furthermore, as K commented during the interview, many gay friendly clubs are consciously denying trans individuals from entering. As emphasized by all the interviewees in this study, male domination is not only a bar phenomenon but it is present in the queer communities, organizations and scenes in Beirut, limiting the access and influence of females. If applied, conceptual anorexia could serve to identify the strategic awareness with which women are routinely marginalized from various spaces. It also provides an angle of a possible explanation to the lack of female representation in historical narratives and academic research since their presence is limited and they are thus more difficult to locate and understand.

As argued, access to spaces is a highly political question. An analysis of this using a critical class perspective suggests that socioeconomic status is an important factor to consider. As discussed by Merabet (2014), Beirut is not a city for pedestrians. Owning and driving a car costs money, and using public transportation is associated with low status, making mobility in Beirut a class issue. K stated that attitudes towards non-normative sexualities and gender identities vary throughout all levels of society and are not connected to class belonging or sect, but affording to be discrete about a controversial life style though is indeed a matter of socioeconomic conditions.

Access to Beirut's gay nightlife is also a matter of class belonging. Not everyone can afford to spend money on the pricy night clubs and, in some communities, clubbing is not socially accepted which adds yet one more dimension of potential exclusion of LGBTQ individuals from accessing certain social contexts (K). However, the LGBTQ communities in Lebanon are varied and broad and should not be reduced to merely represent the party culture, even though for a foreign viewer this is the most visible and easiest accessed part of those communities.

5.2.3 Visibility through Anonymity?

Visibility is for privileged middle class gay men!

(L b)

The question of visibility is a highly political one that varies depending on the context. Among the main organizations Helem and Nasawiya have chosen visibility as a tactic and they both operate in public, whereas Meem has chosen invisibility and is mostly carrying out actions anonymously. On an individual level, many queers and LGBTQ activists chose not to be open about their identities and activism, or to only be open in certain contexts. Openness is in many cases attached with great danger for the individual.²⁴ The concept of visibility, or being “out”, is a delicate matter for queer identified individuals in Lebanon, be they activists or not. LGBTQ persons living in Lebanon need to make an individual assessment on whether, and to what extent, they can come out as LGBTQ. However, as argued by Sedgwick (1990), coming out is not a single one-time-only act, but a process that reflects various encounters and situations.

The initial quote of this section was stated by L. According to her, the concept of visibility is closely connected to the concept of “being out of the closet”, both strongly associated with Western cultural interpretation of gay identities and queerness, which is in turn reinforcing Western homonormativity, as argued by Puar (2007). The question then becomes for whom visibility is important, and for whom the struggle is carried out. To L, adopting the stereotyped Western associated visibility is the same as accepting labels and boxes instead of fighting them, and thus the answers to such questions could be put harsh but simple: “Visibility is for the outside world – we don’t struggle for them!” (L b).

The conceptual anorexia surrounding female sexuality originates in the general taboo concerning female sexuality. This is indeed a limiting factor for gender equality and it commonly results – as in the case of M – in insufficient or absent sexual education. Nevertheless, this could also to some extent be used by queer women to negotiate a somewhat increased possibility to express their sexuality although in secrecy, protected by the invisibility of female sexuality. Contrary to men, women are generally not required to manifest heterosexuality because they are not expected to manifest sexuality at all. This is also why women generally enjoy a somewhat broader scope in terms of dress code since it is

²⁴ This is true in many societies worldwide does not exclusively apply to Lebanon.

more socially accepted for women to “look or behave masculine” than it is for men to “look or behave feminine”, according to N, K and L. Generally, women do not to the same extent risk of failing their gender, as men do because, as argued by Shax (2012), the denial of female sexuality is nevertheless relying on the assumption that women are heterosexual. Thus when queer women are taking advantage of this imposed stigmatization they are negotiating within existing system, creating a space hidden from the heterosexual gaze. In this context even invisible acts of resistance could be subversive and thus be included in Butler’s (1999) term gender trouble. The lesbian feminism, presented here through Wittig (1992) and Rich (2003), that argue that women can resist heteronormativity and patriarchy by “running away” from it by not conforming to heterosexuality could perhaps gain from extending their argument to also apply to invisible resistance to heteronormativity.

The social control of women’s bodies, as brought up by M and L respectively, is among other ways expressed in a generally higher social pressure on women to get married and establish a normative nuclear family. Social pressure to get (heterosexually) married is a source of anxiety for many Lebanese LGBTQ individuals. According to L (a), the honor related to women’s bodies is reflected in the glorification of motherhood and female reproductivity, thus making it harder for women to live unconventionally, which could be seen as a counter argument to the claim that queer women can potentially enjoy some extent of space in the imposed sexual taboo. In fact, I argue that this does not counter the tactical utilization of invisibility but it rather suggest that this tactic works differently in different contexts and depending on the age and sociocultural background of the woman in question.

Seen in the light of Eduards (2007) theories, the female body is exposed to objectification and sexualization but simultaneously female sexuality is tabooed in its function as a yardstick of male honor. In this function, female sexuality is only allowed to be reproductive and failed feminine performativity is at risk of being punished. There are many sides to this issue though. M, for instance, does not experience any significant pressure from her family to get conventionally married and establish a family, something she suggested was because she has many older siblings which already have families and children, thus she believes that her unmarried status is less pressing for her parents.

As a further angle to the debate about visibility, L argued that invisibility could, and should, be practiced out of solidarity with more marginalized and vulnerable groups in society. Considering L’s statement, cited above, visibility is attached to privileges that only a

small group of LGBTQ individuals hold. Subsequently L stated that “If my visibility is on someone else’s expense, why should I do it?” (L b). On the other hand, and to emphasize the complexity of the matter, it might be argued that if queerness and LGBTQ issues remain invisible, then heteronormativity (and LGBTQ-phobia) will not be challenged.

Recent years, the Lebanese society has experienced increasing awareness of LGBTQ existence and issues, which has been positive to some extent but has also led to a backfiring in form of increasing homophobia. Negative images of homosexuality in particular, but also of other LGBTQ identities, contribute to fueling general prejudices, misconceptions and LGBTQ-phobia. This has also been reflected in the mainstream media representation which has been more aggressive towards the LGBTQ communities (L a).

According to N, one major challenge for the work of Helem is dealing with media. She explained that even though Helem activists can carry out their work relatively open – and Helem has, as mentioned, a public office, official contact details and a web site – dealing with media is still problematic. The risk of outing people against their will is a constant threat, and when dealing with mainstream media that risk is even higher. One way to deal with this is to have reliable media channels that are either allies of the movement or operate from within the community (N).

While acknowledging the many obstacles and discriminating structures that LGBTQ individuals are facing in Lebanon, M argued on the other hand that recent years the climate has changed to the better. She is experiencing higher tolerance from the mainstream society now compared to a couple of years ago, especially in Beirut, and she believes that it might be slightly easier to be young and LGBTQ today in relation to twenty years ago when she grew up. It might be too early to give an adequate and satisfying reason to this improvement and this study is definitely lacking empirical data to provide such an answer, but it is perhaps not too farfetched to suggest that, if M is right, it could be thanks to ambitious activism and increased public awareness about LGBTQ existence.

5.3 Internal and External Power Structures

LGBTQ communities do not exist in a vacuum but are affected by, and interrelated with, other contexts and levels of society. Thus, as has been frequently argued throughout this thesis; patriarchal structures exist also within queer spaces, and even some queer identities are

adjusted to normativity. This final theme seeks to explore hierarchies within the LGBTQ communities, by addressing respectively male and cis dominance through expressions of femophobia and transphobia. Lastly, the impact of Western domination in queer politics will be discussed in the light of previous analysis and theories of the issue.

5.3.1 Femophobia and the Glorification of the Masculine

If you are organizing a male dominated room, then [male cases] will be visible on the expense of other cases

(K)

Both Merabet (2014) and Lundqvist (2013) are bringing up for discussion the phenomenon of prejudice among many gay men against effeminate men, drag queens and transsexuals, all of which are ridiculed for supposedly manifesting femininity. Lundqvist (2013, 111-121) is describing how drag queens are simultaneously cheered by gay men when performing on stage and then harassed by the same audience while at the dance floor. Merabet (2014) is referring to similar tendencies when addressing pejorative attitudes expressed by some gay men towards perceived effeminate men. This Merabet refers to as internal homophobia, coming from within the gay communities, or internalized homophobia, caused by absorbing and internalizing pejorative stereotypes about homosexuality from the heterosexist society (135-149). He is also using the term homosexual homophobia when observing the lack of internal support from the community when certain gay identities – that is gay men perceived as feminine – are discriminated against in public and at gay venues (217-226).

As has been clarified, the word phobia is being used and understood in this analysis not as a fear for the subject to which the phobia is directed, but rather the fear of the privileged to lose power and status to the less privileged if hierarchies are being challenged. By scrutinizing the usage of the term phobia, as defined in this thesis, in those phenomena that Lundqvist and Merabet are describing here, I suggest that this is not in fact expressions of homophobia but rather femophobia. Femophobia is referring to the fear of the male, patriarchal regime to lose its power at the expense of gender equality. According to the portrayed narratives, the problem does not seem to be caused by unease with possible homosexuality among the individuals targeted by the internal stigmatization that Lundqvist and Merabet are pointing

out, but what unites the targeted individuals is perceived manifestations of femininity. Thus this internal stigmatization is reflecting a patriarchal order which is privileging masculinity. Wittig (1992), Rich (2003) and Butler (1999) are all connecting patriarchy with heteronormativity, arguing that the two are interdependent. However, I argue that such manifestations of femophobia as discussed above suggest that also in a homonormative context, masculinity is still valued higher than femininity in existing patriarchal structures, which also permeate LGBTQ communities.

Besides, as also noted by Merabet (2014, 142-149), those gay men participating in stigmatization of other queer individuals, as described, are distancing themselves from queer identities that are accused to be even more controversial than the own identity. In a heteronormative society all LGBTQ identities are constructed as the non-normative, not-fitting, *Other*, thus when individuals, that are indeed already alienated, state “*Ana mesh heyk!*’ (I’m not like that!)” (146), to in turn defy an even more non-normative group, a queer *Other* is identified within an already existing group of *Others*. This could also explain the lack of internal support, which Merabet (2014, 217-226) labels homosexual homophobia. By leaning on Puar’s (2007) reasoning about homonormativity I suggest that these hierarchal divisions among LGBTQ identities could instead be regarded as a form of internalized homonormativity (performed normativity, as Butler might suggest) in an attempt to be accepted (or at least less stigmatized) by the heteronormative society. As Seidman (2001) argues such attempts to be included in the unity of normativity are counterproductive in their reinforcing of a normative regime and their creation of new exclusions. However, many people just want to live their life in peace without being engaged in activism or exposed to discrimination and hence one should be careful when judging such behavior as unfair.

Within a patriarchal society, as elaborated in the theory chapter, femininity in general is subordinate to masculinity, which thus does not solely affect female associated male identities but it is also targeting females in general. According to Shax (2012), gender oppression within LGBTQ communities (she is particularly addressing Helem) has for long been an issue of debate. She states that sexist expressions are manifested in different ways ranging from sexist jokes to verbal and physical harassments and that, as a further marginalization, complaints about it was commonly met with suspicion, ridicule, victim blaming and ignorance.

Marginalization of women within Lebanese LGBTQ communities is an issue addressed and problematized by all the informants of this study. This issue is also the core to the internal

conflict in Helem that eventually resulted in the establishing of Meem and its disunion from Helem. One informant from Helem referred to this as an “unpleasant incident” that tend to happen in such organizations, hence not being specific for Helem adding that “Helem will always try its best to be a safe-zone” and that they are striving at “being more LGBTQ and not just gay.” Although not disagreeing with this standpoint, another informant from the organization had a harsher, and perhaps more self-critical attitude towards the subject, confirming that the creation of Meem and its separatist characteristic was and is needed. The fact that this conflict is very infected nevertheless witness of its delicate nature originated in the failure of the then main LGBTQ community to satisfyingly recognize and deal with patriarchal power structures.

5.3.2 Cis Dominance and Transphobia

But the truth is, I'm not male, I'm transgender. I'm very proud to be transgender. Even after all my operations, whatever I end up looking like, I will always be a female-to-male transsexual.

(Meem 2009, 172)

A further angle of patriarchal structures within the LGBTQ communities and scenes, and regarding overall representation in society is that, with its cis orientation, it is also depriving trans individual from inclusion. Just as femophobia is understood here as the fear of the male, patriarchal regime to lose its power, transphobia is referring to the fear of cis identified groups to lose privileges, along with the claim of being natural and normal thus invisible, if gender binary is contested.

As discussed, the normative nature of male-man/female-woman gender binary requiring gender identities to be cis does not translate to actually *being* normal and natural, but it is understood in queer theory as being socially constructed to be *perceived* as normal and natural. The transgender spectrum of identities is contesting cis-normativity as much as it is marginalized by it. This applies to both a theoretical level and in practice. Theoretically because much of queer theory's criticism of lesbian feminism is based in the cis-orientation that is usually characterized by the latter; and practically, transgenderism is related to social stigma and marginalization. However, if, as cited by Charlotte Chuck Tate (2012, 20), “there is no underlying essence to being female to which a cisgender experience could be

meaningfully tied”, then an analysis on queer female marginalization, such as this, should not be tied to ciswomen.

The empirical material on transgenderism and transsexuality from the field work of this study is very scarce and deficient, and the little information at hand is solely concerning transwomen and/or male-to-female transsexuals.²⁵ It is cited in *Bareed Mista3jil* that: “Female-to-male transsexuals like me are even less visible in Lebanon than male-to-female transsexuals.” (Meem 2009, 133). This statement gives a glimpse of the diversity of trans identities as well as it problematizes marginalizing power structures surrounding trans. Subsequently, it needs to be emphasized that there are many parts missing in this study to provide an accurate analysis of trans issues in Lebanon. Anyhow, analyzing the lack of empirical data suggests that the conceptual anorexia surrounding trans issues in Lebanon is efficient and it is obviously very hard for a cis-identified researcher as myself to reach the trans communities, or even note traces of them in the spheres, social and physical, in which I moved in Beirut.

Trans was touched upon during the interviews with L, K and N respectively, focusing, as mentioned, on transwomen. K was emphasizing the social stigma surrounding trans identities, explaining that socially this could result in exclusion from the family, discrimination at the labor market and housing market and general harassments in the public and private sphere. Legally trans individuals face the risk of being arbitrarily arrested by the police and harassed under article 534. According to K there is a general practice of the police to place transwomen in the male department of jails and custodies. Considering the social stigmatization and hostility of transgenderism in society, there is an obvious risk for transwomen to be subjected to severe abuse in such places. This practice should be regarded as a part of an unofficial punishment, as discussed in relation to the legal system. Police brutality against trans individuals is a difficult issue to reach due to the general lack of legal support of LGBTQ individuals. N argued that as an LGBTQ individual you are more or less lawless and that “violence directed at [LGBTQ individuals] is like ‘I can do what I want because nothing is going to happen to me’” (N), referring to the unlikelihood to be convicted for LGBTQ-phobic hate crimes. This information is further confirmed in the Human Rights Watch report presented earlier, in which emphasize is put on the impunity of LGBTQ

²⁵ These two definitions are sometimes referred to as equivalent. In respect of the broad spectrum of trans identities I chose to refer to them as separate identities here to avoid generalizations.

offenders by the legal system and the widely use of unofficial punishments by the police in forms of torture, humiliation and ill-treatment commonly targeting LGBTQ individuals.

The practice of actively rejecting trans individuals from entering certain gay friendly venues, as commented by K, serves as yet another expression of the internalized homonormativity, as discussed in previous section. Note that I am not at all claiming that homosexuality and transsexuality are equivalent, although I am arguing, on the base of the queer theoretical ground, that they are stigmatized under the same oppressive structures (which does not however imply that they are identically stigmatized). The potential subversion of all norm-contesting identities as theorized by Judith Butler (1999) – what she refers to as gender trouble – is also a potential ground for discrimination. In order for a norm to exist it has to be defined in relation to what it is not – in relation to the alien *Other* (Wittig 1992). Thus, as pointed out by Puar (2007), adapting to homonormativity might provide a somewhat escape from social stigmatization but it can only be done by demonizing someone else, in defining another norm-breaking *Other* that will be exposed to stigmatization; in this case trans individuals.

In relation to the discussion about different strategies to maintain an oppressive system, by for instance dismissing and ignoring issues related to oppression, a legal case is demonstrating another such strategy. In 2014 a transwoman was cleared of charges for violating article 534 after being prosecuted for, and admitting to, having had sexual relationships with men. The judge nullified the case, arguing that no crime had been conducted, and stating that gender is more than what is written at the legal document; it should also be based on self-identification. The judge based his decision on the fact that the prosecuted woman identified herself as a woman and that she further defined her sexual relationships with men to be “classified within the framework of natural relations between men and women” (Legal Agenda 2014), and was thus not being “guilty” of same-sex acts. This legal case could be regarded as a historical landmark for the right of the individual to define one’s own gender (although it is restricted to one of the two confirming to gender binary; male or female) and of the rights of trans individuals. However, in much of the media reporting of the case, locally and internationally alike, this is instead referred to as landmark for gay rights, ignoring the fact that the transwoman in question did not identify as gay.²⁶ The

²⁶ See “Landmark Ruling Rubbishes anti-gay Law in Lebanon,” The Daily Star, March 5, 2014, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Mar-05/249261-landmarkruling-rubbishes-anti-gay-lawin-lebanon.ashx#axzz3G14168zu>, and “Lebanon: Being Gay is not a Crime nor against

judge did question and criticize the traditional interpretations of article 534 and the unclear formulations of the article, but I argue that the potential recognition of transgenderism and transsexuality in this case is lost if referred to as a gay right issue. I suggest this to be yet another contribution to conceptual anorexia in that it efficiently marginalizes, even rejects, the discriminated group in question.

5.3.3 Western Impact on Queer Lebanon

...we don't strive for gay parades, we want something else, something that suits here.

(L b)

As argued, there is a common misconception in the mainstream Arab societies that homosexuality is not inherently Arabic but imported from the West (Amer 2012 and Habib 2007). This misconception is fueled by the Western self-proclaimed position of defining queer, which goes together with the tendency of equating gay visibility with pride parades and a certain kind of (gay) lifestyle. The Western narrative about the Muslim/Arab other is incompatible with the mainstream Western interpretation of what constitutes a real LGBTQ identity. The main factor in making these two incompatible is the Western narrative that is restricting queer subjects from being other than white, while non-white subjects are recognized but exposed to racialization and cannot be other than straight. Thus it is impossible to simply transfer Western homonormative ideals to a Lebanese context.

The Western pride movement has frequently used visibility and a kind of “in your face” attitude as tactics, which is commonly associated²⁷ with pride parades and queer galas, but in the case of Lebanon, queer activism is carried out under different circumstances and has taken other directions. As discussed, the founding of Meem was centered on the need for invisibility due to security reasons and it is practiced as a deliberately chosen tactic. Invisibility might even allow women a somewhat increased possibility to live unconventionally. Thus many queer women reject the West-influenced gay visibility (Farah 2012b). Recall for example the quote from the informant stating that she is “Shia’, gay and proud of it!” This woman was not open about her gay identity for the majority of the people with which she interacted regularly,

Nature,” The Huffington Post, March 4, 2014, accessed October 13, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dan-littauer/lebanon-gay-rights_b_4896786.html.

²⁷ Examples of this is for instance the popular Queer Nation slogans; “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!” and “Out of the closets and into the streets!” and the Pride movement.

including her family. Thus she was performing heterosexuality on a daily basis, but nevertheless she claimed to be proud of her gay identity. Clearly, in this case, pride does not necessarily require visibility as understood in the dominant Western interpretation of these concepts.

Moreover, the Western self-proclaimed right of interpretation also has a material aspect in terms of funding. Many activists and organizations are reliant of Western money in form of donations. Thus, funding is a delicate and highly political matter that, as argued by L, can be simply put as the choice between money and independence. This is not an easy choice, though, and however you chose, it comes with consequences. As L (b) commented, “money is power over agenda” with which she addressed the problem with the many strings that are usually attached to receiving funds. L explained how many foreign organizations, especially European and North American, provide money with certain conditions which is limiting the receiver’s power over its own agenda. She expressed this by sarcastically imitate the donators of these funding saying: “You will get money if you become like us!” adding that in such transactions, cultural differences between the, mainly Western, donators and the Lebanese receiving organizations, are commonly ignored. Still the dilemma remains; what is an organization going to do with independence if it does not have money to carry out activism? But what difference does an organization make if it is unable to set an own agenda due to political involvements of the donors? Financial problems are critical issues for many of the LGBTQ organizations (L a).

6. Conclusions

Without a strong feminist movement that is working on issues of female sexuality, there can be no space for anyone to talk about queer female sexuality.

(Shax, quoted by Farah 2012)

It has been argued frequently throughout this thesis that patriarchal tendencies are manifested at every level in society. In the dominant patriarchal discourse, female sexuality is commonly shamed and tabooed as a means to keep women subordinated and maintain the patriarchal hierarchies in which female sexuality exists for the purpose of male pleasure and reproduction. Hence other expressions of female sexuality than those, have efficiently been erased from historical narratives and marginalized in current popular culture. As for the case of Lebanon, sexual education is insufficient and for some even absent, especially regarding non-confirmative sexualities and sexual practices. Furthermore, Arabic, the native language of many Lebanese, is lacking sufficient words to express LGBTQ identities and experiences, causing many queer Lebanese to express such things in European languages, mostly English and French. This contributes to further alienation of queerness in the Lebanese society and fuels the common misconception that LGBTQ is in fact a Western invention. Habib's (2007) term *conceptual anorexia* has been employed and elaborated in this thesis to identify patriarchal marginalization of females in historical and cultural narratives. The tools for this marginalization that have been identified in this thesis are the erasing of narratives, rejecting to address issues of discrimination, the dismissing and/or ridiculing of attempts to bring it up for discussion and the neglecting of certain struggles combined with the appropriation of their achievements (as when a trans right victory was reported as a gay rights victory).

Although the taboo surrounding female sexuality is marginalizing women, it can similarly provide a potential space where queer women can live out their sexuality protected by the invisibility of the taboo. Though this is a very restricted freedom, it is employed as a tactic for non-conforming women as a possibility to, to some extent, hide from the heteronormative gaze. This could indeed be considered subversive. Regarding the language issues, attempts to reclaim and own existing Arabic terms, as well as integrating English terms into the Arabic vocabulary, can indeed be interpreted as acts of resistance, whether carried out consciously or not.

As have been elaborated, issues of male dominance and the ensuing marginalization of females, have not been thoroughly address nor dealt with by the main LGBTQ communities. Consequently, queer women and trans individuals have been organizing separatist communities, operating mostly underground. Here, invisibility is on one hand deliberately chosen as a tactic to ensure security, but on the other hand it has been employed as a necessarily solution to internal discrimination and marginalization, and could thus be said to be enforced due to the circumstances in which these communities were established in the first place. To claim a safe space, women and trans persons frankly had to distance themselves from males.

Sexual harassment in the public sphere is limiting women's possibilities to move freely and comfortably, thus enforcing many women to be aware of their physical appearance and adopting tactics to avoid being exposed to harassment. During the conflict that resulted in women and trans separatist organizing there were reported cases of sexual harassment committed by male members of the LGBTQ communities. Such abuses are problematic, not only because they are abuses, but also because they are manifesting patriarchal power within contexts that should be safe for LGBTQ individuals. Lundqvist (2013) and Merabet (2014), describe expressions of internal stigmatization directed from some gay men towards LGBTQ men perceived as feminine and address them as internal or internalized homophobia. By interpreting the term phobia as a fear of the privileged to lose power at the expense of equality, this thesis suggests that such expressions of stigmatization should rather be referred to as femophobia. Further it has been argued in the analysis that femophobia can be used to understand discrimination of individuals that somehow manifest perceived femininity, no matter of assigned gender, in society at large and within LGBTQ communities.

However, with a queer theoretical understanding of human interactions, phobia is not inherited and natural but it is a social construction, something we learn and thus it can be unlearned. This provides a further angle to the discussion about whether visibility should be used as a political means in activism for LGBTQ rights. Recall L's (b) statement that "If my visibility is on someone else's expense, why should I do it?" She was arguing that by promoting visibility some groups or individuals might be harmed and there has indeed been an increase of public homophobia as a response to recent increased LGBTQ visibility in Lebanon. However, invisibility might lead to inaccessibility and it also makes it harder for people to find the communities. In the case of M, for instance, more public visibility and awareness would perhaps have made it easier for her to identify her sexuality at an earlier

stage. The question of whether to – and how to – promote LGBTQ awareness in public is clearly a delicate matter.

Due to stigmatization, many LGBTQ individuals in Lebanon are performing heterosexuality on a more or less regular basis. The concepts of gay pride and visibility are commonly interpreted by Western standards in which performing heterosexuality to avoid being outed as LGBTQ might translate as internalized stigmatization. The findings and analysis of this study are showing a different picture though, where pride and visibility are not necessarily interdependent. As have been argued, it is obviously possible to be “Shia’, gay and proud of it!” without being openly gay in every social encounter. Non-conforming individuals are regularly assessing their social surroundings and different tactics are invented and employed to negotiate space and identities. Subsequently I want to emphasize that simply enforcing Western interpretations of queer to a Lebanese context is neither possible nor desirable. All the informants of this study have respectively called for Arab queer beyond Western impact.

As stated by Joumana Haddad (2010, 27) in a critical discussion of the dominant Western view of the Arab world; “Change is not ‘importable’ material.” In harmony with Haddad, this thesis does not intend to change the Lebanese society, or advocate for possible solutions to problems brought up and discussed in the analysis. The ambition of this study is to offer alternative ways to understand Lebanese LGBTQ communities and internal and external power structures that affect them. By employing a gender perspective, particularly in response to the general overweight of male representation in previous research and current reports, this study provides a relevant contribution to the field.

My overall difficulties in getting in touch with Meem as well as the lack of data from the trans communities could suggest themes for further research. However, in respect for the consciously chosen invisibility employed by Meem, especially considering the fact that an informant associated to Meem explicitly told me that she could not discuss the organization with someone not engaged in it, I argue that it is better to let such discussions come from within Meem on their conditions. However, there is more to research and analyze about the debate on visibility or invisibility as a tactic for LGBTQ activism in Lebanon. The different shapes of conceptual anorexia, as elaborated above, such as erasing narratives and dismissing attempts to address discrimination, are opening up for further research about patriarchal disciplining of females as well as non-conforming identities.

Monique Wittig (1992) argues that the goal of the feminist struggle is not for women to become men, or like men, and by that prove that they are as worthy as men claim to be. Rather, the goal lies beyond gender binary, beyond patriarchy. It is not to acknowledge male superiority and become what men are perceived to be; because in the end male identities are also socially constructed. The same is applicable for LGBTQ; there is nothing to gain in becoming heteronormative, to be accepted as normal. This would deprive the potential subversion of non-conforming identities and create new groups viewed as *Others* instead of deconstructing normativity.

Conclusively, during our second interview, L told me that due to resignation many activists dream about leaving Lebanon, and many do so, especially to Europe. L did not share these sentiments, on the contrary she expressed hopes for the future, saying; “I want to stay here. There is work to be done, I feel needed here.”

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Interviews

J, December 1, 2014

K, October 29, 2014

L (a), November 11, 2014

L (b), December 14, 2014

M, December 15, 2014

N, October 29, 2014

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