



Collective Statement on Priority Areas to Protect the Rights of and Ensure Well-Being for LGBTQ+ Migrants in Mexico

On June 12-13, 2024, the Women's Refugee Commission and Washington University in St. Louis convened more than 20 experts to discuss the challenges and needs of LGBTQ+ migrants in Mexico. Experts came from large and small shelters, legal service providers, and organizations both focused on LGBTQ+ migrants as well as those with a calling to serve all people on the move. All participants recognized ongoing challenges in addressing LGBTQ+ migrants' needs, given high needs and limited resources.

The challenges confronting LGBTQ+ migrants who require international protection begin from social marginalization, discrimination, and dehumanization. In their home countries, they commonly experience and must escape from violence, lack of education access, and labor exploitation because of their LGBTQ+ identities. As they migrate, marginalization and discrimination continue. Risks of violence, including targeted sexual violence, are disproportionately high on the migration route, as is vulnerability to human trafficking. Meeting basic needs is a challenge for many. Unscrupulous employers exploit LGBTQ+ migrants as workers, and marginalization means that many LGBTQ+ migrants lack alternatives. LGBTQ+ migrants may turn to substance use as a coping strategy or sex work as a survival strategy; these choices can exacerbate marginalization through encounters with law enforcement or if sexual exploitation ensues. Organizations that defend the rights of and support LGBTQ+ migrants work with meager resources and act bravely in the face of threats to their well-being.

Priority Areas to Protect the Rights of and Ensure Well-Being for LGBTQ+ Migrants in Mexico

Key priority needs arose from our discussions. First, the existing systems of protection in Mexico are inadequate and must be strengthened to meet the unique challenges LGBTQ+ migrants face. Second, participants recognized the absence of individualized services available to intervene in cycles of violence, trauma, and exploitation that LGBTQ+ migrants face. Without such services, shelters and other organizations serving LGBTQ+ migrants are forced to take up the gap. Third, when shelters – both specifically for LGBTQ+ migrants and those that serve LGBTQ+ migrants, among other clients – extend their resources to fill in the gaps, constraints lead to a lack of integrated services within shelters. As budgets get stretched ever thinner, services like mental health, security, training, and general operations compete as priorities.

1. Strengthening Systems of Protection for LGBTQ+ Migrants and Defenders of LGBTQ+ Migrants

Violence against LGBTQ+ people is pervasive, and impunity for perpetrators is common in the region. LGBTQ+ individuals lack access to justice: crimes against them fail to get recognition; recognized crimes

go uninvestigated; when migrants press charges, fiscalías wave away their testimony and their claims. State agents, including police, may perpetrate crimes. LGBTQ+ migrants who are survivors of gender-based violence have their cases for protection unacceptably delayed or decided by officials who discount their unique risks and special protection needs. Widespread social discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals enables exploitation, and LGBTQ+ migrants face violence across multiple domains including physical, psychological, the economic, human trafficking, as well as direct threats and persecution. These cycles of structural violence and direct violence need initiatives and policies that:

- guarantee the protection of LGBTQ+ migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers;
- defend LGBTQ+ migrants' rights;
- combat discrimination and institutional violence; and
- provide security for human rights defenders.

2. Advancing Individualized Services for LGBTQ+ Migrants for Intervention and Prevention

There is a critical need for social services to intervene in cycles of violence, trauma, and exploitation for LGBTQ+ migrants who require protection. Medical and mental health services for migrants in Mexico either do not exist or have limited expertise in working with the LGBTQ+ community. Such services must be individualized for each person's particular needs. The services must be adequately robust to assist the individual in specific areas – e.g., trauma, behavioral health, or addiction – and additional areas where the individual needs intervention and support. Further, there is a broad lack of prevention services and integrated mental health services with physical health services for the LGBTQ+ community, which creates extra challenges for LGBTQ+ migrants; therefore, this issue must be addressed to meet the specific needs of LGBTQ+ migrants. Experts identified the following priorities:

- Building and strengthening networks of social services providers for LGBTQ+ migrants – inclusive of:
 - » types of services provided,
 - » scope of practice,
 - » referral capacity, and
 - » regional availability of providers;
- Building cultural humility within existing providers to work with LGBTQ+ migrants; and
- Increasing access to prevention services, inclusive of basic needs assistance, employment assistance, housing assistance, mental health services, and substance use services.

3. Expanding Shelters' Capacities to Provide Services to LGBTQ+ Migrants

Shelters that serve LGBTQ+ migrants have long improvised to provide the most comprehensive support possible to LGBTQ+ migrants. However, they operate with limited funding, limiting their services. Trade-offs must be made between basic operations; the quality of food and shelter provided; breadth of services provided to migrants; security within shelters; security for shelters and all those within; security for shelter staff, who may be targets for violence or extortion themselves; and specialized cases that require outsized outlays. In general, limited staff are available who can provide counseling and attend to LGBTQ+ migrants'

psychosocial needs. Many shelters are partially or wholly staffed by volunteers whose tenures may be time-limited and who may arrive with the best of intent but lack cultural competence with the needs of the LGBTQ+ community. In this context, the following are the highest priority areas to strengthen shelters' ability to best support LGBTQ+ migrants:

- Ensuring that culturally competent mental health services exist within shelters;
- Improving training for shelter staff and volunteers, inclusive of trauma-responsive care and cultural competence;
- Strengthening security for those within shelters;
- Receiving operational support in the face of significant need, including critical food assistance to LGBTQ+ migrants; and
- Making long-term investments in shelter-based comprehensive services.

We know that the needs of LGBTQ+ migrants are high and likely growing. However, the social invisibility of many LGBTQ+ migrants means that it is challenging to comprehensively capture their unmet needs and human rights violations. For others, particularly for trans* migrants, social visibility dramatically multiplies the risks of violence and exploitation. Now is not the time to step back. It is time to redouble our efforts.

We believe that needs are growing as governments – mainly but not limited to the government of the United States – place ever more burdens on people who seek asylum and other forms of protection. These burdens, such as the recent asylum ban, violate the rights of all people and disproportionately harm the marginalized, a category in which LGBTQ+ migrants are prominent. Administrative burdens are much more challenging to overcome in the face of social discrimination, and risks of targeted violence impacts individuals' abilities and willingness to wait for administrative processes to run their course. We call upon all governments – in Central America, Mexico, and the United States – as well as funders, service providers, and individuals to step up to meet the basic humanitarian and security needs of all migrants. Now more than ever, it is critical to protect LGBTQ+ migrants and provide them with safety and support that meets their specific needs.