



Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) youth participate in a group team-building exercise during the monthly meeting of the LGBTI Youth Group in Lebanon. © UNHCR/ Rita-Flora Kevorkian / 2016

3

LGBTI YOUTH GROUP – LEBANON

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| Population Group: Refugee and Lebanese LGBTI youth. | Project Objective: Support refugee and Lebanese LGBTI persons to create their own network for peer-to-peer support, building life skills and greater access to protection, assistance and solutions. | Implementing Partners: MENA Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration and Capacity Building (MOSAIC) and other national and international non-governmental organizations. |
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1. Project overview

In 2015, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) refugee youth, with the support of UNHCR and other partners, established an innovative LGBTI Youth Group in Lebanon. It was created to provide peer-to-peer support, a safe space for open discussion, life skills development activities and increased access to protection, assistance and services for LGBTI Syrian refugees. The group is led by LGBTI refugee youth, with the 15 initial members ranging in age from 19 to 29. The group has expanded to 35 members with UNHCR Lebanon's support, including through accessing financial support in 2015 from the Global Youth Initiative Fund and in 2016 from the Multi-Donor Trust Fund for UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict. The group is now able to conduct more activities and increase its support for LGBTI refugees of all ages and nationalities, as well as Lebanese LGBTI persons.

2. Context and needs

In mid-2016, Lebanon was host to 1,049,364 refugees and asylum-seekers, 98 per cent of whom are Syrians who were forced to flee the armed conflict in their country.¹ Lebanon also hosts 449,957 registered Palestinian refugees who receive protection and assistance from the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine (UNRWA).² These numbers make Lebanon the country with the greatest number of refugees per capita in the world.³ The refugee population also includes individuals from Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and some 30 other countries.⁴ The exponential increase in the number of refugees since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 has brought with it many protection challenges in an increasingly narrow protection space and a context classified as a protracted emergency.

In 2015, a focus group discussion with LGBTI Syrian and Iraqi refugee youth was conducted by UNHCR Lebanon and a national non-governmental organization (NGO). In 2016, as part of the operation's participatory needs assessment, additional focus group discussions were carried out with LGBTI refugees of different nationalities. These assessments determined that LGBTI refugees face particularly high protection risks, including disproportionate levels of violence, exploitation and abuse. The assessments also exposed the particular difficulties faced by LGBTI refugees in finding decent housing and obtaining and keeping a job, due to discrimination. As a consequence, LGBTI refugees suffer from extreme isolation and face difficulties in building protective social networks with other refugees and integrating into their host community.

Not only do LGBTI refugees in Lebanon face specific challenges to integration, they also experience sexual harassment, assault and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Many LGBTI refugees have been subjected to severe physical violence, necessitating hospitalization or surgery in some cases. Recurrent sexual violence, including rape, is not uncommon. Transgender refugees face disproportionately high rates of sexual violence and sexual exploitation. LGBTI refugees are often fearful of reporting incidents of violence – including physical and sexual assault – to the authorities for fear of repercussions, including possible additional violence.

3. Process and activities

In order to undertake the needs assessment and then to establish LGBTI Youth Group, UNHCR Lebanon reached out to LGBTI refugees who had previously been in contact with UNHCR and NGO partners. It was these refugee youth who took the initiative to establish the LGBTI Youth Group.

Two LGBTI refugees were then recruited as volunteers in order to better link LGBTI communities with UNHCR and NGO partners. In 2016, in order to support their work with LGBTI persons of concern, UNHCR Lebanon entered into formal partnerships with an international humanitarian NGO, a national case management NGO and a specialized national LGBTI organization focused on support and advocacy. In 2015 the LGBTI Youth Group applied for and succeeded in securing a one-year grant through UNHCR's Global Youth Initiative fund.

In 2016, a second LGBTI Support Group was created in another geographical area in Lebanon to expand the accessibility of LGBTI refugees to these protection spaces. Like the youth group, this one consists of refugees of all ages, nationalities and sexual orientations and gender identities, including Syrians and Lebanese. Both groups are organized and driven by their members.

¹ UNHCR, [Population Statistics – Midyear 2016 Stats](#).

² UNRWA, [Where we work: Lebanon](#).

³ UNHCR, [Mid-Year Trends 2016](#); UNHCR, [Refugees from Syria: Lebanon](#) (Geneva: UNHCR, 2015).

⁴ UNHCR, [Population Statistics – Midyear 2016 Stats](#).

The LGBTI Groups have an official meeting once a month, but also sustain a peer-to-peer support network through informal meetings in places where members feel safe and comfortable.

LGBTI Youth Group activities include:

- **Regular meetings and updates:** Monthly discussions among members to share updated information on the situation in their communities, including challenges faced and opportunities identified.
- **Information sessions:** Regular sessions are held with group members, during which information is provided on available services. During these sessions, group members can share frustrations and openly discuss and seek clarification on questions and challenges they face in accessing services.
- **Training:** NGOs provide training and training-of-trainers to build group members' capacities and awareness in areas of interest to them, such as legal assistance, health services and first aid. There is also a capacity building component on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) delivered in coordination with a national NGO specialized in working with LGBTI persons.
- **Case management:** Social workers with a national NGO provide psychological and emotional support, assistance with accommodation, financial support including emergency cash assistance, medical and legal services, and resettlement referrals to UNHCR for cases deemed at heightened risk or necessitating specific protection measures.
- **Life skills activities/vocational training:** Different activities, as prioritized by the group, are offered by NGOs including courses in hairdressing, make-up, cooking, the English language, film-making, handicrafts and photography.
- **Psychosocial support activities:** Social workers provide art therapy via music, dance and drama.
- **On-the-job coaching activities:** Group members are given access to an internship programme for SGBV survivors in order to build their skills in specific areas and to be able to learn in a safe environment while developing social networks and ultimately regain self-confidence.

Internal capacity building initiatives were also implemented by UNHCR and NGO partners as well as with key service providers in order to improve their ability to protect and assist LGBTI refugees, including:

- **Training:** UNHCR, with the support of a national NGO working on LGBTI issues, conducted training-of-trainers sessions on case management for relevant actors, among them nine social workers (six women and three men) in 2015. In 2016, a six-month training programme (one session per month) for case management supervisors of local and international NGOs was conducted on SOGI to improve their response when working with LGBTI persons of concern.
- **Capacity building:** Awareness-raising and training activities were undertaken with UNHCR and partner NGO guards, registration and reception staff, non-specialized SGBV actors, outreach volunteers and others to increase their understanding of SOGI, and how to implement their obligation to ensure that LGBTI persons of concern are not discriminated against and are provided with safe spaces. The rainbow "Safety" pins developed at UNHCR headquarters were shared with UNHCR Lebanon frontline staff and a password given to LGBTI persons to use when approaching the UNHCR Reception Centre.

4. Partners and resources

With the technical and financial support of UNHCR and NGO partners, the LGBTI Youth Group members themselves have assumed the bulk of the responsibility for implementing this project. Trained social workers, caseworkers and outreach staff from the NGOs support the work of the LGBTI Youth and Support Groups.

Outreach volunteers with previous volunteer, academic or work experience in the fields of social work, law, or psychology; motivation; availability; and a connection to, and support from, the LGBTI community; have been recruited to offer additional support to LGBTI refugees. This entails identification and referral of high-risk cases and support in conducting community-based initiatives.

The LGBTI Youth Group operated on a budget supported for one year by the UNHCR Global Youth Initiative Fund. Both the LGBTI Youth and Support Groups have also secured funding from UNHCR Lebanon and the Multi-Donor Trust Fund for UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict.

5. Participation and accountability

The LGBTI Youth Group is independent and organized and led by its members, so it is highly participatory. Members jointly decide how the group will be run and what activities to prioritize. Several communication, feedback and complaints mechanisms have been established, such as:

- **Focus group discussions:** UNHCR and partner NGOs conduct focus group discussions with LGBTI group members, providing the space to discuss activities and receive feedback and suggestions.
- **Evaluations:** After each activity a participatory evaluation is conducted, while upcoming activities are adjusted based on the feedback received.
- **Complaint boxes:** Every community centre has a complaint box where group members can deposit their feedback anonymously. Although feedback generally has been positive, the initiative has seen some changes based on concerns raised through this box as well as directly with UNHCR and NGO staff.
- **Emergency hotline:** An emergency hotline has been established for LGBTI persons. One of the NGO partners offers a rescue option, including the provision of short-term accommodation, until the national case management NGO and UNHCR can develop and execute a longer-term plan.

Age, Gender and Diversity Approach

The LGBTI Groups now include members of all ages, sexual orientations and gender identities, and nationalities – bringing together asylum-seekers, refugees and host community members.

6. Results

“Because of my identity as a transgender person, I find it hard to get a job or maintain a decent living standard. I was exposed to sexual exploitation by an official last year in order to get residency papers renewed. Further, I had serious health problems with my liver at that time but was not able to access health services because I could not afford the fees. Add to that the fact that I was late paying my rent and the landlord threatened to throw me out. As a result, I felt lonely, isolated and powerless to a point where I decided to commit suicide.

*During this difficult time in my life, I accidentally met with someone who introduced me to a member of the LGBTI Youth Group who managed to immediately connect me to the group. After that, some of the group members referred me to specific institutions where I managed to receive free medical care for my serious health situation. The group has also helped out with temporary accommodation. I was also invited to attend the art therapy activities which comprised singing and dancing, which was of great help to me in my healing process. **Now I am an active member of the group which has become my home, my family and my first line of support.***

LGBTI Youth Group Member

During a focus group discussion held as part of documenting this field practice, LGBTI Youth Group members noted that, although they faced many challenges in their home country, the risks in the host country are exacerbated due to the loss of the social support networks they had at home. The LGBTI Youth Group has managed to create a safe and inclusive environment and become, in their words, “a second home”. Through the group, they have become better informed of the services available to them, benefit from much needed peer support and are able to start participating in community life. The group has created a sense of belonging and empowerment, inspiring hope and supporting greater self-reliance.

Focus groups with LGBTI refugees in 2016 as part of UNHCR Lebanon’s participatory needs assessment, individual interviews with LGBTI refugees and the monthly meetings with the LGBTI Youth Group indicate that:

- Case workers have strengthened their skills and developed the attitudes necessary for undertaking case management with LGBTI refugees. Guards at UNHCR and partners centres have shown a positive change of attitude to assisting LGBTI refugees. UNHCR reception staff have improved their ability to identify the needs of LGBTI refugees and refer them to specialized services.
- The skills training provided to LGBTI group members has enabled some LGBTI refugees to access livelihood opportunities.
- LGBTI youth sold their work at a crafts exhibition held with the support of several NGOs.
- LGBTI persons from different refugee communities have been brought together, leading to increased understanding of their different backgrounds and situations they faced in their countries of origin and increased provision of peer-to-peer support and assistance.
- LGBTI rights advocacy tools have been developed. After participating in a film-making workshop, LGBTI Youth Group members wrote and acted in a documentary titled, *My Refugee Story*, directed and filmed by 1morecup media organization and facilitated by MOSAIC.
- The involvement of LGBTI Youth Group members in UNHCR Lebanon’s annual participatory assessments has led to changes in programmes based on their concerns and suggestions.
- UNHCR has built new, productive partnerships with international and national NGOs working on LGBTI rights, opening the doors to long-term collaboration.

Sustainability

The LGBTI Youth Group membership has expanded over the past year and managed to secure funds through UNHCR's Global Youth Initiative Fund, UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict and UNHCR Lebanon.

As the group is run by its member, who volunteer their time and expertise, with support from national NGOs, it is quite sustainable.

7. Lessons learned

Organizing support and services for refugee and host community LGBTI persons is challenging in Lebanon. For instance, it is difficult to reach out to LGBTI persons living outside urban centres. These difficulties are exacerbated by the precarious legal context faced by LGBTI refugees in the country. The interpretation of article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which states that “any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature is punishable by up to one year in prison” is a major area of concern that affects the protection of LGBTI persons of concern.⁵ It hampers outreach by humanitarian organizations and makes it difficult to gain the trust of LGBTI persons. As such, strict confidentiality procedures need to be established. Moreover, some national NGOs have expressed concerns that providing services and support to LGBTI persons could jeopardize their operations, or lead to the stigmatization of their staff.

Potential Risks and Mitigation Strategies

| Risk | Mitigation |
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| <p>LGBTI Youth Group members stated four risks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Low participation of refugees.• Lack of legal documentation limits freedom of movement.• Risk of detention and deportation.• Discrimination and related security concerns during group meetings and activities. | <p>Key measures have helped mitigate these risks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The LGBTI Youth Group only undertakes activities that are suggested by group members.• Meetings and activities are held in a safe location that is easily and safely accessible to those living in different parts of the city.• Safe transportation to activities and meetings is ensured for all members of the group.• Advocacy is conducted by UNHCR in Lebanon on the need for refugees to obtain legal documentation and other refugee rights. |

⁵ Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code prohibits “sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature” which, although a Jdeideh court rejected its application to homosexuality in January 2014 is, nonetheless, inconsistently applied by law enforcement agencies to LGBTI persons.

8. Recommendations

This initiative has the potential to be scaled up through increases in funding and membership. It can also be adapted to other contexts and replicated, but it is important to keep in mind the following recommendations:

- Map national legal frameworks on SOGI issues and the extent to which domestic law and policy may pose possible risks of discrimination, penalization or prosecution of persons who are LGBTI. Develop a strategy to manage and mitigate risks arising in this context, especially when developing LGBTI-specific programming that may increase the visibility or exposure of LGBTI persons.
- Undertake a mapping exercise, before initiating specific activities, to identify existing local organizations working with LGBTI persons as well as the key actors to be engaged in the project. It is essential to establish a network and strong alliances at all levels due to the potential sensitivities and challenges related to working with LGBTI persons.
- Reach out to diverse LGBTI asylum-seekers and refugees through a safe participatory assessment that identifies existing networks and determines specific needs, priorities and capacities. These should form the basis for an initiative that is led by LGBTI persons of concern, with support from UNHCR and partner NGOs.
- Bring together LGBTI members from the host community and diverse refugee communities in a group forum.
- Collaborate with local grassroots LGBTI organizations that have existing experience working in the specific cultural context.
- Pilot the project first, as a small-scale initiative, carefully designing the project with the possibility for it to be scaled up later.
- Build the capacity of social workers in case management, including by training and mentoring them to support LGBTI persons of concern without discrimination, meeting their rights and needs, and maintain full confidentiality.
- Provide training to other key services providers, including UNHCR frontline and partner staff and affiliate workforce.
- Ensure the provision of comprehensive services and referral pathways, including health, mental and psychosocial support, housing, financial assistance, vocational training and education, legal assistance and other services in a “one-stop shop”.
- Prioritize mental health and psychosocial services and livelihoods support, including internships and vocational training, as they are both vital to the protection of LGBTI persons of concern.
- Develop awareness-raising materials for the broader community that promotes acceptance, respect and non-discrimination for persons with diverse SOGI.
- Continue with the establishment and implementation of relevant UNHCR internal mechanisms to raise awareness on this topic.

9. More information

UNHCR Lebanon: lebbe@unhcr.org

1morecup media organization and MOSAIC, [My Refugee Story](#) (2016).

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).

MOSAIC, Legal Guide about Article 534, in [Arabic](#).

Faysal El Kak, Male Survivors of Sexual Assault: A Manual on Evaluation and Management for General Practitioners (MOSAIC), in [Arabic](#), in [English](#).

National and Regional Organizations

MOSAIC: <https://www.mosaicmena.org/>

ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality: <http://www.abaadmena.org/>

International Organizations

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

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