

LGBT refugee resettlement in the US: emerging best practices

Scott Portman and Daniel Weyl

US refugee resettlement agencies are directing more attention and effort toward assisting LGBT refugees and asylum seekers, and best practices are beginning to emerge.

For more than two decades, the US has recognised persecution due to sexual orientation as grounds for refugee status. Despite this, the number of self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) refugees entering the US remains much smaller than predicted given that the prevalence of same-sex orientation is estimated to be about 3.8% in the population as a whole.¹

In 2011, 81,372 refugees and asylum seekers entered the US, of whom as many as 3,000 may eventually identify as LGBT.² Very few LGBT refugees disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to refugee resettlement agencies, other than the limited number granted refugee status specifically on this basis. Neither UNHCR nor the US government records the number of refugee or asylum cases granted due to persecution for LGBT identity, nor are those so identified tracked through the refugee allocations and resettlement process. The number of LGBT refugees who disclose their status and who are resettled annually on that basis is probably less than 300, and the number of persons granted asylum based on sexual orientation or gender identity is probably less than 500.³

Refugees and asylum seekers who obtain refugee status as a direct result of persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity often resettle alone and do not arrive with families or friends, and may remain segregated from those who share the same country of origin. Many of them fled violence from relatives and community members and consequently have limited, if any, relational ties upon arrival. For some, this isolation is self-imposed but it is still a result of the deep-seated fears they continue to harbour. LGBT refugees' security

concerns are not entirely subjective; many have reported threats of aggression or verbal abuse from other refugees because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Those who are computer literate or who have some English language skills are on average less isolated and more aware of the differences in attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual orientation and gender identity in countries of resettlement than those who lack those skills. They are also typically more likely to disclose and seek services. LGBT refugees without these skills not only experience greater isolation but may also have more difficulty coming to terms with their own sexuality or gender identity, and may define themselves differently from the familiar 'LGBT' categories.

Preferred sites

Controversy remains as to whether LGBT refugees are best resettled to 'preferred sites' or whether all refugee resettlement programmes should develop competencies to resettle this population. LGBT refugees undeniably benefit from resettlement to locations with a positive legal environment, an established LGBT community, and a critical mass of other LGBT refugees. LGBT refugees often migrate from their original resettlement site seeking communities of choice, which is a compelling argument for allocating LGBT refugees to preferred communities initially. Where concentrated populations of LGBT refugees exist, resettlement practitioners also have greater justification for developing the social networks and establishing formal working relationships with LGBT organisations, LGBT-friendly employers, housing providers and other community resources that exponentially improve LGBT refugee integration.

Certain refugee resettlement sites are more experienced at integrating comprehensive services, and are better prepared to make appropriate referrals or to accommodate special medical or mental health needs internally. One model for LGBT refugee resettlement parallels that used for refugees living with HIV in the 1990s, in which specific agencies were equipped to manage the health needs of people living with HIV/AIDS while maintaining rigorous standards of confidentiality.⁴ Resettlement agencies serving LGBT refugees may also be able to incorporate lessons learned from torture treatment programmes, which typically emphasise specialised trauma-informed mental health services, offer services over a longer period of time, and employ a team approach that enables survivors to obtain services without having to retell their story or disclose their identity to multiple providers.⁵

Transgender refugees are best resettled in preferred sites where agencies have prior expertise and pre-existing linkages with LGBT-specific service providers. Transgender refugees face profound difficulties in obtaining specialised medical care, supportive and safe housing, and appropriate employment. Another emerging best practice is to link LGBT refugees with sponsors, either in the LGBT community or among straight allies, who can assist in meeting initial needs and provide the sense of social support that LGBT refugees who are isolated from their own communities require.⁶

Mainstreaming LGBT resettlement

Given the small number of self-identified LGBT refugees and the great number who do not disclose, it is important for all refugee service providers to create a safe and supportive environment and to foster tolerance within the wider community. Mainstreaming involves integrating LGBT-appropriate services within existing practices, based on the knowledge that any refugee may be LGBT and that uniform standards for access, respectful communication and protection need to be provided regardless of whether any refugees disclose information about sexual orientation or gender identity. This mainstreaming of LGBT-appropriate services includes simple steps, such as making

sure that multilingual brochures and posters are displayed on site, displaying a rainbow flag or symbol⁷ to demonstrate openness to conversations about sexual orientation or gender identity, and ensuring that staff members are conscious of the adverse effects of jokes, derisive or inappropriately gendered language, and stereotyping. Mainstreaming includes ensuring that appropriate anti-discrimination and grievance policies exist, and ensuring that these policies are understood by and accessible to programme participants.⁸

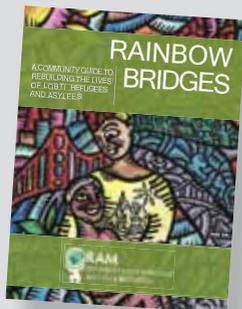
Mainstreaming also extends to communication with refugees within the agency and immigrant communities externally. Practitioners should integrate information on sexual orientation and gender identity within broader conversations on diversity and cultural differences in the US, in order to avoid separating out and stigmatising LGBT refugees. There are two forums in which resettlement agencies have clear opportunities to educate refugees on diverse expressions of sexuality and gender. Cultural orientation – conducted within the first 30 days of arrival – offers a chance to dispel prevalent myths surrounding the LGBT community and promote acceptance. Careful introduction of gender roles, including sexual orientation, into discussions of parenting can mitigate the risk of violence against LGBT or gender non-conforming young people. ESL classes present another opportunity; although ESL instructors may prioritise language acquisition for employment purposes, English classes can also serve as extended cultural adjustment sessions. Staff must be cautious and introduce these topics delicately so as not to shame refugees for their beliefs or appear to be undermining their religious and cultural mores.

Recruiting ‘ally ambassadors’ within the refugee community is a powerful technique to effect positive change. Within each refugee community, one can usually find individuals sympathetic to the plight of LGBT refugees, even among nationalities or cultures which are generally highly averse to conversations about sexual orientation or gender identity. Prime candidates are young adults who, based on their English proficiency and



Rainbow Response

<http://tinyurl.com/HAI-Rainbow-Response>



Rainbow Bridges

<http://tinyurl.com/ORAM-Rainbow-Bridges-2012>



Rainbow Welcome Initiative assessment report

<http://tinyurl.com/HAI-Rainbow-Assessment>



Opening Doors

<http://tinyurl.com/ORAM-Opening-Doors-2012>

access to resources, have assumed leadership roles within their respective communities. These individuals are often more progressive and prone to support LGBT peers and advocate on their behalf if they are targeted or excluded.

Communities of support

By providing additional assistance and by offering emotional and social support, LGBT groups can serve as the community network LGBT refugees urgently need. However, making a referral to the local LGBT group is not sufficient in itself to prevent the continued isolation of LGBT refugees. Refugees have reported their reluctance to join and participate in domestic LGBT groups because of cultural differences and because refugees, as immigrants and as persons of colour, often feel invisible, excluded or unwelcome in Western LGBT spaces. The onus falls on resettlement practitioners to train LGBT groups on the backgrounds and needs of refugees and to devise ways for the LGBT community to offer a welcoming and safe space for refugees to access services and support. Establishing a mentorship programme or hosting social gatherings are just two methods that have proved successful.

While LGBT refugees may greatly benefit from domestic LGBT community support, this cannot rival what LGBT refugees can offer each other. Just as survivors of torture often find it easier to connect to other survivors regardless of nationality or ethnicity, so too do LGBT refugees naturally bond with those whose experiences, hardships and dreams they share. Community is critical to the resettlement process; LGBT refugees are no different from all refugees in that they cannot transition successfully and achieve self-sufficiency without networks of support.

One best practice is for refugee resettlement agencies to develop participant-led social groups comprised of local LGBT refugees and asylum seekers. These groups can organise social outings and help LGBT refugees make friends and explore their new neighbourhoods. These activity groups parallel similar activity groups piloted in torture treatment centres, and address similar needs.⁹

While LGBT refugees' particular needs and recent history of persecution may distance them from their ethnic or national communities, ultimately

efforts must be made to build bridges between LGBT refugees and other immigrants from their countries of origin. With increased support, improved access to services and new opportunities to become part of a community, LGBT refugees will be able to carve out new lives and pursue new possibilities.

Scott Portman SPortman@heartlandalliance.org is Senior Technical Advisor, and Daniel Weyl DWeyl@heartlandalliance.org is Coordinator, Rainbow Welcome Initiative, with Heartland Alliance International. www.heartlandalliance.org Heartland Alliance International's Rainbow Welcome Initiative is a two-year technical assistance programme for US refugee resettlement agencies and torture treatment programmes intended to improve services for LGBT refugees and asylum seekers. www.rainbowwelcome.org

1. Gates, Gary J (2011) *How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?* The Williams Institute, University of California at Los Angeles <http://tinyurl.com/Williams-Inst-Gates-April2011>

2. www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_rfa_fr_2011.pdf
3. The refugee estimates are based on information from Resettlement Service Centers (RSCs) in East Africa, the Middle East and Asia, where the majority of refugees are processed. The asylum seeker estimates are based on the National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC) informal survey of other programmes specialising in LGBT asylum seeker legal representation as well as members of the American Immigration Law Association who handle these cases in private practice.
4. For information on best practices on HIV+ refugee resettlement see www.refugeehealthta.org/webinars/hiv/aids/hiv-webinar-062011/ and www.refugees.org/resources/for-service-providers/hiv-aids.html
5. For a description of an integrated model for torture treatment, see www.heartlandalliance.org/kovler/news/caringfortorturesurvivors.pdf
6. The Organization for Refugee, Asylum and Migration (ORAM) has piloted a programme in San Francisco in which LGBT refugees and asylum seekers are matched with community volunteers who provide housing, social support and assistance in finding employment. See www.oraminternational.org/
7. Now widely recognised as the symbol of the international LGBT movement.
8. See Heartland Alliance International's resettlement manual *Rainbow Response: A Practical Guide to Resettling LGBT Refugees and Asylees* at <http://tinyurl.com/HAI-Rainbow-Response>
9. HAI's Marjorie Kovler Center has run a torture survivor support and cooking group for several years, in which torture survivors gather monthly to cook foods from their countries of origin, share dinner and participate in social activities.