

# Towards inclusion of LGBTI+ refugees in service provision in the Western Balkans



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# **Towards inclusion of LGBTI+ refugees in service provision in the Western Balkans**



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## Foreword

This report has been prepared to assess the state of play for the inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex (LGBTI+) refugees, asylum seekers and migrants (henceforth referred to as LGBTI+ refugees) and the protection of LGBTI+ rights in the context of current service provision in the Western Balkan region, and to make recommendations for future policy and programming. The core aim was to identify gaps in service provision and possible interventions to address these; this study does not, however, provide a comprehensive needs assessment. The first section of the report gives an overview of the challenges experienced in meeting the needs of LGBTI+ refugees. The second section points to good practices and recommendations for more effectively meeting the needs of LGBTI+ refugees, before concluding with some key recommendations for policy and programming.



## Content

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Foreword .....  | 3  |
| Introduction .....  | 7  |
| Overview of the challenges in meeting the needs of<br>LGBTI+ refugees .....   | 11 |
| Good practices and recommendations for improving access and<br>quality of service provision for LGBTI+ refugees ..... | 21 |
| Conclusions: core policy and programming recommendations .....  | 33 |
| Appendix: List of interviewed organizations .....   | 35 |
| Bibliography .....  | 37 |



## Introduction

### *LGBTI+ refugees*

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex (LGBTI+) refugees, asylum seekers and migrants face particularly acute challenges during their migration journeys and processes of integration. They are often subject to multiple forms of discrimination, as both migrants and people with a non-conventional sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC). As one key informant interviewed for this study emphasised: “I think the intersection between two communities makes it always harder. Being an LGBT and a refugee or a migrant, and especially when it comes to skin colour, race, ethnicity, and things like this, it becomes harder.” Discriminatory attitudes and experiences of marginalisation create harmful situations for LGBTI+ refugees, not least in terms of the risk of abuse and exploitation. Service providers may fail to provide (appropriate) care for LGBTI+ refugees. LGBTI+ refugees may also lack the financial, emotional, or practical support that other refugees rely on from their families and co-ethnic networks because, due to their different SOGIESC, they may have been rejected by their families or fear discrimination or harassment by their fellow migrants. LGBTI+ refugees’ mental health may be under particular strain due to previous experiences of trauma and/or social isolation. Given their heightened social isolation, lack of support, and economic precarity, LGBTI+ refugees may also be especially at risk of human trafficking. Given the multiple discrimination that LGBTI+ refugees face, this report assesses the extent to which the fundamental rights of LGBTI+ refugees are addressed in current service provision in the Western Balkans, and what could be done to better ensure their respect, protection, and fulfillment. We recognise that many of the challenges discussed exist for all refugees in the Western Balkans (for example, regarding limited service provision and language and cultural barriers), but in this report, we focus on the (often additional) challenges that LGBTI+ refugees face.

## ***Asylum in the Western Balkans***

Despite some headway made in the realisation of the right to asylum and access to integration-related rights, asylum systems in the Western Balkans require further improvement. A substantial number of foreigners in need of international protection still do not perceive the region as their intended destination, but as a transit area on their way to the EU Member States offering better conditions for refugee integration. Asylum seekers and refugees in the Western Balkans still rely heavily on the support provided by civil society organisations (CSOs) and international organisations such as UNHCR and IOM, while systemic solutions and effective coordination among government authorities are lacking. Since 2015, when the number of asylum-seekers on the Eastern Mediterranean route attempting to transit through the Western Balkans reached its peak, that trend has not changed. What has worsened in the meantime are the attitudes of some of the EU member states, which have taken a far stricter approach when it comes to accepting refugees on their territory, as demonstrated by the wall built by Hungary on its border with Serbia and the continued abuse of refugees by the Croatian police. LGBTI+ persons are among those flows of people who come to Europe seeking safety and a better future, often from places such as Afghanistan, Iran and countries of eastern Africa where their identities are criminalised. Many intend only to pass through the Western Balkans in order to reach Western Europe, while some stay to apply for asylum in Serbia where (unlike other Western Balkan MARRI participants) gender identity and sexual orientation are explicitly recognised as grounds for international protection.

## ***Methodology***

This study follows a qualitative approach and is based on a review of academic and grey literature and semi-structured interviews with service providers, refugees and an academic. The study focuses on the challenges and experiences of service providers in the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. To get a better understanding of the situation, interviews were conducted with seven service providers in Serbia, three in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and one regional organization. These interviews were complemented with four interviews with service

providers in other European countries and one interview with an academic working on this area so as to get a better overview of best practices and potential recommendations. The interviews were conducted in the period January-March 2022.



## Overview of the challenges in meeting the needs of LGBTI+ refugees

### *Lack of available or appropriately tailored services*

According to international literature, available services (including basic services) for refugees may be insufficiently tailored to the needs of LGBTI+ persons (Keuroghlian et al., 2018). Where LGBTI+-friendly or LGBTI+-specific services exist, demand may outstrip supply (particularly due to funding constraints) (Gruberg et al., 2018). The interviews conducted with stakeholders outside the Western Balkans highlighted that those initiatives that focus on the specific needs of LGBTI+ refugees are often started out of necessity by LGBTI+ refugees themselves – having failed to find the necessary services available when they came to their country of destination, they decided to establish the needed organisations and services themselves. Key informants agreed that while necessary services may be available in larger cities, LGBTI+ refugees and migrants are often placed in small communities where such services are not offered.

This has also been found to be the case in the Western Balkans, where there is a significant lack of specific services for LGBTI+ refugees, both in transit and at destination. This lack of services exists throughout the cycle of refugee protection – beginning with the arrival in the country and throughout the asylum and integration process. In addition, no comprehensive needs assessment on such services has been done in the past. No adequate screening of the number of LGBTI+ refugees has been made, as well. The main gaps in service provision for LGBTI+ refugees are related to healthcare, housing, employment, social inclusion, physical security, as well as various other services related to integration. Trans and gender diverse persons are in a particularly vulnerable position and have an acute need for support and protection. Healthcare for trans individuals was highlighted as a significant concern, both by the interviewees in the Western Balkans and those working elsewhere. Trans individuals face particular difficulties accessing trans-specific healthcare, such as hormone therapy or regular specialists' medical examination, which is vital for their healthcare and well-being. Especially for those who have already started the transition process, the non-provision of hormone therapy can have dire consequences, and they often have to rely on social workers and lawyers to

intervene for them, or they depend on community support to acquire the medication outside the system. According to interviewees in the Western Balkans, lack of funding is the major obstacle preventing improvements in the quality and diversity of services for LGBTI+ refugees.

### ***Lack of capacity among available service providers***

International literature highlights that service providers may lack the necessary knowledge and skills to engage with and meet the needs of LGBTI+ refugees (for example, language skills, cultural competence, knowledge of forced displacement and LGBTI+ issues and skills for trauma-sensitive care) (Gruberg et al., 2018; Kahn et al., 2018). This issue was similarly highlighted by the interviewees outside the Western Balkans, who explained that service providers are often not aware of the specific needs of LGBTI+ refugees and migrants and are disconnected from the LGBTI+ community. The lack of necessary capacity was also attributed by interviewees to the heavy reliance of many organizations on volunteer labour to be able to provide services, as there is often no structural financing available either to cover full time personnel costs or to fund sustainable programmes. Additionally, multiple key informants raised the issue that, even where services exist, accessing the LGBTI+ refugee and migrant population is difficult due to several factors such as stigma, language and cultural barriers. Therefore, even those organizations that do offer services for LGBTI+ refugees and migrants often cannot access the target population to offer their services.

Among the stakeholders interviewed in the Western Balkans, the lack of capacity among service providers, who are insufficiently sensitised to the needs of LGBTI+ refugees, was commonly discussed. These interviewees highlighted the lack of knowledge and skills among camp staff, translators, police authorities in charge of the asylum procedure, as well as among CSO representatives working in the field. Some of the specific gaps are the non-use of appropriate terminology relating to diverse SOGIESC and lack of knowledge on the countries of origin of LGBTI+ refugees by service providers in the refugee protection system. Many of the interviewees explained that knowledge and skills vary substantially between different staff members, based on individual capacities. This was also emphasised by one of the refugees interviewed, who explained: "Regarding the staff at the camp, sometimes they are really good and trustworthy and sometimes they are really bad. It depends from person to person."

In the Western Balkans, there is no systematic approach to capacity building on topics related to LGBTI+ refugees. Capacity building activities, such as trainings and workshops, happen sporadically and are usually project-based. Follow-up activities and longer-term approaches are rare. LGBTI+ refugees are not on the everyday activity agendas of CSOs. Some of the interviewees explained the lack of capacity-building among governmental service providers in relation to the lack of political will in Western Balkan countries to become countries of destination, rather than transit, for refugees. Without this political commitment, there is little interest in ensuring comprehensive service provision, including for LGBTI+ refugees. Outside of governmental support, LGBTI+ CSOs could play a more active role in meeting the needs of LGBTI+ refugees. However, the LGBTI+ CSO representatives interviewed for this study explained that they currently have insufficient knowledge about the protection system for refugees, its processes and challenges. In that sense, increasing the visibility and access of local LGBTI+ CSOs to LGBTI+ refugees would be important. Lastly, capacity development among all service providers is currently inhibited by a lack of comprehensive data and research on the population of LGBTI+ refugees and their needs.

### ***Lack of coordination among service providers***

Interviewees at the international level discussed a lack of coordination between key actors as a barrier to the effective protection and inclusion of LGBTI+ refugees. The key stakeholders interviewed in the Western Balkans similarly observed a notable lack of coordination among service providers when it comes to supporting LGBTI+ refugees. In this context, some individual human rights activists have become de facto focal points for LGBTI+ refugees due to their strong individual efforts in providing services, guidance, referrals to other organisations and individual support. To a lesser extent, coordination is also insufficient among the CSOs working directly with the migrant population, as well as between CSOs and the staff running the camps and reception centres. Coordination and cooperation between refugee-serving CSOs and local LGBTI+ CSOs was observed to be very underdeveloped in the Western Balkans – as well as by interviewees working in other regions. In the Western Balkans, coordination is impeded by the fact that local LGBTI+ CSOs do not have access to, and do not provide services at, refugee camps and reception centres in their respective

countries. Reflecting their above-mentioned lack of knowledge and skills, local LGBTI+ CSOs therefore remain unaware of the particular needs of LGBTI+ refugees (both in-transit and in the process of integration) and do not provide tailored services and activities for them. As a further barrier, representatives from local LGBTI+ CSOs reported that there are no funds available to support the implementation of such services. However, all the CSO representatives interviewed reported strong willingness to improve their cooperation and the quality and accessibility of their services for LGBTI+ refugees, including through the development of their networking capacities and opportunities for joint service provision. The lack of available funding therefore remains the main obstacle to improvements in this regard.

### ***Prejudice and stigma among host country stakeholders and the broader refugee/migrant population***

As mentioned above, LGBTI+ refugees may face multiple forms of discrimination or marginalisation as a result of both being foreign and their different SOGIESC (Gavrielides, 2017; Heartland Alliance International, 2013). Societies in countries of transit or destination can be hostile towards LGBTI+ persons; such discriminatory attitudes may also manifest in the behaviour of staff in refugee-supporting organisations (Dillane & Powell, 2020), as also confirmed by interviewees. Hostile attitudes can also combine with stereotypical perceptions of what LGBTI+ persons look or behave like. As one key stakeholder explained: “you can tell from the questions, even though they’re not totally indiscreet, you can sense this culture of disbelief still. You can sense that they begin the interview with the presumption that you are not what you say you are until you convince us about it.” Stereotypes of how an LGBTI+ individual should behave then lead to a culture of disbelief if these stereotypes are not met.

Even LGBTI+ groups or community members in a country of destination or transit may be discriminatory or exclusionary towards LGBTI+ refugees because of their differences (for example, economic, or cultural) (Gavrielides, 2017). This was observed to be the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where local activists pointed to the lack of connection between the local LGBTI+ community and LGBTI+ refugees, where local LGBTI+ community members demonstrate a lack of understanding of, and discriminatory behaviour towards, LGBTI+ refugees.

LGBTI+ refugees may also fear discriminatory or abusive treatment by service providers or groups, and may therefore avoid seeking help (Kahn et al., 2017). They may similarly avoid engaging with members of their co-ethnic community (Kahn et al., 2017). This was also confirmed by the international interviews, which highlighted that people will not only not identify as LGBTI+, but will often hesitate to go to LGBTI+ service providers or attend LGBTI+ community events out of fear of detection by their migrant community. As one interviewee explained: “Most LGBTIQ clients, they come alone. They are not with a family, but they are supervised by a community, that either they spend the journey with them in the boat or, for example, they found themselves forced to work with them because of language or because of easy access to work with the same community.”

The dominant culture in the Western Balkans region is not welcoming towards people of diverse SOGIESC. According to the many key informants, the general public in this region also has lack of knowledge on the issues LGBTI+ refugees face in their countries of origin and usually perceive the reasons they come to Europe as strictly economical. Many refugees are aware of this and therefore do not see a future for themselves in these countries. Others expect the situation in the Western Balkans to be like that of Western Europe or North America and are therefore very disappointed when they come to understand the harsher reality. As one refugee interviewed for this study reflected: “I also expected LGBTI+ persons would be better welcomed in Serbia, but that is not the case.” Hostile and discriminatory attitudes are manifested both by service providers – such as hospital staff, as reported by one refugee interviewee – as well as in wider society.

Regarding the attitudes of service providers in the Western Balkans, interviewees in Serbia were more positive about the role that legal support organisations play in supporting LGBTI+ refugees with legal advice, as well as wider support and referrals to other services. Regarding the attitudes of wider society in Serbia, this was observed to be a particular problem for LGBTI+ status-holders’ longer-term integration – although the two refugees interviewed in Serbia reported generally more positive experiences. LGBTI+ persons who are open about their SOGIESC face challenges in finding employment and housing, due to discriminatory attitudes. These difficulties were reported as being especially acute for trans and gender diverse individuals. General practitioners also openly discriminate against trans people, whether they are refugees or locals. The refugees interviewed for this study reported that the large majority of local LGBTI+ persons that they have met are not open about their LGBTI+ identities with their friends

and family, and advise LGBTI+ refugees to be similarly careful about disclosing their own identities publicly. This is very disappointing and frustrating for LGBTI+ refugees who hoped to live a freer and less fearful life in the country of asylum.

### ***Personal safety concerns for LGBTI+ refugees***

Given the prevalence of discrimination discussed above, LGBTI+ refugees may fear that by accessing services, or engaging with local LGBTI+ groups, they may become a target for harassment and abuse (Karsay, 2016). LGBTI+-related discrimination risks may also combine with personal safety risks based on other factors such as gender, age and family relationships. Fears regarding personal safety may also lead LGBTI+ refugees to avoid, or leave, refugee camps or accommodation, thereby making it more difficult for them to access basic assistance and services (Dillane & Powell, 2020). Outside refugee accommodation, LGBTI+ refugees may struggle to find their own place to live, as they are often discriminated against by landlords due to their legal status. They may therefore fail to find alternative accommodation.

The lack of safe accommodation for LGBTI+ refugees was commonly discussed by interviewees as the major risk to LGBTI+ refugees' personal safety. This is particularly important, having in mind that most LGBTI+ refugees were victims of sexual and gender-based violence in their countries of origin or in transit. In the Western Balkans region, accommodation for refugees tends to be provided through large group reception centres or camps, organised according to a binary understanding of gender. This leads to challenges, as trans and gender diverse individuals are often perceived only in accordance with their assigned gender, resulting in their allocation to a dormitory for the gender they do not identify with, or being banned from accessing toilets for the gender they identify with. In general, LGBTI+ persons are at risk of homophobic (as well as racist) harassment and abuse from other refugees and migrants in collective accommodation. As one international interviewee stated, "It's a bit risky for refugee asylum seekers, for privacy reasons, but also, they stay in the same community from where they are fleeing and they put them at risk of discrimination, but also of sexual abuse and other risks." Sometimes camp staff act to protect LGBTI+ persons from such abuse, but not always – for example, the refugees interviewed highlighted a lack of support from the authorities in

response to incidents which take place outside the camp, such as physical attacks they suffered on the way to the camp. Trans and gender diverse individuals are easily targeted if living in their identity and often feel forced to hide their identity inside the accommodation facilities, thus creating additional complications for them. Faced with these risks, many LGBTI+ persons remain closed about their identity and do not seek help and support. Although LGBTI+ refugees are sometimes transferred to safe houses when they are identified as being at-risk, this only happens on an ad-hoc basis. Some countries, such as Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania, have LGBTI+ safe houses. Others, such as Serbia, still lack such accommodation. A systematic approach to the provision of safe accommodation for LGBTI+ refugees therefore remains crucial.

### ***Lack of awareness among the LGBTI+ refugee population about available services***

LGBTI+ refugees may not be aware of specific services available to them (UNHCR, 2021b). And, particularly if they have not identified themselves to service providers as LGBTI+ (for example, for personal safety reasons), they may not be made aware of relevant services (UNHCR, 2021b). This was observed to be the case in the Western Balkans, where LGBTI+ refugees lack information on the asylum process (including the grounds for protection based on LGBTI+-related persecution), the availability of services and support, as well as on the presence and nature of a local LGBTI+ community and societal attitudes towards LGBTI+ persons and issues. Available services are not sufficiently visible or publicised, and LGBTI+ persons are not encouraged and empowered to seek help and services on their own. As one refugee interviewee described: “I had no idea where to go and what to ask when I got to Serbia. I had no idea what kind of services even existed until I got in touch with civil society organisations. There is a complete lack of information for immigrants.” Additionally, LGBTI+ refugees may not understand the information that is available to them because they are not familiar with the western terminology used to refer to SOGIESC issues, and therefore do not relate the information to their own needs. Outside of group reception facilities, it is also worth noting that awareness-raising may be particularly difficult, because community outreach tends to be time and resource-intensive, and can therefore be limited by funding constraints (Gruberg et al., 2018). Some of the interviewees from the Western

Balkans noted that the visibility of services is increased when information is provided in the native languages of refugees, as well as when such services are promoted by the staff working in the accommodation facilities.

### **Barriers relating to legal status and rights**

Interviewees working in other regions highlighted that one big issue that makes asylum claims extremely difficult for LGBTIQ+ refugees is that they often do not self-identify upon arrival or in the initial asylum interviews. This then often creates large problems in the asylum procedures. Especially in countries with a strict policy of returning individuals to so-called “safe countries of origin”, many LGBTIQ+ individuals might not get a chance to plead their case, as the asylum procedures are often accelerated, with limited right to appeal, or no automatic suspension of the deportation order in the case of appeal. As one interviewee stated: “They don’t have the right to appeal, and if they have a rejection, they go directly to detention, and they stay there as long as they’re not deported”. This is, however, not the case in the Western Balkans, where refugees have a right to appeal with automatic suspension and they do not face the risk of immediate detention or deportation.

These interviewees also emphasised that the asylum policies and practices are insufficiently sensitised to the needs and experiences of LGBTIQ+ refugees. They argued that the grounds for international protection based on LGBTIQ+-related persecution are too narrow, and do not take into consideration situations in which persecution is enacted by citizens rather than governmental authorities, or the harsh laws punishing LGBTIQ+ individuals in countries that are nonetheless considered safe. Furthermore, interviewees pointed to the insensitive attitudes and misinformed understandings of the officials making decisions on asylum cases. As one key stakeholder explained:

*“some employees who work in this migration process and asylum process are homophobic themselves, or the translators in the [asylum] interview are homophobic themselves, which [prevents] refugees from speaking freely about their sexual orientation.*

*At the same time, we have to understand that LGBTIQ refugees who come to apply for asylum in [country of destination], they mostly come from a background where they were not used to speaking*

*about sexual orientation. Some people don't know the terms, what does homosexual mean? We need to know that people need to have time to get prepared, to get supported, to get consulted on how to prepare for the interviews"*

Additionally, this interviewee also highlighted instances in which asylum officials do not believe the stories of LGBTI+ applicants because they do not conform to their stereotypical expectations. The interviewee gave the example of lesbian women who may have children because they were previously forced to marry, which in the view of asylum officials discredits their claim to being lesbian.

LGBTI+ refugees also struggle to access other rights. One key informant at the international level highlighted that family reunification is often difficult or impossible for LGBTI+ individuals:

*"Family reunification, also something that is impossible because people come from a country where they're discriminated or criminalized, so they don't have any marriage certificate or something like this. If they were with someone in their country for 10 years, they cannot have a family reunification."*

Similarly, in the Western Balkans, some employees working in the migration process have insufficient knowledge on SOGIESC and LGBTI+ context in the countries of origin of the refugees. This has a negative impact in decision making of asylum claims based on SOGIESC. In addition, same-sex partnerships are not legally recognised in all of the Western Balkan countries, including North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and LGBTI+ refugees face the same legal restrictions and problems as local members of LGBTI+ communities. As one refugee interviewee explained: "I want to stay here and get married. I am impatiently waiting for the law on same-sex communities to be adopted. I want to work here. I believe in my future here."

The access to the formal labour market was also considered an issue for LGBTI+ refugees in the asylum procedure in the Western Balkans. As mentioned above, LGBTI+ refugees and asylum-seekers may face particularly acute economic challenges because they often do not have the same family or social networks that would otherwise support them. This makes income-generation even more of a priority for LGBTI+ refugees. However, asylum-seekers in the Western Balkans have to wait nine months to be granted a work permit. This is very challenging for refugees, as one interviewee explained: "First of all, there is a problem with getting a work per-

mit. I have to wait for 9 months. What should a person do by then? Live on thin air?!"

### ***Lack of Data***

Key informants at the international level repeatedly raised the importance of not having enough data available that includes information on sexual orientation and gender identity. There were several reasons mentioned for this: firstly, individuals often do not want to self-identify as LGBTI+ due to security concerns; and second, organizations collecting data on refugees and migrants are often hesitant to ask for this information due to political sensitivities and concerns about data protection. However, without actually counting how many LGBTI+ refugees and migrants are in need of services, it is difficult to impossible for organizations to access funding or other support, especially from governments, or to lobby for changes in regulations.

## Good practices and recommendations for improving access and quality of service provision for LGBTI+ refugees

### *General capacity building and coordination among service providers*

First, governmental institutions working with refugees need to be more sensitized in their overall approach to LGBTI+ refugees. Therefore, a set of educational trainings and services should be implemented to improve this. These trainings have to be comprehensive and LGBTI+ specific, as well as provided on an annual basis. Ideally, this training would also be part of the onboarding process of new hires. The international interviewees suggested ways in which capacity development for governmental institutions can go beyond conventional trainings. As one key informant suggested, governmental institutions can recruit LGBTI+ staff members and consultants and foster links with LGBTI+ groups:

*“Also, it’s not just about having training. Like I said bluntly, it’s about not necessarily training a straight caseworker, but including an LGBTI+ person who can have a peer-to-peer support with a refugee and the asylum seeker, because a person who is LGBTI+Q knows better and understands better what the other person needs because in some cases, he or she may have faced the same things.”*

Here, it is also important to think about how issues that are essential for LGBTI+ refugees can be framed in contexts that are more restrictive. As one key stakeholder working in another region suggested:

*“Sometimes abstract concepts of equality, respect for tolerance, or respect for diversity, things like that, they don’t land. Sometimes, what helps them land is being a lot more targeted and focused. We don’t believe in violence. We believe that everyone should live a life without violence. We should believe no one should be trafficked. We should have a job. Things that maybe aren’t that like Western, patchwork rainbow framework, but instead are much more focused on what are core values that are really intelligible in other context, particularly around bodily integrity and security.”*

A similar approach has been taken by the GIZ programme ‘Strengthening Governance and Civil Society in Uganda’, where initiatives to develop the capacity of governmental institutions, such as the police, to protect the

rights of LGBTI+ persons have focussed on ensuring non-discrimination and the protection of human rights for all, based on the relevant legal frameworks, rather than framing such interventions as LGBTI+ activism. Another key informant suggested that focussing on health may be another useful universalising frame through which to promote the health needs of LGBTI+ refugees. Likewise, other interviewees suggested that efforts to improve service provision for, for example, trans women, may be more effective if based on the simpler logic that trans women, like other women, are particularly vulnerable and therefore need protection, rather than on arguments in support of gender diversity.

Second, as demonstrated in literature, local LGBTI+ groups and organisations may also be particularly valuable sources of support for LGBTI+ refugees (i.e. who may feel more comfortable engaging with LGBTI+ organisations than general refugee or migrant support organisations). But local LGBTI+ organisations and groups may need specific training on refugee issues in order to better meet the needs of LGBTI+ refugees (Gavrielides, 2017). Equally, refugee or migrant support organisations may need specific training to meet the needs of LGBTI+ persons (Gavrielides, 2017). In the Western Balkans context, both local LGBTI+ organisations and refugee and migrant support organisations need capacity development support to better understand and address the specific needs of LGBTI+ refugees. Coordination and cooperation between these actors should also be improved. Local LGBTI+ groups and CSOs need access to LGBTI+ refugees in order to better understand and address their needs. And, as the international interviewees emphasised, refugee-support organisations should develop relationships with the LGBTI+ community in their area, both in order to develop a better awareness of the issues that the LGBTI+ community is facing and also to signal to LGBTI+ refugees and migrants that there is a safe space in which they can disclose their identities. Cooperation between refugee-support CSOs and LGBTI+ CSOs should also be improved via formal and informal structures such as platforms, coalitions or regular focus group meetings etc. The international interviewees also emphasised that community-driven initiatives, in which LGBTI+ refugees themselves take a central role, are crucial. Firstly, a more bottom-up, participatory approach better ensures that the needs of the target population are at the centre of any initiative. Second, including LGBTI+ refugees in the design and implementation of initiatives makes it easier to access and connect with the target population. This is because, while it is already a good start to employ local staff members who are part of the LGBTI+ community, access remains difficult because language and cultural barriers persist.

Hence, it is essential to include LGBTI migrants and refugees from different backgrounds as staff members and volunteers in programs and initiatives.

Services also need to be developed to support LGBTI+ refugees throughout their stay in the Western Balkans: from their arrival, to their onwards migration to another country or throughout their asylum process and integration in a Western Balkan country. Support organisations should coordinate to build up inter-organisational awareness and referral pathways to connect LGBTI+ refugees with appropriate support available from other LGBTI+-sensitive organisations (UNHCR, 2021b). A good example of the coordination between service providers in Serbia is the case of one refugee interviewed. This person was able to disclose their identity to a governmental official upon arrival; they were then referred to UNHCR who helped to transfer them to an asylum centre for their longer-term accommodation; their asylum application was processed smoothly and they received a positive decision; their integration was then facilitated by: local LGBTI+ CSOs who supported them in understanding the LGBTI+ context and by including them in LGBTI+ events and activities; other local CSOs which provided psychotherapy and other integration support; and by governmental institutions which provided Serbian language classes, education and financial assistance for a number of months. As a consequence of this support, the interviewee perceives Serbia as their destination country and does not intend to leave. This kind of coordination – based on systematic cooperation and referral pathways – needs to become standard practice among relevant actors in the Western Balkans. A holistic case management approach can furthermore help to better address the diverse and interacting needs of LGBTI+ refugees – as one example discussed in literature, healthcare providers should work with other organisations to address the broader determinants of health, such as housing and legal issues (UNHCR, 2021a). According to the international interviewees, one way of moving towards a more coordinated and comprehensive approach are the so-called “Rainbow Houses” which are becoming more common. These are initiatives that do not only provide safe spaces for LGBTI+ refugees, but which also provide more holistic service provision, connecting different service providers and government entities to allow better support of LGBTI+ individuals.

***Facilitating voluntary self-identification as LGBTI+ whilst ensuring confidentiality; and raising awareness of available services***

LGBTI+ refugees should never feel forced to disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation. However, to facilitate voluntary self-identification, support organisations can create 'safe spaces' by fostering a welcoming culture; employing diverse staff (in terms of SOGIESC and cultural background); displaying LGBTI+ safe space posters and wearing LGBTI+ pins (e.g. rainbow flags); using appropriate language and preferred pronouns; and training interpreters and other staff (such as volunteers) to use appropriate and respectful language (Gavrielides, 2017; Heartland Alliance International, 2013; Keuroghlian et al., 2018; Migration Council of Australia/Forcibly Displaced People Network, 2020; UNHCR, 2021b). Registration procedures for new arrivals should also be conducted in a safe space to allow individuals to disclose their LGBTI+ identity if they wish to, in safety and confidence and without feeling forced (IDC, 2016). Strict confidentiality protocols should be established to manage disclosures.

Different kinds of safe spaces may be valued by LGBTI+ refugees and can serve different functions. Disclosure upon arrival in a camp or reception centre may be important for individuals who want further information or access to services. In these cases, interviewees emphasised that an individual, one-to-one approach, and the provision of a safe space where they feel welcome, accepted and where their confidentiality will be ensured is necessary to facilitate such disclosures. The availability of sensitised translators – who are not necessarily from the same ethnic background, depending on the refugee's preference – is also vital. Other LGBTI+ refugees may not want to self-identify in the camp or reception centre, but, particularly if they consider the country their intended destination, they may prefer to identify as LGBTI+ outside of their accommodation, usually in safe spaces such as at the office of a psychologist or lawyer, or through contacts with the local LGBTI+ community. One good example of a safe space outside of reception centres is the Pride Info Centre in Belgrade, Serbia, which provides an open space for LGBTI+ individuals, where many of the refugees interviewed made their first contact with the community and felt safe and welcomed there. LGBTI+ refugees who consider themselves in transit may be especially reluctant to self-identify as LGBTI+ publicly. In these cases, the availability of a safe space where they will not be identified as LGBTI+ by fellow refugees and migrants is particularly important. Particularly during transit, the signals that an organisation offers a safe environment for an LGBTI+ person to turn to can be as simple as dis-

playing a rainbow flag. As one key informant stated:

*“All the way I was afraid as a gay person. I was afraid to speak about my sexuality because I don’t know the people, I’m in a forest, I’m in the middle of nowhere. I never felt safe, so I will never come out as a gay person. I guess the challenge would be harder for trans women because they are not able to hide their identity. Anyway, but for me at some moment where I felt safer at some points, when I stopped, I saw rainbow flag and, in such places, when I saw rainbow flag, I felt like, ‘Oh, I can approach the people and speak with them here.’ That’s why also now here, when we work with people who work in refugees camp or officials, we tell them, ‘You have to create a space where LG-BTIQ people can feel safe to speak about their sexuality and remove the idea that you can be homophobic.”*

These safe spaces can be linked to other services, but do not always have to be. As one key informant stated, sometimes it is just enough to have:

*“a space with people just to hang out. If they don’t hang out there, we don’t know what their home life is like. They’re going to be on the street. They hang out in public, and when they’re in public, if there’s a prosecutorial state apparatus, if there’s community homophobia, there’s just a lot more risk. I think having a space, even if it’s just a room, being like, this is the room for the community, that means a lot and people will do it.”*

The key stakeholder interviews and desk review offered various recommendations on how to provide a safe space, while minimising the risk of being identified by others as LGBTI+. First, it is important to make sure that refugees are given the opportunity to speak to a service provider alone, without translators, family members or others present. Second, measures can be taken to make it less obvious that an individual is accessing LGBTI+ support. One key stakeholder explained that, in the country where they work, every reception centre has a dedicated “LGBT resource person” – the focal point for information and referrals for LGBTI+ persons. This person is also always the resource person for religion, which means that it is not possible to know whether someone who visits the resource person is visiting to discuss religion or LGBTI+ issues. The UNHCR also suggests that it may help to create dedicated office hours for appointments with LGBTI+ refugees, to provide greater safety and confidentiality (UNHCR, 2021b). Support staff can also help LGBTI+ refugees to protect their own confidentiality by training them in digital safety protocols (i.e. to prevent their personal information being ac-

cessed from their mobile devices if they are apprehended by border guards or police) and to encourage safe online communications (UNHCR, 2021b).

Other recommendations focus on how to raise awareness and provide information and services to LGBTI+ refugees discretely, without identifying individuals as LGBTI+. First, to raise awareness of available services among LGBTI+ persons who may not have identified themselves as such, LGBTI+-appropriate services should be mainstreamed across service provision – i.e. service provision should, as standard, be sensitive to the diverse SOGIESC of all potential service-users (Portman & Weyl, 2013). All support staff should also communicate about the specific services and focal points for LGBTI+ persons so that LGBTI+ refugees are made aware of these without needing to ask or search for information themselves. To ensure that individuals that do want to reach out have a safe way to get (contact) information, one of the key stakeholders recommended to post information on the inside of bathroom stalls, where people have privacy even in crowded accommodation. Similarly, another key stakeholder explained that they always ensure that informational flyers are left in places within reception centres which LGBTI+ can access at night – to allow refugees to take a flyer when they are less likely to be observed. Interviewees emphasised that a variety of communication methods are likely necessary, which could include online websites and counselling, physical information desks or contact points, and in-person informational sessions. One key stakeholder argued that:

*“A living word is the best word. It is best to talk about it live – info sessions, workshops, etc. This can be accompanied by printed material, additional support, etc. My experience is that the best kind of awareness raising was shown through workshops and direct communication with beneficiaries.”*

If onwards migration is anticipated, service providers can also help by setting up referrals and providing contact information for relevant service providers in other countries along the route (Heartland Alliance International, 2013). Information about the situation for LGBTI+ persons in potential countries of destination is also likely to be valued by LGBTI+ refugees in transit. One key stakeholder working in another region suggested that, in order to better support asylum-seekers in transit, it would be very helpful to have a Europe-wide network or directory of support organisations so that staff or volunteers in one country could refer an individual to support in the next (intended) country.

### ***Access to legal rights and support***

Service providers should ensure that LGBTI+ refugees have information on their legal rights and access to legal support (UNHCR, 2021a). In Serbia, government authorities making decisions on asylum claims recognize LGBTI+ specific cases and have granted international protection for a certain number of LGBTI+ persons. However, key stakeholders consider that decisions on asylum claims by LGBTI+ refugees are becoming increasingly restrictive. In general, the two refugees and other key stakeholders interviewed in Serbia perceived that there is adequate legal support for LGBTI+ refugees. The refugees interviewed stated that lawyers were properly sensitized and approachable, that their legal rights were not put in question, and that they faced the same challenges as any other asylum seeker in the region. However, key informant interviewees perceived the situation as being more difficult for LGBTI+ refugees.

Beyond obtaining refugee status, LGBTI+ refugees should have information and legal support for their broader integration, which may include legal access to specific healthcare services, changing their gender markers in documents, protection from hate crimes and discrimination, and with regard to instances of discrimination in the housing or employment markets, for example (UNHCR, 2021a).

### ***Access to safe housing***

LGBTI+ refugees should be consulted on their preferences regarding housing – i.e. whether they prefer private or shared accommodation, and, if shared, which gender(s) they prefer to share with, and whether or not they wish to share with people from the same ethnic background (Migration Council of Australia/Forcibly Displaced People Network, 2020; UNHCR, 2021a, 2021b).

The literature and interviews show strong agreement that it is much better to accommodate LGBTI+ refugees in urban areas where there tends to be more diverse communities and a greater concentration of LGBTI+-friendly or LGBTI+-specific services and organisations (ORAM, 2012; UNHCR, 2021a, 2021b). If housed in the community, care should also be taken not to place LGBTI+ refugees in areas where hate crimes are committed (Migration

Council of Australia/Forcibly Displaced People Network, 2020, citing Dixon and Dixon, 2020). Support organisations should work with the local LGBTI+ community to identify LGBTI+-friendly neighbourhoods, landlords and housemates (Heartland Alliance International, 2013).

In the Western Balkans, the provision of safe accommodation for LGBTI+ refugees outside the general accommodation facilities is an urgent priority. As one refugee interviewee stated, “For LGBTI+ asylum seekers, a better and safer accommodation is mandatory, and it doesn’t exist. There are not so many LGBTI+ immigrants, so it would be safe for us to get a safe house.” The establishment of, for example, “safe houses”, would not only provide safe accommodation, but also an appropriate space for the provision of more comprehensive and tailored services for LGBTI+ individuals. If separate accommodation or “safe houses” cannot be provided, the interviewees discussed the benefits of accommodating LGBTI+ persons in a separate part of a reception centre, and/or in a centre which is already a safer space for LGBTI+ persons (i.e. a centre for women or families rather than single men). However, it is also important to bear in mind that discrimination may also occur even in these “friendlier” environments for more vulnerable groups. As one key informant emphasised: “the single women and minors could be homophobic”. This arrangement was nonetheless described as a very positive development by a key informant working in another region, where LGBTI+ persons are able to request transfer to a particular reception centre (in an urban area) where both women and LGBTI+ persons are accommodated. A similar good practice example was observed in Serbia, where a reception centre accommodates trans persons along with other vulnerable individuals, such as victims of sexual and gender-based violence, in a facility which is across from the main building. The trans individuals who are accommodated in this separate facility are given rooms to themselves or which they share with other trans people; they have keys to their rooms and also have reliable internet access there.

Regardless of how the reception centres are otherwise arranged, it is important that toilets and bathrooms should be inclusive and safe for all – and private facilities may be needed to accommodate trans refugees (UNHCR, 2021b). Adequate material and financial support must also be provided to ensure decent living standards in any accommodation, and to avoid recourse to negative coping behaviours. Funds should be set aside for resolving any emergency housing issues – i.e. to quickly provide safe, appropriate accommodation where urgent problems (e.g. harassment or abuse) arise (Heartland Alliance International, 2013).

Lastly, LGBTI+ refugees are particularly at risk of abuse and violence in immigration detention (Dillane & Powell, 2020); alternatives to detention must therefore be considered.

### ***Access to mental and physical health services***

Specific kinds of health services may be particularly important for LGBTI+ refugees – these include trauma services and access to hormones and gender affirming surgery for trans individuals (Heartland Alliance International, 2013; UNHCR, 2021a). Psychological support was also described as very important for the refugees interviewed for this study. Activities to foster social support and inclusion (see below) should also be seen as an important part of promoting good mental health – particularly given the isolation that LGBTI+ refugees often experience. Mental and physical healthcare must be free at the point of use and delivered in safe and private settings.

Key informants also highlighted the importance of providing education on HIV/Aids, safe sex, and drugs. This is particularly important for LGBTI+ refugees, many of whom come from restrictive societies where education on these topics is lacking, and who may engage in risky behaviour when they arrive in Europe and have opportunities to live more freely – or where they may be at risk of negative coping behaviours such as sex work.

Psychological support has been highlighted as crucial for LGBTI+ refugees. Some of the key informants highlighted that this is particularly important in order to address the trauma experienced in the country of origin and in transit, as well as to mitigate re-traumatization during the asylum procedure, including when negative decisions are delivered, as well as to secure smooth integration into the new society.

Healthcare staff need to be trained to meet the needs of LGBTI+ refugees – i.e. to understand the relevant cultural context, to use appropriate language, to understand the particular health needs that LGBTI+ refugees may have, and to deliver care in a trauma-informed way (Keuroghlian et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2021a). Professional, trained interpreters must also be used in healthcare settings (i.e. instead of relying on family or community members) in order to ensure the patient's confidentiality (Keuroghlian et al., 2018).

### ***Counter-trafficking measures***

As mentioned, LGBTI+ refugees are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Key actors working with refugees in the Western Balkans are not adequately sensitised to the risk profiles of LGBTI+ refugees. Counter-trafficking initiatives therefore need to better address the needs and vulnerabilities of LGBTI+ refugees and victims of trafficking. Most of the key informants in the Western Balkans agreed that LGBTI+ refugees are at a higher risk of trafficking in comparison to other refugees.

### ***Access to employment and economic support***

In terms of meeting basic needs, some key stakeholders interviewed in the Western Balkans argued for the need of cash-based interventions, as these are viewed as more effective in allowing LGBTI+ refugees to meet their own, specific needs, which may not be effectively addressed through the mainstream provision of, for example, food and clothing. Regarding the longer-term socio-economic inclusion of LGBTI+ refugees, care should be taken to include LGBTI+ refugees in livelihoods programmes, with due consideration of their particular needs and safety risks (UNHCR, 2021b). Support organisations should also cultivate relationships with employers which are LGBTI+-friendly, in order to facilitate referrals to safe and inclusive workplaces (Heartland Alliance International, 2013; UNHCR, 2021a).

### ***Social inclusion***

To foster inclusivity within co-ethnic communities, general orientation information or activities for refugees and migrants should be LGBTI+-friendly and inclusive (Portman & Weyl, 2013; UNHCR, 2021a). It may also help to recruit “ally ambassadors” from within co-ethnic communities to further encourage inclusivity (Portman & Weyl, 2013). In addition to including LGBTI+ topics as part of the general orientation or integration sessions for refugees, one key stakeholder also suggested that such activities should go beyond simple information provision, to create safe spaces for more open and honest dialogues where people from different backgrounds feel

able to ask questions, share their doubts or concerns, and better learn from each other.

Local LGBTI+ groups and communities should be engaged with – but, as emphasised above, training may be needed to sensitise local LGBTI+ groups to the needs of LGBTI+ refugees specifically (Portman & Weyl, 2013). Activities and initiatives to help build bridges between LGBTI+ refugees and local LGBTI+ communities may include: mentorship and sponsorship programmes, support groups, social gatherings and outings (Portman & Weyl, 2013). Peer support networks among LGBTI+ refugees may also be extremely valuable (Heartland Alliance International, 2013; Migration Council of Australia/ Forcibly Displaced People Network, 2020; Portman & Weyl, 2013). Key informants discussed the importance of having easily accessible social gatherings for LGBTI+ refugees, where low threshold consultations can take place. Events and activities should also be organised with careful attention paid to the different needs and backgrounds of LGBTI+ refugees. For example, while a LGBTI+ refugee may very much enjoy a trip to a local Pride event, another might experience the crowds and culture as alienating or intimidating. One key informant, therefore, advised that it may be better to organise smaller and more private social events – for example, including only the regular members of an organisation – which may feel more comfortable and welcoming than events at which lots of strangers are present.

Lastly, since LGBTI+ refugees may not benefit from the support of their co-ethnic community, it may be particularly important for them to overcome language barriers in order to build relationships with the local community. Support for language-learning is therefore highly important (Gavrielides, 2017).



## Conclusions: core policy and programming recommendations

A systematic and comprehensive service provision for LGBTI+ refugees, migrants and asylum seekers is not in place. The research conducted for this study did highlight areas where changes should be made to improve service provision for LGBTI+ refugees.

- It is necessary to systematically and continuously build capacities on the topic of LGBTI+ refugees of all stakeholders, decision makers and service providers working in the system of protection of refugees and secure better coordination and cooperation among them, including both governmental institutions, civil society organisations and individuals.
- There is a need to establish systematic referral pathways and protocols/mechanisms to grant LGBTI+ refugees' access to specific services (e.g. private/separate accommodation). It is important that these services are sensitive to the needs of the individual and not a one-size-fits-all solution.
- It is necessary to provide a comprehensive, systematic, and diverse provision of LGBTI+ specific services, in line with specific needs of LGBTI+ refugees and followed by adequate funding, established mechanisms of provision and support from professionals working in the refugee protection, including safe accommodation, psychological and legal services, support in integration and social inclusion and adequate visibility and accessibility of such services.
- Organizations need to be trained on how to facilitate voluntary self-identification of LGBTI+. This requires that safe spaces need to be created where LGBTI+ refugees can interact with each other and with service providers.
- More research is necessary on the needs of LGBTI+ refugees during transit. This study gives a first overview of the specific needs of those in transit, but more data is required in order to ensure that the situation can be properly assessed, and needs can be met.



## Appendix: List of interviewed organizations

*This study is based on the valuable contributions of the following organisations who participated in the research interviews and who consented to be named:*

### Regional interviews

- *Civil Rights Defenders (Serbia) – Programme Assistant*
- *Crisis Response and Policy Centre (CRPC) (Serbia) – Director; and Coordinator of Cultural Mediators*
- *Da se zna! (Serbia) – Monitoring Programme Coordinator and Survivor’s Contact Point*
- *Danish Refugee Council Serbia – Team Leader and GBV Specialist*
- *ERA – LGBTI Equal Rights Association for Western Balkans and Turkey – Advocacy Manager*
- *Geten (Serbia) – Psychologist, Psychotherapist and Trans Support Group Coordinator*
- *Grupa 484 (Serbia) – Programme Coordinator; and Programme Assistant*
- *HCIT (Serbia) – Legal Assistant*
- *Human Rights Activist (BiH)*
- *IOM BiH – Programme Coordinator on Migration Governance*
- *Psychosocial Innovation Network (Serbia) – Senior Psychologist*
- *Sarajevo Open Center (BiH) – Advocacy Programme Manager*
- *SRH Serbia – Executive Director; and Programme Manager*

### International interviews

- *GIZ ‘Strengthening Governance and Civil Society in Uganda’ – Technical Advisor*
- *LGBT Asylum (Denmark) – Counsellor*
- *MGRM (Malta) – Artist and queer activist*

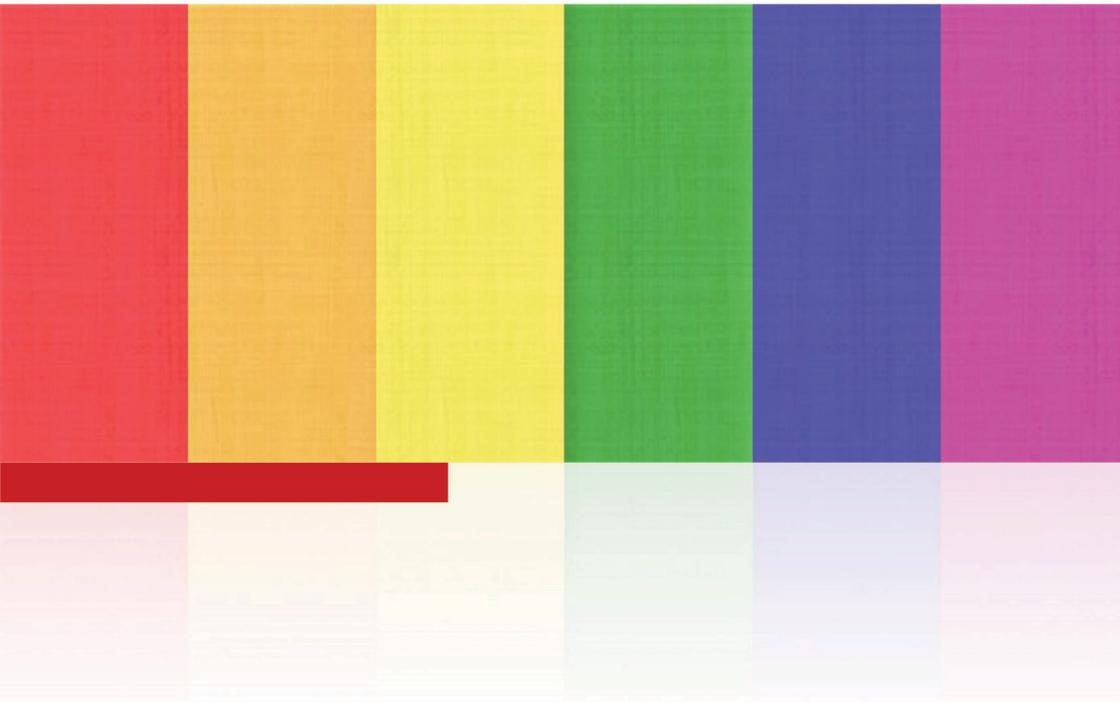
- *Oxford University – Researcher*
- *SOFRA – Queer Migrants e.V (Germany) – Board member*
- *SolidarityNow (Greece) – Career Counsellor; and Coordinator of the legal team*

*We are also enormously grateful for the participation of two refugees who gave interviews for this study, but whose identity we prefer to keep anonymous.*

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