



**REFUGEPOINT**

# Challenges related to LGBTIQ+ refugees and shelter in urban contexts

Hester Moore and Beth Waruiru

**Overview:** Ensuring safety, protection, and solutions for queer refugees remains a global challenge. Providing interventions for these communities brings additional challenges in countries of asylum that themselves criminalise same-sex relations. Continual cycles of displacement; violence, exploitation and abuse; economic and social vulnerabilities; and an overall lack of social capital experienced by LGBTQ+ refugees, fuels chronic insecurities and other challenges in urban environments. This piece was written with a view to improving the protection of queer refugees, particularly with respect to shelter, but with implications and lessons for other programs as well.

## 1. Introduction

In urban humanitarian protection environments, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ+)<sup>1</sup> refugees and asylum seekers confront compound obstacles in the search for safe shelter. Queer refugees experience multiple intersecting protection risks. Continual cycles of displacement; violence, exploitation and abuse; economic and social vulnerabilities; and an overall lack of social capital experienced by LGBTQ+ refugees fuels chronic housing insecurities in urban environments. These realities are reinforced by the absence of an overarching protective social network, which could otherwise facilitate safe shelter options for queer refugees living in foreign countries. Confronted with hostile attitudes from both host and refugee communities in countries of asylum, lacking social capital, connections and often battling language barriers, queer refugees' capacities to negotiate safe shelter are vastly reduced; relegating many to reliance on exploitative situations to provide basic necessities.

Based on their profiles, members of distinct queer refugee communities – including gay and bisexual men, lesbian and bisexual women, and trans and gender-diverse individuals – experience the relationship between social capital and housing insecurity in different patterns. Whereas gay and bisexual men generally purport wider community connections and tend to live in larger groups, lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) refugee women reside within a less identified demographic group; are generally less mobilized, and reside in smaller numbers. Their relative invisibility often relegates LBQ women to the outskirts of conversations about humanitarian response, and little attention is given to these refugee experiences. Trans\*<sup>2</sup> individuals, also possessing their own unique protection risks, face immense social stigma and marginalization in the search for permanent, safe housing.

For many LGBTQ+ refugees, living in cities generally offers a greater degree of anonymity (and security) than the exposed nature of life in refugee camps or settlements. Shelter designations in these settings pose unintentional, but serious, risks to these refugees as members of minorities attempting to navigate insular and hostile non-urban environments. While potentially less conspicuous, however, life in the cities carries its own risks; material and cash assistance to urban refugees have vast limitations, and queer refugees are often faced with the difficult question of how to navigate self-reliance in challenging, and dangerous, urban environments. Notably, whilst

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<sup>1</sup> While there is no single term in use that accurately captures the spectrum of all sexual and gender identities, the “+” attached here to the LGBTQ acronym indicates inclusivity towards other identities not encapsulated in the term itself. “LGBTQ+ refugees” is used interchangeably throughout this piece with “queer refugees”, both as umbrella terms for the constantly evolving range of sexual and gender identities.

<sup>2</sup> Trans\* is an umbrella term that refers to all identities within the gender spectrum. The asterisk denotes all transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming identities.

not as restrictive as the camp, the mobility of queer refugees in cities remains highly constricted. Based on their realities, many refugees are forced to live in substandard shelters in lower socioeconomic, conservative and more condensed urban areas; exposing them to the intrusive glare of neighbours and landlords, and influencing the scope of their movements to avert the risks inherent in interacting with their environment.

## **2. Effects of lack of shelter, challenges**

Without securing shelter, refugees are left without stability and safety. For queer refugees, safe accommodation is paramount. In the urban context, securing accommodation can be a daunting task due to living arrangements in low income settlements. Typically, refugees identify affordable accommodation and live in small groups of three or four people. Queer refugees who can “pass” as heterosexual or cisgender are often tasked to engage landlords in negotiating rent and signing leases. This brings about a power imbalance in the household, with visibly queer refugees feeling indebted to others who sometimes may not live in the household. In several cases documented in urban environments, this arrangement has resulted in exploitation (financial and sexual), constant threats of eviction and increased reports of mental and psychological torture.

Trans\* refugees have an especially challenging time identifying and maintaining accommodation. Visible trans\* refugees are at a significantly higher risk of abuse and violence within the larger host community. In many occasions, queer refugees are unwilling to share accommodation with trans\* refugees, fearing the escalation of their own risks. Trans\* refugees face discrimination by other queer refugees and non LGBTQ+ refugees, leaving them isolated and at heightened risk. Visibly queer refugees have reported that upon arrival in countries of asylum, they have been forced to engage in survival sex for accommodation. Consequently, there are increased reported cases of SGBV and HIV, as well sexually transmitted infections. In urban contexts, both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ refugees have been served with eviction notices after interacting with visibly queer refugees.

Host communities also play significant roles in victimizing queer refugees - especially new arrivals, who lack social connections, safety nets and financial support in new environments. Cases of intimidation, sexual exploitation, intimate partner violence and physical assault have been reported to UNHCR and partner agencies; with refugees unwilling to pursue legal redress on account of discriminative justice mechanisms.

To find safe spaces, some queer refugees join online dating apps and chat groups. These online communities can expose refugees to blackmail and, in some cases, SGBV with perpetrators masquerading as persons from the queer community. Similarly, faced with the prospect of suffering further violence from authorities, refugees are generally unwilling to pursue legal remedies against perpetrators in these instances.

### 3. Potential solutions

Based on these prevailing risks, identifying safe shelter options for LGBTQ+ refugees in urban humanitarian environments can be an immensely challenging exercise. Shelter interventions by humanitarian agencies generally fail to marry safe houses with safe spaces. Emergency housing facilities for refugees - including for survivors of domestic violence – is not disaggregated for LGBTQ+ individuals<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, because safe houses are microcosms of refugee communities, the same levels of homophobia and intolerance that prevail in the wider community can be transplanted on social relations and power structures within safe housing facilities; placing refugees at further risk, but within a more condensed environment. It is therefore crucial that agencies develop and maintain more inclusive strategies for safe housing in protection response<sup>4</sup>. As a precursor, this necessitates the mainstreaming of queer perspectives and needs within shelter and protection-specific strategic and operational documents, including partnership agreements. In designing and maintaining safe housing facilities, agencies need to remain sensitive to diversity amongst residents; and ensure that *do no harm* is respected. In practice, this could mean protective policies that guarantee privacy vis-a-vis the sleeping arrangements of queer persons (especially with the special sensitivities and preferences of trans\* residents in mind); ensuring that all staff are trained on and sensitive to LGBTQ+ issues; facilitating queer refugees' access to sensitized psychosocial and health services in safe houses; and creating responsive feedback and complaints mechanisms.

Housing large groups of LGBTQ+ refugees together, either in safe housing arrangements or in the community, can be a serious protection risk. In some urban contexts<sup>5</sup>, humanitarian agencies have been compelled to intervene in precarious protection situations, by relocating groups of queer refugees following threats from neighbours and members of local communities. Consequently, queer refugees are advised by agencies to avoid living in numbers large enough to provoke adverse attention from locals. While living in smaller groups can mitigate such protection risks, however, the financial burdens associated with this often place additional stress on refugees in their attempts to be self-reliant. As such, cash assistance for queer urban refugees can be a vital tool in helping individuals to pay their rent and to ensure more sustained housing security. Research and conversations with LGBTQ+ refugees show that cash assistance is harnessed by most of them primarily as a means to pay rent<sup>6</sup>. Guaranteeing that basic needs are

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of discriminations and access, see instances of masculine-presenting LBQ women being rejected from emergency safe houses after having suffered instances of domestic or intimate partner violence – The Wildness, *Abuse in Queer Relationships: Time to Talk About It, Part I* (August 2019)

<sup>4</sup> While ideally, safe houses specifically for queer persons would exist, in practice this is not a realistic objective for many agencies operating in urban contexts in countries of asylum. Unless and until such objectives are feasible, recommendations should be adapted to align with realities.

<sup>5</sup> Nairobi, Kenya

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Refuge Point, *Disaggregating LGBTIQ Protection Concerns: Experiences of refugee communities in Nairobi* (2018); Human Rights Watch, *Don't Punish Me for Who I Am: Systematic Discrimination Against Transgender Women in Lebanon* (2019)

met through targeted cash assistance ensures a minimal level of protection for queer refugees in the urban environment.

For trans\* refugees, the search for safe shelter carries additional risks. During outreach exercises, trans refugees frequently cite the ongoing need for humanitarian agencies to provide safe housing for vulnerable trans\* individuals<sup>7</sup>. In addition, trans\* refugees can encounter barriers with landlords on account of contrast between affirmed gender identity and identity documents. While landlords require tenants to present a form of identification when renting, trans\* persons' names and gender expressions do not often align with the sex markers on their documents. This is a feature of many trans\* experiences (both nationals and foreigners), and the relationship between a landlord and a trans\* tenant carries significant power imbalances and SGBV risks. On account of their displacement and foreign status, trans\* refugees possess heightened vulnerabilities in these instances. Accordingly, providing housing assistance to at-risk queer refugees can encompass other interventions than cash. Many trans\* and queer refugees encounter discrimination from potential landlords based on their gender expressions or non-conforming appearances. Depending on the environment, identifying and working with a network of queer-friendly landlords (and mapping friendlier neighbourhoods) could be one solution. This can be done in partnership with local groups working with queer people, who are best placed and connected to offer insight into potential solutions.

Another answer is scattered, community-based housing for smaller groups of queer people. This could also incorporate elements of holistic protection programming, including access to skills development, vocational training, and home-based income generating activities (such as artisan or online-based work). Cash assistance provided to residents ensures that basic needs - including rent, food and medicine – are met. For queer youth and children, community-based safe housing can also provide alternative protection solutions than orthodox shelter interventions. In discriminatory environments, foster care and supervised living arrangements, group homes, and mainstreamed safe housing can pose serious risks to the safety of young queer people. Developing tailored shelter solutions for young LGBTQ+ people can also allow them to access education, psychosocial support, skills development, and to engender friendships and communities within their own homes.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Because of the vast effects of social exclusion, queer refugees live in the margins of society, with little access to services and lacking essential family or community safety nets. Having already experienced isolation and persecution in their own countries, and then again in a foreign one, refugees are at a unique intersection of risks compounded by these cycles of exclusion and displacement. Queer refugees lack the protections offered by a social safety network, and the urban isolation of queer refugees is a distinct risk factor. In an already difficult urban

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<sup>7</sup> Refuge Point, *Disaggregating LGBTIQ Protection Concerns: Experiences of refugee communities in Nairobi* (2018)

environment, where refugees' mobility and abilities to remain anonymous are compromised, LGBTQ+ individuals are at increased risk of *invisibility* or isolation from services. Cultivating protective social networks in the urban environment is therefore an important element of bolstering the safety of queer refugees. Depending on the context, this could assume the form of linkages with local and community-based groups working on LGBTQ+ issues; promoting peer support and youth groups amongst refugee communities (and providing safe spaces and mobilization); ensuring outreach efforts and mobile services to the community; and formulating support strategies for the development of refugee-led community-based initiatives.

Contextual challenges in arriving at solutions arise uniquely in every urban protection environment. As such, not all recommendations are applicable; especially in contexts where there is a minimal presence of LGBTQ+ focused programming and groups. In every context, however, agencies have the duty to investigate the unique shelter challenges of queer refugees and to integrate these perspectives into strategy.