



Rainbow pins have been developed and distributed among trained staff to create a welcoming and safe environment. © UNHCR

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# BUILDING CAPACITY FOR PROTECTION OF LGBTI PERSONS OF CONCERN – JORDAN

### Population Group:

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) refugees and asylum-seekers in Jordan.

### Project Objective:

Create conditions to better ensure LGBTI persons of concern have safe, dignified and equitable access to protection and assistance, including by building the knowledge and skills of UNHCR and partner staff.

### Implementing Partners:

UNHCR and its operational partners in the Syria Refugee Response in Jordan.

## 1. Project overview

In 2014, UNHCR Jordan began an initiative to strengthen its capacity to protect and assist lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons of concern. The aim is to ensure that all five field and camp offices in the country become safe and welcoming spaces for LGBTI persons. Despite a challenging protection environment and cultural sensitivities that adversely affect LGBTI refugees and asylum-seekers, the UNHCR Jordan initiative has significantly increased the protection of LGBTI persons of concern.

LGBTI focal persons are now in place in all UNHCR Jordan offices, referral pathways have been established and UNHCR and partner staff in these offices are trained and equipped to interview LGBTI persons in a respectful manner and to provide them with counselling and referrals to services that enhance their protection and access to solutions.

## 2. Context and needs

In mid-2016, Jordan was host to 721,369 refugees and asylum-seekers, more than 90 per cent of whom are Syrians who were forced to flee the armed conflict in their country.<sup>1</sup> Jordan also hosts 2,117,361 registered Palestinian refugees who are provided protection and assistance by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine (UNRWA).<sup>2</sup>

LGBTI refugees and asylum-seekers face many challenges in Jordan. While the legal environment is relatively tolerant, LGBTI refugees and asylum-seekers face protection risks and discrimination from persons in positions of authority, family members and community members. Key protection risks include violence, harassment, extortion and segregation; rejection by families and communities of origin; hiring discrimination and abuse in the workplace; and the hostility of landlords and neighbours. LGBTI persons of concern also have difficulties in gaining access to health care, whether mental and psychosocial support, treatment for sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS or hormone therapy for transgender persons.<sup>3</sup> Another obstacle is the perception among some LGBTI persons that UNHCR and partner staff may also hold discriminatory views.

Though UNHCR Jordan has promoted protection and access to solutions for Iraqi LGBTI asylum-seekers and refugees since the beginning of the Iraq crisis more than a decade ago, in 2013 the operation identified that the protection of LGBTI persons of concern required strengthening. Encouraged and guided by UNHCR's [Need to Know Guidance: Working with LGBTI Persons in Forced Displacement](#) of 2011 and the UNHCR [Guidelines on International Protection #9](#) on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) of 2012, UNHCR Jordan made a commitment to improving protection and assistance responses for LGBTI persons.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Process and activities

In collaboration with the international Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration (ORAM), UNHCR Jordan organized a workshop on LGBTI issues in November 2013 that included an awareness-raising and training component for an initial core team of UNHCR staff. The workshop also included mapping and needs assessment exercises that helped lay the foundation for a strategy for system strengthening and capacity building to improve protection for LGBTI persons of concern.

The strategy incorporated the lessons that UNHCR Jordan had learned as it responded to individual LGBTI cases over the years, when persons of concern were initially interviewed by UNHCR Protection and often subsequently matched with in-house and implementing partner case workers. This earlier experience had allowed the operation to develop institutional knowledge on LGBTI experiences, risks and needs in the countries of origin and asylum. This knowledge, together with feedback received from LGBTI asylum-seekers and refugees, was incorporated into the operation's approach.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR. [Population Statistics – Midyear 2016 Stats](#).

<sup>2</sup> UNRWA. [Where we work: Jordan](#).

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Greenwood and Alex Randall, [Treading Softly: Responding to LGBTI Syrian Refugees in Jordan](#) (Washington DC: George Washington University, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, [Need to Know Guidance: Working with LGBTI Persons in Forced Displacement](#) (2011); UNHCR, [Guidelines on International Protection #9](#) (2012).

UNHCR Jordan also benefitted from the important perspectives of national LGBTI advocates and community members. Initial contact with advocates allowed the operation to connect with LGBTI community members in Jordan, who have provided encouragement and expert advice concerning available resources, community views, activities to be conducted and the overall content of the plan. UNHCR Jordan also employed a respected community member as consultant/trainer on LGBTI awareness and protection.

The strategy, based on the understanding that change must start within UNHCR, has two pillars: 1) training designed to strengthen LGBTI awareness among UNHCR staff and partners; and 2) improved protection responses to LGBTI persons of concern. It is not geared toward establishing LGBTI protection as a stand-alone intervention; rather, the aim is to mainstream LGBTI protection within the agency's overall work.

With the objective of creating a receptive environment for LGBTI persons at UNHCR's offices in Jordan and improving protection responses in LGBTI cases, the plan included the following activities:

- Training for UNHCR and partner staff on working with LGBTI persons in forced displacement.
- Developing an in-house network of staff trained to respond appropriately to LGBTI persons' protection risks and needs.
- Creating welcoming environments in UNHCR offices, including visibility through posters and pins, providing assurances of confidentiality, use of appropriate terminology and engaging in respectful behaviour and body language.
- Establishing a referral system for LGBTI persons of concern.
- Inclusion of the needs, risks and priorities LGBTI asylum-seekers and refugees in standard operating procedures and practices, including criteria for prioritization as urgent/emergency cases for protection interviews, refugee status determination, and resettlement, as well as prioritization for other services and assistance, including financial assistance.

Following the initial workshop and finalization of the LGBTI protection strategy, an internal network of 70 LGBTI-sensitized UNHCR staff was created. These frontline staff were recruited from protection, registration, community services and other units from each of the five UNHCR offices in Jordan. All have undergone LGBTI awareness raising and training in interviewing techniques and serve as entry points for LGBTI persons of concern who approach these offices. Every staff member in the in-house LGBTI protection network wears the rainbow button that signals to LGBTI persons of concern that they can safely approach that staff member.

To signal safe spaces and increase identification, UNHCR Jordan and its partners use rainbow colours as an LGBTI symbol. These rainbow colours appear on buttons as well as posters with the phrase, "You are safe here", in Arabic and English.

In addition, UNHCR Jordan has conducted 20 half-day training sessions on "Working with LGBTI Persons in Forced Displacement" in both English and Arabic. Training participants included 435 humanitarian staff members (230 women and 205 men) representing 24 organizations, including United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations. The training focuses on:

- The core values of UNHCR, including the Code of Conduct; the Policy on Discrimination, Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority; and the Age, Gender and Diversity Policy.
- Basic information on gender, sex and sexuality.
- Correct LGBTI terminology in Arabic and English.
- Specific protection risks faced by LGBTI persons of concern.
- The international legal framework for LGBTI rights.

As follow-up to the LGBTI awareness training, four half-day training sessions on “Interviewing LGBTI Asylum-seekers and Refugees” were held in 2016 with 77 staff from UNHCR, UN agencies and partners. UNHCR Jordan also conducted a LGBTI protection training-of-trainers for several UNHCR partners, including UN agencies and NGOs.

UNHCR Jordan and partners also undertake targeted LGBTI protection responses as a component of its mandated protection role. They have established a referral system monitored by UNHCR protection officers who supervise in-house and implementing-partner case workers. The case workers maintain contact with the agencies involved in the referral system, besides working directly with LGBTI persons of concern.

The types of service LGBTI persons need varies from case to case, but include legal counselling and services, monthly financial assistance, urgent cash assistance, mental health and psychosocial support, health care (in cases of rape this includes post exposure preventive (PEP) kits, hepatitis vaccinations and free, anonymous HIV and other sexually transmitted infection testing) and coordination with the Family Protection Department of the Public Security Directorate in response to violence or other crimes.

#### **4. Partners and resources**

UNHCR implements the plan and provides training to its own staff and those of its operational partners in the context of the Syria Refugee Response in Jordan. The sensitivity of the issue in Jordan requires UNHCR to adhere strictly to its mandate-supported objectives and to target those organizations that would most clearly benefit from improvement in their protection response to LGBTI persons of concern.

Three facilitators were responsible for delivering the LGBTI-related training. Two were UNHCR protection staff with LGBTI and training experience, and one was an external, highly-qualified Jordanian trainer on LGBTI issues respected by the Jordanian LGBTI community. Office premises were used for all the training, both to keep costs down and to present the issue as a low-key, technical skills-development process rather than a public event that might have attracted unwanted attention.

The UNHCR LGBTI focal points in field offices dedicate approximately ten per cent of their time to this issue, along with two full-time staff in Amman who allocate at least twenty per cent of their time.

#### **5. Participation and accountability**

Participation by LGBTI persons of concern can be strengthened going forward. The LGBTI protection strategy and activities has largely relied on existing guidance and standards pertaining to reception, training and protection response, rather than on providing material services or a new protection mechanism for LGBTI persons of concern. UNHCR efforts have focused on ensuring that the existing systems and services of UNHCR and partners were accessible to LGBTI persons of concern, and the views of LGBTI community members have been gathered individually to inform further improvement.

LGBTI persons of concern can contact UNHCR’s LGBTI focal points to provide direct feedback or make complaints, given that the focal points’ engagement is fairly intensive and bound by strict confidentiality. They can also submit complaints or provide other feedback through the complaint boxes in all registration areas, including in camps. In addition, a code of conduct was created for all security field officers and security guards in the camps in agreement and collaboration with the companies managing them.

#### **Age, Gender and Diversity Approach**

All LGBTI persons of concerns are included in the LGBTI protection plan, regardless of age, SOGI, or any other form of diversity.

## 6. Results

- There was an increase in the number of LGBTI individuals provided with safe and dignified access to services. Participants from partner organizations improved their skills and capacity to identify and refer LGBTI cases to UNHCR and other service providers. In several cases, partner staff approached UNHCR immediately after the training to refer cases that, due to the training, they had come to recognize as in need of protection assistance.
- The UNHCR partner organizations that participated in the training reported to UNHCR that by increasing their awareness of LGBTI protection risks and responses they were able to reach out to more LGBTI persons and create a more welcoming environment for them.
- Following the training, UNHCR partners reported that they were able to sensitize other organizations regarding the protection needs of LGBTI persons of concern.
- Partner organizations also reported that the training on LGBTI interviewing techniques was of practical use as it enabled them to reach out and address LGBTI protection needs and concerns more effectively.
- The rainbow button with the text “Safety” in Arabic has become so widespread among LGBTI focal points and advocates that the vast majority of LGBTI persons of concern are familiar with it – showing it is an effective way to signal a safe environment.

### Sustainability

The LGBTI protection strategy has the potential to be sustainable as it relies almost entirely on human resources and capacity (knowledge and skills) within UNHCR and among its partners, with resources that have been predominantly mobilized internally.

There is continuing interest among UNHCR Jordan staff and partners in expanding the LGBTI training programme to focus on specific areas such as interviewing techniques, credibility issues and health, among others.

## 7. Lessons learned

Initiatives that aim to increase the protection of LGBTI persons of concern in contexts such as Jordan can be particularly challenging. Lessons learned from the experience are:

- LGBTI identity can be a difficult concept to discuss and understand in some contexts. Although most participants responded favourably to the training sessions, some challenged the legitimacy of LGBTI identity on religious grounds. Facilitators developed strategies and techniques to address these concerns. For example, they avoided cultural debate by diverting discussion away from cultural and religious perspectives and instead promoted discussion around LGBTI identity from the perspective of service delivery. Facilitators frequently reiterated that they were “not promoting homosexuality” but “doing humanitarian work”. This helped foster a better environment during the training.
- Case studies of violence by persons in positions of authority, including sexual violence, perpetrated against LGBTI persons of concern were also presented during the training. Discussing the nature and role of authority figures in perpetrating violence against LGBTI persons proved challenging. Although few participants denied the reality of authority figures committing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against LGBTI persons of concern, the facilitators avoided the potential for conflict by highlighting case studies of a more global or regional nature, rather than referring to specific countries.

## Potential Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Risk	Mitigation
LGBTI persons, especially transgender people, face a high risk of violence, including sexual assault.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criteria for the prioritization of LGBTI protection cases have been established, allowing such cases to be given precedence over others to ensure that appropriate information is obtained and actions taken.</li> <li>• LGBTI focal points are available to provide same-day or next-day interviews to address protection needs.</li> <li>• Refugee status determination and other protection interventions for LGBTI persons of concern is prioritized.</li> </ul>
An LGBTI person's identity could be disclosed to a third party – constituting a serious protection risk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The importance of the right to confidentiality is emphasized in all training and procedures.</li> <li>• References to LGBTI status are not recorded in broadly-accessible proGres (UNHCR's registration database) fields.</li> <li>• SGBV reports are maintained separately from the main case file, and are accessible only to staff with the need to know.</li> </ul>

## 8. Recommendations

This initiative could be scaled up to enable the engagement of more UNHCR and partner staff, especially in training sessions. However, when replicating this project, it is important to keep in mind the need to:

- First consult with LGBTI persons of concern and national LGBTI organizations and associations to assess needs, risks, capacities and proposed solutions jointly.
- Understand the cultural, social and legal contexts as they pertain to LGBTI identity, especially when designing and facilitating training on LGBTI protection and assistance.
- Use correct terminology in the national language in order to clarify misconceptions around LGBTI identity as a result of language bias and increase sensitivity and awareness on LGBTI issues.
- Avoid distributing printed materials to training participants on topics related to LGBTI persons of concern in contexts where possessing this literature could pose risks to the individual. Printed materials could put organizations and individuals at risk, as they could be interpreted as promoting homosexuality.
- Take specific measures to address the protection needs and risks faced by transgender persons, especially transgender women. The LGBTI population is not a homogenous group. Within this population, transgender persons often face heightened protection risks, including sexual assault, harassment and other forms of transphobic violence. Specific measures may also be needed to increase lesbian women's access to protection and assistance.
- Emphasize scientific research that substantiates and normalizes diversity of sex, SOGI and that disputes stigmatizing views, and focus on the topic from the perspective of UNHCR' policy on everyone's equal right to protection, assistance and solutions and what this means for service delivery.

## 9. More information

UNHCR Jordan: [joram@unhcr.org](mailto:joram@unhcr.org)

UNHCR, [Need to Know Guidance: Working with LGBTI Persons in Forced Displacement](#) (2011).

UNHCR, [Guidelines on International Protection #9](#) (2012).

UNHCR, [Protecting Persons with Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities – A Global Report on UNHCR's Efforts to Protect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Asylum-Seekers and Refugees](#) (2015).

UNHCR and IOM, [Training Package on the Protection of LGBTI Persons in Forced Displacement](#) (2015).

MOSAIC, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Toolkit (2016), in [Arabic](#) (soon to be released in English).

### International Organizations

Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration (ORAM): <http://oramrefugee.org/>

International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA): <http://ilga.org/>

Out Right Action International: <https://www.outrightinternational.org/>