



An Engineered Hostility:

THE ARCHITECTURE OF ANTI-TRANS OPPRESSION IN SOUTH-WEST ASIA AND NORTH AFRICA



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About GATE

GATE is an international advocacy organization working towards justice and equality for trans and gender diverse communities. Rooted in our movements, we work collaboratively with strategic partners at the global level to provide knowledge, resources and access to international institutions and processes. Our vision is a world free from human rights violations based on gender identity and gender expression. Our strategy is to transform the landscape of global advocacy, knowledge creation and resource distribution through critical inclusion of trans and gender diverse movements at all levels of political, legal and socio-economic processes.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyzes the nature of anti-trans hostility in the South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region. In the SWANA region, trans and gender diverse people have no State-recognized rights, meaning that they face a system of active, pre-emptive denial of their existence by State authorities.

The hostility described in this report is a top-down strategy of the States in this region. It is a symptom of a broader, State-led, anti-human rights doctrine that targets any group, notably feminists, political dissidents, religious reformers, or ethnic minorities, that deviates from State-sanctioned norms.

This State-engineered hostility is a political tool that serves two primary goals:

1. **A Scapegoat for Internal Crises:** It allows States to deflect public anger from catastrophic economic failures by manufacturing a 'moral panic' around deeply marginalized and socially unpopular groups, such as trans and gender diverse people.
2. **An Anti-Imperialist Performance:** It allows States to perform an anti-colonial posture by framing trans and gender diverse identities as a "Western product." This is often achieved through what has been termed (dis)translation politics, where the word 'gender' itself is deliberately misinterpreted as a foreign plot to undermine local values (Mustafa, 2025).

This strategy is executed through a triangular alliance of power: State-aligned religious institutions that provide the theological doctrine; political elites who weaponize it for populist gain; and State-controlled security and media that enforce it through censorship, digital persecution, and violence. State-controlled media is central to this, consistently conflating trans and gender diverse identities with homosexuality and sex work as a way to frame all of these communities as forms of 'sexual deviance.'

Consequently, trans and gender diverse organizing in the region is nascent, fragmented, and forced into survival mode. However, it's important to note that this is not a passive mode; instead, it involves active, tech-savvy digital resistance, feminist coalition-building, and artistic production (Girijashanker, 2018). However, activists are often forced to prioritize immediate, life-sustaining needs over long-term advocacy, focusing their limited resources on emergency shelter, legal aid, and discreet medical care.

This report recommends a fundamental shift in international support: from top-down, advocacy-focused projects to a decolonized model that provides flexible, core funding for direct survival services, invests in a sustainable and secure regional ecosystem led by local activists, and prioritizes community-defined needs over donor-centered requirements.

Methodology

This report draws on a multi-method qualitative research approach conducted across the broader SWANA region. The analysis integrates extensive desktop research on legal frameworks, religious jurisprudence, political discourse, media ecosystems, and policy developments, along with a systematic review of both traditional and digital media, to examine how State, religious, and political actors construct and disseminate anti-trans narratives and sentiments. To complement and ground this analysis, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen experts, including lawyers, researchers, and trans activists from Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Interviews were conducted in Arabic (Darija, Egyptian, and Levantine) and English, anonymized for security, and used to validate and nuance patterns emerging from the media and policy mapping. Triangulation across these sources enabled the identification of region-wide dynamics of State-engineered hostility while accounting for national specificities. Given the high-risk context, strict ethical safeguards were applied throughout the research process, and all identifying information was removed to protect participants.



Chapter 1.

INTRODUCTION

The lives of trans and gender diverse people throughout South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) are shaped by a robust and interlocking system of oppression. This system is not incidental; rather, it constitutes an engineered reality predicated upon specific religious doctrines that pathologize trans identities. These doctrines are strategically weaponized by political leaders and codified into hostile laws and policies.

Any analysis of this environment must first clarify the term 'anti-gender movement' within the context of the SWANA region. Activists and legal experts interviewed for this report consistently cautioned against applying an uncontextualized label, arguing it is a misnomer in the regional context. This clarification is critical: unlike in other contexts, where anti-gender movements focus on seeking to remove established rights, the hostility in the SWANA region is a continuous, top-down process of active denial.

"The State isn't really interested in us. They don't target trans people, but they don't support us either. Everything is random, and there isn't anything you could call an organized anti-trans movement in Egypt." - **Egyptian Activist**

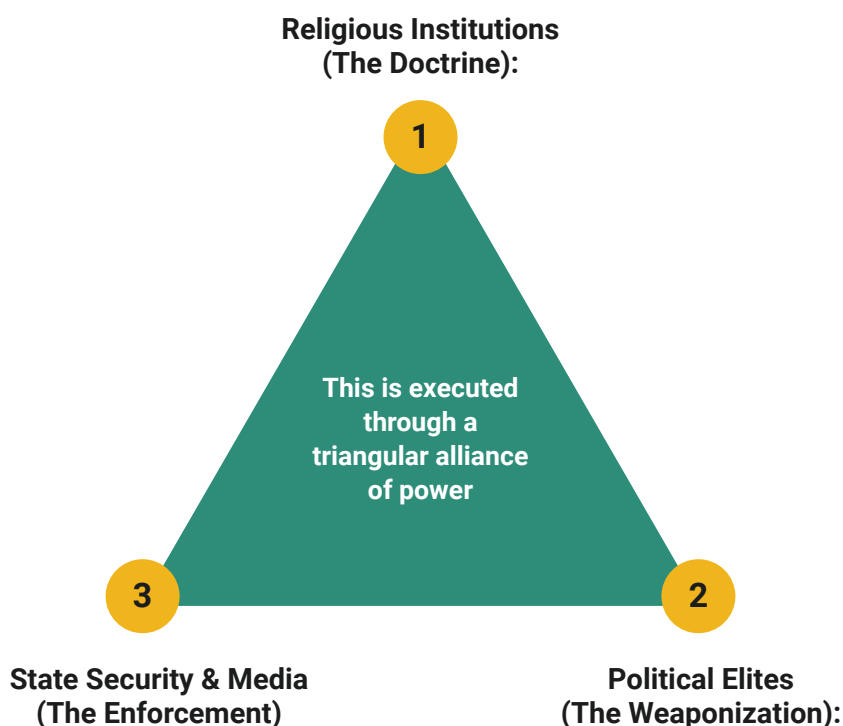
This engineered hostility is more accurately understood as a symptom of a pervasive, State-led anti-human rights doctrine that targets any deviation from State-sanctioned norms. Trans and gender diverse people are often just one target in a wider campaign of social purification.

"Military rule here is built on masculinity... and the State does not tolerate any discourse that differs, even on issues much more minor than this." - **Egyptian Human Rights Lawyer**

Another activist from the region echoed this, framing the persecution as part of a totalizing system of control:

"We are working in a criminalized context, even if it is not criminalized at the level of legislation... it is criminalized at the level of practice and interpretation of these laws."

The State's strategy is not one of reaction, but of pre-emptive exclusion and opportunistic persecution.



1. **Religious Institutions (The Doctrine):** Some influential State-aligned bodies, such as Egypt's Al-Azhar, provide the ideological justification by constructing a *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) framework that condemns gender identity confirmation as a 'delusional mental disorder' while permitting intersex 'correction' (Noralla, 2023a). A Jordanian activist noted, "Every trans case goes to *Dar al-Iftaa* and is rejected... this has been the case since 1982."
2. **Political Elites (The Weaponization):** Several authoritarian leaders weaponize religious doctrines to create populist moral panics. This rhetoric allows them to deflect from crippling economic crises and, simultaneously, to perform an anti-imperialist posture. As one Moroccan activist noted, this is how regimes frame the issue: "They say it is a Western idea that came to dismantle the general values of the Moroccan family." This sentiment was shared by another, who observed how all political factions converge on this point: "The secularists and the Islamists... both of them, when they want to talk about Moroccan authenticity, they talk about the family."
3. **State Security & Media (The Enforcement):** State-controlled media and security forces translate political rhetoric into action. The media systematically conflates trans and gender diverse identities with 'sexual deviance,' while police use 'public morality' laws to criminalize individuals by proxy (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

This entire architecture is often built on a foundation of deliberate State inaction. For many regimes, formally acknowledging the existence of trans and gender diverse people, and thus the need to legislate their access to healthcare and legal recognition, is seen as a headache.

"The State isn't interested... It's not that they hate us... they just don't want a headache. If we are going to give them a headache... they will just close the whole topic." - **Activists, North Africa**

This report examines this deliberate architecture of exclusion. It traces the progression from foundational religious *fatwas* (a non-binding legal opinion or ruling in Islam) to their weaponization by political actors, their codification in law and medical policy, and their devastating impact on the social and legal realities of trans and gender diverse people across the region.

Chapter 2.

THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF HOSTILITY

The marginalization of trans and gender diverse people is not a static cultural feature but an active political process. States instrumentalize anti-trans sentiment as a flexible tool of governance, creating a social and cultural environment of intolerance that empowers both State and societal actors to perpetrate violence.

Economic Crisis as a Catalyst for Moral Panic

The political weaponization of anti-trans sentiment is not arbitrary; it is a direct and calculated response to severe, ongoing economic crises across the region. States are facing catastrophic inflation, reaching 21% in Egypt and 79% in Syria, soaring public debt of 91% of GDP in Egypt and 82% in Tunisia, a complete financial meltdown in Lebanon, and a post-civil war economic collapse in Syria (Wright & Dashiell, 2025).

In this context, moral panics are a potent diversionary tactic. By manufacturing an internal cultural threat, whether sexual deviance, gender ideology, or Western imports, States redirect public anger away from their own catastrophic economic mismanagement.

"We are talking about groups that are marginalized in a region that is always on a hot tin roof... We are surrounded by a terrifying regional context... the war on Palestine... the military interventions in Lebanon... We are working in a context where, even if a democratic transformation happened today, it wouldn't be allowed to happen." -
Egyptian Activist

In Iraq, the 2023 anti-gender backlash followed the 2019 Tishreen protests, directly channeling widespread political and economic frustration into a moral campaign (Mustafa, 2025). The

scapegoating of trans and gender diverse people is a low-cost, high-impact populist strategy to perform State power.

"The political elites are using this 'anti-gender rhetoric' to deflect from the economic crisis... It's a way to gain populist legitimacy... They talk about 'family values' to avoid talking about the fact that people can't feed their families." - **Lebanese Activist**

An Easy Scapegoat: Exploiting Pre-existing Stigma

This strategy of deflection is only effective because trans and gender diverse people are an 'easy and low-cost' target. The overwhelmingly negative social views documented in [Table 2](#) indicate that the State is not creating this stigma out of thin air; it is simply exploiting and amplifying it for political gain.

Because the community is already deeply marginalized, lacking both political representation and social capital, it cannot effectively fight back against State-led smear campaigns. This makes trans and gender diverse people the perfect scapegoats.

"Every once in a while, you see a leader of a political party in times of the elections come on TV to say, oh, we arrested this number of trans people." **Activist - Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

Another practitioner noted the State logic:

"Every once in a while, they can choose a scapegoat... this is a trend that has been repeated historically, to persecute a group to cover up other societal problems."

Political Weaponization and Recent Events

Hostile rhetoric escalates into State action, particularly during times of political instability or when leaders need to signal their moral credentials. The last few years have seen a marked increase in such top-down actions, which serve to institutionalize anti-trans ideology.

Table 1: Recent State-Led Anti-Trans and Anti-LGBTQI Actions (2022–2025)

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION	DESCRIPTION
April 2024	Legislative Criminalization	Iraq	The Iraqi parliament amends its Anti-Prostitution Law to explicitly criminalize same-sex relations with 10-15 year prison terms and to ban gender reassignment surgery and related medical care (Republic of Iraq, 2024; UK Home Office, 2025).
March 2024	Administrative Prohibition	Egypt	Egypt’s civil registry authority, under direct pressure from religious bodies, issues a new directive mandating obligatory forensic and DNA testing for any citizen seeking to amend their civil records. This policy effectively closes a previous loophole, making legal gender recognition impossible for trans and gender diverse people (Noralla, 2023d; 2024f).
2024 - 2025	State-Building via Persecution	Syria	The new transitional government, described by international bodies as “deeply fragile,” has engaged in targeted arrests of trans women (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2025). Activists and EU reports identify “persons with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)” as a key risk group, suggesting the new regime is testing the waters and using moral persecution to build populist legitimacy (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2025).
August 2023	Vigilante Enforcement	Lebanon	The Christian fundamentalist militia <i>Jnoud al-Rab</i> (Soldiers of God) violently attacks a drag event at a queer-friendly bar in Beirut, beating patrons. Amnesty International called it an ominous sign of a deteriorating rights situation abetted by State inaction (Amnesty International, 2023; Younes, 2023).
February 2022	Honor Killing	Iraq	A 23-year-old trans woman, Azad Doski, was murdered by her brother in Duhok, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The killing was widely reported as an ‘honor killing,’ highlighting the climate of impunity for violence against trans and gender diverse people (Deghan, 2022).
2022 - 2024	Digital Counter-Campaign	Regional	The <i>Fetrah</i> campaign, originating in Egypt, spreads regionally. This social media campaign promoted a unified banner based on <i>fetrah</i> (instinct) to reject LGBTQI identities, explicitly framing them as a ‘Western cultural invasion’ (Andalousi, 2022; Tantawi, 2022).
2022 - 2023	Symbolic Moral Crackdowns	Gulf Monarchies	State authorities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait launch coordinated media campaigns and seizures of rainbow-colored toys, clothing, and children’s products, framing them as a threat to public morals and religious values (Agence France-Presse, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2023).

The Strategic Conflation of Identity and Vice

State-controlled media play a critical role in enforcing the State’s moral agenda. In the SWANA region, public discourse is almost universally hostile. A key tactic is the deliberate conflation of trans and gender diverse identities with gay men and, most critically, with sex workers. This is not merely an error but a strategic, self-fulfilling prophecy. Systemic exclusion from family, education, and formal

employment, driven by the State and some religious policies that deny legal recognition, forces many trans and gender diverse people, particularly trans women, into the informal and criminalized economy as a means of survival.

"Due to their gender identity, most trans people are... expelled from their homes... This opens no other door for them... most trans women go into... sex work... This is a systematic repression of this group that generates... poverty." - **Moroccan Activist**

This economic desperation creates a hyper-visible subgroup, the trans sex worker, which State authorities and media then seize upon as proof of the entire community's inherent deviance. Authorities make no distinction or actively refuse to do so. An activist from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq noted,

"There's no distinction... most of the discussion... is associated with sex work."

"The government doesn't know how to differentiate between trans people and people who work in 'the business' [sex work]. A trans woman's very existence is treated as incriminating evidence; her identity itself becomes the crime scene." - **Egyptian Lawyer**

This conflation allows authorities to pathologize all LGBTQI people under the single, pejorative umbrella of *inḥirāf jinsī* (sexual deviance). This term has been officially mandated for use in the media in countries like Iraq (Noralla, 2024e). When trans and gender diverse people are given a platform, it is for dehumanizing entertainment.

"The media discussion is stupid... the goal is just to create propaganda to get profits... a discussion for entertainment. The person is treated like a circus puppet... The interactions were as if he were a clown." - **Egyptian Activist**

Another activist from Morocco described the 'yellow journalism' (sensationalization rather than factual reporting) that dominates, whereby

"the independent electronic media portrays her, a trans woman, as a sex worker... and she is the one who destroyed the image in Morocco."

Social Repercussions and Public Perception

These top-down state-led campaigns of condemnation foster a social and cultural environment marked by intolerance, fear, and misunderstanding. Public opinion data indicates a low level of familiarity coupled with a high degree of discomfort.

Table 2: Social Perceptions of Gender Identity in Select SWANA Countries*

***Source:** Adapted from International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (2016)

Survey Question	Egypt	Algeria	Iraq	Jordan	Morocco	Saudi Arabia	UAE
% who personally know someone who is trans	14%	21%	22%	16%	21%	21%	23%
% who find it unacceptable for a male-assigned child to 'dress and express himself as a girl'	69%	74%	55%	71%	72%	65%	62%
% who find it unacceptable for a female-assigned child to 'dress and express herself as a boy'	61%	68%	52%	63%	64%	60%	60%

This lack of familiarity enables the negative stereotypes, amplified by some State and religious leaders, to dominate the public narrative and sentiments about LGBTQI people. Societal rejection is particularly pronounced in the case of children, as the data illustrates. This widespread societal condemnation, which conflates all LGBTQI identities, engenders substantial barriers to education and employment and enables violence with impunity.

"Trans women are systematically profiled and criminalized... If they find more than one trans person living together, they treat the apartment as a brothel... just their shape and their body make it a 'case'. - Egyptian Legal Expert

Chapter 3.

THE ANATOMY OF HOSTILE DISCOURSE

The anti-gender narratives that flourish in the region are not simple, organic prejudices. They are deliberately constructed and disseminated, drawing their power from three primary sources: a specific, localized religious doctrine; global geopolitical resentments; and networked digital subcultures.

The Foundational Religious Doctrine: 'Correction' vs. 'Change'

The ideological underpinning of anti-gender sentiment in the region is a specific interpretation of Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) that gained prominence in the 1980s (Noralla, 2022). This framework, advocated by powerful institutions such as Egypt's Al-Azhar and the Saudi-based Islamic Fiqh Council, meticulously constructs a legal and moral binary that distinguishes intersex conditions from trans identities (Noralla, 2024b).

- Tashīh al-jins (Permissible 'Correction'): *Khuntha* (intersex individuals) are acknowledged in classical Islamic texts as possessing biological ambiguity. Contemporary religious rulings have thus classified 'sex correction' surgery as a *halal* (permissible) medical intervention aimed at aligning the individual with the 'true' biological sex they were meant to have (Noralla, 2024b).
- Taghyīr al-jins (Forbidden 'Change'): Trans and gender diverse people are perceived as psychologically deviant. Their identities are characterized as mental disorders, and any attempt at medical transition is condemned as a prohibited sex change. This is viewed as an artificial alteration of *taghyīr al-khalq* (God's perfect creation), rendering such actions *haram* (forbidden) (Noralla, 2023a).

This distinction, articulated in a foundational 1986 *fatwa* (non-binding legal opinion or ruling in Islam) from Al-Azhar (Egyptian Islamic Research Academy), explicitly delineated a path of pathology rather than affirmation, advising those with gender dysphoria to "seek therapy for what was categorized as a delusional mental disorder" (Noralla, 2023a). An Egyptian lawyer confirmed this remains the consensus:

"Both of them, Al-Azhar and Dar al-Iftaa [an Egyptian Islamic advisory, justiciary and governmental body], agree that as long as there is no biological defect, we should not change the papers."

This religious framework has subsequently proliferated into conspiratorial social narratives, amplified by State media, that attribute trans and gender diverse identities to material greed, claiming trans men transition to exploit Islamic inheritance laws (which favor males) or that trans women transition to evade compulsory military service (Salama et al., 2022).

Geopolitical Catalysts

Geopolitical factors powerfully amplify this locally constructed religious doctrine, which allows States to adopt an anti-imperialist posture as a form of political defense. By framing trans and gender diverse identities as a ‘Western product,’ governments can portray their repressive policies as a decolonial act of defending authentic national and religious values. In Iraq, the 2023-2024 anti-gender backlash weaponized “the problematic relationship between gender and translation, using deliberate misinterpretations” to frame the very term ‘gender’ as a Western plot to undermine Islamic values (Mustafa, 2025). This same State-led anti-gender politics, linking the term to foreign interference, has been documented in Turkey as a tool to attack gender studies departments in universities (Özbay & Ipekci, 2023). As one Moroccan activist explained, this posturing is often a direct response to international pressure:

“The Minister of Justice... came out with this statement that... this is a ‘Western idea’ and they have become a ‘striking force’ in the world... This statement came after pressure from the UPR (Universal Periodic Review) recommendations.”

The Backfire of Performative Activism

Performative, context-blind gestures, such as the ‘One Love’ armband campaign during the 2022 Qatar World Cup, are seen by local activists as profoundly counterproductive. Such protests, often undertaken against the advice of local queer groups, cement the narrative that LGBTQI rights are a tool to “drive their moral superiority over the uncivilized Arabs” (Damien, 2022; Schaer, 2022). They are perceived as ‘homonationalism,’ a term critiquing the use of LGBTQI rights as a barometer to justify racism and intervention against ‘backward’ Muslim others (Puar, 2007).

This dynamic had disastrous consequences in Iraq. As activists reported, when the anti-LGBTQI bill was proposed, some governments and activists launched a high-pressure campaign that resulted in the Iraqi head of parliament withdrawing the bill from discussion. This created a constitutional crisis, which was later resolved when the Constitutional Court ruled that the speaker had acted unconstitutionally. This intervention backfired completely: it transformed the public conversation from one about ‘immorality’ into one of ‘national sovereignty’ (Mustafa, 2025).

Digital Amplifiers

The State’s top-down narrative is amplified and laundered through a sophisticated digital ecosystem. This is not just random online hate; it is a networked subculture that has been identified as the ‘Arabic Manosphere’ (Kaddoura, 2025). This ecosystem creates a hybrid discourse that “invokes religious texts to justify gender hierarchies while simultaneously borrowing neoliberal analytic tools and anti-feminist rhetoric” (Kaddoura, 2025, p. 4).

A prime example of this in action is the *Fetrah* campaign, which activists identified as a key turning point. Originating in Egypt in 2022, *Fetrah* (meaning instinct) was a highly organized digital counter-campaign to pro-LGBTQI visibility. It spread “from the ocean to the Gulf,” (Andalousi, 2022, Electronic

Battle section, para. 1) promoting a simple two-color flag (blue for male, pink for female) as a 'unified banner' for the 'rejection of homosexuality' based on 'instinct' (Tantawi, 2022). As an activist from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq described it:

"The whole Fetrah campaign started from the religious fundamentals from Ikhwan al-Muslimin, Muslim Brothers... It was a very organized campaign... very professional... Having their website, their social media platforms, and being translated in different languages."

Online influencers also contributed, with one Moroccan activist noting:

"On Instagram and Facebook pages, they say, "you have to look for her Adam's apple and her legs to know she's not a woman." ...There are organized groups... Religious groups have discussion centers and meet on Zoom to discuss fighting... the LGBTQI community."



Chapter 4.

THE LEGAL AND PARA-LEGAL ARCHITECTURE OF EXCLUSION

The confluence of religious doctrine, political weaponization, and geopolitical resentment is ultimately codified into a legal and para-legal framework designed to marginalize and erase trans and gender diverse individuals from public life.

The “Pathologization Trap”: A Failed Strategy of Survival

For decades, the only viable strategy for trans and gender diverse individuals to seek care or legal recognition was to lean into the State’s pathologizing framework. By accepting a medical diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, they could attempt to fit themselves into the narrow, ‘permissible’ category of *tashīh* (correction) rather than the ‘forbidden’ *taghyīr* (change). This created a pathologization trap, forcing activists and individuals to argue that they were ‘mentally ill’ and in need of a ‘cure.’ This pragmatic, survival-based strategy has two devastating long-term consequences:

1. It reinforces the State’s medical-model authority and the idea that trans and gender diverse identities are a disorder.
2. It creates a ‘good vs. bad trans’ binary: the ‘legitimate’ (medicalized, binary, post-operative) individual versus the ‘illegitimate’ (non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender diverse, pre-operative) individual, who remained in the ‘sexual deviant’ category.

States are now closing this trap. The 2024 Egyptian policy mandating DNA tests is the final step in this, as it invalidates the gender identity disorder diagnosis as a legitimate path to legal gender recognition. It collapses all trans and gender diverse people, regardless of their medical status, back into the single, criminalized category of ‘sexual deviant.’ This is mirrored in the political discourse in Morocco, where one activist noted:

“A consultant to the Minister of Justice said that... in the near future, they might consider trans people as ‘people with special needs.’”

This is the State’s preferred inclusion model: one of pathology and disability that requires State management, not one of rights and autonomy.

The Legal Framework: Criminalization and Denial

For trans and gender diverse people, the pursuit of recognition is not rooted in rights but constitutes a navigation through a system designed to penalize their very existence. The legal framework functions through a combination of colonial-era morality laws, modern digital persecution, and the systematic, religiously justified denial of healthcare and legal recognition.

In most States, a legislative vacuum persists, meaning no laws explicitly protect or recognize trans and gender diverse people (Noralla, 2024d). This is a deliberate tactic, granting States maximum discretionary power to prosecute individuals, who are often indistinct in the eyes of the State from ‘sexual deviants’, under ambiguous ‘public morality’ or ‘debauchery’ statutes (Tolino, 2020). As one Moroccan activist detailed:

“There are three laws that affect trans people the most... Article 489, which criminalizes homosexual relations... Article 483, public indecency, which is used by police to target trans people for their clothing... and Article 490, consensual relations outside marriage.”

An Egyptian lawyer observed how the State’s recognition is itself a form of control:

“The State doesn’t understand anything other than someone who has fully transitioned... it has to be very obvious... But this is also a trap. A new phenomenon has started to appear... cases of forgery... this is a new variable... it’s coming from the problem and the intentional obstruction in changing papers.”

Table 3: Legal Realities for Trans and Gender Diverse People in Select SWANA Contexts

Context	Criminalization of Gender Expression	Legal Gender Recognition	Access to Gender-Affirming Care
Egypt	Criminalized by proxy. ‘Debauchery’ and ‘public morality’ laws are used to prosecute. Digital entrapment (fake profiles on apps) is a primary police tactic (ARTICLE 19, 2024; Noralla, 2023e).	Effectively blocked. A 2024 policy mandates DNA and forensic testing, restricting legal gender recognition to a narrow definition of intersex individuals (Noralla, 2023d; 2024f).	Prohibited for trans people. A ‘Sex Correction Committee’ run by the Medical Syndicate, which includes clergy, must approve cases. This committee’s mandate is restricted to ‘correcting’ intersex individuals (Noralla, 2024a).
Iraq	Explicitly criminalized. A 2024 law imposes 10-15-year prison sentences for ‘homosexual acts’ and ‘gender reassignment surgery,’ including penalties for medical practitioners (Noralla, 2024e; Republic of Iraq, 2024; UK Home Office, 2025).	Not afforded. The 2024 law makes any attempt at legal or medical transition a criminal act.	Criminalized. The 2024 law explicitly bans gender-affirming healthcare for trans individuals (Noralla, 2024e).
Lebanon	Criminalized by proxy. Article 534 (‘acts contrary to nature’) is inconsistently applied. Vigilante violence, often incited by political and religious leaders, is a major threat (Haidar, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).	Ambiguous and inconsistent. Legal gender recognition is achievable in some cases, but it depends entirely on individual judges. Some grant it post-surgery, while others deny it based on chromosomal evidence (Noralla, 2024c).	Accessible (Privatized). Care is available through private healthcare providers and NGOs, but this access is unregulated, expensive, and limited to those with the financial means.

Saudi Arabia	Explicitly criminalized. Strict enforcement of laws prohibiting ‘imitating the opposite sex’ and ‘public morality’ (Noralla, 2023c).	Not afforded. There is no legal path for legal gender recognition.	Prohibited. Access to gender-affirming care is criminalized for trans individuals and permitted only for intersex persons (Al-Dajani, 2020).
Morocco	Criminalized by proxy. Article 489 (‘lewd or unnatural acts’) and ‘public decency’ laws (Art. 483) are used by police to harass and arrest trans and gender diverse people based on appearance.	Not afforded. There is no legal procedure for legal gender recognition.	Not regulated (underground). Care is not formally prohibited but operates in a legal grey area, making it inaccessible, unsafe, and expensive.
Kuwait	Decriminalized (in theory). The 2022 Constitutional Court ruling striking down Article 198 (‘imitating the opposite sex’) was a major victory. However, other ‘morality’ laws can still be applied (Noralla, 2023b).	Ambiguous. A promised medical committee to facilitate legal gender recognition has not materialized, leaving trans and gender diverse people in legal limbo. The State’s stance is effectively, “be yourself, but don’t show it.”	Legally restricted. Care is not explicitly banned but remains precarious and inaccessible through the State system (Alijmi, 2024).

This ‘criminalization by proxy’ is increasingly executed through digital persecution. Security forces in multiple countries have weaponized technology to locate and apprehend LGBTQI individuals. Reports confirm that police create fictitious profiles on applications like Grindr and WhatsApp to ‘entrap’ individuals, eliciting queer-themed conversations or photos that are then used as evidence (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This digital monitoring culminates in real-world violence, arbitrary detention, and torture, with a new and concerning trend where police use violence or biometrics (Face ID, fingerprint) to unlock phones and gather evidence forcibly (ARTICLE 19, 2024).

Extra-Legal Enforcement

Where State power is diffused, informal religious and political militias act as a para-legal enforcement arm of the State’s moral agenda. These groups operate with the tacit or explicit approval of political elites to enforce social control.

In Iraq, political parties maintain their own media networks, television channels, and even meme pages that spread a lot of hate, while also controlling militias that carry out arrests (Haidar, 2023; Osseiran, 2023). An activist from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq described how these militias and political police forces are intertwined:

“Even if you think of [the autonomous region], the main two political parties have their own main police and army. Through a call of a lead, they can do things and change things and bury things under a table.”

Another activist described this performance of power:

“They arrest people, they come on TV... sometimes people get arrested, no one knows about it... they are kept for a little while, and then they’re let go.”

This was echoed by a Syrian activist describing similar arrests by “*people belonging to the transitional government... the Syrian General Security, unfortunately.*”

In Lebanon, this extra-legal violence is overt. The Christian fundamentalist group *Jnoud al-Rab* (Soldiers of God) has gained notoriety for its violent raids on LGBTQI-friendly spaces, operating as a vigilante group enforcing its own interpretation of public morality. In August 2023, its members violently attacked a drag event at a Beirut bar, beating patrons. This was not an isolated incident but part of a “radical transformation” in the social situation, abetted by a hostile environment created by political and religious leaders, including Hezbollah (ARTICLE 19, 2024).

Chapter 5.

THE STATE OF TRANS ORGANIZING

Against this backdrop of institutional hostility, geopolitical turmoil, and extra-legal violence, trans and gender diverse-led organizing in the SWANA region is nascent, fragmented, and critically under-resourced. Activists consistently describe their communities as being in 'survival mode.' This, however, does not imply passive victimhood. Instead, it has fostered active, tech-savvy forms of digital resistance and mutual aid. A lawyer working on these cases stated: *"Survival, I think, is the title of the stage now."*

An Egyptian health practitioner offered a similar assessment:

"We as activists... have the same vision. But unfortunately, this is not a 'queer movement'... they are purely individual initiatives... accounts on social media."

Active Survival

This active survival is most visible in the community response to the State's digital persecution. Far from being unaware, activists and community members engage in digital counter-surveillance. Reports from ARTICLE 19 (2024) highlight this "queer resistance to digital oppression," where community members are taught to use security features like timed-disappearing messages, app-locking functions, and digital self-defense tactics to evade police entrapment (Girijashanker, 2018). This demonstrates a high degree of agency, framing survival not as a passive state, but as a daily, strategic, and technical practice of resistance.

Furthermore, this resilience is not purely defensive. Activist groups in the region have long engaged in a multi-pronged approach that includes coalition-building, feminist organizing, and artistic production (Girijashanker, 2018). They strategically use advocacy through UN mechanisms as a key tool to communicate with their own governments, demonstrating a sophisticated navigation of the very international systems they often critique (Noralla et al., 2025). One Moroccan activist described their work as *"changing the narratives through stories and podcasts"* and *"creating safe spaces"* for community empowerment.

Despite this resilience, the capacity for strategic political action is severely constrained when the most urgent needs are for the fundamental building blocks of life (Chaer, 2023). This sense of despair is pervasive, with one activist stating bluntly, *"It's really hopeless. It should just close the door and go home."* A Jordanian activist described the fragmentation:

"There is no gathering between them, honestly... everyone is just trying to survive so they don't get kicked out of their family."

The Internal Class Divide

The movement that does exist is deeply fractured by pre-existing class privilege. This internal class divide dictates every facet of survival and activism:

- ✎ Access to Healthcare: In a context of total State denial, gender-affirming care is privatized, unregulated, and underground. Access is contingent on wealth. A Lebanese activist explained: *"The health sector is privatized... you need to go to a private clinic... this is for people who have money... the rest are on their own, on the black market."*
- ✎ Access to Activism: The NGO human rights sector is often accessible only to an urban, educated elite who speak English or French. This creates a disconnect with the trans and gender diverse communities' non-English-speaking, working-class majority.
- ✎ 'Respectable Passing': Class privilege provides a literal shield from State violence. As one academic study of Syrian transmasculine refugees in Lebanon notes, survival often depends on 'respectable passing', investing in "markers of class, citizenship, and age over those of gender" to appear 'respectable' and non-threatening to the security-morality apparatus (Chaer, 2023).

The Funder's Trap

This fragility is compounded by an established non-profit landscape that is often described as cis-centric, extractive, and driven by the misaligned agendas of international donors. Activists criticize a funding model that prioritizes 'societal awareness' campaigns while the community *"is hungry and can't find medicine."* One activist from the Levant described the paradox of trans and gender diverse identities in the 'human rights industrial complex':

"Trans identity is the identity that is most broken and begged upon... and it's the identity that has the most money, that money comes in for... and the most politically unrepresented identity."

Trans and gender diverse individuals are often reduced to subjects of study in focus groups, a dynamic that the same activist called 'money for your data,' rather than being empowered as agents of their own liberation. This transactional relationship not only produces flawed research but also prevents the development of a substantive, community-led political movement.

This relationship with funding creates an impossible funder's trap. Local groups are forced to rely on donors, who are often the only source of material support, yet this very reliance provides the proof that regimes use to label them as foreign agents. Activists are acutely aware of this paradox:

"It is not that we rely on the West; it is just that who else can you rely on for funding? We know... Western funding often comes with stipulations that may ultimately harm your cause, but what can we do?"

Chapter 6:

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively support trans and gender diverse communities in the SWANA region, funders and international partners must shift from agenda-driven advocacy projects to a model that prioritizes survival, resilience, and the development of a sustainable, locally-led ecosystem. The community's needs, as articulated in interviews, are clear and consistent.

1. Fund Direct, Flexible, and Core Services

The single most critical need is for long-term, flexible, core funding directed to trans-led groups and informal collectives. The focus must shift from long-term advocacy metrics to immediate survival. As one Egyptian activist stated:

"The funding must focus on building the movement... cadres that are effective... [and] urgent interventions like psychological, medical, and legal support."

- Earmark funds for emergency interventions: safe houses, emergency financial assistance for food and subsistence, legal aid to fight arbitrary arrests, and accessible, trans-competent medical and psychological care.
- Provide flexible, core funding that allows local groups to pivot to crises without waiting for donor approval, addressing realities that arise:

"We now have in Egypt many trans women or trans men who are being kicked out of their homes, and we have no means of support whatsoever."

2. Invest in a Sustainable and Secure Regional Ecosystem

Funders can play a crucial role in breaking the isolation that weakens the movement. Activists report a deep need for regional connection but lack the resources and security to build it. One activist from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq noted:

"We don't talk much. We don't have alliances... and collaboration, and I think we should, both regionally and internationally."

- Fund and facilitate secure, closed-door regional convenings for activists to build trust, share strategies (including the proactive models of feminist organizing and artistic production), and develop coordinated responses.

- Invest in local knowledge production by funding community-led research, cultural archives, and storytelling.

3. Decolonize Advocacy and Funder-Partner Dynamics

The function of international partners is not to dictate the agenda but to listen and provide resources. This necessitates abandoning performative, symbolic gestures that provoke backlash.

- Shift power to local groups. Stop imposing donor-centered requirements that prioritize 'societal awareness' over survival. As one activist asked: *"How will I raise awareness in a society I can't save?"*
- Employ diplomatic leverage discreetly and only at the specific request of local partners, rather than through public, performative gestures that endanger them.
- Heed the calls from activists for a *"revolution inside the movement on a global level... to understand why we are doing this and for whom."*

4. Support Capacity Building for Holistic Resilience

While advocacy capacity is important, the community's primary vulnerability is often economic and digital. Activists identified clear gaps in support that go beyond traditional human rights training.

- Fund specialized programs for digital security to counter the State's digital persecution tactics and provide *"training on cybersecurity to counter coordinated online hate."*
- Support economic empowerment through employment and skills training to combat the extreme economic marginalization that forces trans and gender diverse people into precarious situations.
- Invest in collective care and well-being programs to address the profound activist burnout, recognizing that *"we sometimes forget ourselves... we must have programs for collective and self-care."*

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