Discussions about the health of women should include transgender women

We read with interest Dooa Oraby's Correspondence in The Lancet Public Health (February, 2018)¹ about the importance of prioritising women and gender equity in HIV/ AIDS prevention and treatment in the Middle East and north Africa (MENA). Women in this region still lag behind in markers of gender equity; including women in all sectors of the health-care system could improve HIV treatment coverage.² Women living with HIV/AIDS in MENA face HIV-related discrimination including denial of health care, confidentiality breaches, and stigmatising testing environments.1,3 But discourse on health-care strategies, including the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS among women in MENA, overlook transgender women. Any and all discussions about the health of women should include transgender women. This inclusion must prioritise agency and intersectionality by fostering the leadership of transgender women in women's health movements and seeking the contribution of diverse perspectives regarding issues such as socioeconomic status, immigration status, and gender expression. March, 2018, marked the first time transgender women openly participated in International Women's Day activities in MENA. "Transgender women are women" read one of the signs carried at the International Women's Day march in Beirut, Lebanon. Five transgender women marched at the front of the large crowd of women activists and embodied the very inclusion that the slogans demanded and asserted.

Plans to initiate the first transgender-led organisation in MENA are underway. Transgender women in MENA, like in many other settings, experience high rates of sexual and mental health disparities because of social and structural barriers. Public health efforts that aim to advance women's health must mirror what many women's groups are already doing on a community level: prioritising the visibility of transgender women in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment efforts, and resisting patriarchal hegemony. Transgender women are women. It is time that our research, health-care provision, and discourse clearly and consistently reflect this.

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