

Towards inclusive resettlement for LGBTI refugees

Jennifer Rumbach

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) refugees face myriad challenges within the resettlement context. Practical initiatives – such as creating a welcoming space, ensuring confidentiality, training staff, providing critical resources and fostering inclusive workplaces – can promote a more humane resettlement experience.

Resettling to a new country is a formidable task for any refugee. Like other marginalised populations, LGBTI refugees face added challenges. Many have been abused or discriminated against due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, and if they do not wish to discuss their sexual orientation or gender identity with the protection community, they navigate alone a resettlement system that may not be sensitive to their needs. Once they arrive in their new communities, LGBTI refugees seek dignified inclusion there while inevitably battling continued discrimination.

Since 1975, the US Refugee Admissions Program has welcomed more than three million refugees into the United States. To facilitate this, the US Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration funds and manages nine Resettlement Support Centers¹ (RSCs) around the world. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) administers four of these RSCs, and we are now implementing an LGBTI project at all four sites.²

This LGBTI project is critical for a wide range of LGBTI refugees, including those persecuted for their sexual orientation or gender identity, those whose sexual orientation or gender identity is not the primary reason for their flight but will affect their future experience in the US, those who are 'coming out' to officials/support providers for the first time and require counselling, and those who do not wish to share their sexual orientation or gender identity in their country of first asylum but may do so in the country to which they are resettled.

The Safe Space Initiative

Welcoming LGBTI refugees is key to providing effective assistance. Without this, many refugees will not feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity with IOM staff. They may fear discrimination, breaches of confidentiality or being barred from resettlement. Sometimes an office has a reputation for being unwelcoming due to the experience of one or more refugees. They may also make assumptions based on the nationalities of the staff. In Iraq, for instance, the majority of RSC caseworkers are of Middle Eastern or North African origin, and LGBTI refugees have reported feeling reluctant to share information with them because they fear they may be homophobic. Establishing refugee resettlement offices as 'safe spaces' is thus especially important.

In the LGBTI context, a safe space – whether a forum, community, network, family (biological or chosen) or physically defined place – is where individuals can freely express, question and explore their sexual orientation and/or gender identity without fear of judgment or reprisal.

Most critical to gaining the trust of LGBTI refugees is guaranteeing confidentiality. LGBTI persons must feel certain that those assisting them will not share sensitive information with family members or the community. This is especially important for those who have not shared their sexual orientation or gender identity with members of their family, including opposite-sex spouses.

We actively promote a welcoming and confidential space by widespread use of a safe space sign, incorporating safe space and confidentiality language into interview

scripts, and disseminating an LGBTI status and resettlement handout³ to refugees referred to the US resettlement programme. Refugees are told that they may request a staff member of another gender, if desired. This initiative has been implemented at RSC offices in Iraq, Jordan and Nepal, and is now being started up at other IOM RSC sites covering the regions of Eurasia, Latin America, North Africa and Middle East, and South Asia.

The safe space sign and handout have been particularly effective in Iraq. The sign reassures refugees that we believe in equal rights for all persons and that if they are being persecuted because of their gender or sexual orientation, they can tell us – in confidence. The handout explains that being

LGBTI does not bar refugees from resettlement or delay their cases. It is distributed to all refugees to ensure LGBTI individuals can access the information in a way that does not call attention to their sexual orientation or gender identity. While the safe space sign references the broad terms 'gender' and 'sexual orientation', the handout specifically uses local terminology for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.

An additional tool used at the Iraq RSC office is an LGBTI hotline, introduced during widespread anti-LGBTI violence in 2012. Because some refugees did not feel comfortable sharing information at the Baghdad office, or were unsure whether they qualified for the resettlement



programme, we set up a 24-hour hotline number answered by an LGBTI or 'ally' staff member.⁴ The staff answering the hotline reassure callers that they are supportive of LGBTI individuals and that the information will be handled sensitively.

Providing critical resources

We have an obligation to offer resources of as many types and through as many avenues as possible, for several reasons. First, we recognise that many LGBTI refugees will never feel comfortable or safe coming out to IOM or partners. It is critical we do not pressurise them to do so. Second, we know that a percentage of the refugees we serve every day, in every operating environment, are LGBTI, regardless of whether or not they have identified themselves as such. Finally, we know that not all communities in the US are as welcoming to LGBTI persons – especially transgender individuals – as others. Providing resources to all refugees helps ensure that LGBTI individuals who do not share their status will still receive information critical to making better informed decisions about their resettlement case and final destination. And by providing this information to everyone, we can also notify the resettlement community at large that LGBTI equality is highly respected in the US.

Information resources can be shared in a variety of ways, including through cultural orientation classes, handouts, private counselling sessions, public bulletin boards or pre-departure briefings. For persons awaiting resettlement, resources may be in the form of referrals to LGBTI-friendly health-care or psycho-social programmes. For persons receiving assistance during transit, it may be information about non-gendered toilet facilities or travelling with certain medications. For persons bound for the US, we can inform them about resources like the Rainbow Welcome website administered by Heartland Alliance.⁵

Creating an inclusive work environment

An organisation that promotes inclusion and sensitivity towards LGBTI refugees

must ensure its offices provide a welcoming and supportive – and therefore effective – working environment for all staff. To this end, the LGBTI staff training includes a module featuring inclusion exercises for staff and a special session for supervisors on creating a harassment-free workplace.

An inclusive work environment also promotes better care, because LGBTI and ally staff members are well placed to recognise issues of concern to LGBTI persons. For example, an LGBTI staff member in Nepal recognised that questions about opposite-sex partners in interviews could act as a deterrent to LGBTI refugees sharing their sexual orientation or gender identity, or information about same-sex partners. In Iraq, an ally staff member offered her office number to a refugee whom she suspected did not feel comfortable sharing information in person. After receiving counselling, he asked if other LGBTI refugees in the resettlement programme could call her. She then suggested her number become the permanent LGBTI hotline. In both instances, the staff said their LGBTI-inclusive office environment encouraged them to take this initiative.

Training staff

The RSC LGBTI training created in early 2011 was initially a sensitivity session for staff in Baghdad. Its primary aim was to help staff recognise that they are already serving LGBTI refugees (even though not identified as such), and to understand the particular challenges faced by LGBTI individuals in Iraq. In early 2012, violence against LGBTI persons in Iraq significantly increased, and it became clear that sensitivity trainings were not enough. RSC staff needed in-depth training for working with LGBTI individuals, and more needed to be done to make LGBTI refugees feel welcome at our office. The Baghdad LGBTI sensitivity session was thus developed into a full LGBTI training package.⁶ It was offered to all Resettlement Support Center staff in Iraq and selected IOM staff in Jordan in 2012, and to selected staff and partners in India, Thailand, Egypt and Nepal in 2013. It will be provided for staff working with refugees

and migrants in North Africa and the Middle East, Latin America, Eurasia and South Asia throughout 2013. Training is provided for both IOM and partners in the field.

The training provides a diverse toolkit for staff. Sensitivity training educates trainees about LGBTI persecution, myths and realities, and asks them to consider workplace inclusion. Skills training provides information about what questions to ask and which to avoid during counselling and interviews; correct LGBTI terminology; how to write successful LGBTI protection or persecution assessments; particular concerns for lesbians, bisexual women and transgender persons; challenges faced by refugees from particular geographical or cultural areas; LGBTI needs during interpretation, travel and transit; and assumptions that can create a barrier to assistance.

We believe it is important that all staff are equipped to offer the highest quality of care to LGBTI refugees. Refugees come into contact with numerous staff during resettlement, including caseworkers, counsellors, interpreters, information centre staff, transit centre staff and medical health staff. They often spend significantly more time speaking with support staff than with caseworkers. For that reason, the training offers 14 modules that can be combined for a wide variety of personnel.

For many staff, sexual orientation and gender identity are new or uncomfortable topics. Recognising this, the training promotes practical skills for refugee assistance professionals, rather than requiring staff to change their minds about LGBTI issues within a one-to-three day training period. By approaching the topic in this manner, we found in the Middle East that trainees are then more receptive to broaching ideas about LGBTI equality, and less defensive of cultural or religious beliefs that may not align with those ideas.

Training is the beginning of a process. While we move towards understanding

and acceptance, the emphasis is first and foremost on our ability to serve LGBTI refugees with the same high level of professionalism we offer to others. Staff who complete successful LGBTI interviews or offer successful counselling and support services are acknowledged in front of their teams for their dedication and expertise.

Beyond resettlement

The full spectrum of LGBTI individuals exists in all of the communities we serve. In many cases, LGBTI refugees and migrants are marginalised or isolated in the humanitarian aid context due to a lack of understanding about LGBTI populations, their diversity and their particular vulnerabilities. Staff training, safe space initiatives and resource-sharing efforts are applicable not only to Resettlement Support Centers but also to organisations working in emergency environments, in refugee camps, with urban refugee and migrant communities, and in medical health services. Future projects should address these needs to ensure that LGBTI migrants and refugees are provided with a dignified experience at every stage – not just during resettlement. The experience gained and good practice developed within the resettlement context point to ways in which this this can be achieved.

Jennifer Rumbach jrumbach@iom.int is the Resettlement Support Center Manager for South Asia in the International Organization for Migration. She was previously the Middle East North Africa Resettlement Support Center Deputy Manager for Iraq. www.iom.int

1. The US Refugee Admissions Program Resettlement Support Centers are: Africa, Austria, Cuba, East Asia, Eurasia, Latin America, North Africa and Middle East, South Asia, and Turkey and Middle East.
2. IOM currently administers Eurasia (based in Moscow, Russia), Latin America (based in Quito, Ecuador), North Africa and Middle East (based in Amman, Jordan), and South Asia (based in Damak, Nepal).
3. Available on request from the author.
4. Someone who "advocates for and supports members of a community other than their own". UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt_resources_definiton_of_terms
5. www.rainbowwelcome.org
6. Advice and materials available from the author.