LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE & DISASTERS

Exploring the impacts of disasters on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other non-binary, non-heterosexual (LGBTQIA+) people and how the lack of guidance and policy impacts the inclusion of these people in preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters.

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About Us

DRR Dynamics Ltd is a research and advocacy organisation formed in June 2014. Its primary goal is ensuring marginalised groups are better included in disaster risk reduction (DRR), disaster risk management (DRM) and humanitarian policy and practice.

Evidence repeatedly shows that groups outside of mainstream society or with limited social/ economic or educational capital (women and girls, older people, those with disabilities, ethnic minorities/ indigenous populations and LGBTQIA+ groups) are more likely to be impacted by a disaster or emergency event. Indeed, numerous recent events have shown these groups often experience higher rates of mortality, injuries or economic disruption.

The groups most marginalised within disasters often have the least input to the development of DRR policy and practice at local, national, regional and international levels. This can create a policy or programme devoid of marginalised groups representation and without proper recognition of the needs and specific requirements of these groups.

DRR Dynamics advocates that marginalised groups should be seen as agents of change who are not only able to contribute to DRR policy and practice but in turn, make it more efficient, inclusive and fair.

Introduction

In times of crisis, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other non-binary/non-heterosexual (LGBTQIA+) individuals***** are often faced with unique challenges that aren't experienced by heterosexual or gender-binary people (UNHCR, 2021). As with other marginalised groups, LGBTQIA+ people will often have their vulnerabilities, needs and strengths overlooked in policy development, implementation, and practical guidance (Dwyer and Woolf, 2018).

This marginalisation has also been reported in the disaster response phase, with people within the LGBTQIA+ community being discriminated against and not receiving the appropriate aid and assistance. Despite some work being done at an international level to recognise diverse gender and sexual minorities in human rights (see the Yogyakarta Principles (2007) and the Yogyakarta Principles Plus 10 (2017)) the very limited success and implementation of this work has allowed for their exclusion from key international disaster policy instruments (Barbelet and Wake, 2020).

As such, there is a continued failure, both at national and international level, regarding the recognition and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals within disaster policy and practice and as such, there exists a detrimental 'blind spot' within the disaster and related (international development and humanitarian) sectors (Gender in Humanitarian Action, 2017).

These policy blind spots have real world consequences and the current body of literature (which is small but growing) exploring LGBTQIA+ people and communities in disasters and humanitarian settings repeatedly highlights harassment and the perpetuation of discrimination and marginalisation experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in humanitarian and disaster settings. These discriminatory practices materialise in a variety of ways. For example, a commonly cited issue is the harassment endured by LGBTQIA+ individuals when gender-segregated shelters, toilets and sanitation facilities are established without consideration for gender and sexual minorities in humanitarian responses (The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 2011).

Likewise, research has highlighted the exclusion and marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ populations in disaster settings can directly impact health needs with basic medical and health-based considerations often failing to be met (Rumbach and Knight, 2014). For example, in disaster settings, there may be a failure to recognise the need for dignity kits and sanitary provisions for trans men who menstruate, as well as other medical needs, both physical and mental, which are more unique to LGBTQIA+ individuals (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2016).

A failure to have health needs met is further supplemented by a lack of specialist access to health services by LGBTQIA+ people. Reports identify issues accessing health care arise for many reasons, including fears about disclosure and confidentiality of their personal lives, especially within countries and societies where homophobia and transphobia are rife, as well as the risk of LGBTQIA+ individuals being openly rejected from accessing health services from healthcare practitioners (UN Women, 2021).

In the response phase, there have further been reports of numerous obstacles to LGBTQIA+ individuals in accessing aid provisions from those responding to disasters or humanitarian crises.

A key issue highlighted by reports and literature is the barrier caused by identification cards that do not reflect a person's gender identity and/or appearance (The New Humanitarian, 2014). Similarly, a lack of recognition for non-heterosexual families (with same sex or gender diverse parents) can also mean LGBTQIA+ people are unable to get the support and assistance needed (Pride in the Humanitarian System, 2018).

This can, in some cases, entirely exclude an individual from aid distribution. For example, after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami hit Tamil Nadu, the government issued ration cards. However, Aravanis, a third gender group found in the region, were unintentionally excluded from receiving ration cards due to their exclusion in government policy and gender discourse. Thus, such actions extenuated their marginalisation post-disaster (Picha, 2008).

By examining the LGBTQIA+ perspective within disaster contexts, this paper and research seeks to highlight the current gaps inclusion globally, use case studies to explore how LGBTQIA+ people can be engaged and consulted to ensure inclusive policy and practice and provide policy recommendations to assist policymakers, politicians and practitioners in closing the current gaps in policy and practice.
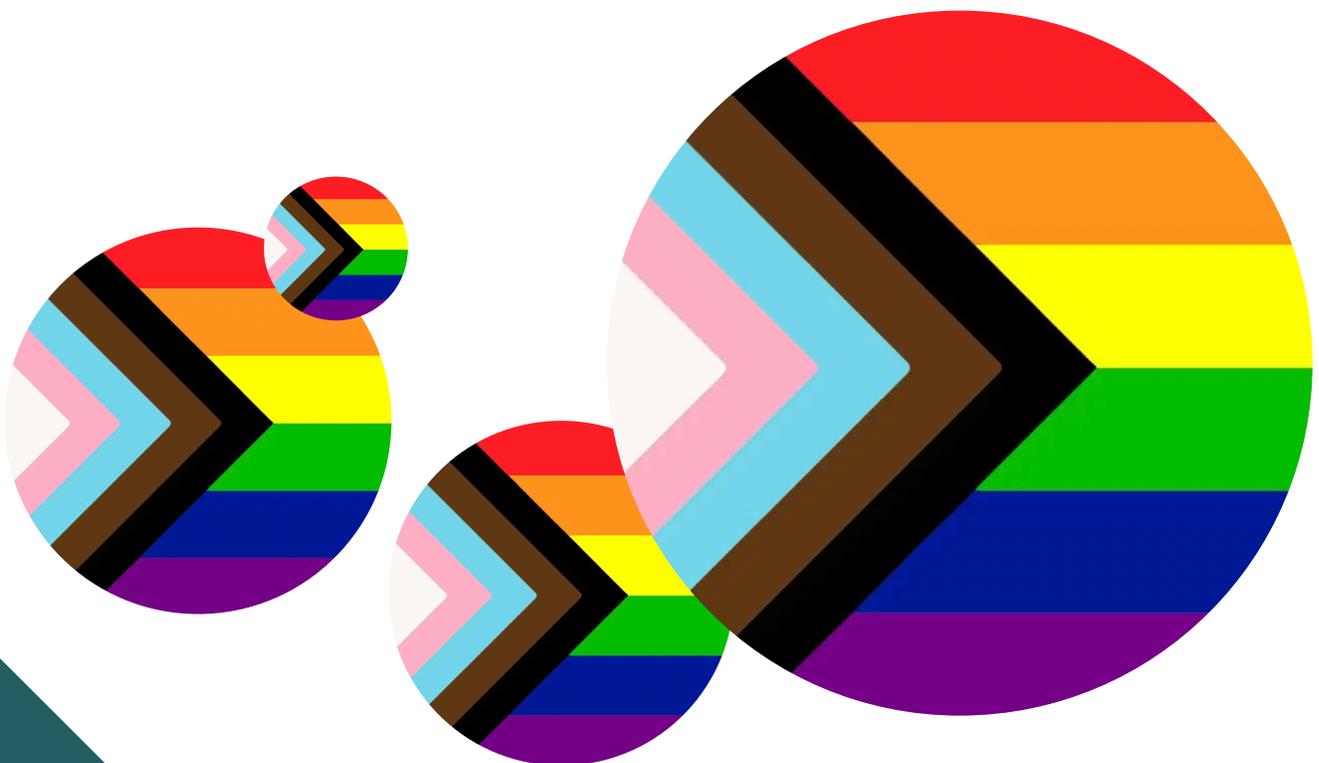
Background

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (United Nations The Sendai Framework, 2015) was developed as an all-inclusive framework to reduce and mitigate the risks associated with disasters. As with other 2015 United Nations Landmark agreements (including the Sustainable Development Goals, Paris Climate Change Agreements and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda), there was a specific focus on groups who are considered marginalised in disaster situations. Women and girls, those with disabilities, older people, ethnic minorities, poor people and indigenous populations were all explicitly mentioned within the Framework and identified as being at greater risk of negative impacts from disasters.

Whilst there is discussion around gender within the Framework, the document relies largely on the binary understanding of gender (male and female only), and as such, excludes a part of the community which is often amongst the most vulnerable to disasters. Those identifying as transgender, non-binary, or gender fluid were not explicitly mentioned within the Framework and as a result, there is currently no UN-led effort to specifically understand how sexual and gender minorities are impacted by disasters.

Research carried out by DRR Dynamics in early 2021 (Blanchard, 2021) highlighted that there are currently only six countries globally who have mention of LGBTQIA+ people within their official disaster preparedness, response or recovery policies.

Of those six, only two countries have policies that were led by central government departments, with the others being in partnership with NGOs or via academic institutions (via funding allocation). Indeed, much of the work found during the research for this paper, was authored and developed by academic institutions (Blanchard, 2021).

Other literature exploring the role of LGBTQIA+ people in disasters often highlights the lack of sexual and gender minorities within the Sendai Framework, which as discussed above, neither explicitly recognises the need to include LGBTQIA+ individuals per se, nor does it define or consider the non-binary understanding of gender as a severe hindrance to fully inclusive disaster preparedness response and recovery (United Nations The Sendai Framework, 2015).

The Sphere Handbook 2018, for example, advocates for the meaningful consultations of LGBTQIA+ individuals and organisations at every stage of humanitarian response, but provides no further indication of exactly how this should be done, what sensitivities should be considered when engaging with the community, nor the role of cultural and societal constructs around sexuality and gender identity which need to be considered to ensure a meaningful approach to engagement (Sphere Standards, 2018).

Other inclusive-focused documents such as The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (Core Humanitarian Standard, 2014) and The Inclusion Charter (Agenda for Humanity, 2016), developed principally by the CHS Alliance, Groupe URD and the Sphere Association, again emphasises the need to ensure policy and practice is inclusive but does so under umbrella terms of 'vulnerable' and 'marginalised' groups, which in themselves embody a non-exhaustive list of vulnerable individuals.

As highlighted by a recent UN Women report, The Only Way is Up, there remains scarce reference to LGBTQIA+ as a unique group who bring with them unique vulnerabilities. Notably, the report also identifies how LGBTQIA+ people as a group face further exclusion through the advancement of inclusive gender practices which interpret gender in solely binary terms (UN Women, 2021). On this point of grouping and using the umbrella terms of 'vulnerable' groups and 'minorities', the authors of the UN Women report highlight that this loosely defined grouping as a means to include LGBTQIA+ may itself be a contributing factor to the slow progress made in the effective inclusion of these communities and individuals in the design and implementation of disaster-related policies, plans and standards (UN Women, 2021).

Inclusive disaster policy design and implementation should be an essential point of focus to ensure a better understanding of the vulnerabilities and capacities of all marginalised groups and specifically, of LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities. Inclusive practices are critical to ensure the central tenets of humanitarian response, this being the principle of impartiality, as well as the commitment to 'leave no one behind' (United Nations Transforming Our World, 2015).
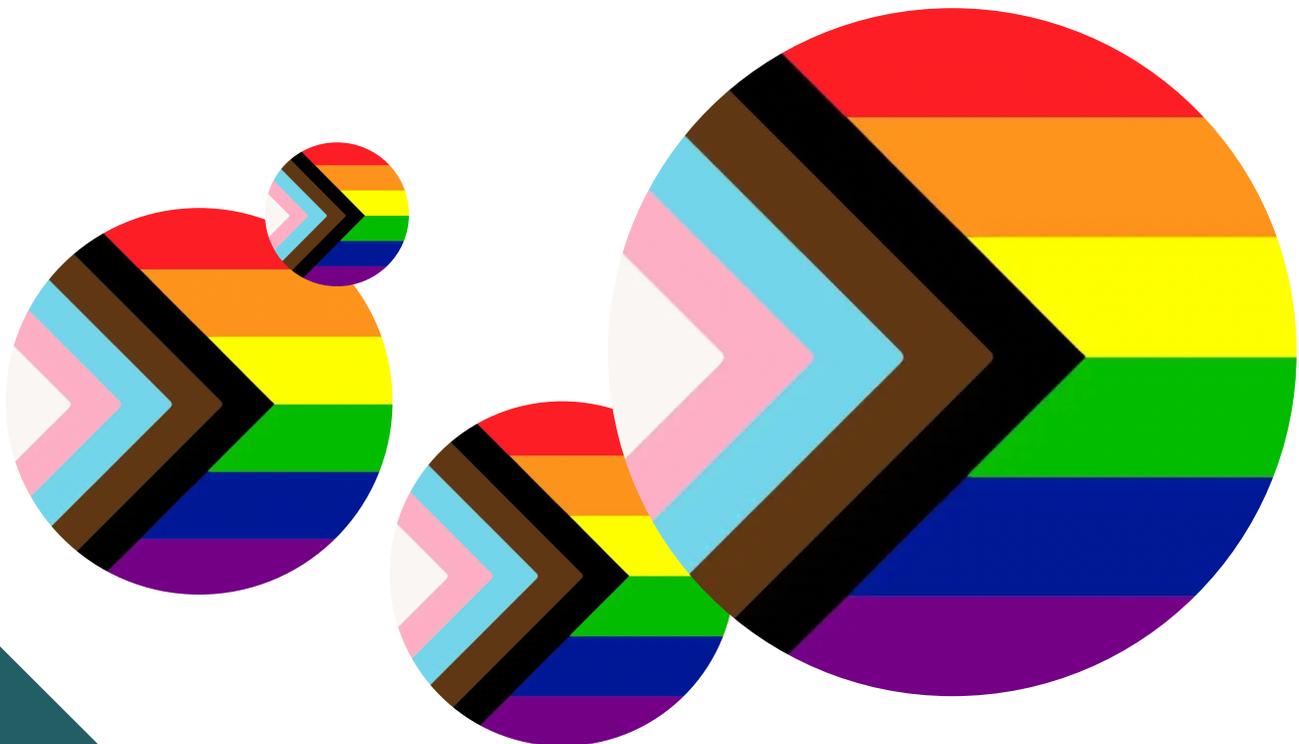
Beyond Marginalised Into Hyper-Marginalised

In addition to the unique impacts of disasters on LGBTQIA+ people, it is also key to recognise the multidimensional forms of discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ people in disaster contexts. For example, in disaster settings, many people turn to their faith for support, both spiritual and literal in the form of packages of care from faith-based NGOs. However, for LGBTQIA+ populations, they can often be further marginalised due to the narrative of disasters being an act of God and by religious teachings within their particular faith. For LGBTQIA+, this can materialise as an instigator for discrimination and harassment as the narrative may blame the disaster on the "transgression" of LGBTQIA+ individuals and is, in other words, a form of "retribution for their sins" (Pride in the Humanitarian System, 2018, p15 & 27). These discriminatory practices (originating at policy level) of some faith-based organisations heightens the impact of disasters for the community and some (but not all) faith-based organisations have been recognised as actively perpetuating the discrimination of LGBTQIA+ in times of crisis (UN Women, 2021).

Likewise, LGBTQIA+ households face unique exclusions from certain forms of aid provisions, as LGBTQIA+ households and families do not abide by the narrow interpretation and heteronormative assumptions of what exactly constitutes a family unit. As highlighted by the Pride in Humanitarian System Consultation Report, this results in households made up of same-sex partners being de-prioritised by relief providers thus not being given equal access to aid (Pride in the Humanitarian System, 2018) and equally being excluded from accurate needs assessments for aid provisions.

This is often due to poorly designed or implemented policy and training (Rumbach and Knight, 2014).

Furthermore, LGBTQIA+ individuals have been excluded from recovery work programmes due to discrimination. In a study involving LGBTQIA+ individuals in Rohingya refugees camps, it was reported that they faced difficulties in finding work, which resulted in a heightened reliance on aid distribution (UN Women, 2021).

Likewise, in examining case studies of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) highlighted how gay men were overtly discriminated against and excluded from post-emergency work programmes by being seen incapable and unfit as "the proponents wanted men" (OCHA, 2016, p7). These failings can stem from a lack of guidance and clarity at policy level, both national government and local-led implementation.

Capacity Over Vulnerability

Discriminatory and exclusionary processes, as discussed, unjustifiably discount the value all LGBTQIA+ individuals can add to community resilience and ignores (purposefully or otherwise) LGBTQIA+ people's unique knowledge, community organisation and resilience.

LGBTQIA+ people have been shown to exhibit a wide range of resilience measures which if included during policy development, could aid and support a more inclusive policy process in disaster risk reduction and emergency management spaces (Dominey-Howes et al, 2018). Much of this resilience has been shown to stem from a degree of self-reliance in the face of marginalisation in day-to-day life (Dominey-Howes et al, 2018).

This lack of wider inclusion has seen examples of LGBTQIA+ focussed community groups, NGOs and other systems set up to ensure access to services both in, outside and within disaster and crisis situations (Dominey-Howes et al, 2018). Usually run by the community themselves, the services provide access to healthcare, legal support and community fundraising for specific issues. This self-reliance and community led response provides an example of how disaster response and recovery could be more focused on specific community needs, rather than a homogenised response which actually caters to only a very few people without the consideration of an intersectional approach to vulnerability. More research is needed to understand the specific capacities which the LGBTQIA+ community bring to a wider disaster response process. Further research will assist in developing a policy process that considers these issues.

Lack of Data or Guidance on Collecting Data Sensitively

A complete understanding of the specific challenges, vulnerabilities and capacities faced by these communities is still largely unknown due to a lack of specific LGBTQIA+ focused data. Of course, this lack of data is a driving force behind inequality amongst all marginalised groups and despite the recent focus on the concept of 'inclusion' in disaster policy (especially at the international level), data that can be disaggregated (collected in a way that allows the data to be broken down into detailed sub-categories) is still rare. Given the specific hostilities faced by LGBTQIA+ people in many parts of the world, this is particularly true of LGBTQIA+ people. The failure to recognise this community within international humanitarian and disaster frameworks and instead leave their inclusion to be grouped under broader umbrella terms such as 'vulnerable populations' or 'minority groups'** has meant there currently is no internationally recognised call for disaggregated data by sexual and gender minority.

Indeed, some researchers have found this approach (broadly encapsulating all marginalised groups) increases the risk of tokenistic inclusion and a lack of specific policy-based tools designed to help those most vulnerable (UN Women, 2021).

In addition, there needs to be more wide-ranging guidance on how to approach the issue of data collection for policy development from this community. Given the risk many within the LGBTQIA+ community face by even acknowledging their sexual preference or gender identity, careful consideration needs to be developed and shared to ensure that collecting such data does not result in further discrimination before, during and after disasters. While the slowly increasing spotlight on the inclusion of all vulnerable groups may be regarded as also improving the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals in disasters, it has been shown within the research for this paper that the failure to explicitly examine the role of vulnerability and capacity of LGBTQIA+ people in global disaster and humanitarian frameworks limits effective inclusion both at policy and practical levels.
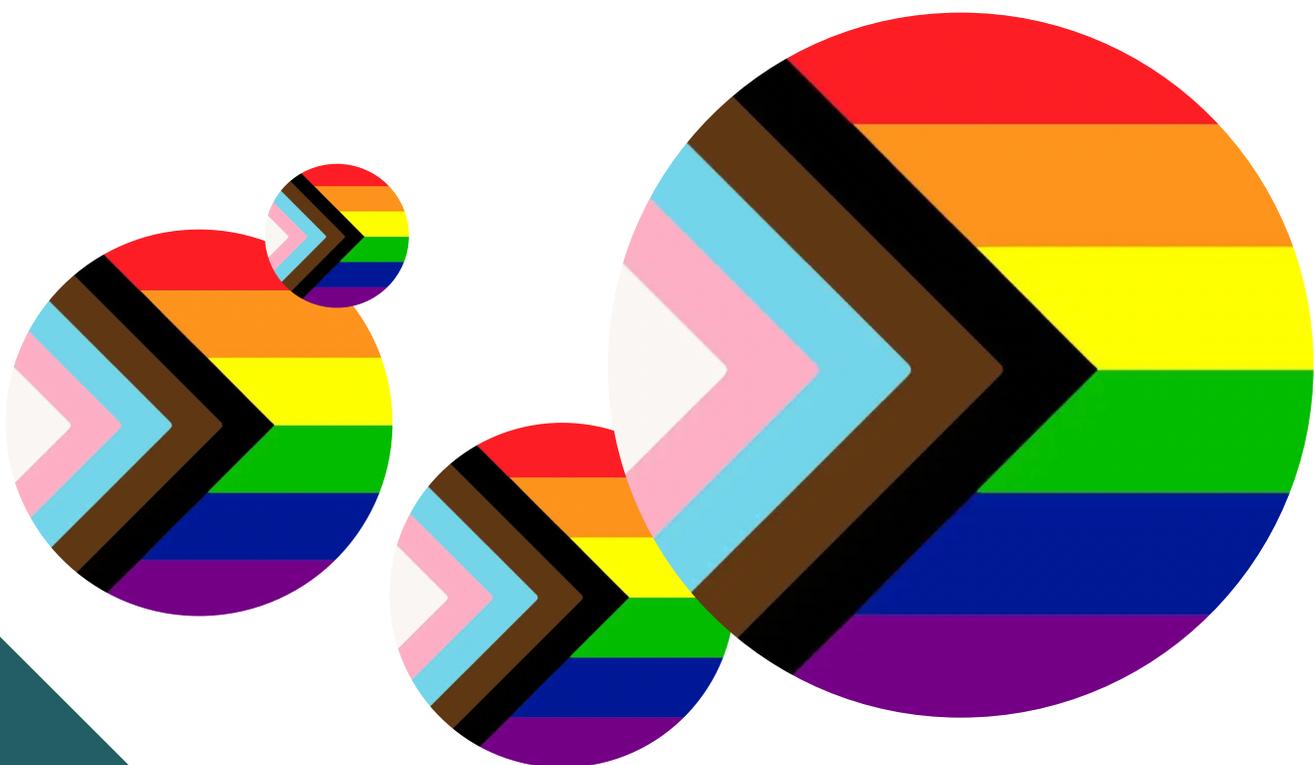
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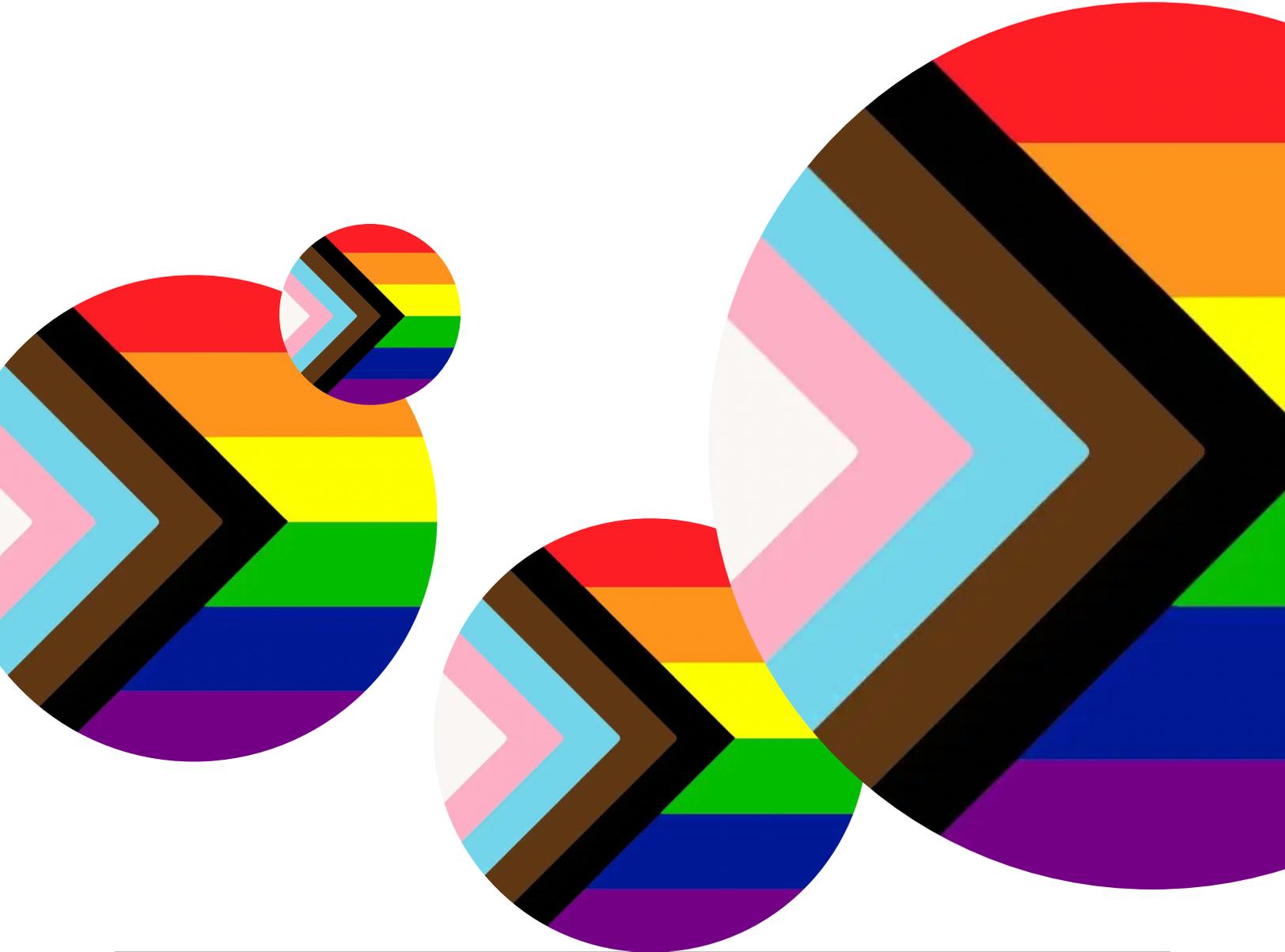
The research for this paper has highlighted considerable gaps in policy and practice at international, national and local level when responding to disasters from the perspective of LGBTQIA+ people. A lack of global leadership at UN level and subsequent lack of focus from National governments during successive disaster-related frameworks has meant people within the LGBTQIA+ category are often left behind in the preparedness, response and recovery phases of emergencies.

In order to rectify this and to ensure that disaster risk reduction policy and practice is truly inclusive of all in society, the following recommendations have been made:

● Ensuring LGBTQIA+ people are not only reflected and considered in policy and practice within disaster risk reduction, but actively seeking to include LGBTQIA+ people and groups in the development and building of such preparedness, response and recovery schemes.

● Ensuring a system of policy development that recognises the essential role of centralised guidance to build and incorporate LGBTQIA+ people within disaster risk reduction policy and practice but also accommodates local level, grassroots implementation of that gender and sexual minority inclusion.

● Continued evidence-based research into the impacts of disaster and emergencies on LGBTQIA+ people must be encouraged and importantly, funded. There should be a concerted effort to move that research out of the realms of purely academic settings and into real-world policymaking and implementation.

● The championing a human rights-based approach to disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response, where a person's sexual or gender identity is not a barrier to receiving the assistance and opportunities needed to recover from a disaster. This championship should be funded and encouraged by governments and international organisations, but with the explicit inclusion of LGBTQIA+ grassroots organisations and NGOs.

Case Studies

Active Outreach and Community Engagement

In 2009, to ensure inclusive outreach and identification, an NGO in Nairobi (the organisation name was withheld in the submission to our call for evidence) established an assistance programme for LGBTQIA+ refugees. In doing so, staff identified LGBTQIA+ refugees in need of assistance and generated appropriate referrals by collaborating with local LGBTQIA+ organisations, progressive religious institutions and trusted healthcare providers. The organisation also operated an 'open door' policy which provided LGBTQIA+ refugees with greater anonymity and reduced fears of being identified as LGBTQIA+ by other refugees (Breen and Milo, 2013).

In 2017, the Pakistan Red Crescent (PRC) actively looked to find and discuss obstacles and socio-economic issues faced by transgender communities within the country. Once identification had been made, a roundtable discussion was established to facilitate the direct interaction of openly transgender communities with Pakistan Red Crescent program managers in order to initiate discussions on how the PRC could better support and provide a platform to the transgender community (Gender in Humanitarian Action, 2017).

Active Outreach and Community Engagement

Since 2020, Outright Action International has introduced a newly proactive engagement with the LGBTQIA+ community by actively offering emergency funds to other LGBTQIA+ organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Outright Action International, 2021a). In addition, in a recent report (Bishop, 2020), OutRight Action International highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the marginalisation of many LGBTQIA+ individuals, and reports on other impacts, including but not limited to the rise in food insecurity, the abuse of state power and the increased risk of family or domestic violence. The report contains critical analysis to support the improved identification of the specific impacts faced by LGBTQIA+ people and communities in future disasters.

Establishing Safe Spaces

In 2015, Nepal experienced a devastating magnitude 7.8 earthquake killing over 8,800, injuring almost 22,000 and making approximately 3.5 million people homeless (Reid, 2018). In response to this, the Blue Diamond Society Nepal (BDS) which already worked with the country's gender and sexual minorities, created physical safe spaces by organising camps and facilitated food preparation for their community members (Blue Diamond Society, 2021) BDS also collected data on the experiences of community members, which allowed them to analyse what challenges their members were facing and what their needs were so that these could be addressed in future policy development. They also developed new relationships with the humanitarian cluster system, a relationship which has continued beyond the recovery work from the 2015 earthquake.

Establishing Safe Spaces

In Kenya, LGBTIA+ refugees have been housed by an NGO through a specific scattered-site housing programme and the same NGO covered the temporary cost of these rentals so as to ensure that one single safe house was not the target of harassment or violence; this further provided LGBTI refugees with greater anonymity (Breen and Milo, 2013).

In 2016, the Women's Refugee Commission in Lebanon collaborated with other NGOs in order to support the safety of trans women living in Beirut. They did this by providing information on available services, creating a safe space to meet, and facilitating art and drama group therapy sessions (Women's Refugee Commission and MOSAIC, 2017).

Mental Health Support

By noticing that LGBTQIA+ people were being left out of COVID-19 relief efforts, Youth Champs 4 Mental Health in Fiji, used grant funds to specifically distribute aid to LGBTQIA+ sex workers, an area of work whereby trans people are disproportionately represented.The organisation continues to advocate for mental health support for all (including suicide prevention), and further offers mental health services as first responders in times of disasters (Outright Action International, 2021b).

Mental Health Support

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Mawjoudin We Exist for Equality found a spike in demand for assistance by LGBTQIA+ community members (Mawjoudin, 2020). In response, they provided psychological support, facilitated online workshops and activities to generate a sense of community, issued phone credit, medical assistance, housing and rent support and the provision of food aid and vouchers. The organisation further collated lists of NGOs and other initiatives that were offering support to the LGBTQIA+ community and shared this list across their social media platforms so that individuals had greater access to information on the support available to them. Mawjoudin reported counselling sessions were the second most requested service (after food aid), which likewise highlights the impact of COVID-19 on the mental welfare of the LGBTQIA+ community members, a trend increasingly identified in emerging research as to the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTQIA+ people (Tusker Haworth, 2021).

Likewise, Fundación Amal Argentina also found a spike in demand for psychological assistance and heightened food insecurity faced by their community members, these being LGBTQIA+ refugees and migrant sex workers, people due to the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdowns confining community members to very small spaces for prolonged periods of time (Fundación Amal Argentina, 2020). In receiving funds from the OutRight Action International COVID-19 Emergency Fund, Fundación Amal Argentina was able to provide essential humanitarian aid, money to help reduce the debts of community members accommodation and housing costs, and they were further able to facilitate psychological assistance via WhatsApp.

Recognising Capabilities

In 2010, after the eruption of Mt Merapi in Indonesia, a group of Warias (Indonesia's third gender) chose to contribute to emergency shelters by providing haircuts and make-up services to evacuees. They also provided entertainment by hosting drag queen contests and, as a result of the money raised, the group were able to reach further evacuation sites and assist a large number of people who had been displaced by the disaster (Balgos et al, 2012).

The response of the Blue Diamond Society to the 2015 earthquake also highlights the capabilities of LGBTQIA+ communities in times of disasters. For example, alongside establishing a safe space, BDS along with community members further volunteered in hospitals to assist with the response and recovery as well as helped in the search for missing friends of community members. From the response actions taken by BDS there is a clear willingness by both BDS and community members to utilise their capabilities and capacities in disasters and to help others, despite any abuse they may face during this exposure.

Training

A UNHCR office in MENA reported that training had been conducted specifically to raise awareness of LGBTI issues to outreach volunteers and partner organisations. The office then provided training materials that outline recommendations on processes to ensure inclusion and the setting up of safe spaces signs (UNHCR, 2015). Likewise, another MENA UNHCR office reported the establishment of in house LGBTI-sensitised staff in all field offices, and further, the identification of such staff by using discrete rainbow pins on their ID badges (UNHCR, 2015).

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*Here, LGBTIQIA+ is used as an umbrella term to include all persons whose sexual orientation gender identity/expression and sex characteristics is not adequately addressed by the categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex, in particular persons whose gender identity is fluid or non-binary. It is used with the intention of the broadest possible inclusion to encompass all in an attempt to encompass all in an attempt to include non-western categories and local expressions of non-heteronormative SOGIESC.

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