
Later Is a *Cis-Hetero* Patriarchal Time Zone: Narratives of Resistance to LGBTQI+ Inclusion amongst Humanitarian Practitioners

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The plight of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people has become increasingly visible in Western media and scholarship within the past 10 years. Yet, despite increasing commitments and an expanding number of dedicated reports and initiatives, LGBTQI+ individuals remain discriminated against, exposed to violence, and excluded from humanitarian assistance. This article investigates the disconnect between global rhetoric and the persistent exclusion of LGBTQI+ people from most humanitarian relief programmes by conducting a critical discourse analysis of narratives deployed by humanitarian protection actors regarding LGBTQI+ inclusion. Drawing from interviews with humanitarian workers and humanitarian guidance documents, it argues that several mutually reinforcing discourses are currently at play within the humanitarian system to endlessly delay the meaningful inclusion of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people. These narratives not only uphold the cis-heteronormative and racist structures upon which the humanitarian system is constructed but also contribute to further stigmatization and anti-LGBTQI+ violence in an increasingly polarized world.

Keywords: LGBTQI+ refugees, humanitarian assistance, heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, LGBTQI+ inclusion

Introduction

The experiences and needs of forcibly displaced lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+)¹ people have become increasingly visible in contemporary debates about humanitarian crises and assistance. While most of the literature still focuses on LGBTQI+ refugees and migrants who live in North America or Western Europe (Camminga and Marnell 2022), a smaller but significant number of studies have explored the situation of the majority of LGBTQI+ refugees who are displaced within the Global South, in countries such as Kenya,

Uganda, Turkey, and Lebanon (Nyanzi 2013b; Greatrick 2019; Sari 2020; Pincock 2021; Reda and Proudfoot 2021; Sinclair and Sinatti 2022). In these contexts, the humanitarian system—a complex eco-system of transnational, national, and local entities who engage in actions to ‘save lives, protect livelihoods, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of crisis’ (Maxwell and Gelsdorf 2019, p. 5)—plays a critical role in ensuring the liveability of displaced people’s lives.

Within the humanitarian system itself, there is evidence of increased commitment to and advocacy for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ individuals across humanitarian responses. Most UN agencies and international NGOs openly celebrate Pride month online and have statements of commitment to supporting LGBTQI+ rights on their websites, accompanied by examples of activities targeting this population. While these are encouraging signs, analyses of recent humanitarian responses have shown that LGBTQI+ people remain predominantly excluded from formal relief programming and rely instead on informal networks of solidarity and support within the LGBTQI+ community (Larkin 2019; Camminga 2021; Reda and Proudfoot 2021; Ritholtz and Buxton 2021).

In this article, I explore the disconnect between the resounding commitments to LGBTQI+ inclusion made by humanitarian actors and the reality of humanitarian service delivery. First, I present a brief overview of the current debate on LGBTQI+ inclusion in the policies and practices of humanitarian actors operating in areas of the Global South affected by conflict and natural disaster. After introducing the methodology and context of the study, I move to analysing discourses deployed by humanitarian professionals involved in the delivery of protection services to justify their limited engagement with forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ persons in the programmes they design and manage in Central and East Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. By adopting the tools of critical discourse analysis, I consider how the deployment of certain narratives contributes to maintaining specific forms of power and privilege within the humanitarian system and therefore upholding cis-heteronormativity. Taking temporality as a critical dimension of displacement (Shakhsari 2014; Dotsey and Lumley-Sapanski 2021; Masoumi 2022), I argue that humanitarian discourses implicitly or explicitly relegate LGBTQI+ inclusion efforts to the future tense. During humanitarian crises, I contend, the future is never proximate, but rather an endlessly delayable horizon—intended here as a vanishing point, that which cannot be reached—towards which all hopes for LGBTQI+ recognition are oriented.

The State of LGBTQI+ Inclusion in Humanitarian Assistance

While the presence and specific vulnerabilities of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people in humanitarian crises have long been neglected, an increasing number of studies has documented the impact of conflict, disasters, and displacement on this group (see e.g. Balgos *et al.* 2012; Nyanzi 2013a,b; ORAM 2013; Rumbach and Knight 2014; Roth *et al.* 2021a; Yarwood *et al.* 2022). These sources identify multiple and compounding forms of social exclusion contributing to distinctively

negative outcomes for forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people, including the lack of familial or community support, discrimination in accessing services, and the heteronormative design of most humanitarian programmes (Rumbach and Knight 2014; Larkin 2019; Camminga 2021; Reda and Proudfoot 2021). They also highlight how intersecting forms of marginalization such as race, gender, class, and, in particular, refugee status, combine to further exacerbate the impact of humanitarian crises and limit access to humanitarian assistance (Allouche 2017; Reid and Ritholtz 2020; Samuels *et al.* 2021; Yarwood *et al.* 2022). Moreover, common definitions of humanitarian crisis fail to capture the experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals who are displaced not because of catastrophic events, but due to acts of collective or individual homophobia or transphobia, or the enactment of anti-LGBTQI+ legislation (Hagen *et al.* 2021).

Nonetheless, displaced LGBTQI+ individuals and communities are more visible than ever and humanitarian actors are producing an expanding library of statements, reports, and guidance documents symbolizing their commitment to formally include LGBTQI+ people in their target group (UNHCR 2015; Klappeer 2017). Significant markers of this noticeable shift include the publication of landmark reports on the protection risks faced by forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people (Roth *et al.* 2021a; Ahlenback 2022) and training materials by UNHCR and IOM (UNHCR and IOM 2021), the founding of Edge Effect, an organization entirely dedicated to advocating and supporting LGBTQI+ inclusion in the humanitarian sector, and the creation of a Director of Humanitarian and Global Development Programs role within Outright International, a global LGBTQI+ rights advocacy organization. In highlighting these recent developments, I do not intend to erase the hard work of actors who have been working with LGBTQI+ communities for several years if not decades, including a range of LGBTQI+-led organizations in countries affected by humanitarian crises (Larkin 2019). These efforts however took place amongst a generalized silence about the existence and needs of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people. It is only within the last 10–15 years that the international development and, later, humanitarian sectors have brought such discussions into the light (Jolly and Cornwall 2016; Klappeer 2017; Mason 2018).

The increased attention towards LGBTQI+ refugees, other displaced groups, and LGBTQI+ rights in the Global South more broadly is at the centre of an important scholarly debate. Authors such as Massad (2002), Puar (2007), and Rahman (2014) have documented the emergence of a Western *homonationalist* or *homocolonialist* discourse which positions Europe and North America as the beacons of modernity and human rights which the rest of the world needs to catch up to. In this linear representation of progress towards LGBTQI+ rights, which Klappeer (2017) terms *homodevelopmentalism*, Western models of LGBTQI+ identification and political participation become (homo)normative as the only globally recognizable and acceptable forms of sexual and gender diversity. In doing so, they not only erase non-Western ways of being and living outside of gender binarism and heterosexuality, but they also obscure the impact of historical and contemporary local and transnational forces, including colonialism and imperialism, on the trajectories of homophobia, transphobia, and queer liberation

(Klapeer 2017; Rao 2020; Saleh 2020b). At the same time, the wholesale rejection of LGBTQI+ liberation discourses as Western can both efface the multiplicity of localized resistance strategies and lend support to conservative anti-imperialist arguments which seek to return to an imagined pre-colonial cis-heteronormative patriarchal state (Nyanzi 2013a; Allouche 2019; Rao 2020).

Undoubtedly, when one considers the material conditions and protection status of the majority of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people today, Western discourses which, for instance, centre on the figure of ‘the suffering Syrian gay refugee’ (Saleh 2020a), appear highly hypocritical. The increased securitization of migrants’ and refugees’ movements has decimated safe pathways to the West, leaving LGBTQI+ individuals fleeing persecution stuck in a condition of perpetual transit, primarily in contexts with limited protections for, if not criminalization of, same-sex relationships and/or trans existence (Greatrick 2019; Pincock 2021; Ritholtz and Buxton 2021; Camminga and Marnell 2022). Restrictive migration and international protection regimes, combined with the increased visibility of LGBTQI+ rights and the strengthening of anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI+ movements worldwide (Nepon 2022), have concerningly resulted in an increase in violence and discrimination directed against forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ persons in the last few years (Bergenfield and Miller 2014; UNHCR and IE SOGI 2021).

Similarly, within the humanitarian system the specific vulnerabilities and demands of LGBTQI+ forcibly displaced persons remain vastly unaddressed despite the increased visibility and guidance available (Nyanzi 2013b; Rumbach and Knight 2014). High-level commitments have yet to translate into meaningful levels of funding to support the integration of LGBTQI+ considerations in humanitarian responses. Available funding tends to concentrate on the needs of and initiatives led by gay men, with very little consideration for LBTQI+ women and non-binary people (Moore 2019; Samuels *et al.* 2021; Jolly 2023). Dedicated programmes often rely on narrow and stereotyped ideas of what LGBTQI+ people (especially men) need, such as sexual health education and supplies, as articulated by a young West African gay man quoted in Bergenfield and Miller: ‘Everyday you are talking about condom and lubricant. Are we going to eat condom and lubricant? You are coming to talk about HIV when people are beating us!’ (2014, p. 13).

The overemphasizing of sexuality and sexual health in initiatives targeting LGBTQI+ people erases the complexity of their experiences with social exclusion, violence, conflict, and displacement and the intersection of sexual and gender diversity with other forms of marginalization due to race, gender, caste, religion, refugee status, and more (Reid and Ritholtz 2020; Pincock 2021; Yarwood *et al.* 2022). Eligibility requirements for humanitarian protection and assistance have been challenged for imposing a static Western view of sexual orientation and gender as separate and immutable identities and forcing visibility practices which increase the risk of violence and detention (Abu-Assab *et al.* 2017; Greatrick 2019; Saleh 2020b). Ultimately, the historical and continued failure of the humanitarian system in addressing homophobic and transphobic attitudes internally has led to

distrust amongst affected LGBTQI+ populations who thus prefer not to approach relief organizations or service providers for fear of being subjected to further stigmatization and harm (Reda and Proudfoot 2021; UNHCR and IE SOGI 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the re-orientation of humanitarian funding and approaches towards public health rarely included deliberate consideration of how LGBTQI+ populations would be affected. Bishop (2020) documented concerns of LGBTQI+ activists around the world ranging from devastation of livelihoods to increased violence within the family and by the State. Camminga (2021) and Reid and Ritholtz (2020) described how LGBTQI+ refugees and migrants were prevented from accessing humanitarian relief during the pandemic due to their compounded marginalization and the disruptions experienced by LGBTQI+-led organizations in several contexts. Beyond the pandemic, several studies have drawn attention towards the insufficient and often conditional protection offered to Ugandan LGBTQI+ refugees living in Kenya (Zomorodi 2016; Ndiritu 2021; Pincock 2021; Samuels *et al.* 2021). In the face of extreme levels of violence against this group, perpetrated by humanitarian actors, refugees, and host community members, humanitarian organizations have so far been unable to devise effective strategies for their protection and their wellbeing, instead chastising refugees for seeking other forms of external support (Pincock 2021).

Increased attention towards forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people amongst humanitarian actors, activists and researchers is evident in this brief survey of the literature. However, much of the discourse remains centred around the need to rescue 'brown homosexuals from brown homophobes' (Rao 2010 cit. in Rao 2014, p. 203) without engaging in self-reflection over the exclusionary and discriminatory impact of humanitarian programmes (Bergenfield and Miller 2014; Klapeer 2017; Rahman 2020b). Furthermore, research on LGBTQI+ inclusion rarely extends to the role of humanitarian agents who are responsible for the concrete implementation of high-level commitments into programme designs, staff trainings, and service delivery (Paine 2018). Without discounting the complex interactions between political, social, and economic factors that determine who is prioritized within a humanitarian response, this article offers an insight on an understudied aspect of humanitarian action, namely the agency of humanitarian workers and the power dynamics that constrain or influence it.

As a queer humanitarian practitioner, I am deeply aware about the contradictions and compromises that characterize this work. I believe many of my colleagues, including those cited in this article, approach these discussions with a strong commitment to do the best they can within those constraints. Nonetheless, we all operate within systems of power and, by the mere fact of being humanitarian *professionals*, with considerable privilege. It is only by understanding and acknowledging our role in upholding gendered, racialized, and hetero-normative systems that we can re-centre our ethical commitments to humanitarian work and do better for people of all genders and sexualities affected by crises.

Methodology

The qualitative interviews presented in this article were conducted for a broader study investigating the uses of intersectionality within humanitarian discourses around gender-based violence (GBV). Interview questions did not specifically enquire about LGBTQI+ inclusion, but a strong association between the idea of intersectionality within the humanitarian system and LGBTQI+ identities appeared during the analysis, prompting further reflection on this conceptual relationship and on the narratives that were articulated by interview participants around this issue. The interview data were complemented by an analysis of publicly available documents, including assessment reports, guidance materials from UN agencies and NGOs, and summaries of convenings focusing on LGBTQI+ inclusion in humanitarian response.

In total, 21 humanitarian practitioners were interviewed in 2019. They all identified as cisgender women at the time of the interview and were originally from Africa, the Middle East, North America, or Europe. Ten participants were women of colour. They worked for a range of organizations within the field of protection and/or GBV programming in emergencies, including bilateral donor agencies, UN agencies, research organizations, faith-based organizations, national and international NGO, across Central and East Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East or in HQ roles based in Europe and North America. All interviews were conducted remotely through Skype, recorded when consent was granted and transcribed by the author. Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo 12 software and analysed using the tools of critical discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysis defines discourse as ‘the imbrication of speaking and writing in the exercise, reproduction and negotiation of power relations’ (Fairclough 1995, p. 94). As Nyanzi (2016) alerts us, ‘various discursive strategies and explanatory frameworks are employed to sideline sexuality from development’ and humanitarian response and to protect its patriarchal and heteronormative foundations. In examining narratives about LGBTQI+ inclusion across interviews and documents, I therefore take humanitarian discourse as a ‘battle-field of knowledge’ where language has the power to attract and shift attention to issues, influence resource allocation, and dictate policy solutions (Arnfred 2014).

I approach this study as a white lesbian feminist researcher and humanitarian practitioner who has been involved and invested in humanitarian debates around LGBTQI+ inclusion for the past 15 years. Through this intervention I aim to ‘reclaim [my] own location within this industry and use this as a space from which to speak and to challenge assumptions’ (Cornwall and Jolly 2009, p. 8) and contribute to a more just and transformational approach to humanitarian response (Nyanzi 2016). My positionality also had a practical impact on the research process. All participants were recruited through my professional network which facilitated access and the establishment of rapport during interviews but might have restricted the diversity of voices included and influenced some of the responses. While the individuals interviewed hail from different types of organizations and geographical locations, they represent a specific section of the

humanitarian system, namely that of transnational networks of funding and coordination which connect (mostly) Western donors with UN agencies, large international NGOs working across continents, and highly visible national NGOs who regularly receive funding from and collaborate with international organizations. These networks often share similar framings, language, and approaches to protection and GBV thanks to the work of global coordination bodies such as the GBV Area of Responsibility and local GBV sub-clusters or working groups.

Importantly for the focus of this paper, interview questions did not explicitly refer to gender and sexual diversity or LGBTQI+ identities. On one hand, the broader scope of the interview might have resulted in more superficial reflections on this topic, as participants were not directly asked to share their thoughts about LGBTQI+ inclusion, rather these simply emerged in conversation. On the other hand, it is probable that the wide-ranging nature of the discussion and my insider status contributed to practitioners being more transparent about their concerns and less likely to engage in performative narratives around LGBTQI+ rights—despite some of them being aware of my sexual orientation.

This study did not include forcibly displaced participants. Its findings are therefore not intended to chart a path towards better programming for LGBTQI+ people in humanitarian settings, as such a path can only meaningfully be based on the voices, needs, and actions of those who are impacted. This article also does not consider the important—yet theoretical—question of whether LGBTQI+ inclusion in humanitarian responses should be considered as a form of social justice or as the homocolonial assimilation of queer struggles into neoliberal global governance. My limited ambition is to contribute to the analysis of factors that promote or hinder LGBTQI+ inclusion in humanitarian programmes, focusing on the role played by humanitarian practitioners in upholding cis-heteronormative forms of social organization and power through their work.

Findings

In seeking to trace the pathways taken by the concept of intersectionality into humanitarian GBV discourse, I asked all interview participants where they had encountered this idea in their work. In their answers, several practitioners linked the pressure to adopt an intersectional approach in their work to advocacy for LGBTQI+ inclusion in humanitarian responses. Overall, 19 out of 21 participants mentioned LGBTQI+ inclusion without prompting during interviews, revealing a strong connection between narratives of intersectionality and LGBTQI+ inclusion in humanitarian discourse. Several participants reported that concrete steps towards inclusion were being made, and some provided examples of shifting attitudes amongst humanitarian teams. Despite generally welcoming such developments, as conversations deepened participants also aired concerns or constraints which, they perceived, fundamentally jeopardized the possibility of offering protection services to displaced LGBTQI+ individuals.

I group these concerns in five main narratives. I argue that while these narratives operate along mutually reinforcing but independent axes, they ultimately all serve to delay concrete action towards LGBTQI+ inclusion and thus protect the current racist, cis-heteronormative and patriarchal paradigms upon which the humanitarian system is grounded (Kothari 2006; Wilson 2012; Spencer 2018; Vijfeijken 2019; Lokot 2021; Daigle 2022; Jolly 2023). The underlying temporal nature of the narratives was particularly visible in some interviews, such as in the extract below, where Participant 2, a white woman working for a donor organization, explicitly positions discrimination based on sexual and gender diversity (as well as race, class, ethnicity, and religion) as secondary to gender and age-based inequalities:

I think conversations around class and race and sex, and ethnicity and sexual orientation and religion and so forth are really important, but I think within the context that we work [in]...those probably are going to come as a second tier. From my perspective it would be easier to start the conversation around gender and age and then maybe add on other things as they make sense in particular contexts.

In this quote, sexual orientation is not only seen as less important and potentially less relevant to displaced people's lives than their gender (understood in binary fixed terms) and age, but it is also suggested that considerations regarding this identity dimension are *maybe* added on at a later stage and only in some contexts. This example illustrates the overarching move that all of the narratives described below are engaging in, a move I summarize by borrowing Cynthia Enloe's statement that "'Later' is a patriarchal time zone" (Enloe 2004, p. 215) and adding *cis-hetero* to it. Enloe coined the phrase in reference to post-conflict reconstruction, arguing that in this phase nationalistic and social pressures demand that women wait for their turn while men are prioritized across economic reconstruction and social reintegration programmes. As women wait, gender inequality becomes further entrenched and women's social and economic position recedes. Similarly, I argue, humanitarian practitioners and guidance documents analysed here build a case for LGBTQI+ inclusion to be delayed until *later* and, in doing so, they contribute to the increased vulnerability and marginalization of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people.

There Is Nothing We Can Do: Law and Culture

When I started raising the question of protection for LGBTQI+ staff and programme participants with my humanitarian colleagues based in East Africa in the early 2010s, the most common answer was a shrugging of shoulders and a dismissive 'It's illegal here'. Legal frameworks criminalizing same-sex desire and/or behaviour and trans existence, often combined with restrictive laws targeting refugees, undoubtedly pose a significant challenge for humanitarian actors who wish to support LGBTQI+ individuals. Interview participants pointed out that criminalization prevents some organizations from engaging in discussions around

LGBTQI+ rights, let alone programming, as for example mentioned by Participant 5, a Black African woman working for an international NGO:

One of the hindrances of course is the laws in the countries. There are some places where you can't even for example talk about LGBTI because the country has criminalised it. So it becomes even more difficult for an organization to work on all such. I would doubt that the organisation [would] even approach it because then the laws of the country wouldn't allow it.

Discussions about criminalization often go hand in hand with references to culture and attitudes which prevent the implementation of safe programming for LGBTQI+ groups, as highlighted by Participant 7, a white woman working for a UN agency:

In certain parts of the world and conservative cultures, talking about homosexuality might shut down the conversation completely.

Both these statements refer to the impossibility for humanitarian actors to even name LGBTQI+ people and their issues, let alone actively involve them in programming, due to external factors (laws and culture) that they are unable to influence.²

There are examples of humanitarian organizations and other civil society actors being targeted by national authorities or losing community acceptance due to their support of LGBTQI+ causes and/or individuals, especially in East Africa (Nyanzi 2013b; Nyeko 2019; Sinclair and Sinatti 2022). However, such blanket statements are often made on the basis of a superficial understanding of specific legal provisions in different countries and of whether they are likely to be enforced. Participant 5, for example, mentions that one cannot even *talk about LGBTI* because of criminalization. However, the criminalization of same-sex sexual acts does not prohibit the open discussion of LGBTQI+ rights or the provision of services to individuals who identify as LGBTQI+. While accusations of 'promoting homosexuality' are often leveraged against LGBTQI+ rights organizations, only 7 countries in Africa, according to ILGA, have explicit legal barriers in place to curtail freedom of expression on sexual and gender diversity issues (Ramon Mendos *et al.* 2020).³

When it comes to culture, discussions are often imbued with racialized and colonialist undertones, as seen in the following extract from the summary of the 2021 Global Roundtable on Protection and Solutions for LGBTQI+ People in Forced Displacement:

Many traditional CSO and host government service providers lack the expertise to provide LGBTQI+ inclusive and sensitive services, and their staff may display homophobic, biphobic, transphobic and intersex-phobic attitudes. (UNHCR and IE SOGI 2021, p. 19)

This extract highlights *traditional CSO and host government service providers* as lacking the appropriate inclusive and egalitarian attitudes and programme

designs. In doing so, it implicitly positions the participants to the roundtable as more enlightened defenders of LGBTQI+ rights whose efforts are hindered by these *Others'* lack of expertise and sensitivity. In contrast with these stereotypical depictions, participants from the Global North in this study were more likely to raise the inclusion of trans women in GBV programming as a controversial issue, echoing transphobic arguments circulating amongst British and US feminists (Hines 2019). Women from the Global South working for national NGOs were instead more likely to mention collaborating with LGBTQI+ organizations and shared examples of how they addressed homophobic attitudes within their teams.

The fear of reputational damage or of being prevented from providing assistance to the broader population in need can lead organizations and individual humanitarian actors to 'a pervasive state of mind that holds staff back from engaging, even when the conditions are sufficiently conducive' (Dwyer 2021, p. 13). While the narrative of powerlessness in the face of exclusionary laws and cultures described here is not explicitly framed within temporal references, its effect is to delay any meaningful discussion to advance LGBTQI+ inclusion in humanitarian response. Humanitarian actors can present their discriminatory practices as an unfortunate product of external circumstances and disguise their own homophobic or transphobic views as respect for local cultures. If and when—the reasoning goes—host States change their legislation and culture, only then will well-intentioned humanitarians be able to assist LGBTQI+ people.

Training First

Despite the frequent use of references to law and culture as an insurmountable barrier, interviews revealed that in situations that could have been conducive to LGBTQI+ inclusion, little progress was made due to a range of other concerns. One of the most frequently cited reasons for not deliberately including forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people in programming across interviews was the fear of doing harm due to limited skills and knowledge, as stated by Participant 6, a Black woman from the Global North working for an international faith-based NGO:

I think it was more of looking at let us not do any harm, by doing things that we have no knowledge of what the hell we're doing.

This statement references the fundamental humanitarian principle of Do No Harm (Giovanni 2014; Khaled 2021) which requires all humanitarian actors to consider and, to the best of their abilities, prevent any harm that might result from their intervention. What makes the invocation of Do No Harm interesting in these instances, is that the cause of potential harm is located, almost exclusively, in practitioners' own lack of knowledge and expertise about sexual and gender diversity, as articulated by Participant 10, a white woman working in a UN agency:

What I was frustrated about was that we were forced to do something about it without the skills or the experience or the knowledge about what we should be doing about it.

At the same time, the constant reminder that humanitarian actors are unprepared to respond to the needs of LGBTQI+ communities can begin to appear disingenuous. By the time this study was conducted, guidelines and training materials on how to work with LGBTQI+ refugees and other displaced groups had been published by UNHCR in 2012 and 2017, respectively, and the 2017 GBV Case Management Guidelines included (limited) guidance on how to support LGBTQI+ survivors. Furthermore, blanket statements about the inability of the humanitarian protection sector to adequately understand LGBTQI+ issues rest both on racialized judgements about humanitarian workers from the Global South, as discussed above, and on an assumption of cis-heteronormativity within the humanitarian system which erases the lived experience and professional expertise of humanitarian practitioners who *are* gender and sexually diverse and/or have previously worked with LGBTQI+ communities.

The interrelated narratives of Do No Harm and lack of knowledge and the ensuing recommendations for trainings and capacity building might be founded on genuine concerns about the wellbeing of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people and a welcome dose of self-reflexivity when it comes to humanitarian actors' own prejudices and blind spots. When this is the case, such concerns should promote the meaningful engagement of LGBTQI+ groups to understand their experiences, needs, and wishes and to devise safe and collaborative programming approaches. However, I suggest that these narratives can also function to overemphasize the difficulty and complexity of providing services to LGBTQI+ people in humanitarian settings. In doing so, they create an incessant demand for further training and guidance as a *prerequisite* for any dedicated support or simply to address

existing discriminatory practices within humanitarian programmes. Further, if the mere existence of guidelines and trainings is taken as evidence of progress towards inclusion, the delivery of assistance to LGBTQI+ people affected by crises can be postponed indefinitely, until the (mythical) moment when everyone in the humanitarian system finally feels ready to engage with them.

Data First

Claims of ignorance about LGBTQI+ issues lead to another common delaying tactic, experienced by social justice movements across the world and the humanitarian GBV sector alike: demands for more data and more research. A long-standing debate within the humanitarian protection sector, the need to justify investments in programming with, preferably quantitative, evidence might seem intuitive but hides a range of complex ethical issues (Robinette 2020). When it comes to LGBTQI+ groups in humanitarian crises, the challenge of producing evidence becomes even more intractable due to the regime of invisibility that individuals and communities have had to adopt to avoid violence and stigmatization and the risks involved in data collection (Samuels *et al.* 2021; Shaw *et al.* 2022; Yarwood *et al.* 2022). Importantly, as long as LGBTQI+ people's needs are not adequately addressed by humanitarian actors, the risks of disclosing one's gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or sexual characteristics remain disproportionate compared to the potential (future) benefits.

Despite these well-known risks, references to the need for evidence *before* action can be taken to protect and support LGBTQI+ groups emerged during interviews and across documents. A World Bank discussion paper on sexual orientation and gender identity in conflict, for instance, directly states:

Enhancing access to basic services and providing development or humanitarian aid in FCV [fragile, conflict and violence affected] environments requires quantitative evidence [...]. In the absence of such data, governments and the development and humanitarian communities lack the quantitative grounds for developing SOGI-sensitive policies and programs. (Salazar Godoy 2020, p. 13)

The need to simply prove that LGBTQI+ people exist to advocate for their inclusion in humanitarian responses was also echoed in the UNHCR and IE SOGI roundtable, where a cross-cutting recommendation to establish an evidence base states the need 'to verify *statistical existence* of and protection and solutions trends amongst LGBTIQ+ displaced and stateless persons.' (UNHCR and IE SOGI 2021, p. 27, emphasis added).

These repeated calls for data that can quantify the presence of LGBTQI+ people in humanitarian contexts are partially a strategy against assertions that the number of affected individuals who are sexually or gender diverse is negligible and therefore does not justify dedicated attention (Hagen *et al.* 2021). This is a narrative that Participant 17, a white researcher working for an international NGO, encountered in her work:

This idea that ‘Oh, but those communities are so small’. They’re not, we’re just not seeing them. They’re actually there! There are many, many, many people there.

While global homocolonialist discourses might have centred the figure of the suffering gay refugee for the past decade (Saleh 2020b), at the operational level the conversation seems to be still grappling with the question of whether LGBTQI+ forcibly displaced people exist, let alone suffer or require humanitarian assistance. This fundamental question and the ensuing demands for evidence thus persist despite the growing body of research documenting the experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals during humanitarian crises.

I acknowledge the need to continue building a complex, intersectional picture of LGBTQI+ experiences during crises and displacement, especially for those groups that have so far been neglected in research and humanitarian action, such as trans men, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, intersex people (Moore 2019; Samuels *et al.* 2021; Yarwood *et al.* 2022). At the same time, the positioning of evidence as a precondition to the development of LGBTQI+-inclusive approaches becomes a convenient stratagem to delay any concrete action until such time when some other organization, not engaged in the important business of saving lives in an emergency, produces some useful information. Once again, humanitarian practitioners and by extension their organizations shift the responsibility of creating the conducive conditions for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ people onto someone else, at another time.

(Cisgender) Women First

References to the numeric negligibility of gender and sexually diverse individuals in emergencies often combine with discourses about the scarcity of resources for humanitarian response to construct an argument in favour of prioritizing *the majority* over the specific needs of *a minority*. Across interviews, for example, GBV practitioners shared their concerns that efforts to improve access of LGBTQI+ people to humanitarian assistance and to adopt a more intersectional understanding of inequality would divert financial, human, and time resources from (cisgender and heterosexual) women and girls. For instance, Participant 12, a woman of colour from the Global North who used to work for a faith-based organization, shared:

So the specific discrimination based on woman, being a female as a sex, being biologically a female, will be just watered down, will be overshadowed by all the oppressions that are politically correct to be announced, that might have available funding for supporting . . . initiatives that address specific oppressions. And I think that women’s struggles are just going to the background.

In this quote, references to biological sex suggest a connection between discourses advocating for the prioritization of women and girls in emergencies and transphobic arguments which present cisgender women as victims of a campaign of erasure (Hines 2019). Such parallels were present across multiple interviews,

though by no means all, reinforcing a narrow construction of the humanitarian category of ‘woman’ as cisgender and preferably heterosexual. Exclusionary definitions of womanhood are also found across policy documents, UN resolutions, and humanitarian guidance documents which either remain silent on gender identity and sexual orientation or present LGBTQI+ groups as a separate category from ‘women’ and ‘men’, with no overlap between those groups and no shared needs or concerns (Affan 2019; Hagen 2016).

Acknowledging the harmful nature of such binary constructions, it is nonetheless worth noting that despite a consolidated evidence base on the impact of conflict and disasters on women and girls and extensive global commitments to ending violence against women and girls, the GBV sector remains one of the least funded in humanitarian responses (Marsh and Blake 2020; Raftery *et al.* 2022). The limited and yet insufficient resources to support survivors of GBV have been hard-won within a patriarchal humanitarian infrastructure which stubbornly refused to acknowledge the presence of violence against women and girls during emergencies. GBV practitioners therefore feel constantly threatened by anti-feminist backlashes worldwide (Harcourt 2016; Nicholas and Agius 2017; Myrntinen and Schulz 2023).

Indeed, Participant 5 explained the resistance of some of her colleagues to the inclusion of LGBTQI+ people (but also people with disability) in these terms:

It’s mostly from this perspective of ‘we have little resources and we are not sure how do we [do it]?’ Because for you to really cater for these other [groups] it means there is some things that you need to do extra... It means we need to do some things differently and to do things differently you need to add on resources, whether it is in terms of skills, or it is in terms of the personnel, or it is in terms of even just readying the personnel that you have. So how? Is there any extra that is put in these?

In her analysis, Participant 5 signals that more comprehensive and more inclusive services require additional resources and that without such resources, practitioners are forced to make difficult ethical decisions about who to prioritize. As highlighted by Jolly, ‘for all the critique of international development discourses on LGBTI, the actual resources are minimal’ (2023, p. 3) and most humanitarian actors feel under pressure to ‘do more with less’ as donors’ declarations on the importance of LGBTQI+ inclusion do not correspond to increased funding for frontline humanitarian actors (let alone LGBTQI+-led organizations). On the contrary, demands to demonstrate the value-for-money of humanitarian intervention tend to discourage specialized programming for highly marginalized groups, especially when they are in a numerical minority and thus result in high cost-per-beneficiary ratios (Jackson 2012; Rubenstein 2015).

The chronic scarcity of resources undoubtedly contributes, amongst humanitarian actors, to dynamics of victimhood competition, a common feature of social justice politics which triggers ‘internal competitiveness amongst deprived groups for a larger share in the small part reserved for them’ (Menon 2015, p. 42). Rather than joining forces in demanding the end of discriminatory funding and programming approaches that exclude them from humanitarian assistance, marginalized

groups, and the organizations that serve them see each other as competitors for the limited available resources, whether that be funding or a seat at the humanitarian coordination table. In accordance with these dynamics, the humanitarian professionals I interviewed shared their intention to prioritize women and girls over other marginalized groups. For instance, Participant 2 stated:

Right now our priority is getting staff to focus on the needs of women and girls, that's first and foremost. . . We do talk about LGBTI populations within our gender trainings and GBV conversations but I would say it's pretty minimal. . . our priority right now is really around focusing on women and girls in particular and not necessarily on the additional intersections or layers of structural oppression.

In this quote, Participant 2 highlights first the need to convince staff within her organization to 'focus on the needs of women and girls', demonstrating that the integration of a gender lens in humanitarian work still requires continuous advocacy. Such necessary efforts, however, are presented as the only priority and narrowly focused on discrimination and violence based on (binary) gender inequality rather than 'on the additional intersections or layers of structural oppression'. There appears to be no recognition that these additional layers of oppression, including homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, affect women and girls in many contexts of displacement and therefore a lack of intersectionality, even within a women-only programme, will result in the exclusion of highly marginalized women and girls (Hagen 2016; Tschalaer 2021; Myrntinen and Schulz 2023).

The narrative of '(cisgender) women first' was born out of the need to combat the patriarchal structures of the humanitarian sector, but it is currently being deployed to exclude LGBTQI+ people, including women who are not cisgender or heterosexual, from humanitarian designs and funding flows. As with all previous narratives, 'women first' can be read in well-meaning, benevolent terms, as it promises that once the protection of women and girls is firmly secured as a pillar of all humanitarian responses, then issues of sexual and gender diversity will be next on the list. This promise however sounds almost fantastical given the slow pace of progress towards gender equality. What is being asked of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people is therefore to indefinitely put their needs and rights on hold so that other—more important to some—battles can be fought.

Partners First

The final narrative was less present in the interviews but is ubiquitous across advocacy and programmatic documents regarding LGBTQI+ inclusion in humanitarian response. LGBTQI+ organizations and activists are often the only reason why humanitarian actors acknowledge the existence of LGBTQI+ people in specific emergencies and, even more frequently, they become providers of humanitarian services to LGBTQI+ displaced groups regardless of whether they are formally supported to do so (Reda and Proudfoot 2021; Samuels *et al.* 2021). Therefore, after facing harsh criticism for failing to engage displaced LGBTQI+ voices in early initiatives (Bergenfield and Miller 2014), the humanitarian system is

currently hailing partnership with LGBTQI+ groups or organizations as a best practice. For example, recommendations to partner with LGBTQI+ civil society organizations recur throughout the summary of the Global Roundtable organized by UNHCR and IE SOGI in 2021 and across the literature as a key approach for inclusion (see e.g. [Larkin 2019](#); [Dwyer 2021](#); [Ahlenback 2022](#); [Yarwood et al. 2022](#)).

The centrality of LGBTQI+-led and/or specialist organizations in these recommendations is encouraging, and certainly cause for celebration in a sector that has traditionally located all knowledge and expertise in large Western organizations ([Heron 2007](#); [Duffield and Hewitt 2009](#)). Yet, I include this narrative in my analysis with cautionary intentions. I recall a long-overdue meeting of my former global team dedicated to discussing the inclusion of LGBTQI+ women and girls in our GBV programmes. Within minutes, we were informed that our team was not ready to move forward with LGBTQI+ inclusion. Instead, we should prioritize learning and partnership building. My other queer colleague and I left the meeting frustrated. For years, we had been listening to long lists of what should be done *first* and what should be done *instead* of opening our women's centres to trans, lesbian and queer women. The newest item on that list was, tellingly, the need to find partners, namely formal LGBTQI+ organizations that could guide us and assume the risks that adopting an openly LGBTQI+-inclusive agenda might carry instead of our large international organization.

While centring LGBTQI+-led organizations is undoubtedly the right approach, it is important to be vigilant so that humanitarian actors do not simply use the identification of viable, capable partners as the latest delaying tactic. The presence of visible and vocal LGBTQI+ local actors should not be the determining factor in decisions to support LGBTQI+ people in crisis, as was the case in Participant 6's experience:

I think the only time I've ever thought about LGBT was probably in Iraq. And that was because I knew there was a service that I can actually refer to. I think [in] Bangladesh, I didn't, because I knew there was no service I could actually refer anyone for more support for LGBT issues.

Invisibility is often essential for the survival of informal groups of queer activists and displaced people. Especially in the early phases of an emergency, connecting with LGBTQI+-led organizations might be challenging, or even dangerous if not done carefully. Furthermore, assumptions that the needs of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ individuals can be addressed by LGBTQI+ organizations of the host-country have been proven wrong in multiple contexts due to the lack of resources, limited interest in supporting refugees, and tensions between displaced and local LGBTQI+ communities due to religion, language, or political strategies ([Nyanzi 2013b](#); [Greatrick 2019](#); [Pincok 2021](#); [Reda and Proudfoot 2021](#)).

Ultimately, while supporting LGBTQI+ organizations is critical and recommendations to that effect should be welcomed, the humanitarian system cannot discharge its responsibility to remedy the historical exclusion of LGBTQI+ people

from humanitarian programming onto marginalized groups themselves. Furthermore, the identification, formal establishment of partnerships, and inevitable processes of capacity building (if only to meet the donors' bureaucratic requirements) should not further delay the access of LGBTQI+ individuals to life-saving humanitarian assistance and services.

Conclusion

The five narratives presented in this article (There's nothing we can do: law and culture, Training first, Data first, Women first and Partners first); all emerge from legitimate concerns amongst humanitarian protection professionals regarding the safest and most effective way to integrate LGBTQI+ people in humanitarian responses. Interviews revealed a sincere preoccupation about the risks involved in *adding on* LGBTQI+ issues to existing programme models without having the appropriate skills or resources to do so, respecting the unique situation of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ individuals and ensuring their voices are centred. What was missing, however, was an acknowledgement of how current humanitarian assistance does not simply leave behind LGBTQI+ people, and especially women and non-binary people, but rather compounds the harm they face during displacement and increases their stigma and marginalization. If the principle of Do No Harm is invoked, then it must be accompanied by the recognition that continuing with humanitarian business as usual *will* harm forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ persons by tearing apart families, exacerbating their vulnerability to sexual and other forms of exploitation, and signalling their irrelevance to the broader community (Cornwall and Jolly 2009; Rumbach and Knight 2014; Camminga 2021; Ritholtz and Buxton 2021).

Therefore, these narratives, while raising important questions for the humanitarian system, contribute to the marginalization of LGBTQI+ people and the re-entrenchment of homophobia and transphobia within and beyond the humanitarian system (Cornwall and Jolly 2009; Camminga 2021). Like the women Enloe (2004) was writing about, excluded from post-conflict reconstruction and thus condemned to decades of deepened inequality so that men could be prioritized, LGBTQI+ (and several other marginalized) groups are placed in the *later* phase of humanitarian response. Yet, the humanitarian system operates, by definition, in the *now* of the emergency, the urgent response, the immediate needs. Even in protracted crises that have kept humanitarian actors on the ground for decades, they function in a constant sense of urgency, with high levels of staff turnover, ever-pressing deadlines, and short funding cycles. In the humanitarian system, *later* never really comes and, if it does, it is often someone else's responsibility. Later is a cis-hetero patriarchal time zone where forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people can wait indefinitely for their turn.

Some might question why, at a moment of so many visible shifts towards the acknowledgement and inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in humanitarian action, not to mention the vast array of critiques that have been leveraged against such initiatives, I focus on narratives of resistance. First, as Jolly (2023), Nyanzi

(2013a,b), and Saleh (2020a) have argued, the visibility of displaced LGBTQI+ groups in the media or UN debates does not correspond to improved conditions at borders, in refugee camps, urban settlement, or detention centres. Therefore, analysing the rupture between discourse and practice can elucidate not only the bottlenecks towards implementation but also the ways in which apparently progressive statements can hide the same homophobia or transphobia they purport to condemn. Regardless of personal beliefs or intentions, as humanitarian workers we all participate in a system that has been built on imperialist, racist, and cis-heteronormative foundations (Kothari 2006; Duffield and Hewitt 2009; Jolly 2011; Wilson 2012). With this article, I hope to encourage a reckoning with our own complicity in these systems of oppression through the deployment of these apparently well-meaning narratives, and a reflection on how we might wish to engage in struggles for inclusion within the humanitarian sector and beyond. I also hope to support those who are already engaged in LGBTQI+ advocacy to challenge such narratives and move the conversation from *when* to *how*.

Second, the strength of the contemporary anti-gender movement is a fundamental concern for LGBTQI+ and feminist communities worldwide (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Wilson 2020; Zarembek *et al.* 2021; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Its strategic alliance with both anti-colonial and feminist discourses to marginalize queer liberatory projects in the name of anti-Western politics or of 'saving women' significantly complicates the landscape and extends anti-LGBTQI+ discourse beyond its conventional borders (Greatrick 2019; Hines 2020; Rao 2020; Colella 2021; Jolly 2023). Signs of these alliances were already visible in the narratives of this study's participants, with uncomfortable parallelisms between the prioritization of cisgender women and transphobic views. Understanding how these discourses, which at first glance may appear benign or even progressive, function to disarm LGBTQI+ activists and further marginalize displaced people with diverse genders and sexualities is essential to counteract them. Ultimately, what these narratives do is not promote liberatory movements against Western imperialism or patriarchal domination, but rather reinscribe systems of oppression that far from simply targeting LGBTQI+ people, will affect (cis and trans) women and girls, ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, foreigners, and a range of other minoritized groups for decades to come.

In closing with Participant 9's words below, I join her in asking 'When is the right time?'. I hope to have made a small contribution to shifting the answer to that question, from *later* to *right now*.

If I had a quid for everyone who said 'Oh, it's too soon for us to start talking about queer women. It's too soon'. As a queer woman, when someone says that, I feel it. So when's the right time?

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Endnotes

1. I use the acronym LGBTQI+ across the article as an umbrella term for people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions and/or sexual characteristics. The term LGBTQI+ and its identity-based etymology have been criticised for failing to capture the complexity and ontological variety of understandings of gender and sexuality outside of the West (Rahman, 2020a; Saleh, 2020b), but it remains widely used by queer and trans activists and humanitarian actors in the Global South as well as the Global North.
2. While interview answers were often broad, a handful of participants mentioned specific contexts where LGBTQI+ inclusion work could be particularly challenging, such as Cameroon or Bangladesh. Other interviews, however, challenged such stereotypes with reports of successful LGBTQI+ inclusion efforts in Syria, Uganda, and Iraq.
3. The recent enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023 in Uganda increases this number to at least eight and represents a concerning trend towards criminalization of LGBTQI+ rights' discussion regionally and globally.

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