

LGBTI Refugees

Migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless, and internally displaced persons that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI), face a complex array of challenges and threats throughout all stages of the displacement cycle. Challenges faced by LGBTI persons of refugee backgrounds include discrimination, violence (including rape, torture and murder), difficulty in accessing basic social and economic rights and barriers to articulating their protection needs during asylum procedures (*UNHCR, 2012*).

The UNHCR defends the rights of LGBTI individuals and recognises that refugee claims based on sexual orientation or gender identity fall under “membership in a particular social group”, one of the five grounds for protection enumerated in the Refugee Convention (*UNHCR, 2012*).

LGBTI refugees face dual vulnerability of being both LGBTI and a refugee.

Global overview

Although there has been significant development in LGBTI rights over the past decade, the majority of this progress has occurred in the West. Homosexuality is still illegal in 74 countries with varying levels of punishment. The death penalty for this applies in 13 countries, including Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Mauritania, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, UAE, provinces of Nigeria and Somalia, and parts of Syria and Iraq held by Islamic State (ILGA, 2017).

Experiences of LGBTI refugees

As people from a refugee background, their experiences of war and displacement trauma is combined with experiences of homo/transphobia.

Experiences reported by LGBTI refugees include (*UNHCR, 2013*):

- Alienation from friends and families – including stigmatisation, abandonment and violence
- Forced marriage to someone of the opposite sex
- Public humiliation - in countries like Indonesia, convicted gay men are lashed during public ceremonies

- Hunting of LGBTI individuals - gay dating apps are intercepted by police and homophobic groups to punish and torture LGBTI victims
- ‘Correctional’ rape – often used as punishment against females for transgressing gender norms
- Engaging in survival sex work due to the scarcity in employment opportunities.

Physical and mental health challenges

LGBTI refugees face persistent barriers to accessing health services due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are often fearful of disclosing their LGBTI status due to the high risk of being subjected to degrading treatment from service providers and consumers (*Hall & Sajjani*).

LGBTI refugees are at a heightened risk for:

- Poor or unmanaged sexual health
- Anxiety disorders
- Depression and suicidal thoughts
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness
- Dissociative disorders
- Difficulty with trust and intimacy

LGBTI refugees face amplified susceptibility to mental health challenges due to their exposure to different forms of stress – including isolation, persecution and lack of social support (*Hall & Sajjani*). These symptoms can persist long after resettlement in Australia.

Good support offered by culturally tailored services that are sensitive to LGBTI needs act as a strong protective factor.

Sexual and reproductive health issues

Although all refugees face challenges with managing their sexual health, those who identify as LGBTI face a heightened vulnerability due to the need of disclosing their sexual orientation during assessment in order to access the necessary treatments.

LGBTI refugees may begin to acknowledge and more freely disclose their same-sex attraction or gender identity once they are in a more tolerant society.

Communication and use of Interpreters

Service providers and interpreters face unique communication challenges that can impact the relationship with the LGBTI client. Sexual orientation

and gender identity terms vary immensely across culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Confusion and cultural taboo have tainted the type of language used to refer to LGBTI people, with inaccurate and offensive terms often being used due to a scarcity in sensitive terminology.

The Organisation for Refuge, Asylum and Migration (ORAM) has published a guide titled "[Essential Terminology for the Humanitarian Sector](#)" that can be used by health professionals and interpreters to communicate effectively and respectfully with LGBTI clients in their language (ORAM).

Be careful not to automatically assume the sexuality or gender of your refugee clients.

Sexual orientation, sex and gender identity are all separate concepts. Where possible, utilise forms that provide the option of "other" in addition to *male* or *female* as choices for gender or sex; thus allowing inclusion of trans, intersex and gender diverse people.

It is important to also recognise that people who engage in sexual activity with the same-sex do not always identify as lesbian or gay. Some prefer to identify as 'men who have sex with men' (MSM) or 'women who have sex with women' (WSW), (*Gungras*) or, may not disclose this at all.

Using correct terminology and inclusive language, helps to reduce prejudices and stereotypes, and helps to promote safer spaces for LGBTI people. A useful [Inclusive Language Guide](#) has been developed by the Victorian State Government.

Creating a "safe space" for LGBTI refugees

It is important for service providers to create a *safe space* inside their facility for LGBTI refugees. By visibly reassuring your patients that your service is LGBTI inclusive, you are creating an opportunity for open communication and further support. ORAM has a "safe space checklist". Steps include:

- Sensitivity training for staff members on LGBTI identity and communication
- Place translated "LGBTI Safe Space" posters in waiting areas and interview rooms
- Intake and internal information forms should address sexual orientation and gender identity

- The privacy and confidentiality of LGBTI refugees should be strictly safeguarded
- Have an active referral pathway to local organisations that assist LGBTI refugees.

Relevant Services

Twenty10 –counselling / social support LGBTQI Inclusivity Training for organisations	8594 9555
NSW Sexual Health Infolink	1800451624
The Gender Centre – Transgender support	9794 1900
Q Life – phone & on-line support 3-12pm	1800184527
ACON - support and LGBTI health	9206 2000
Asylum Seekers Centre	9078 1900
STARTTS	9519 7599
NSW Refugee Health Service – free GP clinic	8778 0770

NSW Health Services for Young People

www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/youth/Pages/health-services-yp.aspx

ACON: a NSW based health promotion organisation specialising in support and LGBTI health. ACON maintains a list of [LGBTI friendly GP's](#) that includes languages spoken.

References and Recommended Reading

Advance Diversity Services and partners (2017): [Multicultural LGBTI+ Support Directory](#)

Grungras N., et al, (2009) [Unsafe Haven: Security Challenges Facing LGBT Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Turkey](#). *The Fletcher Journal of Human Security* (24) 41-61.

Hall & Sajnanji, (2014) [Mental Health Challenges for LGBT Asylum Seekers in Canada](#). *Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights*

The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Intersex Association ILGA (2017) [Sexual Orientation Laws in the World – Overview](#)

Organisation for the Refuge, Asylum and Migration (ORAM): [Essential Terminology for the Humanitarian Sector, Safe Space Checklist, Posters](#) & other resources.

UNHCR (2012) [Guidelines on International Protection No. 9](#)

UNHCR (2013) [Resettlement Assessment Tool: Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Refugees](#)

Victorian State Government (2016): [Inclusive Language Guide](#)

