



# Submission for the UN IE SOGI's Call for Input: Violence and discrimination experienced by lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women

Rainbow Railroad | January 2026

## Background

Rainbow Railroad is an international human rights organization that creates pathways to safety for at-risk LGBTQI+ people and strengthens policies and systems that support their protection and integration. Headquartered in Toronto and New York, Rainbow Railroad is one of the few organizations that work as direct service providers, advocates, thought leaders, and movement strategists to address global queer forced displacement. Since its founding in 2006, the organization has received 75,173 requests for help from individuals facing persecution due to their diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC). In collaboration with a global network of grassroots organizations and human rights defenders in crisis-affected contexts, Rainbow Railroad has supported more than 40,000 LGBTQI+ individuals, including facilitating international relocation for more than 2,300 people since its inception.

Globally, there are an estimated 117.3 million people worldwide who are forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations including 8.4 million asylum seekers<sup>1</sup>; however, the number who identify as LGBTQI+ is unknown. There is no comprehensive global data on the number of persons seeking asylum due to SOGIESC-based persecution.<sup>2</sup> This lack of disaggregated data has contributed to limited research on the experiences of LGBTQI+ people who are forcibly

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR : [Figures at a glance 2025](#)

<sup>2</sup> Center for Global Development: [Three things to know about LGBTQI+ Refugees this World refugee day 2024](#)

displaced and to persistent blind spots within humanitarian and refugee protection frameworks.

In recent years, Rainbow Railroad and other LGBTQI+ civil society organizations have documented the proliferation of laws, policies and political movements that explicitly target LGBTQI+ people. In 2025 alone, Rainbow Railroad received over 20,000 requests for help from LGBTQI+ individuals across diverse contexts. These included Ugandan LGBTQI+ refugees living in refugee camps in Kenya awaiting resettlement, asylum seekers stranded at the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as internally displaced people.<sup>3</sup>

Within this broader landscape, lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women have been consistently overlooked in refugee and humanitarian frameworks, particularly in protracted displacement settings<sup>4</sup>. LBQ women's experiences are shaped by intersecting vulnerabilities which can include gender, sexual orientation, migration status and poverty induced by forced displacement; their protection needs are rarely identified or addressed.

Rainbow Railroad's submission threads together community-led research, reports from LGBTQI+ grassroots partners, UN and civil society documentation, and Rainbow Railroad's proprietary data gathered through frontline work. Rainbow Railroad recognizes the diversity of LGBTQI+ women, including transgender women who identify as lesbian, bisexual or queer.

This submission identifies significant and recurring forms of violence and discrimination impacting LBQ women in contexts of forced displacement. Despite facing heightened risk, LBQ women remain largely invisible within refugee systems, resulting in persistent failures to prevent gender-based violence, ensure protection, and secure durable solutions for those affected by forced displacement.

## Significant challenges, barriers and forms of violence and discrimination impacting LBQ women

Rainbow Railroad's data provides clear evidence that LBQ women face persistent and severe protection risks across forced displacement contexts. Between 2015 and 2025,

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<sup>3</sup> Rainbow Railroad: [Understanding the state of Global LGBTQI+ Persecution 2024 Annual Report](#)

<sup>4</sup> Ulrike Krause, [Invisibilization of the unwanted Others? Feminist, queer, and postcolonial perspectives on the 1951 Refugee Convention's drafting](#), Women's Studies International Forum, Volume 107, 2024

Rainbow Railroad received requests for help from more than 24,000 individuals who did not identify as cisgender men. Among those who disclosed gender identity, transgender women (22.5%) and cisgender women (19.1%) together constituted the largest groups seeking assistance, followed by transgender men and gender non-conforming people. Among those who disclosed sexual orientation, lesbian (23.5%), bisexual (17.9%), and queer (13.5%) identities were prominently represented.

The majority of LBQ women requesting assistance were between the ages of 18 and 35. Rainbow Railroad's data shows that many LBQ women face exposure to violence and displacement during early adulthood, often coinciding with increased visibility of sexual orientation or gender non-conformity, economic precarity, and family formation pressures.

Across regions, LBQ women reported gender-based violence spanning family rejection, community exclusion, verbal and physical abuse, including threats framed as "corrective" violence. Among those who disclosed safety concerns, family-based rejection (56.8%) and community rejection (48.9%) were the most frequently reported, followed by physical violence (34%) and verbal threats (27.1%). These harms were often compounded by severe health and welfare concerns, with 46% of LBQ women who disclosed such concerns reporting lack of basic needs, and 36% disclosing mental health distress, including suicidal ideation.

The nature of assistance requested from Rainbow Railroad further illustrates the severity of risk for LBQ women in contexts of forced displacement. Data collected by Rainbow Railroad points to relocation as the most frequently requested form of support, followed by requests for emergency shelter, mental health services and health/medical care.

These patterns indicate that, for many LBQ women, remaining in their country of origin or first country of asylum is not a viable option. The data from requests for help not only reflects the vulnerabilities impacting LBQ women, it also points to systemic failures in providing protection, safety and dignity within existing humanitarian and refugee systems. One LBQ woman told Rainbow Railroad:

This "is My country, but I can't survive here...I have no place to stay, no family member can host me as they all know that I am Lesbian...I am alone. I tried to get a job but no one can hire me. [I] am starving in my own Country. I have no one to talk to. I have no one to ask for help. What I am kindly asking [for] is Help so that I can finish my study and get a stable life. [I] am homeless. Please I need your help. I truly beg you, I need your hand

because I am feeling hopeless, trauma isn't leaving me alive if life continues to be hard to me like it is today.”

## LBQ women who face heightened risks or specific forms of targeting

Between January 2015 and December 2025, Rainbow Railroad’s data on LBQ women shows that the United States (9,914 individuals), Afghanistan (2,936 individuals), and Uganda (2,886 individuals) were the top three countries of origin by number of people seeking assistance. This data signals specific country conditions, policy decisions, and political shocks that narrow protection space for LBQ women.

**Afghanistan:** Under Taliban rule, political collapse has magnified protection gaps; for women and LGBTQI+ people facing persecution, often the only viable survival strategies are concealment or flight<sup>5</sup>.

**Uganda:** Uganda’s Anti-Homosexuality Act entrenched severe legal penalties for same-sex intimacy and continues to incite hatred and violence toward LGBTQI+ people. Rainbow Railroad’s requests for help increased significantly following its enforcement, with LBQ women frequently citing family and community rejection in requests for assistance<sup>6</sup>.

**United States:** Executive actions in 2025 suspended key elements of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program<sup>7</sup> and introduced restrictive interpretations of sex and gender. As of August 2025, state legislatures had proposed restrictions on gender-affirming care or transgender health care in at least 39 jurisdictions.<sup>8</sup> Rainbow Railroad data from U.S.-origin requests shows a disproportionate concentration of transgender and gender-diverse individuals seeking assistance. LGBTQI+ refugees are also being targeted within the United States.<sup>9</sup> As a result of their intersecting vulnerabilities, LBQ women are uniquely impacted by these policy changes.

Across these contexts, violence and discrimination against LBQ women are not incidental, but structural and predictable, and are increasingly shaped by the

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<sup>5</sup> Afghan LGBT:Shadow Report: [LBTO Women in Afghanistan Under Taliban Rule \(2021–2025\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> Rainbow Railroad: [New anti-LGBTQI+ Legislation in Uganda will Increase Harassment and Discrimination-March 2023](#)

<sup>7</sup> Executive Order of January 20, 2025. Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program.United States Code, title 3 [www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/realigning-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/realigning-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program/)

<sup>8</sup> American College of Physicians, [Attacks on Gender-Affirming and Transgender Health Care](#)

<sup>9</sup> Rainbow Railroad: [Expelled and Unwelcome: LGBTQI+ Refugees Caught in a Global Attack on LGBTQI+ and Asylum Rights](#)

introduction of anti-trans laws and policies<sup>10</sup> and executive actions.<sup>11</sup> LBQ women continue to be impacted by escalating concerns about institutional homophobia and transphobia within police and other state institutions<sup>12</sup> which not only fail to protect, but actively reproduce fear, instability, and harm, particularly for LBQ women in contexts of forced displacement.

## Structural protection gaps affecting LBQ women in the context of forced displacement

Safeguarding access to asylum is especially important for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers.<sup>13</sup> LBQ women, in particular, are routinely rendered invisible within humanitarian and refugee systems. Their experiences are engulfed under broad categories such as “women and girls” or “LGBTQI+ persons,” obscuring LBQ-specific vulnerabilities. Anti-gender and far-right movements are particularly violent and exclusionary towards marginalized groups of women, including migrants, women belonging to ethnic or religious minorities and trans, lesbian or queer women.<sup>14</sup> Risk assessments and programming across humanitarian and refugee protection spaces often fail to address the safety of LBQ women.

This invisibility is reinforced by chronic underinvestment in LBQ-led and LBQ-specific initiatives. Global analyses by feminist and LGBTQI+ funders indicate that LBQ organizations receive a disproportionately small share of resources relative to the severity of the risks they address.<sup>15</sup> LBQ women are disproportionately excluded from economic and social support systems; that economic vulnerability directly correlates with exposure to violence.<sup>16</sup> Funding marginalization limits the ability of LBQ-led initiatives to provide sustained protection services, document violations of rights, or participate meaningfully in humanitarian coordination.

Forcibly displaced LBQ women face systemic barriers to accessing healthcare, legal protection and durable solutions. Rainbow Railroad’s data indicates that only a small number of LBQ women seeking help outside their country of citizenship held recognized

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<sup>10</sup> UCLA School of Law, Williams Institute: [The Impact of Anti-Transgender Policy and Public Opinion on Travel and relocation](#)

<sup>11</sup> Rainbow Railroad: [Condemns USCIS Actions That Threaten Asylum & Refugee Protections Across the U.S.](#)

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International Report: [Kenya: “Justice like any other person”, Hate crimes and discrimination against LGBTI refugees](#)

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Human Rights: [UN rights experts urge more protection for LGBTI refugees at-risk](#)

<sup>14</sup> UN Women: [Understanding backlash against gender equality: Evidence, Trends and Policy Responses](#)

<sup>15</sup> Mama Cash: [Vibrant yet under-resourced](#)

<sup>16</sup> Lesbian Global: [Economic Inequality for LBO+ Women: How Conflict and Disasters Create a crisis within a crisis and why Global philanthropists must act now, 2025](#)

refugee status (4.9%), while 17.8% requested a letter of support as supporting legal documentation.

Even in attempting to leave situations of danger, LGBTQI+ people, including LBQ women, face barriers. Data shows that airlines and airport authorities frequently become suspicious when individuals do not visually conform to heteronormative expectations, particularly nonbinary and transgender expressions of gender and sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, it is important to note that even when removed from immediate danger, LBQ women frequently encounter exclusion or barriers in accessing shelters, healthcare, and psychosocial services. Fear of mistreatment by police, healthcare providers, or humanitarian actors leads many to avoid reporting violence altogether. These service gaps are particularly damaging in protracted displacement contexts, where trauma compounds over time.<sup>18</sup>

## Divergent Pattern for LBQ women in the Global North vs the Global South

Rainbow Railroad's data reveals distinct patterns between LBQ women requesting help from the United States and those seeking help from other countries.

Requests originating from the United States have increased sharply since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Among U.S.-based requests where gender identity was disclosed, transgender women constituted approximately 38.2% of people seeking assistance, with transgender men and gender non-conforming people also disproportionately represented. When U.S. cases are excluded from the current dataset, cisgender women represent the largest group requesting help (approximately 21%), followed by transgender women (17.8%) and transgender men (15.6%).

Differences also emerge in relation to sexual orientation. Pansexual (25%) and queer identities (23.7%) accounted for a significantly higher proportion of U.S.-based requests, while lesbian and bisexual identities were more prominent in non-U.S. contexts. Most individuals requesting assistance from the United States were citizens, signalling internal displacement driven by heightened political hostility toward gender diversity.

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<sup>17</sup> A. Espinosa, K. Hampton, N. Nathwani, et al. Extrajudicial border enforcement against LGBTQI+ asylum seekers. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2024. [doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae031](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae031).

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, [For Lesbians, No Refuge in the Refugee Camp](#)

LBQ women requesting help from outside the United States were far more likely to lack legal status (9.9%) or to be asylum seekers or refugees in transit countries, facing heightened risks of detention, exploitation, and refoulement. Despite these differences, international relocation remained the most frequently requested form of protection across both contexts, demonstrating that many LBQ women perceive relocation as the only viable pathway to safety.

Rainbow Railroad's data also points to constrained mobility as a central driver of harm for LBQ women in forced displacement contexts. The high proportion of requests for international relocation, coupled with the large share of LBQ women lacking legal status in countries of transit or asylum, suggests that risk is compounded not only by exposure to violence, but by the inability to escape it. One LBQ woman told Rainbow Railroad:

"I have been married for years and have a daughter. 12 years ago I felt like I was bisexual, however gradually I [realized] I'm lesbian. I have my own lesbian partner. Some months ago my husband found out I'm lesbian. As you know here in my country there are lots of cruel rules against women, let alone the lesbian. My husband has threatened me to kill or keep my daughter out of my hands. Here in my country they even kill gay people as Islamic laws. I'm scared to death. Could you please help me?" She further shared details of a violent experience she had, including being physically attacked by her husband, and her husband and mother "talking about getting rid of [her] for good." She said: "My mother started crying because she didn't want me killed even after all this, so instead she suggested they marry me off to my cousin so I'm no longer their problem. There's no way on earth that I will marry my cousin, so I've decided that if nothing changes, I will kill myself one night before our marriage. Because I can't live like this forever."

## Rainbow Railroad's Response

Rainbow Railroad's support of at-risk LBQ women demonstrates how targeted, gender-responsive interventions can reduce exposure to violence and discrimination, particularly when addressing barriers to mobility and access to protection pathways.

Since 2023, through a referral partnership with the Government of Canada, Rainbow Railroad has operationalized the Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR) pathway<sup>19</sup> as a protection mechanism for at-risk LGBTQI+ individuals. This model enables Rainbow

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<sup>19</sup> Rainbow Railroad: [Major Announcement - Getting LGBTQI+ People to Safety in Canada May 2023](#)

Railroad to directly refer 250 cases for resettlement, bypassing barriers that frequently exclude LBQ women from traditional refugee status determination processes.

For LBQ women, this intervention is significant. As shown through our data, these women often lack formal documentation, face heteronormative and gendered assumptions in the immigration process<sup>20</sup>, or are unable to safely access UNHCR registration due to fear of exposure or retaliation.

Rainbow Railroad's intervention following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan showcased the importance of rapid, flexible crisis response protection mechanisms when state and humanitarian systems collapse. Rainbow Railroad supported emergency evacuations, coordinated referrals for resettlement in partnership with allied governments, and provided interim assistance including safe housing, financial support, and psychosocial care. This response demonstrates that mobility itself can function as a life-saving intervention when formal protection systems fail, and that queer organizations are often best positioned to support safe movement for forcibly displaced LBQ women.

In 2024, Rainbow Railroad launched the Queer Forced Displacement Initiative to establish an international multi-stakeholder network aimed at advancing protection and solutions for forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people.<sup>21</sup> Early insights from these multi-stakeholder roundtables indicate that LGBTQI+ forcibly displaced people, including LBQ women, are increasingly vulnerable to the rise of anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-refugee policies in multiple regions.<sup>22</sup>

Our data and interventions illuminate how the lived experiences of LBQ women in forced displacement contexts are invisible because systems have failed to capture and resource them adequately.

## Recommendations

Rainbow Railroad believes that addressing violence and discrimination against LBQ women requires dismantling laws and policies that target LGBTQI+ people and investing in gender-responsive, intersectional, and community-led protection frameworks that restore safety, dignity, and mobility for LBQ women who have been affected by forced displacement. As such, we propose the following recommendations:

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<sup>20</sup> See for instance Kaitlin (Kat) Dearham, [“We just know who we are”: lesbian refugees in the Canadian immigration system](#)

<sup>21</sup> Rainbow Railroad: [Queer forced Displacement Initiative](#)

<sup>22</sup> Rainbow Railroad: [Report Back: Queer forced displacement in Mexico 2024](#)

1. Create resettlement pathways that are gender responsive, such as Rainbow Railroad's Government-Assisted Refugee partnership with the Government of Canada. Ensure that these programs follow GBA+ or similar frameworks to create systems-level conditions that enable access to justice for marginalized populations and ensure sustainable and long-term protection solutions for forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people.
2. Develop targeted protection pathways for LGBTQI+ internally displaced persons, recognizing that many remain at extreme risk within their countries of origin and require urgent solutions.
3. Increase funding for LGBTQI+ civil society organizations and regional networks to strengthen humanitarian and refugee protection systems for forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people.
4. Strengthen crisis response mechanisms by integrating LGBTQI+ protections into broader humanitarian frameworks, ensuring that LGBTQI+ forcibly displaced people are not overlooked in emergency response planning.
5. Expand multilateral coordination efforts, including investing in mechanisms such as Rainbow Railroad's Queer Forced Displacement Initiative (QFDI), to enhance knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and policy development across international actors.
6. Ensure meaningful participation of LGBTQI+ people with lived experiences of forced displacement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of domestic and cross-border policies affecting LGBTQI+ forcibly displaced people, prioritizing intersectional and community-led approaches.
7. Implement concrete measures at the state and UNHCR level that enhance data collection about LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers, and ensure adequate training for the collection and use of sensitive information..