



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Trans coverage in Jordan: Western fad, or missing narrative?

By **Manar Hafeth Ismail**

June 2023
Hilary Term
Sponsor: Mona Megalli

Contents

Introduction	3
What does transgender mean?	4
Medicine & transgender people	6
More than a mental health issue	6
Law & transgender people	10
Transgender people and labour law	12
Police response to transgender people	13
Social integration & transgender people	15
Access to education	15
Access to services	15
History, religion & transgender people	17
News media & transgender	19
Alternative media	20
Reporting attracts bullying	21
Conclusion	22

Introduction

This project is unlikely to please anyone entirely.

For the 97% who are not transgender, this information may seem foreign, unrelatable, heretical – even faddish. For the 3% who are, the stories may lack the nuance that more time and space would have allowed, or the careful wording that a first-language journalist might have to hand.

But this project was not designed to please anyone: real journalism rarely does. Instead, it demands that we tell the stories no one else will.

In my home country, Jordan, transgender issues are not on the news agenda. It is seen as a western issue. “It has no place in our culture, society or religion(s).”

This project aims to show that transgender issues exists in the east as well. Here, an unreported group of people is suffering from marginalisation, facing familial and societal isolation, and legal problems that prohibit access to lifesaving medical treatment or accurate identification papers – all of which combine to limit their access to education, employment, and a peaceful life.

A 2023 report by global market research and consulting firm, [Ipsos](#), uses data from 30 countries – including Turkey and Singapore, Thailand, Japan and others in the east – to find that 3% of the global population identifies as transgender, non-binary, or “other than male or female”.¹

In Jordan, with a population of 11.5 million people, 3% amounts to 345,000 people.

If the situation described above were true for just one person you loved, would you not want it reported on daily?

While I do not aim to please you, reader, I hope this project will provide information about what transgender issues are, and how they are dealt with in Jordan’s medical, legal, social, historical and religious contexts. Finally, I will review how these contexts are reflected in Jordanian news media.

¹ Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-05/Ipsos LGBT%2B Pride 2023 Global Survey Report - rev.pdf>

What does transgender mean?

To understand what transgender means, we must first [define some language](#) for our discussion – starting with the difference between sex and gender.²

Sex in medical or scientific contexts is used to refer to the classification of individuals as male or female based on their biological and physiological characteristics, particularly their reproductive anatomy and functions. In *Human Physiology*, a textbook prescribed in most medical schools – including in Jordan – Lauralee Sherwood says differences between male and female exist at the genetic, gonadal and phenotypic level.³

The [National Centre for Transgender Equality](#) offers an identical definition in simpler terms: “Sex is a label (male or female) that you’re assigned by a doctor at birth based on the appearance of the genitals you’re born with.”

Gender interacts with but is different to sex. It is defined by the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) as “the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed”. “This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.”⁴

Gender has power structures that can produce inequalities: for example, gender-based discrimination. And one inequality can cross paths (intersect) with another: like inequalities of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, or sexual orientation, among others. This is referred to as intersectionality.

Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt experience of their gender, which may not align with their assigned sex at birth. “When a person begins to live according to their gender identity, rather than the gender they were thought to be when they were born, this time period is called gender transition,” according to the [National Centre for transgender Equality](#).⁵

Sexual orientation refers to a person's attraction or desire for individuals of the same sex, another sex, both, or neither. A transgender person's sexual orientation is

² Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/whatisthedifferencebetweensexandgender/2019-02-21>

³ Sherwood, Lauralee. *Human Physiology* [electronic Resource] : From Cells to Systems. 9th ed. Australia, 2016. Web.

⁴ Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1

⁵ Available at: <https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-transgender-people-the-basics>

not dependent on their gender identity. Studies generally suggest that gender identity and sexual orientation are independent of each other.⁶

[WHO](#) found that “transgender people share many of the same health needs as the general population but may have other specialist health-care needs. [...] However, evidence suggests that transgender people often experience a disproportionately high burden of disease, including in the domains of mental, sexual and reproductive health. Some transgender people seek medical or surgical transition, others do not.”

More transgender terminology

Transgender Individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth.

Cisgender People whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Gender Identity One's deeply felt internal sense of their gender, which may be different from their biological sex.

Gender Expression How a person presents their gender identity through appearance, behaviour, and clothing.

Gender Dysphoria The distress experienced by some transgender individuals due to a conflict between their gender identity and assigned sex.

Non-Binary Individuals who identify outside the binary classification of male/female.

Genderqueer A term used by some individuals who reject traditional gender distinctions or identify as neither exclusively male nor female.

Gender Non-Conforming People whose gender expression does not conform to societal norms and expectations.

Transitioning The process some transgender individuals undergo to align their external appearance and/or physiology with their gender identity.

Deadnaming Referring to a transgender person by their birth name, which they may no longer use or identify with after transitioning.

Preferred Pronouns The pronouns (e.g. he/him, she/her, they/them) a person chooses to be referred to in accordance with their gender identity.

Affirmed Gender A person's gender identity after they have transitioned and are living in alignment with their true gender.

Gender-affirming Surgery Medical procedures that some transgender individuals undergo to modify their physical characteristics to match their gender identity.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) Medical treatment with hormones to help individuals develop physical characteristics consistent with their gender identity.

Passing When a transgender person is perceived as their affirmed gender by others without being recognised as transgender.

⁶ Note that research is complex and evolving: Roselli CE. Neurobiology of gender identity and sexual orientation. J Neuroendocrinol. 2018 Jul;30(7):e12562. doi: 10.1111/jne.12562.

Medicine & transgender people

Psychiatrist Dr. Ashraf Al-Salhi used to treat transgender people at his clinic in Amman. He said his primary therapeutic objectives in these cases were reaching a point of self acceptance, and preventing suicide. These are global concerns: [82% of transgender individuals](#) have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide, with suicidality highest among transgender youth.⁷

“Feelings cannot be suppressed,” he told me. “Their prognosis depends entirely on what [the patients] say. Their psychological treatment is by supporting them to accept their reality and not to take dangerous steps.”

He added: “Most transgender people want sex change operations because they feel themselves in the wrong body, and currently this thing is forbidden in Jordan. So we usually advise them to try to find another society that accepts them.”

A 2018 report, [Traumatic Stress Among Sexual and Gender Minority Refugees From the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia Who Fled to the European Union](#) (Alessi, et al), found that, “Studies have shown that LGBTQ individuals in these regions may experience prolonged and multiple forms of trauma, including physical and sexual assault, corrective rape, psychological abuse, blackmail, forced conversion therapy, public shaming, and social ostracism [...] leaving some LGBTQ individuals to feel they have no choice but to flee.”

The report continued: “official figures do not exist, but reports indicate that significant numbers of LGBTQ people from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and South Asia have sought asylum in the European Union in recent years. [...] LGBTQ refugees are at specific risk due to their sexual orientation and gender identity.”

More than a mental health issue

According to [WHO](#), gender-affirmative health care “can include any single or combination of a number of social, psychological, behavioural or medical (including hormonal treatment or surgery) interventions designed to support and affirm an individual’s gender identity”.

WHO recently redefined their gender identity-related health definition in the International Classification of Diseases ICD-11 to replace outdated diagnostic categories like ICD-10’s “transsexualism” and “gender identity disorder of children”

⁷ Austin A, Craig SL, D’Souza S, McInroy LB. Suicidality Among Transgender Youth: Elucidating the Role of Interpersonal Risk Factors. *J Interpers Violence*. 2022 Mar;37(5-6):NP2696-NP2718. doi: 10.1177/0886260520915554.

with “gender incongruence of adolescence and adulthood” and “gender incongruence of childhood”, respectively.

According to their website: “Gender incongruence has been moved out of the *Mental and behavioural disorders* chapter and into the new *Conditions related to sexual health* chapter.” They said the decision “reflects current knowledge that trans-related and gender diverse identities are not conditions of mental ill-health, and that classifying them as such can cause enormous stigma. [...] Recognition in the ICD also acknowledges the links between gender identity, sexual behaviour, exposure to violence and sexually transmitted infections.”

[Mayo Clinic](#) is a world-renowned nonprofit organisation “committed to clinical practice, education and research”. They say a diagnosis of [gender dysphoria](#) might be based on:

- Behavioural health evaluation: “Your provider will evaluate you to confirm the presence of gender dysphoria and document how prejudice and discrimination due to your gender identity (minority stress factors) impact your mental health.”
- The provider [should] “ask about the degree of support you have from family, chosen family and peers”.
- “Your mental health professional may use the criteria for gender dysphoria listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association.”

Under treatment, the Mayo Clinic suggests people with gender dysphoria explore their gender identity and find the gender role that feels comfortable for them to ease distress. But warns: “Treatment should be individualized. What might help one person might not help another.”

Children with gender dysphoria might temporarily suppress the onset of puberty through the use of prescription medications called [pubertal blockers](#). Mayo Clinic warns: “deciding to get this treatment is a big step. The medications mostly commonly used to suppress puberty are known as gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) analogues.”

If untreated, gender dysphoria is known to impair “the ability to function at school or at work, the result may be school dropout or unemployment. Relationship difficulties are common. Anxiety, depression, self-harm, eating disorders, substance misuse and other problems can occur.”

Treatment options for adults might include:

- Changes in gender expression and role,

- Hormone therapy,
- Surgery, and
- Behavioural therapy.

Dr Suzan Bakhit, a plastic surgery specialist in Jordan, said: “Some of the transgender people who came asking for help regarding surgeries to better represent their identities – like mastectomy – I can’t do anything. [Under] Jordanian laws I can’t perform these surgeries unless there is a medical reason, like the hormones they are getting might be causing cancers in the area I want to remove. Otherwise I will face penalties and can even be taken to court.”

Seeking treatment in Jordan: Rashid’s story

Rashid is a transgender Jordanian man (FTM). His family spared no effort in trying to help him find his femininity: they took him to psychiatrists, endocrinologists, and other specialists. “I stayed in a psychiatric hospital for a month,” he told me. “The explanation of the doctor supervising my condition at that time was that I suffered from a lack of morals.”

Attempting to flee home, Rashid fell and broke his leg. His life was limited to trips to hospital for treatment and returning to house arrest, where his father decided to chain him so that he would not attempt another escape.

Rashid's mother decided to make one last attempt with a new psychiatrist. Without Rashid's knowledge at that time, the doctor said to his mother: “Rashid will not change, this feeling will remain with him, do not try to change him.” That was the point at which his family's treatment began to change for the better. He was around 19 at the time.

“My family allowed me to have a mobile phone because I became depressed and aggressive. That was an opportunity for me to discover the term LGBTQ: only then I recognised I’m belonging to transgender people.”

He took this new knowledge to a psychiatrist who tried to help Rashid receive hormone therapy. “But he needed approval from the council, and they did not agree. My doctor told me the name of the hormone so I could buy it from a private pharmacy.”

Rashid has been taking the hormones with no medical supervision since 2018, when the law changed. “It wasn’t easy to get medical help and some doctors refuse,” he said.

Convincing a surgeon to conduct his mastectomy was “almost impossible”. “If I was a woman who wanted to enlarge the breast, you would not refuse, so why would you not reduce them,” he asked.

When Rashid stopped menstruating and sought out a hysterectomy, he had to produce medical reports proving his condition and the necessity.

As of the time of writing, Rashid said his gender-affirming surgeries remain incomplete.

Alarming global statistics on suicidality, and the trauma reported by sexual and gender minority refugees from our region further emphasises an urgent need for more inclusive and supportive healthcare systems in Jordan.

Despite developments in research and the redefinition of gender identity-related health in the ICD-11, legal restrictions and societal biases still hinder access to gender-affirming surgeries in Jordan.

By acknowledging and addressing the unique healthcare needs of the transgender community, we can foster a future where everyone can live authentically and with dignity, regardless of their gender identity.

Law & transgender people

Jordanian law differentiates between sex change and sex correction operations in the [Medical and Health Liability Law No. 25 of 2018](#), approved by parliament in 2018 and came into force in August of the same year.

One of the provisions of Article 8 of the Medical and Health Liability Law expressly prohibits sex reassignment surgeries. According to Article 22 of the same law, the penalty for performing a medical service in violation of the law in this case is imprisonment for a period of no less than three years and no more than 10 years.

Apart from the 2018 law, there hasn't been a criminal law concerning LGBTQ issues in Jordan since 1951. That's when parliament removed [Mandate No. 74 of 1936](#) – introduced by the British – that criminalised homosexuality.

Law No. 25 defines a sex change as “changing the sex of a person whose sexual affiliation is clear, masculine or feminine, and whose sexual physical features match his physiological, biological, and genetic characteristics, and there is no suspicion of his sexual affiliation as male or female.”

It defines gender correction as “medical intervention with the aim of correcting the gender of a person whose affiliation is ambiguous, so that he is suspected of being male or female, as if he has sexual physical features that contradict the person's physiological, biological and genetic characteristics”.

Penalties for violating medical personnel are stipulated as 10 years in prison with hard labour.

Members of parliament who voted in favour of the article said they did so in the interest of society, and to support the customs and opinion of religion.

[Qistas](#), an online database of Arab legal content, shows a few related cases have been heard since 2018, including petitions by those who received surgery in other countries, like Lebanon and Thailand, to receive new identification papers.

Samih's story

Samih is a transgender man (FTM) whose story can be read through Jordanian court records that refer to him by his deadname. We have changed both names here to protect his privacy.

Samih travelled to Egypt for hormone treatment, followed by gender-affirming surgery in Lebanon in 2016.

According to records, Samih's defence attorney told the court: “The plaintiff wants to correct her [sic] gender bias and change her name to fit her body and soul, to please God, adapt to her human nickname, and to be more efficient in serving her country and integrating with the people of her community.”

The case was first brought to court in 2019 and continued into 2021, when the judicial response was to refuse Samih’s petition.

Samih did not break Jordanian law, because Jordanian law does not criminalise transgender people; only medical personnel who perform re-assignment surgeries.

The judge ruled that, “the court concluded that Article 8 of the Medical Liability Law of 2018 prohibits sex change, which is a public order provision intended to prohibit sex change in Jordan, because it is contrary to society’s values and public order and is not intended merely to prevent doctors to perform it.”

The decision also referenced a lab test, conducted “to determine the sex of a man, whether male or female, through chromosomal hatchery, and that the medical report of the public prosecutor [found] female chromosomes...”

The court refused to change Samih's identity papers, and stated that "according to the aforementioned article, the courts refrain from ordering a change of her sex, which, as previously mentioned, is an absolute order to be attached to the public order of the state. [...] Thus, the applicant's conduct of medical procedures outside the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to change her genitals into male’s will not discourage the Kingdom from applying its sovereign law on its lands.”

While there are no official numbers available, we know Samih is not alone in his situation. Lana (named changed), whom the court also deadname in the record, underwent gender affirming MTF surgery in Thailand.

In 2022, the record showed: “After the clinical examination by ultrasound and CT scan, it was found that there is no uterus or ovaries, and there is no vagina, and that the chromosomal examination resulted in (xy46), meaning that the sex is male.”

The court also said in its decision: “It has been proven by the assessment of the medical committees that the plaintiff is male through chromosomal examination and does not have female genital organs, and that the presence of the vaginal opening is the result of the surgery that was performed in Thailand. [...] There is no error in the records that warrant correction.”

Lana’s lawyer told the court of her gender dysphoria, and that the surgeries were prescribed as treatment. He said she could not coexist with society and traditions due to the difference in her external appearance from her official papers. “When she presents her personal identity to an employee (for example), they are surprised that she is male, even though her external appearance bears female characteristics,” he told the court.

Her lawyer also warned that failure to grant Lana’s petition would cause her severe harm: “ The psychological pain is her feeling of inferiority, the physical pain is her inability to play her role in life as an ordinary person, and the social pain is her rejection by society.”

Before 2018, it was possible to receive new identification. That was the case for Sara (name changed to protect privacy) in 2014, who received new official papers and a civil status identity proving that she was female after undergoing surgery in Australia.

Rashid’s story: Life without identity in Jordan

Despite overcoming crisis with his family, Rashid – who is now 28 – had to leave Jordan for a new life in Turkey, so that he could have citizenship, a good job and a better life in his later years.

Rashid previously attempted an asylum claim in a European country but failed. Travelling out of Egypt, an airline refused his right to travel after finding his passport did not match his gender.

“[They were] worried that I would ask for asylum in the transit country,” he said. Eventually he was routed back to Jordan.

Transgender people and labour law

Jordanian lawyer Hamada Abu Nijmeh, a former Secretary General at the Ministry of Labour (2012-2016) and current CEO of Workers’ House Center, said the country’s labour law defines worker’s rights in absolute terms. A worker is defined as “every person, male or female, who performs a job in exchange for a wage, and is subordinate to the employer and under his command, and this includes juveniles and those under trial or rehabilitation”.

While the law does not prevent the employment of transgender people, it also does not place controls on an employer who refuses to employ a transgender person. “Whether for reasons related to the difference in their external appearance indicating a different gender than the gender on the identity card, or for social or other reasons,” he said.

This, despite Jordan being a signatory of the International Labour Organisation’s [Convention 111](#), which prohibits discrimination at work:

Article 1 from Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111) 1. For the purpose of this Convention the term discrimination includes (a) any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion,

political opinion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation; (b) such other distinction, exclusion or preference which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation as may be determined by the Member concerned after consultation with representative employers' and workers' organisations, where such exist, and with other appropriate bodies.

Nijmeh said that for international law to be implemented, local laws should be adopted. But he noted he had never heard of any case filed in Jordanian courts by a transgender person regarding employment discrimination. (This was confirmed by an independent search on [Qistas](#).)

The lack of existing case law may be due to Jordan not having a culture of filing employment discrimination cases, he said. He also felt that allowing transgender people to change their ID to match their current gender would help facilitate getting a job.

In 2020, legislative authorities in Jordan approved the [repeal of text in Article 69](#) of the Labour Law that defined what occupations and work times are suitable for women to work. They replaced it with text that prohibits any discrimination based on sex between workers that would prejudice equal opportunities.

Police response to transgender people

Jordan does not explicitly criminalise transgender people, but that does not mean authorities cannot resort to other laws to limit their freedom. Under the [penal code](#), anyone who “commits an indecent act or gesture in a public place or community” can be punished with a jail term of not more than a year, and a fine of 200 JD (around US\$282).⁸ And Article 307 of the penal code says that men who disguise themselves as a woman to enter into spaces reserved for women will face jail sentence for not more than 6 months.

A [report](#) released by Human Rights Watch in February this year recounts a story of police harassment of a transgender woman in Jordan.⁹

⁸ Available at: <http://www.moj.gov.jo/EchoBusV3.0/SystemAssets/5d38ea27-5819-443e-a380-b65c7e1f5b56.pdf>

⁹ Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/21/middle-east-north-africa-digital-targeting-lgbt-people>

“[The police] searched all our phones. They took my phone and started sending messages to each other from my phone, then they took screenshots of those conversations and screenshots from my photo gallery. They took photos and videos where I have makeup or a dress on, and they used them as evidence against me. They went through my WhatsApp chats and took contact details so they could entrap my friends as well.” This was a story published by HRW from the same report about transgender woman from Jordan.

My request for a comment on this from the Public Security Directorate was not answered.

Social integration & transgender people

Rashid, who we met in case studies in previous chapters, says his family did not mind when he showed a preference for “boyish” things as a child. “It is not important if you play with boys’ or girls’ toys or wear blue or pink [as a child], but when a female shows signs of puberty, the rules of society are imposed: from not playing in the street to paying attention to how she walks and dresses.”

We’ve already seen how transgender people in Jordan face problems with access to legal protection and medical support, but what is it like integrating into society?

Access to education

Rashid studied in a private mixed school for boys and girls in the primary grades and faced some harassment from male peers. But, in general, the teachers and his female peers liked him, and he felt comfortable in a school uniform that was the same for both boys and girls.

At home, Rashid’s parents and three siblings did not approve of his boyish behaviour. He was subjected to violence, especially from his father, who beat him harshly, and locked him up when he attempted to flee. At the time, Rashid did not know that he was transgender.

Rashid spent years of his life not knowing the meaning of his feelings. “From the moment I was aware, I felt that this body was not my body. I did not tell my family at that time, but the older a person gets, the more and different his needs. When I reached puberty, I was shocked,” he said.

After completing basic schooling, Rashid qualified to study a branch of health education at a public secondary school for girls. In that school, Rashid had to wear a green dress as his uniform.

He was bullied and struggled with feelings of attraction to women. This became so overwhelming that he decided to drop out of school. Rashid believes his lack of a good educational degree, combined with his transgender status, makes it difficult for him to get a job.

Access to services

Advocate Fadel Al-Halteh says one of the most prominent blockers to social integration is having an appearance difference to your official identity. This hinders people seeking employment, travel, or when stopped by police to verify identity.

Trans women face problems if they want to join a female gym, swimming pool, salon, and so on. “In our culture, society still believes that a transgender person

wants this without any reason and does not take into account that there are sometimes medical and psychological reasons,” he said.

In 2021, the advocate was able to help a client obtain a new identity after undergoing a gender correction surgery outside Jordan by proving with medical reports that the person had both male and female apparatus before the operation.

Another transgender person in Jordan, who asked not to be identified, told me that the cost of being at peace in their body was extremely high and should be considered proof of how much higher the discomfort of pretending is. “It’s not a luxury to be trans,” they said, “Nobody wants to be rejected by their family and their society, struggle to find a good job, or to afford to study.”

History, religion & transgender people

In [Room 56](#) at the British Museum in London, you will find a sculpture titled *Queen of the Night* depicting the goddess Ishtar. “[The Mesopotamian deity Ishtar](#) had the power to assign gender,” the museum notes read. “Some of her cult members seem to have been considered woman-like men [...]”.¹⁰

The sculpture from Mesopotamia dates back to between 1800 and 1750 BCE, and – according to former Middle East editor for the *Guardian* newspaper Brian Whitaker – could be [considered proof](#) of the existence of ambiguities surrounding sex and gender in the Middle East since ancient times.¹¹ Another such example often cited is pottery shards from [Ancient Egypt](#) that are inscribed with three genders of humanity, although this is disputed.¹²

In part three of his series, Whitaker writes:

“In previous centuries, Islamic scholars had devoted much thought to the question of ‘khunthas’ people of indeterminate sex. They had concluded that God created everyone male or female, and that a ‘khuntha’ must be a male or a female whose true sex is hidden. In order to apply the gender rules of Islamic society it was therefore desirable to ‘uncover a khuntha’s hidden sex, and in modern times reassignment surgery began to be viewed as one religiously permissible way of doing so.”

A [report](#) from Human Rights Watch notes: “Most of the Arab states inherited strict laws against homosexuality from the French or British colonial systems of justice. Jordan (in 1951) and Bahrain (in 1976) did away with these laws when they passed new criminal codes after gaining their independence, but other countries maintained the colonial-era prohibitions, while sometimes modifying the language and the sentences.”¹³

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Desire-love-identity-LGBTQ-history-trail-2019.pdf>

¹¹ Available at: <https://brian-whit.medium.com/transgender-issues-in-the-middle-east-9f40d0559afa>

¹² Available at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.5615/neareastarch.79.3.0174>

¹³ Available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lgbt_mena0418_web_0.pdf

According to the [Jordanian Constitution](#), the kingdom is an Islamic nation and 97.2% practice the religion, predominantly Sunni Islam. There are also some who practice Christianity.

In both religions, it is possible to find sects that accept transgender people and interpret the scriptures on this topic differently. Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle is an independent Islamic researcher who has published extensively on this topic, most notably in [Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims](#) (2010).¹⁴ Kugle acknowledges that traditional Islamic scholarship often lacks specific discussions about transgender identities, as the historical context and terminology were different. But he suggests a need for empathy, understanding, and inclusion for transgender Muslims. He encourages a compassionate approach that considers the complex interplay between religious beliefs, cultural norms, and individual gender identities.

In 2017, Jordan's [General Iftaa' Department](#), which issues religious edicts, said gender affirming surgeries are "haram". They said: "Transforming someone's genital apparatus and removing his/her genitals by surgery to treat what is called 'Gender Identity Disorder' isn't permissible in Sharia."

The department also ruled: "What determines femininity and masculinity is the body itself and its biological features. The most important of these is the genital apparatus which differentiates males from females. Therefore, if someone suffered from gender identity disorder, then it should be treated in a way that brings things back to normal, but in line with the basic masculine or feminine identity of the genital apparatus of that person, and not transforming his/her gender through removal of genitals by surgery."

A Christian pastor in Jordan, who agreed to interview him without revealing his name, said this edict aligned with his own beliefs. He describes "transgenderism" as a sin, because it seeks to change God's creation, which is "anomalous behaviour".

For Rashid, despite these rulings and a life of rejection, he still adheres to his religious beliefs as a Muslim. He is not sure whether he will be buried upon death as Rashid or Anoud (his dead name).

"I lived two lives: one as a female and the other as a male," he said. "This is what distinguishes a transgender person... and I love myself in all stages."

¹⁴ Available at: <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Homosexuality-in-Islam/Scott-Siraj-Al-Haqq-Kugle/9781851687015>

News media & transgender

A trans Jordanian who spoke to me on condition of anonymity said that if the media put more effort into interviewing transgender people and interviewing unbiased psychiatrists and doctors, it would educate the public, leading to less abuse online and in real life, which would help the community.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) held a media conference in Jordan following the February release of their 135-page report detailing digital targeting of LGBT people in the Middle East. But a review of coverage across TV, digital, official agencies and radio shows the report was largely ignored.

Rasha Younes, a senior researcher with the LGBT Rights Program at Human Rights Watch, told me: “We anticipated that the Jordanian media and local media would not be reporting on these findings because we know that there is extreme censorship on content related to gender and sexuality in Jordan. [...] We understand that the report’s findings will not find its place in Jordanian media. However, we have received better response from regional Arabic-speaking media that is covering the report and putting our findings on Jordan.”

Some examples of that coverage can be found on [CNN Arabic](#), [The New Arab](#), and [Radio Sawa](#).^{15,16,17}

Instead of reporting on the situation, Younes said Jordan media was more likely to air [very negative views](#) about gender and sexuality, adding to the spread of fear and perpetrating stigma, harassment, and violence against LGBT people.¹⁸

¹⁵ Available at: <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2023/02/21/governments-middle-east-target-lgbt-people-online-activity-hrw>

¹⁶ Available at: https://www.alaraby.co.uk/entertainment_media/%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B3-%D9%88%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B4-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7

¹⁷ Available at: <https://www.radiosawa.com/akhbar-wtqaryr/2023/02/21/%D8%A3%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D9%85%D8%B3-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%9F>

¹⁸ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuC-ttojdxE>

Her comment is given credence by a review of reporting on a 2022 anti-LGBT campaign titled “*Fetrah*” (Arabic for human instinct), which garnered wide coverage across [digital](#) and [legacy](#) media – even on a [public service media](#).^{19, 20, 21, 22} The campaign, started by marketing professionals in Egypt, was banned on Facebook.

Alternative media

[My.Kali](#) is a magazine founded in 2007 by a group of Jordanian students who wanted to explore gender issues and represent the LGBTQ community. They describe themselves as “a new form of activism”: “My.Kali is a space that is inclusive of all members of the Arab society regardless of their identity.”²³

One of its founders, Khalid Abdel-Hadi, wrote on the 10-year anniversary:

In 2016, the Jordanian Media Commission made a futile attempt to intervene on our behalf after several news outlets falsely claimed that we were being granted a license and official registration in Jordan. After incitement from the media towards the government about the registration, printing and licensing of our publication, The commission released a statement in July of 2016, clarifying that this was not the case and its General Director, Dr Amjad Al-Qadi, called upon the media to be accurate and to take in public interests instead of publishing false news. He urged journalists to contact relevant authorities to fact check and verify validity of news stories they sought to publish. Despite his early efforts to protect our rights, he caved under pressure from the media and the public and proceeded with censoring our publication.

Today the magazine is largely censored and not easy to read without VPN.

¹⁹ Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/08/03/twitter-arabic-anti-lgbtq-campaign-goes-viral>

²⁰ Available at: <https://albosala.com/%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B0%D9%88%D8%B0-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7/>

²¹ Available at: <https://www.albawaba.com/ar/%D8%A5%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1/%D9%81%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A9-1483369>

²² Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sP0upv-NTg>

²³ Available at: <https://www.mykalimag.com/en/about/>

Reporting attracts bullying

Hiba Abu Taha is a Jordanian journalist who has published several articles about the rights of the LGBTQ people in Jordan. She said she faced backlash and bullying on social media, and that those stories are still used against her – even when reporting on non-LGBTQ issues.

Abu Taha urged caution in reporting: “We cannot shock society; we must explain to them the psychological reasons for sexual transformation.” But she also urged reporters to “practise their journalistic work and professionalism in covering these issues”.

When there is coverage of transgender issues, it is often because it has been confused during reporting about intersex people. This [2023 report](#) in Alsaat recounts a father being given permission to change the sex of the child from male to female after a medical examination revealed she was misclassified. The family faced bullying online because people thought it related to transgender issues.²⁴

A former BBC journalist based in Amman, Ibrahim Riyad, produced a [TV report](#) about a transgender person.²⁵ The comment section below the report on Instagram shows the audience calling for hell fire, telling the news subject to commit suicide, lambasting Riyad for reporting the story, and calling for the closure of BBC Arabic.

“Of course I had fears the story would not be accepted in a conservative society, but my duty as a journalist is to convey people’s issues – especially if they are a minority,” he told me.

²⁴ <https://alsaa.net/article/234797/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%8A%D9%8A%D8%B1>

²⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CjaleIttR2L/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY%3D>

Conclusion

Iman Le Caire is a transgender woman from Egypt, living in the U.S. since 2008. She runs Trans Asylas to assist Middle Eastern trans people seeking asylum.

“The law discriminates against transgender individuals in the Middle East, and I think international [organisations must work with governments] to find a solution to protect queer and transgender people. Or they must change the opinion of people – like in the media, in the press, how they talk about it,” she said.

Interviews with transgender people in Jordan, as well as medical and legal professionals, show a small segment of our society is indeed being excluded from opportunities.

Interviews with Jordanian journalists suggest the price for covering these stories will be high. And overcoming resistance from editors will be the first hurdle.

I hope that this project makes clear that transgender issues are not just a western fad but a global human experience for a small minority.

Making space for that experience in society will not create more of it, in the same way that refusing to write about it has not made it disappear.

Riyad told me he does not regret preparing his report for the BBC. “It is not the role of a journalists to align themselves with their beliefs during the coverage of an event,” he said. “Regardless of the journalist’s opinion on LGBTQ, these people are living with us. However few they are, their voices must be heard. They are ultimately human beings we must not harm.”

In a world where news often aims to please the masses, some stories remain unreported, nestled in the shadows of society. This is one such story and, as I said at the start, it is unlikely to entirely please anyone.

At its heart though, this project is about not about catering to expectations. True journalism demands that we shed light on the narratives that often remain unheard.