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Charting a Path for LGBTIQ+ Justice in Humanitarian Response in Asia and the Pacific





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This advocacy brief is a product of collaboration between members of the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group and Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Working Group. It is primarily informed by the research and contributions of Edge Effect and Outright International, ILGA Asia, and Equal Asia Foundation.

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SUMMARY

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+)^[1] individuals face challenges across different crises, including armed conflicts, disasters, and migration, and forced displacement. As in other regions, LGBTIQ+ communities in Asia and the Pacific are vulnerable to various forms of discrimination and violence, which are both similar to and distinct from other individuals and groups in humanitarian emergencies. These vulnerabilities stem from pre-existing inequalities, discrimination, and violence that are frequently exacerbated during crises, and are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, such as gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, and displacement status, among others. Yet, humanitarian agencies struggle to fully understand and effectively respond to the diverse needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals.

This advocacy brief is a product of collaboration between Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group and Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Working Group in Asia and the Pacific region. It is primarily informed by the research and contributions of Edge Effect and Outright International, ILGA Asia, and Equal Asia Foundation. It underscores a number of significant challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ communities in Asia and the Pacific region, addresses some of the major barriers to achieving LGBTIQ+ inclusion in humanitarian response, and calls on humanitarian organizations to prioritize the protection and inclusion of LGBTIQ+ communities in their response efforts.

[1] The terms LGBTIQ+ or diverse SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics) are used in global contexts. However, neither term is universally applicable nor reflects the full diversity of sexual and gender formations, practices, and identities that exist. These terms and their usage are constantly evolving, and SOGIESC applies to all people. In practice, various culturally, linguistically, and context-specific terms may be used where appropriate.

CHALLENGES FACED BY LGBTIQ+ COMMUNITIES IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC DURING CRISES

As in other regions, in Asia and the Pacific, LGBTIQ+ individuals encounter a range of challenges across various crises, including armed conflicts, post-conflict contexts, disasters leading to migration and displacement, shaped by multiple intersecting factors including gender, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, and displacement status.² These vulnerabilities include, but are not limited to, increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV), disruption of community networks, and patterns of criminalization, stigmatization and discrimination that are reflected in response efforts. These issues expose them to further marginalization in settings such as borders, camps, temporary shelters, and aid distribution areas, where the traditional distinction between public and private spaces is dismantled.³

In the context of conflicts, LGBTIQ+ individuals become targets of various types of violence, including but not limited to, sexual violence, torture, beatings, and exploitation.⁴ Intersecting factors influence an individual's susceptibility to GBV, as well as the range of risks and vulnerabilities they face, including in conflicts and prison/detention contexts. LBQ women and transgender men encounter

unique challenges, including the risk of so-called 'corrective rape', and unwanted pregnancies from rape, as well as forced heterosexual marriage.⁵ For example, in Myanmar, transgender women of Rohingya background were subjected to various forms of sexual violence, including rape.⁶ However, while women and girls are subjected to widespread GBV and make up the majority of survivors of sexual violence globally, research has shown that adolescent boys, especially those with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), also experience sexual violence, including sexual exploitation in humanitarian settings.⁷

In prison or detention settings, LGBTIQ+ individuals face increased vulnerability not only to GBV perpetrated by security guards, but also to potential violence from other detainees.⁸ This was exemplified in Myanmar following the coup in 2021.⁹ Sex-based segregation within prison and detention facilities exposes particularly transgender women and gay men in men's facilities to potential violence and abuse from fellow detainees.¹⁰ This vulnerability is compounded by barriers to access to services and reporting barriers, which may be exacerbated in detention settings due to the fear of further punishment and continued proximity to the perpetrator, as well as existing power imbalances and a pervasive culture of silence.¹¹

Faced with persecution and suppression, many LGBTIQ+ people are forced to flee their home countries despite the lack of established safe passages.¹² Yet, they are likely to face serious violations by border and state policing in transit states, including but not limited to, torture, trafficking, and exploitation.¹³ Lesbian and bisexual women in contexts where gender norms heavily restrict their mobility face unique challenges

[2] Edge Effect and Outright International 2024, [‘They Know What We Don’t’: Meaningful Inclusion of LGBTIQ People in Humanitarian Action](#); ILGA Asia and Stonewall 2023, [Afghanistan Briefing Paper: Too Many to be Given Safe Passage, Too Few to be Part of Humanitarian Response](#); Dwyer 2021, [The Only Way is Up: Monitoring and Encouraging Diverse SOGIESC Inclusion in the Humanitarian and DRR Sectors](#); Humanitarian Advisory Group 2018, [Taking Sexual and Gender Minorities Out of The Too-Hard Basket](#); Peace and Justice Network Pakistan 2023, [A Sensitization Booklet for Humanitarian Organizations for Transgender Community Inclusion in Floods and Disaster Response](#).

[3] Edge Effect and Outright International 2024; ILGA Asia and Stonewall 2023; Dwyer 2021; Humanitarian Advisory Group 2018; ICRC and NRC 2023, [‘That Never Happens Here’: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Against Men, Boys and/Including LGBTIQ+ people in Humanitarian Settings](#); Peace and Justice Network Pakistan 2023; Rumbach and Knight 2014, [Sexual and Gender Minorities in Humanitarian Emergencies](#).

[4] Serrano Amaya 2018, [Homophobic Violence in Armed Conflict and Political Transition](#); Daigle and Myrntinen 2018, [Bringing Diverse Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity \(SOGI\) into Peacebuilding Policy and Practice](#); HRW 2020, [‘They Treated Us in Monstrous Ways’: Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and Transgender Women in the Syrian Conflict](#); Maydaa et al. 2020, [Impacts of the Syrian Civil War and Displacement on SOGIESC Populations](#); Bulduk 2023, [The Violence of War: Intensifications of Bodies and Political Communities](#).

[5] ICRC 2022.

[6] UN Women 2022, [Inputs for the Report on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Peace and Security Submission from UN Women to the Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity](#).

[7] UN Women and WRC 2024, [Supporting Displaced Adolescent Boys and Male Youth in All Their Diversity Who Are Survivors Or At Risk of Sexual Exploitation](#).

[8] NRM 2022, [Rainbow Resilience: LGBTIQ+ Lives and Civil Society in Myanmar's Coup](#).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] ICRC 2022

[12] Afghan LGBT 2023, [In the Shadow of the Taliban: Untold Stories of LGBTIQ+ Persecution in Afghanistan](#); ILGA Asia and Stonewall 2023; HRW and Outright International 2022, [‘Even If You Go, to the Skies, We’ll Find You’ LGBT People in Afghanistan After the Taliban Takeover](#).

when fleeing persecution. This is exemplified in Afghanistan, where mobility restrictions, coupled with rules mandating male accompaniment for women, compound the challenges faced by LBQ women.¹⁴ Even in countries of refuge, they often face the harsh reality of continued criminalization of their identities and/or societal and legal discrimination.¹⁵ Particularly in countries where same-sex relations are criminalized and punishable by death, such as in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is common for LGBTIQ+ people to conceal their identities and activities out of fear for their safety, compounding the difficulties for humanitarian partners to work.¹⁶ This challenge is further exacerbated by the fact that only 37 UN Member States formally grant asylum to persons who have experienced discrimination based on SOGIESC.¹⁷

In the context of disasters and humanitarian crisis, challenges range from barriers to accessing justice, health, education, employment, housing, and other services to facing discrimination and violence at temporary shelters, as well as isolation and further marginalization.¹⁸ In shelters, LGBTIQ+ individuals often confront increased risks of violence and harassment, including in communal facilities such as toilets. This was observed among Rohingya LGBTIQ+ refugees in Cox's Bazar camps, where fear of threats and attacks forced them to regulate their use of these facilities, often resorting to late-night or early-morning visits to mitigate the risk of violence.¹⁹ Likewise, the gender binary segregated service provision has posed many challenges for members of groups that traditionally embrace non-binary identities, such as the *aravani* of India, the *waria* of Indonesia, and the *bakla* of the Philippines.²⁰ Many transgender individuals find it nearly impossible to access assistance, especially when emergency aid requires official identification documents, as seen during the 2022 floods in Pakistan. Most

transgender people in Pakistan lacked identity cards due to family exclusion and the omission of their names from official records to avoid 'disgrace' in society.²¹ At times, LGBTIQ+ people face public moral scrutiny and scapegoating, including inaccurately attributing blame for causing disasters. This was the case in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the *hijra*²² community was blamed for spreading the virus.²³

Crises also often affect the capacity of LGBTIQ+ organizations and destroy informal community networks and safe spaces that are often critical lifelines for LGBTIQ+ people, who may avoid assistance provided by governments, local relief organizations or religious organizations due to fears of violence and discrimination.²⁴ In the face of persistent marginalization, including limited access to education and employment opportunities, discrimination from family and society, and disrupted support networks during crises, LGBTIQ+ individuals are left with even fewer resources to survive crises.²⁵

[13] ILGA Asia and Stonewall 2023; UN Women 2023, [Migration Experiences of People with Diverse SOGIESC](#).

[14] ILGA Asia and Stonewall 2023.

[15] ILGA Asia and Stonewall 2023; UN Women 2023; Rumbach and Knight 2014.

[16] World Bank 2020, [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Contexts Affected by Fragility, Conflict, and Violence](#).

[17] UN Women and DESA 2023, [Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023](#).

[18] Dwyer 2021; Atkin et al. 2024, [Queer Vulnerability and Disaster Situations](#).

[19] Dwyer 2021.

[20] Rumbach and Knight 2014; Atkin et al. 2024.

[21] A. Saeed, ["Pakistan's Trans Community Battles Climate Catastrophe and Exclusion"](#), *The Third Pole*, 5 May 2023.

[22] The term "hijra" refers to people who identify as third gender and are part of South Asia's gender diversity.

[23] Edge Effect 2021.

[24] Edge Effect and Outright International 2024.

[25] Ibid.

CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING LGBTIQ+ INCLUSION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

In the midst of these challenges, humanitarian agencies often fail to fully understand and effectively respond to the specific needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals. The limited inclusion of LGBTIQ+ concerns in humanitarian assessments and response plans, combined with humanitarian capacity gaps, staff prejudices, and the exclusion of local and national LGBTIQ+ organizations, are some of the critical issues that contribute to the failure to meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ communities.

i. Lack of Focus on (All) LGBTIQ+ Communities in Humanitarian Needs Assessments and Response Plans

Humanitarian assessments across responses and within sectoral areas, as well as humanitarian planning documents, regularly exclude or mention LGBTIQ+ people in passing, failing to offer substantial guidance for response planning.²⁶ A review of humanitarian response plans, needs assessments, and other reports from humanitarian settings in Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Vanuatu, including critical thematic focus areas such as shelter, GBV, and livelihoods, exemplifies the systemic omission of LGBTIQ+ communities and their pressing needs within these documents.²⁷ The failure of humanitarian needs and disaster risk assessments, as well as monitoring of humanitarian responses, to disaggregate data by sexual orientation, gender identity and expression

leads to a lack of understanding of LGBTIQ+ individuals' needs and programs specifically designed to target their needs. Even in matters of protection, humanitarian agencies fail to recognize LGBTIQ+ people as survivors of GBV in their needs assessments and response programming, perpetuating their marginalization and denying them access to critical services or tailoring services to their specific needs.²⁸ When programs exist, evidence suggests that services purportedly targeting LGBTIQ+ communities in the humanitarian sector are in fact primarily tailored for gay men or men who have sex with men.²⁹ The focus on gay men overlooks the needs of other groups such as lesbians, transgender individuals, intersex people, and non-binary individuals, as well as issues such as the sexual exploitation of LGBTIQ+ adolescent boys and male youth.³⁰ When LGBTIQ+ individuals are overlooked in assessments and plans, humanitarian responses can even exacerbate pre-existing discrimination and exclusion against LGBTIQ+ individuals. For example, LGBTIQ+ people may face danger and harassment in shelters, toilets, and sanitation facilities that are segregated based on a binary logic of gender. Likewise, the allocation of assistance based on a heteronormative definition of a household or a family that ignores same-sex couples or groups of LGBTIQ+ people who function as chosen families reinforces marginalization.³¹ Lesbian couples in Manila, for instance, were denied food packages during the COVID-19 lockdown because there were no men or children in the household, so they did not meet the definition of 'family'.³²

[26] Dwyer 2021; Edge Effect 2021, "We Don't Do A Lot For Them, Specifically": A Scoping Report, on Gaps and Opportunities for Improving Diverse SOGIESC Inclusion in Cash Transfer and Social Protection Programs, During the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond; IASC Regional Network Working Group on Gender in Humanitarian Action in Asia-Pacific 2017, *Integrating Gender into Humanitarian Action: Good Practices from Asia and the Pacific*.

[27] Dwyer 2021.

[28] ICRC 2022.

[29] Ibid.

[30] ICRC 2022; UN Women and WRC 2024.

[31] Edge Effect and Outright International 2024.

[32] Ibid.



COUNTRY TO WATCH: **MYANMAR**

LGBTIQ+ people in Myanmar have long faced societal ostracism and discrimination, resulting in disproportionately poor outcomes in employment, education, health, and overall well-being even before the current crisis.^[33] Despite the remarkable progress made by the LGBTIQ+ community, the country's penal code still prohibits same-sex relations and imposes harsh penalties. Since the military takeover in February 2021, there have been reports of escalating attacks, arrests, sexual violence, and torture against LGBTIQ+ individuals.^[34] Even before the takeover, the mental health of the LGBTIQ+ community in Myanmar was concerning, with alarming rates of suicidality, self-harm, depression, and anxiety, which has been exacerbated by the ongoing crisis.^[35]

People of Rohingya background face severe marginalization in Myanmar, including denial of citizenship and internal displacement. LGBTIQ+ individuals from Rohingya background are specifically targeted, including with sexual and gender-based violence.^[36] Meanwhile, the needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals who have been internally displaced or who are residing in camps across the border are poorly met. Many humanitarian response frameworks prioritize 'traditional' families and female-headed households, rendering LGBTIQ+ individuals invisible in displacement camp settings.^[37] Other concerns include challenges to accessing HIV antiretroviral therapies, HIV prevention medication, hormone therapies for transgender people, and supportive spaces where they can openly identify as LGBTIQ+.^[38] The tools developed for organizations to improve gender equality in programming, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, can assist organizations in improving inclusive programming in Myanmar.^[39]

BOX 1: COUNTRY TO WATCH: MYANMAR

[33] NRM 2022.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] UN Women 2022.

[37] NRM 2022.

[38] Ibid.

[39] UN Women 2024b, *Understanding and Applying Gender Concepts in Myanmar for More Inclusive Programming*.

Essential Minimum Standards:

- Identify and address the needs and experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals in humanitarian needs assessments and response plans, in partnerships with local and national LGBTIQ+ organizations and activists.
- Ensure that LGBTIQ+ individuals are included in all thematic and cluster areas, by involving them in consultations and decision-making processes across all themes and clusters. This includes, among others, providing separate and safe shelters and sanitation facilities, addressing specific health needs such as HIV/AIDS medications and hormone therapy, developing safe space programs, providing adequate livelihood support, and providing survivor-centred and multi-sectoral responses to GBV.⁴⁰
- Integrate more targeted programming into response plans to effectively address the diverse needs of all members of LGBTIQ+ communities.

ii. Capacity Gaps and Staff Prejudices

Another significant issue concerns humanitarian capacity gaps and staff prejudices.⁴¹ Humanitarian organizations have not fully developed the capacity to meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ people, nor have they addressed staff prejudices. For example, GBV inflicts profound physical, mental, psychosocial, and socioeconomic damage on survivors.⁴² However, there is a significant gap in both services and adequately trained staff available to support LGBTIQ+ individuals.⁴³ There is particularly a capacity gap in understanding the diversity among LGBTIQ+ individuals and how forms of violence tend to hinge on the sexuality and/or gender identity or expression of the victim/survivor.⁴⁴ Moreover, norms and prejudice can also inhibit staff from fulfilling duties and providing services, preventing resources from reaching LGBTIQ+ individuals.⁴⁵ Therefore, service provision continues to be insufficient when staff lack appropriate training to respond proactively and intentionally to the needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals, hold discriminatory prejudices against them, or fail to understand the unique risks and experiences they face, as well as the scope and gravity of these issues.

Essential Minimum Standards:

- Build organizational and staff capacity to address the needs and protect and promote the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people during humanitarian emergencies.
- Collaborate with LGBTIQ+ organizations in developing training programs to build staff capacity. This engagement not only ensures that trainings are informed by lived experiences, but it also serves as a tool for strengthening relationships and trust between humanitarian organizations and local LGBTIQ+ organizations.⁴⁶

[40] See, for example, WRC 2021, [Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and LGBTIQ+ Persons in Humanitarian Settings: A Field-Friendly Guidance Note by Sector](#) (on multisectoral responses for SGBV) and UNHCR 2021, [Need to Know Guidance: Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer Persons in Forced Displacement](#) (on addressing protection needs for LGBTIQ+ displaced persons); and Dwyer 2021 (on shelter).

[41] Dwyer 2021.

[42] UN Women 2024a (forthcoming), [Building the Evidence on Violence Against Persons Based on SOGIESC: Data Collection Challenges and Opportunities](#); ICRC 2022.

[43] ICRC 2022; WRC 2021.

[44] UN Women 2024a (forthcoming); Edge Effect and Outright International 2024.

[45] Edge Effect and Outright International 2024.

[46] Ibid.

iii. Barriers to the Inclusion of Local and National LGBTIQ+ Organizations in Humanitarian Response

LGBTIQ+ organizations face significant obstacles to their full inclusion in humanitarian response. These include, but are not limited to, exclusion from international coordination mechanisms, difficulties in legal registration (which is essential for accessing funding opportunities), capacity gaps, lack of funding, and a lack of existing relationships and trust with international humanitarian actors.⁴⁷ However, LGBTIQ+ organizations play important roles in the humanitarian landscape, providing critical support to LGBTIQ+ communities during humanitarian emergencies and crises. They have invaluable knowledge of the diverse needs in these communities and have trusting relationships with them. There are several examples from Asia and the Pacific region where local and national LGBTIQ+ organizations filled gaps in humanitarian response and played critical roles in assisting LGBTIQ+ communities during crises and emergencies. For instance, LGBTIQ+ organizations supported access to safe housing for members of the at-risk network, provided emergency cash and food assistance, assisted detainees with legal matters, ensured that anti-retroviral medication was available for HIV-positive detainees and other community members with access concerns after the 2021 coup in Myanmar.⁴⁸ During the COVID-19 pandemic, local LGBTIQ+ organizations provided much of the assistance reaching the LGBTIQ+ communities in Bangladesh.⁴⁹ The active involvement of local and national LGBTIQ+ organizations is especially crucial, given that LGBTIQ+ communities often prefer to receive services from organizations they trust and perceive as understanding their concerns.⁵⁰ Notably, several partnerships have been formed between national/local LGBTIQ+ organizations and international humanitarian actors, including in Nepal and Myanmar, to facilitate the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ organizations in humanitarian response efforts.⁵¹ In fact, when LGBTIQ+ organizations have closer relations with humanitarian systems, there are signs of progress in the LGBTIQ+ inclusion in services.⁵²

Essential Minimum Standards:

- Support the participation of local and national LGBTIQ+ organizations in humanitarian and disaster risk reduction programs by providing funding and capacity-building assistance, establishing strong partnerships, as well as when conducting analyses and forming cluster working groups. These measures not only help to foster trusting relationships, but also allow these organizations to effectively meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ communities during crises.
- Invest in forming partnerships before crises occur, and develop flexible funding mechanisms. These are crucial in supporting LGBTIQ+ organizations, particularly those that operate informally.⁵³

[47] Ibid.

[48] NRM 2022.

[49] Edge Effect 2021.

[50] Edge Effect and Outright International 2024; Rumbach and Knight 2014.

[51] Edge Effect and Outright International 2024.

[52] Dwyer 2021.

[53] See for best practices: Edge Effect and Outright International 2024.

COUNTRY TO WATCH:

AFGHANISTAN

Since the Taliban de facto authorities assumed power in Afghanistan in 2021, they have enforced a strict gender order that forbids same-sex relations and transgender identities under their interpretation of Sharia law.^[54]

There have been alarming reports of grave human rights violations against LGBTIQ+ individuals in Afghanistan including death threats, harassment, extortion, arrests and sexual violence.^[55] They endure psychological trauma and challenges in reporting and seeking justice, as well as societal and familial prejudice.^[56] LBQ women face particularly difficult challenges in Afghanistan due to the laws restricting their mobility, requiring them to be accompanied by a male (mahram) companion in public places unless necessary.^[57] Despite the absence of established safe passages, a large number of LGBTIQ+ people are compelled to flee due to persecution and suppression. However, they continue to face violence and discrimination from border and state policing in transit states as well as in countries of refuge, where they also face the threat of deportation.^[58]

BOX 2: COUNTRY TO WATCH: AFGHANISTAN

[54] Afghan LGBT 2023.

[55] ILGA Asia, Afghanistan: "One Year of the Taliban Rule and the Unknown Future of LGBTIQ Lives", 19 August 2022.

[56] Afghan LGBT 2023.

[57] ILGA Asia and Stonewall 2023.

[58] Ibid.



CALL TO ACTION

In Asia and the Pacific, LGBTIQ+ individuals encounter a wide range of challenges in crisis contexts, which persist along a continuum of violence and discrimination experienced before, during, and after crises. This includes increased risks of GBV, economic insecurity, and exclusion from relief programming, among others. Yet, despite emerging good practices among humanitarian organizations, challenges remain in achieving meaningful LGBTIQ+ inclusion in humanitarian action in the region. These challenges include, but are not limited to, the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ communities from humanitarian needs and response planning, capacity gaps, staff prejudices, and barriers to LGBTIQ+ organizations' participation in humanitarian response, among others. However, to ensure an inclusive response, humanitarian agencies must prioritize LGBTIQ+ inclusion in their efforts and address the challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals. By thoroughly incorporating LGBTIQ+ concerns into all stages of planning, assessment, and implementation processes, and by addressing capacity gaps within their organizations, humanitarian agencies can make significant progress toward bridging the inclusion gap. Furthermore, by promoting meaningful engagement with local and national LGBTIQ+ organizations and assisting them in overcoming barriers to their full inclusion, humanitarian actors can effectively address the unique needs of these communities while also promoting their full potential as important actors in the humanitarian landscape.

RESOURCES

- [1] [Asia Pacific Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, response](#)
- [2] [Edge Effect](#)
- [3] [Equal Asia Foundation](#)
- [4] [Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility](#)
- [5] [ILGA Asia](#)
- [6] [ILGA Asia and Stonewall Safar Programme](#)
- [7] [Outright International](#)
- [8] [UN Women Asia-Pacific | Advancement of human rights of LGBTIQ+ people](#)

