

A person is shown from behind, in silhouette, looking out through open wooden shutters. The person's hands are resting on the edges of the shutters. The background is bright and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is contemplative and somber.

“No Place for People Like You”

An Analysis of the Needs,
Vulnerabilities, and Experiences
of LGBT Syrian Refugees
in Lebanon

December 2014



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Foreword

The majority of refugees worldwide flee persecution by armed state and non-state actors. Refugees who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) flee this kind of widespread violence, too. But they are also often forced to escape real and threatened violence perpetrated by family members, friends, neighbors, and other community members because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Once displaced, LGBT refugees often struggle to establish the kinds of safety and support networks upon which other refugees rely, and are the target of severe discrimination. Patterns and practices of persecution against LGBT Syrian refugees correspond with these global trends. LGBT Syrians who have fled to Lebanon face a set of unique challenges, but few host community members or service providers are truly responsive or committed to cultivating social and economic opportunities that will facilitate their integration and enhance their quality of life. It is critical that these and other stakeholders in Lebanon play a more active role in ensuring that LGBT Syrian refugees are no longer subject to severe discrimination, barriers to services, and rights violations.

Heartland Alliance International (HAI) led this assessment in Lebanon to carefully document, for the first time, the specific vulnerabilities of LGBT individuals affected by the ongoing conflict in Syria. The research team interviewed 60 LGBT Syrian refugees, a small number of straight-identifying refugees, Lebanese host community members from various parts of the country, staff from 16 local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), select UNHCR personnel, and staff from Lebanese government institutions and businesses to gather the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders. The breadth of responses allow for a comprehensive analysis that explores the circumstances under which LGBT Syrians flee, and identifies how their backgrounds, experiences, and security concerns inform and limit their access to services in Lebanon. The recommendations presented in this report will help diverse stakeholders in Lebanon more effectively respond to the needs of this highly vulnerable community, which for too long has been hidden and underserved. This report can be accessed at heartlandalliance.org/international.

Acknowledgements

HAI thanks its partner, SFV Consulting Group, for valuable contributions at each stage of this study. HAI extends its gratitude to the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, Helem, and ABBAD, for their thoughtful feedback and guidance. HAI also thanks staff at Proud for referring participants to HAI and for providing a confidential space for interviews. Most importantly, HAI wants to thank those study participants who had the courage to share their stories.¹ This effort would not have been possible without their contributions.

¹ All names of participants have been changed throughout the document to ensure confidentiality.



About Heartland Alliance International

Heartland Alliance International (HAI) is an international, service-based human rights organization committed to protecting and promoting the rights of extremely vulnerable populations through an inclusive approach to comprehensive health and social and economic justice. HAI programs apply a progressive approach to protecting and promoting the rights of extremely vulnerable populations that are frequently excluded from more traditional development interventions.

HAI has extensive expertise in programs that prevent harm and advance the rights of women, girls, and LGBT individuals, all of whom are often targeted because of their perceived transgression of gender norms and behaviors. As such, HAI has placed sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) protection and prevention at the heart of its mandate. HAI's SGBV programs employ an integrated and holistic approach that involves building the capacity of legal service and social service providers, as well as conducting targeted advocacy, media, and public education campaigns. HAI programs incorporate a participant empowerment approach which helps survivors of violence fully participate in their own recovery. Additional information on HAI's global programming can be accessed at heartlandalliance.org/international/.

HAI in the Middle East

HAI has had an active presence in the Middle East since 2004, providing its own specialized mix of protection, mental health, and legal services to vulnerable and marginalized populations in Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Syria. HAI has earned a reputation for promoting human rights in some of the region's most challenging operating contexts, and has successfully paired the provision of direct services with advocacy and organizational development to work toward long-term social change and sustainability.

In Lebanon, HAI focuses its efforts on providing support to highly-vulnerable populations including women and girl refugee survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, survivors of trafficking, LGBT refugees, and other individuals and communities affected by the conflict in neighboring Syria. By combining emergency service provision with local capacity building, HAI's programming provides both short- and long-term solutions to empowering at-risk groups, and addressing the root causes of vulnerability.

HAI's Rainbow Welcome Initiative

In 2011, HAI established the Rainbow Welcome Initiative to support the resettlement of LGBT refugees and asylees in the United States. This initiative acknowledges that LGBT refugees and asylees have unique needs, and that it is the responsibility of resettlement agencies, other service-based organizations, and community members to ensure that upon arrival, their needs are met through comprehensive, culturally-sensitive, and LGBT-friendly services and support.

Through this innovative, first-of-its kind initiative, HAI conducts on-site trainings and offers remote technical assistance to build the capacity of service providers across the United States to strengthen services for LGBT refugees. The Rainbow Welcome Initiative has produced several online resources that are available to both service providers and refugees themselves, including a manual entitled "Rainbow Response," which serves as a practical guide to resettling LGBT refugees. This resource can be accessed at RainbowWelcome.org.



Executive Summary

As of November 4, 2014, the conflict in Syria had caused over 1 million civilians to seek refuge in Lebanon,² and refugees now make up over a quarter of Lebanon's total resident population. Despite the dramatic number of refugees in Lebanon and the corresponding large-scale humanitarian response, there has been very little attention dedicated to understanding and addressing the needs of minority populations. The number of LGBT refugees in Lebanon is still unknown; however, given that conservative estimates approximate 5% of people worldwide self-identify as sexual minorities,³ the total number of LGBT Syrians in Lebanon may be close to 50,000. HAI acknowledges that only a small fraction of those refugees who are LGBT will self-identify and seek protections based on their sexual orientation and gender identity because of stigma and risk (real or perceived). However, HAI believes that for the sake of the hundreds of LGBT Syrians who will come forward, and the thousands more who may be at immediate risk and in need of urgent protection and support, the humanitarian community must take immediate, concrete action to safeguard the rights of this highly vulnerable population.

² <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

³ Diamond, M. Homosexuality and bisexuality in different populations. Arch Sex Behav. 1993 Aug; 22(4):291-310. Available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8368913>

This study confirmed HAI's initial perception that LGBT Syrians in Lebanon are disproportionately the targets of discrimination and violence. Once LGBT Syrians flee violence in their countries of origin, they often suffer continued persecution from community members, other refugees, state actors, and sometimes even humanitarian workers. Doubly marginalized as both refugees and sexual minorities, LGBT Syrians are excluded, isolated, and stigmatized because of their "outsider" status and perceived sexual and gender non-conformity. Furthermore, Lebanon's "morality laws" criminalize consensual same-sex sexual acts between adults, contributing to the prevalence of homophobia and transphobia throughout the country. Aggression against LGBT persons is recognized by some as a form of SGBV. Like women and girls, LGBT Syrians in Lebanon are vulnerable to systematic and multi-layered violence.

LGBT Syrians in Lebanon often lack access to protection and other critical services. Without the same opportunities for housing, employment, and healthcare, LGBT Syrians are more vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. Some stakeholders within the humanitarian community recognize the urgent need to support this highly vulnerable population but many actors are unequipped to effectively address their unique needs and concerns. This study identifies and documents these specific vulnerabilities. It also offers concrete recommendations to service providers, donors, and policy-makers so that they can ensure LGBT Syrian refugees are protected from harm, granted equal access to life-saving services, provided with adequate opportunities to heal from trauma and abuse, and supported to pursue a safe and productive future inside Lebanon and beyond.





Findings

This study concludes that LGBT Syrians struggle to overcome the myriad challenges and vulnerabilities that most other refugees confront, and they are forced to endure an additional layer of discrimination, abuse, and trauma relating to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The key findings, some of which are highlighted below, illustrate the daily discrimination, abuse, exploitation, and exclusion LGBT Syrians face from a diverse range of state and individual actors.

- 96% of respondents reported being directly threatened in Syria because of their sexual orientation or gender identity;
- 54% reported being sexually abused in Syria, with sexual orientation or gender identity being a leading factor in this abuse;
- 56% reported having been physically assaulted in Lebanon, but only 7% reported the crime to the authorities;
- 29% reported having been threatened, extorted, or blackmailed in Lebanon, motivated by bias based on their sexual orientation or gender identity;
- Only 35% of LGBT Syrian refugees interviewed are currently working;
- 58% described their mental health status as poor;
- Only 28% stated they would consider remaining in Syria or Lebanon if conditions improved. Most agreed that they cannot imagine living safely as LGBT individuals anywhere in the Middle East.

Just as gender-sensitive perspectives and frameworks help to ensure the needs of women and girls are addressed in emergency response programming, the international community must also acknowledge that LGBT individuals' experiences, needs, and concerns are often different from their heterosexual counterparts. The research team identified several salient trends which make LGBT Syrian refugees particularly vulnerable in this crisis.

- **Double discrimination:** Doubly marginalized as both refugees and sexual minorities, LGBT refugees are excluded, isolated, and stigmatized on the basis of their outsider status. As refugees, they are perceived as a burden on the local economy and are often not trusted by host community members. Adding to this, LGBT refugees are further marginalized because of their sexual and gender non-conformity.
- **Reduced sources of support:** Because many LGBT individuals are estranged from their families and ostracized by their communities, they lose access to the vital sources of support upon which many other refugees often rely during displacement.
- **LGBT refugees do not fit into current heterosexually-oriented selection criteria or programs:** Relationship and family composition are often important selection criteria for services. LGBT refugees, who are often expelled or shunned by their families, end up categorized as "single males or females" and are consequently not prioritized for assistance.

"The people who I should be able to count on are stopping at no end to kill me. I may as well be dead."

Nizar has been living in Lebanon for six months, since learning that his family had hired gangsters to kill him. He lives in constant fear, is afraid to get a job, and spends his time hiding at home.

Before fleeing to Lebanon, his family had locked him in a small room in the basement with no light, tied him up, starved him, and tortured him when they found pornographic pictures of men on his computer. His sister helped smuggle him out of the house. Even after fleeing to Lebanon, Nizar still cannot escape his family's reach because of their network of relatives and friends that extend throughout Lebanon.

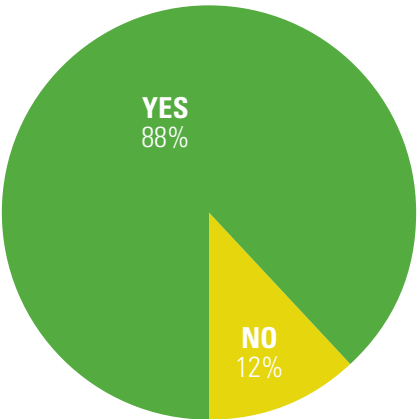
In addition to the violence and discrimination he faces from his own family, Nizar has also been harassed in Lebanon because he is Syrian. He and his partner were approached in broad daylight by two men holding guns, saying "you Syrians think you can do whatever you want in our country, but you better be careful." He pays \$200 monthly to live in a single room with no washroom, no running water, and with no financial support from any humanitarian organization. Nizar said that the series of events and the death threats have made him "hopeless and psychologically broken."

Nearly 100 percent of the LGBT Syrians that participated in the study reported that they were subjected to attacks and injuries while still in Syria, motivated by their sexual orientation or gender identity. In the context of the current violent conflict in Syria, an individual's real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity elevates the risk of violence, in part due to the significant sectarian and religious dimensions of this particular armed conflict.

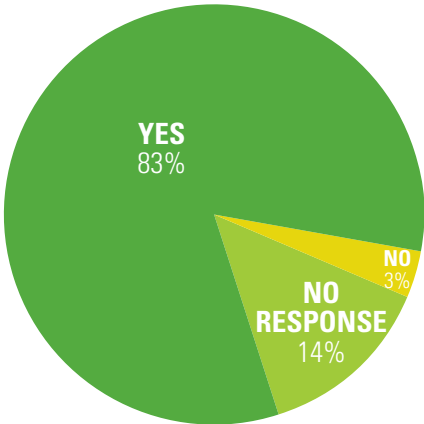
Many of the LGBT Syrians interviewed had experienced sexual violence; respondents explained that they were frequently detained, and those who were suspected or confirmed to be gay, were virtually guaranteed to be sexually abused. Due to the stigma and the shame some survivors attach to their experiences, sexual abuse is often underreported, particularly among men. Currently, the vast majority of studies, program models, and tools that have been developed in response to SGBV are focused exclusively on female survivors – an approach that has unfortunately served to further alienate gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals who may have a need for similar services. There is a growing acknowledgement that SGBV is perpetrated against men in conflict situations, but similarities and differences between that violence, the specific abuse used to target LGBT individuals, and the traditionally understood needs of women and girls has not been adequately investigated. At the same time, lesbian and bisexual women's sexual orientation is often made even less visible by general SGBV response programming for women, which prevents providers from addressing their full range of unique needs.

LGBT individuals in Syria are targeted by armed groups on all sides of the conflict. Members of the LGBT community reported violence perpetrated by Syrian government forces, non-secular rebel forces, secular rebel forces, and non-aligned criminal gangs. Additionally, as the social fabric continued to unravel in Syria, many LGBT refugees also reported that their neighbors, friends, and schoolmates had threatened them or "sold them out" to various armed groups. The corresponding spike in aggression against LGBT individuals in Syria was the primary motivating factor behind 70% of respondents' decisions to flee.

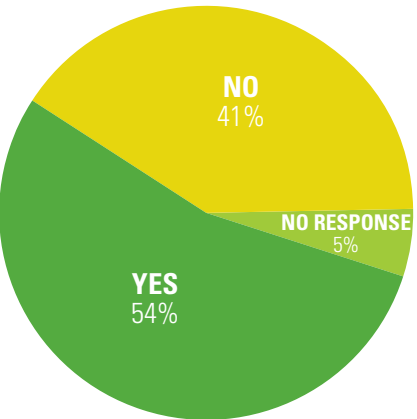
Did you ever personally receive any direct threat of violence/intimidation



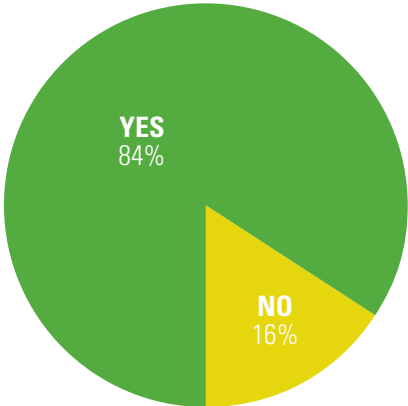
Was the threat motivated by bias against LGBT people?



Were you ever sexually abused in Syria?



If you were sexually abused, do you believe you were targeted because of your sexual orientation/gender identity?



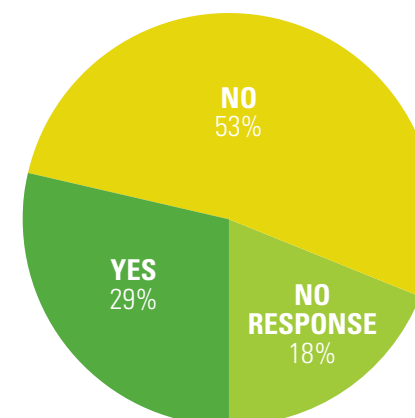
Housing and Employment

Unlike other refugees, LGBT Syrian refugees surveyed tended to live in dorm-style accommodations for single persons or in apartments with roommates (87%). This distinctly differs from other Syrian refugees who most often live with their large families, primarily in tented settlements and converted commercial spaces. Security concerns seemed to play an important role in housing choices for LGBT refugees. Given their heightened vulnerability, LGBT refugees made every effort to secure accommodations where they could live with other LGBT refugees and avoid cohabitation with the larger refugee community. To ensure their safety and make ends meet, many reported borrowing money, sharing an apartment with multiple roommates, and engaging in survival sex (which consequently increases their risk of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking).

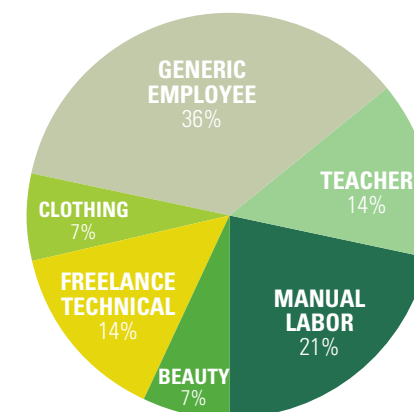
While living with roommates and dating partners was identified as a common coping mechanism for this population, these relationships tend to be less permanent and stable than the family relationships that other Syrian refugees in Lebanon enjoy. Many participants in the assessment highlighted a sense of instability, describing the seemingly constant need to search for new roommates and figure out new living arrangements. The instability becomes an additional source of psychological stress, and takes time away from LGBT Syrian refugees' efforts to secure employment. In addition, some participants mentioned that roommates had stolen possessions and money from them, further contributing to their sense of insecurity, even inside their own homes.

Only 29 percent of those LGBT Syrian refugees interviewed are currently working. This is in stark contrast to the findings in the International Labor Organization's recent study, *Assessment of the Impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and Their Employment Profile*,⁴ which estimated that approximately 70 percent of all Syrian refugees are working. The focus group discussions revealed that employment discrimination played a significant role in LGBT refugees' underemployment. One hundred percent of refugees interviewed for this study reported that they had encountered employment discrimination since arriving in Lebanon, often because of both their nationality and their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Do you work now?



If yes, what is your occupation?



⁴ http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_240134.pdf

The research team interviewed a number of business owners in an effort to understand their attitudes towards the LGBT community and their willingness to hire LGBT Syrian refugees. Most business owners expressed that they did not feel comfortable hiring Syrians and thus did so only for manual labor and “back-of-the-house” positions. All participating business owners reported they pay Syrians less and consider them untrustworthy.

When business owners were asked about LGBT Syrian refugees, the theme of double discrimination was evident. Only one beauty salon owner mentioned that he would be willing to hire an LGBT Syrian refugee if s/he had the required skills. All other business owners interviewed shared the perspective that doing so would drive away business, and offered the following explanations:

- “I wouldn’t hire a Lebanese or a Syrian gay. They have a girlish attitude and act in inappropriate ways.”
- “Syrians don’t speak French and they have a heavy accent which hurts the image of my store. So I would never hire a Syrian, let alone a gay one.”
- “My customers wouldn’t feel comfortable with a Syrian gay waiter serving them, so I could never hire one.”

Several LGBT Syrian refugees explained they are deliberately selective in the employment opportunities they pursue. These individuals described the risk involved in taking jobs that typically hire refugees since it would place them alongside other Syrians who they may be trying to avoid for security reasons. This dilemma forces LGBT Syrian refugees to regularly choose between their economic livelihoods and personal safety.

“We only hire real men.”

This was one of the many insults Hisham endured when searching for employment during his first five months in Tripoli. The funds provided by a local NGO to pay for his modest housing were running out, and he had yet to find a job.

Hisham was eventually hired at a DVD shop. At the time this assessment was conducted, he had been working there three months. He had been permitted to sleep in the back room of the DVD shop after being evicted from his apartment. He had not been paid once since being hired, he told the researchers as he held out his empty wallet. “Even if they employ you, they [employers] know that you are desperate and will take advantage of you. They will not necessarily pay you on time, if at all.” His managers and coworkers keep telling him, “so many people would kill to be in your shoes.”

Hisham explained that his boss had recently begun to verbally harass him at work, initially only on the basis of his nationality and ethnicity. His boss would say things like, “You’re a people [the Syrians] that need to be led by force.” His employer has also recently been hinting at his sexual orientation, saying, “There’s something not right about you. There’s something wrong with you,” and “I can make you disappear, I am an influential man.” Hisham feels as though he has no other choice but to remain with his employer despite the continuing threats and abuse. He is afraid to talk to authorities because he fears he will be targeted again, and possibly beaten and even raped. Hisham has applied for resettlement and is currently waiting for a response.

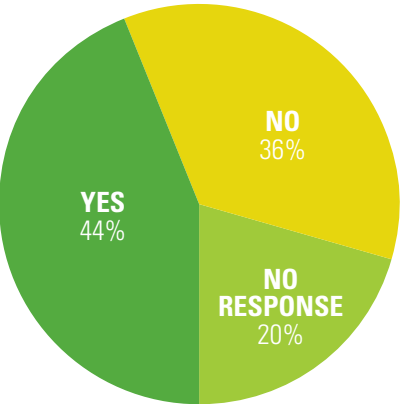
Protection Concerns in Lebanon

LGBT Syrians receive threats from a wide range of actors including state and local authorities, host community members, family members, and even other refugees.

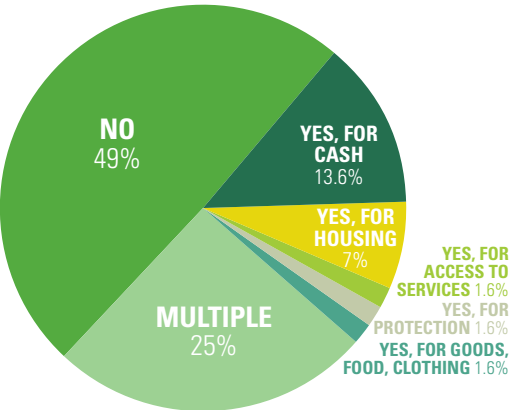
Forty-four percent of respondents claimed that they had been harassed, bothered, threatened, or otherwise discriminated against by Lebanese authorities. Respondents reported instances of being stopped by police in public places, singled out for questioning due to their appearance, or arrested at establishments known for being enclaves for LGBT people. In some cases, police stopped LGBT Syrian refugees for seemingly legitimate reasons – because they lacked standard immigration documents or were soliciting commercial sex work. In other cases, where there was no legal cause for arrest, LGBT Syrian refugees believe they were targeted solely because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

Many LGBT Syrian refugees resort to survival sex, given their increased economic vulnerability and lack of alternative sources of support. This can result in negative health outcomes, violence and abuse, exploitation, and trafficking.

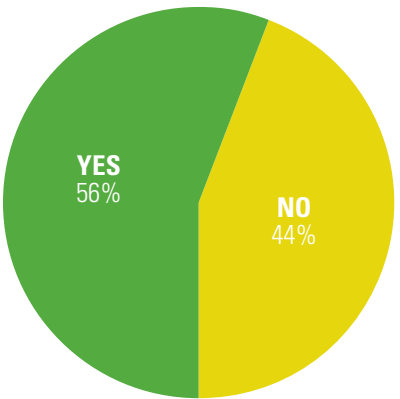
Have you ever been harassed, bothered, threatened, or otherwise discriminated against by the Lebanese authorities?



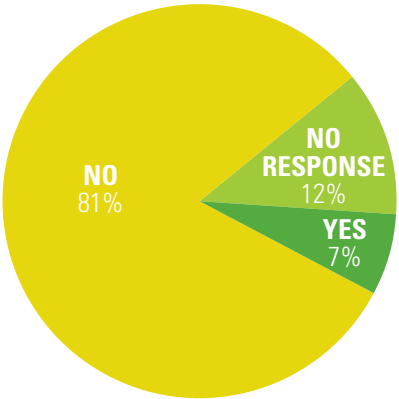
Have you chosen or been coerced to engage in survival sex in exchange for benefits?



Have you ever been physically assaulted, harassed or abused because of your sexual orientation/ gender identity?



Have you ever reported any violence, abuse or assaults to the police forces in Lebanon?



Over half of the LGBT Syrian refugees interviewed for this study have resorted to survival sex in exchange for either cash, goods, food, or clothing. Respondents reported that those soliciting sex in exchange for money or other goods were typically Lebanese men. Participants were visibly uncomfortable when discussing survival sex in interviews and focus groups; none admitted to this during in-person conversations, but instead revealed it on their anonymous questionnaires.

Engaging in survival sex puts LGBT refugees at a greater risk of abuse, but even those who do not resort to this practice remain vulnerable. A majority of LGBT refugees surveyed had experienced some form of physical assault, harassment, or abuse in Lebanon. Respondents explained they were usually assaulted in their own neighborhoods by both men they knew and by strangers. Three refugees also reported being sexually assaulted by taxi drivers who drove them to secluded areas at night and then assaulted them.

Almost none of these victims reported the incidents to the police, out of fear for their own safety and well-being. Some respondents felt certain that the police would arrest them because of their sexual orientation or immigration status. Others saw no point in contacting the police, and believed firmly that action would not be taken to support and protect an LGBT individual, particularly not one from Syria.

For most LGBT Syrian refugees, registering with UNHCR is a critical step they take to protect themselves. Although registering does not provide these individuals with regularized immigration status, registering with UNHCR can improve access to some basic services, referrals, and most importantly, an opportunity for permanent resettlement in a third country. Ninety-three percent of the LGBT Syrian refugees that participated in this study had registered with UNHCR, though nearly 40 percent of them had significant concerns about doing so. Many were unfamiliar with the agency's policies around confidentiality and data protection, and others expressed discomfort with sharing personal information with adjudicators who were Lebanese or Middle Eastern and who may be prejudicial against LGBT persons. While most participants described their experiences as positive, there were select cases where they experienced discrimination from UNHCR staff.

“We don't feel safe.
I lie awake every
night in fear.”

Mohammed, who came from a wealthy family, used to perform in drag shows worldwide and was well known throughout the Syrian LGBT community. The wealth and reputation of his family made him an easy target for armed rebels inside Syria, who were in search of large ransom payments. During the early months of the Syrian crisis, Mohammed was kidnapped by rebel forces who only later learned of Mohammed's sexual orientation. After his sexual orientation became known to his captors, his treatment worsened; he was beaten, raped, and tortured until his family paid the requested ransom.

After arriving in Lebanon, Mohammed lived in a poor neighborhood where people began to suspect he was gay. One afternoon, a group of men arrived, forcibly took him behind the local mosque, and brutally beat him. They exclaimed: “Why did you come to Lebanon? Just to have sex with men? Go back to your country and save it.” Mohammed, his partner, and their gay roommates then had to leave the apartment immediately and move into another neighborhood with a curfew in place for Syrians.

Mental Health Considerations

Fifty-eight percent of respondents classified their current mental health status as either poor or very poor. They displayed symptoms common to severely traumatized people, including anxiety, hopelessness, and depression. LGBT refugees experience rejection by their families, host community members, other Syrian refugees, and sometimes even other members of the LGBT community. This severe marginalization, compounded by financial insecurity and ongoing security risks, leave many LGBT refugees feeling hopeless and uncertain about their future.

- “I try to laugh and be happy when other people are around, but I just want to die. I don’t see the point of being alive in this situation.”
- “I just dream to go to Europe or America. There is no reason to get out of bed here.”
- “Every minute of every day of every week of every month, I am sad. When will it end?”
- “I don’t think I was born to ever be happy.”

Poor mental health can have an adverse impact on many dimensions of these refugees’ lives. Without adequate support to develop mechanisms to cope with the trauma they have endured, LGBT Syrian refugees have a more difficult time making decisions, taking care of themselves, engaging with loved ones, and managing daily stressors. Refugees with poor mental health and low self-esteem are also more susceptible to abusive and exploitative situations.

Mental health services can help LGBT refugees restore or maintain emotional well-being during periods of transition and disruption. However, refugees may have misconceptions about mental health services and fear that mental health professionals will try to “change” them or treat their sexual orientation as a mental illness. While some local and international organizations in Lebanon provide basic psychosocial and mental health services to vulnerable refugees, the providers surveyed for this study acknowledged they have limited capacity to address the unique mental health needs of LGBT refugees.

Sources of Support

In general, most LGBT refugees interviewed for this study cited negative relationships with their family members. Most respondents were rejected by loved ones when they disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity, and significant research has proven that those who face the trauma of rejection and abuse from close relatives frequently have greater difficulty responding to and managing other stress in their lives. The loss of familial support also has economic consequences for LGBT refugees, many of whom are forced to make ends meet and secure safe accommodations entirely alone.

Eliminating non-responses, approximately two-thirds of those LGBT Syrian refugees interviewed do not feel comfortable interacting with the Lebanese host community. In interviews and focus groups, LGBT Syrian refugees explained that they often feel “shunned” by Lebanese community members, including those who identify as LGBT. While most Syrian refugees, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, have experienced discrimination from Lebanese host community members, LGBT refugees also experience discrimination and persecution from other Syrians.

The research team conducted focus group discussions with straight-identifying Syrian refugees, whose attitudes towards LGBT individuals varied slightly but were predominantly hostile. Select responses include:

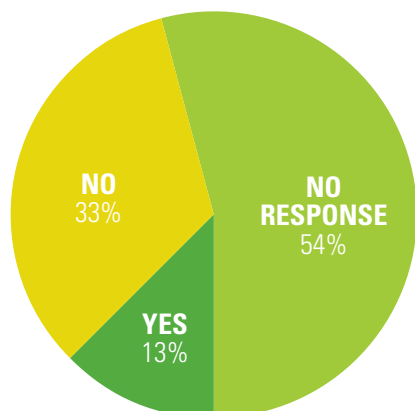
- “Before the conflict, Syria was a pure and good place to live. We didn’t have anything like homosexuality before these problems started.”
- “All gays take money for sex. And they drink and use drugs too.”
- “They are not normal because they wear tight clothes and like to always be in western fashions.”
- “All gays should be killed. They are poisonous and have no place in society.”

Many in the focus group cited the social upheaval caused by the conflict as well as Lebanon's liberal society as the main factors contributing to the "emergence" of same-sex sexuality among Syrian refugees. Some acknowledged there were LGBT individuals in Syria prior to the conflict, but argued that it has become more "problematic" now that LGBT Syrian refugees are "showing off" their identity and practices. Many of the focus group members consider same-sex sexuality a western import and conflate same-sex sexuality with western values – a factor which seems to aggravate hostility against LGBT individuals.

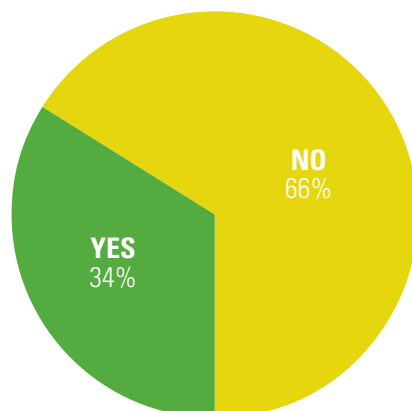
In Lebanon, there are several NGOs dedicated to advancing the rights of the LGBT community, though most of these organizations focus exclusively on policy and advocacy work and do not have the resources or mandate to provide direct services or facilitate the kind of support networks that refugees so desperately need. The few LGBT Syrian refugees who have been able to access services do so via targeted referrals by such organizations in the absence of adequate, widespread outreach.

Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that NGOs should develop programs tailored to the specific needs of LGBT refugees. While LGBT refugees are in need of the same kinds of assistance as other refugees, they are also dealing with a set of unique challenges that require a specialized response. Conscious of security concerns and ubiquitous discrimination, LGBT Syrians are unlikely to seek out mainstream services in Lebanon unless they are assured that the provider is supportive of and welcoming to LGBT individuals.

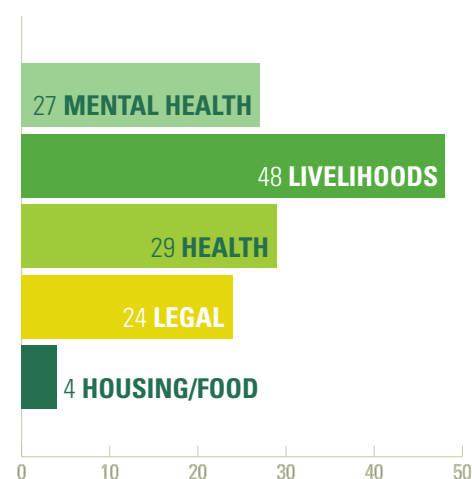
Do you feel comfortable interacting with the Lebanese host community?



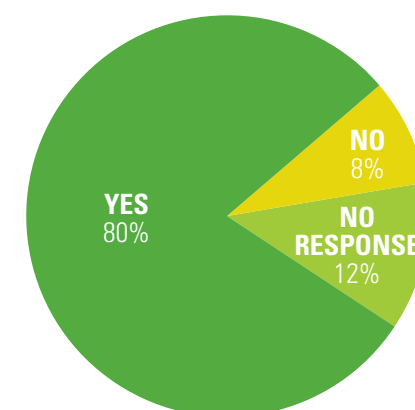
Do you feel that LGBT organizations have addressed your specific needs?



Which services are most needed?



Do you feel that service providers (both international and national) should develop LGBT-specific programs?





Analysis and Discussion

This study identified several overarching trends and experiences that increase LGBT Syrians' vulnerability while they are living as refugees in Lebanon.

Double Discrimination

As illustrated throughout this study, LGBT refugees face compounded discrimination, both as Syrians and as sexual minorities. In focus groups with Lebanese citizens, Syrians (regardless of education level or work experience) were generally considered unskilled workers and were believed to have little education and no social status. Since Syrians began flooding en masse to Lebanon in recent years as a result of the conflict at home, these negative perceptions have worsened and become more widespread. Lebanese often blame Syrian refugees for deteriorating economic conditions and even associate them with a rise in criminality. This has led to increased rates of both subtle and overt discrimination against Syrians throughout the country.

LGBT Syrian refugees are further discriminated against because of their gender nonconforming appearances and perceptions of or stereotypes about their behaviors. Refugees in Lebanon already have a difficult time obtaining housing, employment, and other services, and this becomes even more challenging when working against deeply-entrenched homophobia and transphobia. LGBT Syrian refugees also continue to face significant security challenges when in Lebanon but are often reluctant to approach authorities for protection.

Limited Support Networks

Most LGBT refugees in this study faced some form of marginalization—usually because of treatment by family, friends, and other community members. In traditional Syrian refugee families in Lebanon, even those that are impoverished, individuals often find some form of financial and emotional support to help them overcome the myriad challenges they face while displaced. Most LGBT Syrians have been forced out of those familial structures and have lost access to these vital resources and support networks. While many have demonstrated an impressive level of resilience in the face of these challenges, for most, the barriers to safety and survival are significant and take a physical and emotional toll on the individual.

Mental Health Needs

In addition to the typical levels of stress and trauma associated with forced migration and threats or incidents of persecution, LGBT refugees endure additional stressors related to bias-motivated discrimination, rejection, and marginalization. Individuals living with this level of traumatic stress often find it difficult to effectively make decisions, carry out daily activities, and function as productive members of society. Many LGBT Syrians struggle to rationally respond to challenges, which makes them more susceptible to exploitation, drug use, and acts of violence. Unfortunately, most LGBT Syrians in Lebanon do not have access to the tailored, confidential mental health services that they need.

Lack of LGBT Sensitive Programming

Currently, the refugee response is oriented toward the needs of heterosexuals and utilizes a family-oriented framework to inform program planning and resource allocation. In the same way that programming can lack gender sensitivity, Syrian refugee humanitarian response initiatives overwhelmingly seem to lack LGBT sensitivity.

- **Selection Criteria:** Selection criteria for refugee eligibility for services are usually based on the size of the household, with priority given to large, vulnerable families and female-headed households. Because most LGBT refugees live on their own—either out of choice or necessity—they are often counted as single adults who are not considered a priority.
- **Services:** Services provided to refugees on the whole are rarely tailored to meet the specific needs of LGBT refugees. Psychosocial programs often employ social workers and/or psychologists who are not specifically trained in mental health for LGBT persons. There is also a notable lack of programming designed to build and strengthen social networks and communities among LGBT refugees.
- **Needs and Participation:** To the research team's knowledge, this study is the first organized, meaningful attempt to understand the nuanced needs of LGBT Syrian refugees. Humanitarian assistance programming thus far has not incorporated LGBT refugees' perspectives into initial needs assessments and project design, a factor which has limited the relevance and impact of current initiatives.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** The research team did not find any instances where LGBT refugees were disaggregated within monitoring, evaluation, or reporting mechanisms. Furthermore, no NGOs were found to be using LGBT-specific indicators. This further limits the visibility of LGBT refugee issues within reports for major donors, and in the project management process overall.

Violence and Lack of Recourse

LGBT refugees face different forms of violence during all stages of the refugee process. In many contexts, when conflict erupts and violence becomes more widespread, LGBT individuals are often among the first individuals targeted. This is often a determining factor in their decision to leave their country of origin, as was demonstrated in this study. When they arrive in a country of transit or destination, they often continue to experience violence in different forms. In the Middle Eastern context, where same-sex sexual acts are illegal and socially rejected, LGBT individuals have little recourse when seeking assistance and protection from law enforcement even when they are the victims of horrific crimes and severe human rights violations. As this study has shown, LGBT Syrians face ongoing threats and acts of violence from a number of different actors, months and years into their stay in Lebanon.

The Role of NGOs

Several of the NGO staff members who were interviewed demonstrated a willingness to help address the needs of LGBT Syrians, but also acknowledged that they lack the expertise to do so effectively. On the whole, NGO staff did not display the discriminatory attitudes more prevalent in wider Lebanese society, which is encouraging. All NGO staff interviewed for this study expressed a willingness and enthusiasm to participate in trainings and to adapt their programming wherever possible to accommodate the specific vulnerabilities, needs, and concerns of LGBT refugees. If donors and the international community were committed to providing such training and funding such initiatives, it is clear that local NGOs would be willing to take on this mandate.

The Role of UNHCR

UNHCR has a critical role to play in responding to the needs of and providing adequate protections for LGBT refugees. It has taken some steps to encourage its implementing partners to create or scale-up programming for this vulnerable refugee population. UNHCR has accomplished this through trainings and other programmatic outreach.

In the course of conducting this study, however, the researchers also uncovered a small number of incidents which are of concern. Several LGBT refugees told stories of UNHCR employees exhibiting discriminatory behavior against them. These allegations reinforce the importance of training all incoming staff and identifying members of the team who have the skills and sensitivity to appropriately manage LGBT claims. Furthermore, LGBT refugees reported feeling more comfortable working with someone from a geographic region other than the Middle East. Whenever possible, LGBT refugees should have the opportunity to be interviewed by an international staff member from another part of the world.



Recommendations

The recommendations presented here have been derived from the insights and voices of LGBT Syrians themselves, and from a comprehensive analysis of existing services. These recommendations present a framework within which LGBT Syrians can and should receive adequate protection and support to ensure their security and overall well-being.

For NGOs and Service Providers

1. Create a climate of non-discrimination.
 - Ensure that the organization has a non-discriminatory hiring policy and considers LGBT refugees for staff positions;
 - Publicly communicate that a refugee can self-identify as LGBT to staff, that this information will be treated as confidential, and that the individual will be treated with the same level of dignity and respect as other refugees; and
 - Integrate LGBT issues into other programming addressing tolerance, non-discrimination, and peacebuilding.

2. Develop sophisticated, flexible programming and referral mechanisms that meet specific needs.
 - Research and develop tools, assessments, methodologies, programs, and activities specific to and appropriate for LGBT refugees;
 - Adjust selection criteria to include LGBT refugees in a manner which adequately considers their location, barriers to access, and living conditions;
 - Create programs to increase support networks for LGBT refugees through safe spaces, community centers, and social groups;
 - Offer outreach services to LGBT refugees who may not feel safe enough to travel to NGO offices to seek services;
 - Hire LGBT refugees as outreach workers to identify other LGBT refugees and connect them with services, which would be especially helpful when reaching LBT women; and
 - Recognize that lesbians and transgender individuals have unique social, medical, and protection needs and thus ensure that programs avoid being tailored exclusively to the needs of gay men.
3. Promote economic self-sufficiency.
 - For those LGBT Syrians that are well-educated and possess relevant skills, create job placement networks at gay-friendly businesses;
 - For those with fewer skills, focus on quick-impact (i.e. 6-month courses or less) to strengthen key job skills required in an urban setting; and
 - Link skills-building with assistance, cash-for-work, and income generation opportunities.

For Donors

1. Provide dedicated funding for LGBT refugees as a separate and priority sub-population;
2. Require that grantees incorporate policies and procedures to promote the dignity, respect, and rights of LGBT refugees in an appropriate manner, and that they ensure equal access to essential services;
3. Encourage and fund the development of tools and methodologies specifically for LGBT refugees, which may include toolkits that help providers either develop LGBT-specific programming or mainstream services for LGBT refugees into broader programming; and
4. Advocate with the Lebanese government to decriminalize LGBT-related offenses, or as an interim measure, to selectively enforce existing laws in a manner that reduces the risk of arrest of LGBT refugees for offenses related to their sexual orientation, particularly preventing the arrest of individuals on the basis of their orientation or gender identity alone.


For UNHCR

1. Ensure ongoing training for all current and incoming staff on tolerance, non-discrimination, and respect toward LGBT refugees;
2. Immediately investigate and respond to allegations of staff who either refuse to assist LGBT refugees or demonstrate bias or discrimination;
3. Create an effective complaint mechanism so that LGBT refugees can lodge complaints anonymously against adjudication staff for failure to serve them without bias;
4. Ensure that protection officers from outside the region are available, on a case-by-case basis, to adjudicate LGBT refugee status determinations;

5. Expedite resettlement for LGBT refugees to countries where their sexual orientation or gender identity is not subject to legal sanction and is generally accepted. LGBT refugees should never be sent to a country for resettlement that has criminalized same-sex sexuality;
6. Conduct outreach to female LGBT refugees, who are not as likely to self-disclose;
7. Include LGBT refugee issues in national and regional SGBV working groups; and
8. Advocate with the Lebanese government to stop arrests of LGBT refugees for offenses related to their sexual orientation.

For International Actors

1. Ensure that literature, research methodologies, and program analysis regarding SGBV becomes more inclusive of LGBT refugees. Build on efforts to include LGBT individuals as “persons with specific needs” and highlight their plight among other minority and vulnerable populations’ concerns in refugee crises.
2. Expand research on LGBT refugees to develop a deeper understanding of their needs, vulnerabilities, and experiences in a variety of contexts. This will enable the international community to identify and promote cross-cutting approaches that can be utilized in different countries, regions, and types of emergency situations; and
3. Continue to use international forums as a means to decriminalize same-sex relations and to increase inclusion of LGBT-related human rights language in international conventions. In Lebanon specifically, support the repeal of Article 534, which is in conflict with international law and with the Yogyakarta Principles.

A vertical rainbow flag is on the left side of the image. The background is a blurred black and white photograph of a person walking in a park-like setting with trees.

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