Welcome to Building trans communities inclusive of trans asylum seekers and refugees in Europe
This brochure follows up on the joint seminar of TGEU and ILGA-Europe on LGBTI asylum that was organised in Berlin in July 2016. It was written with the guidance of two expert groups that TGEU set up for the purposes of this project. One group consisted of five experts who are trans asylum seekers and refugees in Europe: Farah Abdi (Kenya/Somalia, Malta), Fernanda Milán (Guatemala, Denmark), Aum Neko (Thailand, France), Sam Shooshian (Iran, Hungary) and Jad the Syrian (Syria, Turkey). The other group included experts who have been supporting trans asylum seekers and refugees: Zhan Chiam, Paul Dillane, Eva Fels, Marina Galanou, Neil Grungras and Alec Recher.

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www.tgeu.org
Introduction

“Hope is bigger than fear. Show them hope. Give them hope. A reason to live. That is what this brochure is all about. A guide for hope givers.”
Fernanda Milán – Guatemala, Denmark

More and more trans communities are starting to support trans asylum seekers and refugees who have fled their home countries and come to Europe. Many trans asylum seekers and refugees are here to stay, but some will (have to) leave again. Maybe you have already thought about how to open your local community to these newcomers but don’t know where to start. This brochure can give you practical ideas about community support. If you need specific information on legal support, you will find materials at tgeu.org/asylum.

Community support can mean simple steps you can take to make them feel welcome in your local trans community and provide support in emergency situations.

In this brochure, you will find:

• information about the most common issues that trans asylum seekers and refugees face (page 5)
• answers to concerns and questions your community may have about this work (page 12)
• general tips and principles that could guide your work (page 14)
• practical steps you can take right away and over (page 18)

On TGEU’s website (tgeu.org/asylum) you will also find:

• a list of resources on legal standards and social support for trans asylum seekers and refugees
• a list of trans and LGBTQI groups in Europe that already work with asylum seekers and refugees
• a poster (“Trans Refugees are Welcome Here!”) that you can put up at events or in your meeting space

Community support can mean simple steps you can take to give trans asylum seekers and refugees strength, hope and safety including, for instance:

• making them feel welcome in your local trans community
• supporting them in starting their own community groups
• being supportive when they are going through a difficult time
• sharing information about transition related care and trans rights in your country
• sharing your contacts for lawyers, doctors, therapists
• sharing information about meetings and events
• providing support in emergency situations

In the asylum camp Frankfurt Neckermann

Leopold Groznov and Anno Komarov – Russia, Germany

On TGEU’s website (tgeu.org/asylum)

What issues do trans asylum seekers and refugees face?

“I came stripped of everything, almost even my life. And then I came to this unwelcoming, unprepared, uniformed place where they mistreated me even more. They weren’t prepared to receive a person like me.”
Fernanda Milán – Guatemala, Denmark

Traumatising journey, traumatising arrival

“I looked at the lifejacket that was handed to me and decided not to put it on. There was no way I was going back. I live or die on this journey. The Turkish sea police tried to sink our boat. But as you can see, one year later I’m sitting here alive.”
Maguy Merchley – Lebanon, Germany

“In Syria, it was problematic to be a trans man. But it is even worse when you’re escaping war, you’re a refugee and you come to a new country.”
Jad the Syrian – Syria, Turkey

Trans asylum seekers leave their home countries because they are in serious danger. On their journey to Europe, they often risk their lives. On entering the country and asking for asylum, they can face violence and harassment from immigration authorities or the police. In time, they learn about the harsh reality of being an asylum seeker in Europe.

Physical violence, sexual abuse and transphobic slurs in refugee camps

“LGBTQI refugees need safe accommodation. It doesn’t make sense for LGBTQI refugees who have run away from homophobia and transphobia to come to a safe country and be grouped together with other asylum seekers who are very homophobic and transphobic.”
Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta

“They would not recognise my gender identity and they placed me with men. The consequences were catastrophic for me. An experience like that, being raped, is adding to your context and makes you more vulnerable. Then I ended up in a human trafficking ring. My life became worse than it was already.”
Fernanda Milán – Guatemala, Denmark

Once they tell the authorities they are applying for asylum, trans asylum seekers are usually placed in mainstream refugee camps or detention centres. They have to stay there until the state decides if it will grant them refugee status, which can take years. They might be placed with people from their home countries and face the same violence they tried to escape from. In a refugee camp, trans people are extremely vulnerable to physical, sexual, emotional and verbal abuse (transphobic slurs, catcalling). Using the toilets, showers or common areas can pose a daily risk. These factors may have serious negative effects on their health. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and other mental health problems are far too common among trans asylum seekers. They are more likely to self-harm or commit suicide.

In a handful of countries, trans asylum seekers can live in shelters for LGBTQI people (Nürnberg and Berlin in Germany) or apartments (Denmark, Vienna in Austria). Many trans people express a need for these facilities, but some think the impetus behind them is based on the assumption that LGBTQI people, and not those who attack them, are to blame for the risks they face.

What is the difference between asylum seekers and refugees?

An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for asylum in a country and is waiting on the decision. A refugee is someone who has already been given refugee status. This means that they do not have to live in uncertainty anymore. They can start living their lives as they want, within the limits of their new country.

What rights do trans asylum seekers and refugees have in Europe?

The UNHCR, the UN body that focuses on asylum, has guidelines on how countries should welcome LGBT asylum seekers and make a decision about their case. The Council of Europe has also made many recommendations to European countries. That is, they should protect LGBTI asylum seekers from physical, sexual or verbal abuse. Across the European Union, asylum seekers and refugees might face different realities, but on paper they have the same rights in every member state. For instance, refugees might face different realities, but on paper they have the same rights in every member state. They might be afraid of their home country might exclude them. For instance, refugees might face different realities, but on paper they have the same rights in every member state. They might be afraid of their home country might exclude them.

The vulnerability of trans asylum seekers

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work. To be able to survive, many trans asylum seekers do sex work before they obtain refugee status, with some continuing in this line of work also afterwards. Especially in countries where sex work is criminalised, this may expose them to more violence from the police or clients.

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Isolation and loneliness while waiting for refugee status

Trans asylum seekers often have to wait for months or years until they obtain refugee status. During this period, they might be completely isolated and lonely. Trans asylum seekers might be rejected by their friends and family back home. Other asylum seekers from their home country might exclude them.


4) Ibid.

3) Ibid.

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid.

7) Ibid.

8) Ibid.
Xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia

“Every person has multiple identities and characteristics that influence their life experiences, such as their gender, race or ethnicity, migrant background, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, class, age or disability. These all operate simultaneously; in other words, they intersect. Trans asylum seekers and refugees often face intersectional discrimination on the basis of their gender identity and expression, gender, race or ethnicity, religious background, migrant status and perhaps other factors as well. This means that some of their experiences will be very similar to those of a local trans person, but others will be very different and much more complex.”

Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta

“Trans refugees arrive, they encounter a different reality. Xenophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia, everything. Everyday.”

Fernanda Milan – Guatemala, Denmark

“Uncertainty about transition related care

At first, I was full of hope. This will be the country where I will find my full transgender rights. […] My personal dream was to start my physical transition from male to female. My dreams had to wait because […] the environment in the LAGeSo [Berlin’s office for health and social affairs] consists of waiting endlessly, and the radical, the erratic chaos set back my personal dream of realising myself by five years. […] I felt extremely alone. My dreams were so far away and my transition to be a woman was going backwards instead of forwards.”

Maguy Merheby – Lebanon, Germany

“Trans refugees also face problems when trying to receive medical care or transition related care. Some of these will be familiar to local trans people too, including language barriers and a lack of the following: information about options; trustworthy contacts; knowledge of the system; money; and culturally-sensitive doctors with an awareness of diverse concepts of being trans. In France, asylum seekers are able to apply for state social insurance, which includes access to hormones. But first they need to know someone who can speak French and can guide them to see the right doctor. This is a big problem.”

Aum Neko – Thailand, France

“Trans refugees are therefore faced with the tough decision to seek medical transition before being granted refugee status is a difficult one. If an asylum seeker starts hormonal therapy but is later refused refugee status, they will lose access to hormones when they are forced to leave the country. This can make them even more visible as a gender diverse person, which could make their life even more dangerous on return to their home country. It is never easy to predict how long it might take to get a final decision on an asylum case, as the asylum process can take years. Trans asylum seekers are therefore faced with the tough choice between starting treatment (with the risk of being deported) or continuing to suffer from lack of access to medical transition until being given refugee status.”

Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta

“For many trans refugees, legal gender recognition is a priority after receiving their refugee status. However, it is often only possible to change your documents if you have a birth certificate from the country that has granted you asylum or if you are a citizen. Citizenship can take years to obtain. Court cases to challenge this approach can be expensive and very long.”

Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta
Getting a job, attending a language class, going to school, finding a place to live or travelling can all be dangerous and traumatising if there is a mismatch between your gender expression and your documents. Difficulties in finding employment or housing can lead to further vulnerability and exclusion from the community. While this is true for all trans people, asylum seekers and refugees face more challenges because of the intersection of their gender, their legal status, their race, ethnicity or religion.

BEING UNDOCUMENTED

“It is time for us to think about how we can help people who do not have legal status and are undocumented. We should support them to have access to their rights (work, healthcare, school, hormones, condoms, family planning, psychologists, school) [...] The important thing is that we should keep in touch with them to prevent problems like expulsion, violence or exploitation.”

Aum Neko – Thailand, France

Even if someone does not obtain refugee status, they might decide to stay in the country illegally. This means that they will lose access to many services. They will also have to fear police checks. Some people stay because they have started taking hormones or undergone surgery and it would even more dangerous for them to go back.

Aum Neko at TGEU and ILGA-Europe’s joint seminar on asylum. 2016.
Questions and concerns

If you are considering supporting trans asylum seekers and refugees, you might have to answer some questions and concerns from other people in your community. You may feel overwhelmed or have some doubts yourself. This section can help you answer some of these queries.

“There are probably no trans refugees in our country”

There are no exact numbers, but we know that many asylum seekers arriving to Europe are LGBTQI, and some of them are trans. If there are asylum seekers in your country, there is definitely a chance that some of them will be trans. Trans people often try to obtain refugee status in countries with a good track record on trans and LGBI rights, such as Denmark or Sweden. People fleeing Spanish speaking Latin American countries may try to go to Spain. In reality, asylum seekers often cannot choose where they apply for refugee status (see section on the Dublin Regulation). This means that even if your country is not usually a target destination for trans people, it may have trans asylum seekers and refugees.

“We do not have money to support asylum seekers”

It is true that in many cases trans asylum seekers and refugees will need money for hormones, bus tickets or other things. But there is a lot you can do without money. You can support their activist work, introduce them to people in your community and share information about doctors. You will find lots of ideas in this brochure.

“The state has to take care of asylum seekers; it is not our responsibility”

On paper, it is your government’s responsibility to provide basic services to trans asylum seekers and refugees. In reality, this often does not happen. Just as for local trans people, often there are no services in place. Resources are scarce and authorities are rarely trained to deal with trans people. Ultimately, trans asylum seekers and refugees often fall through the cracks and suffer violence and exploitation.

“We are already overwhelmed with providing support to our local members”

A good starting point is to do as much as you can right now. Always be clear about what your community can and cannot offer. It is important to keep in mind that sometimes it’s the simple things that can be helpful such as: having a coffee with someone who is going through a stressful asylum process or sharing your experiences or contacts regarding hormones or surgery.

“Asylum seekers will not stay in our country for a long time anyway, so we should not invest too much work in this area”

Some of the worst violence and harassment against trans asylum seekers happens soon after their arrival, in refugee camps and detention centres. Your support can be crucial in preventing this or providing support, information or safety. Some trans asylum seekers and refugees may even wish to leave your country before the authorities have made a decision about their case. However, due to the Dublin Regulation, they will rarely be given a choice about where to live. Many will remain in the country and become part of the trans community and they will face many trans specific issues: local trans communities have an important role and responsibility in dealing with these.
Recognising that everyone’s story is different.

Every asylum seeker will need a safe place to live, to obtain refugee status and be supported along the way. But everyone has their own story and experiences – some of their needs will differ. Your best starting point is to ask the person what they require and go from there, working together.

“Safe housing, getting refugee status and therapy – those are the three pillars to help the person discover themselves, and after that it is up to them. You would be amazed, if they were just given those three things.”

Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta

Recognising the expertise of trans asylum seekers and refugees.

You are not alone in your work on asylum. Trans asylum seekers and refugees are the best experts on the asylum system, and on the experience of discrimination and violence during journeys to Europe, in the camps and in society. Often they can connect more easily with fellow asylum seekers and refugees because they understand the issues, speak the language and can gain the trust of other asylum seekers more easily than local trans people. Some may also want to start their own activist groups or help you shape your political demands so that they are inclusive. You can support each other’s work and be stronger together.

“I am a trans activist and I am leading a group of empowering transfeminine and transgender refugees. Because we are the family. I have no family with me – I came alone. So I can find a family, my community. I can help people with my experience and they can help me.”

Maguy Merheby – Lebanon, Germany

“I thought about starting a group for Iranian trans refugees. I know how tough it is for them. I will need to know the rules, so I will need information.”

Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

Supporting the autonomy and independence of trans asylum seekers and refugees.

Leaving your home country and having to start a new life from scratch strips you of stability and safety. Try supporting people so they can do what they find empowering – study, work, do activism, perform or make art. One idea is to connect them with people who take part in the same activities.

“I came for my rights, I came for my freedom, I came to continue my future. And I am so proud of myself after one year, the whole thing I did in art, and as a trans activist. I use my art to empower myself as a trans activist. I use my art because art is power, art is a language. I am really proud of myself to be in Berlin after one year and all that I did.”

Maguy Merheby – Lebanon, Germany

“I was always passionate about writing, and once I was able to have my own safe place, have protection and be comfortable in my skin after therapy, that is when I was able to go out into the world and become my full self and follow my dreams and write, travel, meet people, be myself, evolve as a human being.”

Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta

Expressing solidarity.

The most powerful thing you can do is to express solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees when politicians and the media talk hatefully about them, when they are being attacked or when your government passes laws that can impact negatively on them. You can always ask how you can stand in solidarity with them. Publishing a solidarity statement, joining a protest, including asylum in your advocacy work or simply putting visible signs of solidarity with refugees could be good starting points. For example, you could post stickers in cafés, in bars, in meeting spaces or on the street saying “Refugees are Welcome” or something similar.

“In Denmark, activists often overlook xenophobia and racism to concentrate on hormone therapy or gender reassignment surgery. If you are going to work with trans people from all over the world, you need to figure out how to work through this.”

Fernanda Milán – Guatemala, Denmark

“LGBTQI organisations need to take a clear stand when it comes to populism and xenophobia. That would also invite LGBTQI refugees into the discussion. Because they would know that organisations are fighting for their rights as well. Because we are still very much excluded when we see the organisations that are advocating for one part of our rights, sitting with a government that does not respect a part of our identity.”

Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta
The ultimate goal in supporting an asylum seeker is that they obtain refugee status. Refugee status means no longer living in uncertainty and fear. It means not having to go back to violence and persecution, but building a new home. It means being able to start work, go to school and become part of society. Social and community support can be crucial in aiding asylum seekers while they are trying to obtain refugee status. However they will also need information about their rights, as well as and contacts for NGOs and lawyers that who can support their case. If you do not know enough about the asylum process, putting them in touch with others who do.

"In Hungary, I donot feel comfortable in trans or LGBTQI groups. They are nice, but they are not very friendly with foreigners. Maybe it is because of the language barrier, I don’t know." 
Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

"Most of Europe’s LGBTQI agenda is centred around white European individuals. But that is not a true representation of today’s Europe. I think this is an internal challenge that organisations need to recognise and come up with a framework to change things." 
Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta

1. Helping asylum seekers obtain refugee status.
   "While becoming friends with trans persons seeking asylum, I share their main goal: getting them asylum and a future" 
Alecs Recher, Transgender Network Switzerland

2. Working on creating safer and welcoming spaces.
   It is important that you are familiar with the issues that most trans asylum seekers and refugees face, and you will learn that by taking action. This brochure is also a good starting point, and you are encouraged to share it with others in your community. It is really important that asylum seekers and refugees do not feel excluded in your community because they are foreigners, or because of their race, ethnicity or religion. It is a good idea to do internal training about asylum, migration, racial, ethnic and religious diversity, because there can be prejudice and stereotyping even within your trans community.

"In Hungary, I do not feel comfortable in trans or LGBTQI groups. They are nice, but they are not very friendly with foreigners. Maybe it is because of the language barrier; I don’t know." 
Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

3. Using your knowledge and experiences to support others.
   Just by virtue of you living in your country and speaking the language, there is so much you can do for trans asylum seekers and refugees. Your knowledge, experience, contacts and connections with activists, lawyers, doctors, NGOs, authorities or the media are all valuable resources.

4. Starting to build a network of supporters.
   There are plenty of people and groups out there who already support or could also support trans asylum seekers and refugees. It may be a good idea to get in touch with them and find out what you can all offer. You could help educate them on trans issues so trans asylum seekers and refugees can turn to them more safely. Suggestions for groups that you could contact include:
   - groups providing social or psychological support or free legal aid to asylum seekers and refugees
   - groups led by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees
   - groups led by (trans) people of colour
   - women’s rights groups
   - sex worker advocacy groups
   - housing rights groups
   - groups working on HIV/AIDS
   - groups supporting victims of human trafficking
   - safe houses for LGBTQI people, or trafficked persons
   - councils or unions
   - social workers
   - interpreters who can attend meetings or translate documents
   - therapists who are willing to donate hours
   - volunteers who can offer a befriending service in a buddy system (see below)

You could create mailing lists or social media groups for these different circles of supporters, which would speed up the process of supporting people.

Unless it is dangerous, you could also let immigrant authorities know that they should refer trans asylum seekers to you and inform them about the services you can provide.

"When I went to Denmark and told the authorities I’m trans, they tried to find people in Copenhagen who could support me.”
Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

5. Being visible about your support.
   Trans asylum seekers and refugees may not know your group exists, mostly because of language barriers or lack of information. It is recommended that you state explicitly on your website, Facebook site, leaflets or event promotions that you welcome asylum seekers and refugees to your group, as well as describing the kind of support that you provide. (See more information under Language.)

6. Being clear about what you can and cannot offer.
   It is important that you are clear in your communication about what you can and cannot offer. Some may ask for financial support, others access to hormones or legal advice. If any of these are beyond your mandate, it is OK to say that you cannot help and to point them towards groups or individuals who can.

7. Continuing to support people even after they have received legal status.
   "After you get refugee status, that’s when the real work starts. Now you are not living underground in society anymore; you are a part of it. Everything I knew about Denmark at that point was not helpful for being in Danish society. I had to learn how everything works: going to school, getting a job.”
Fernanda Milàn – Guatemala, Denmark

Someone who has been granted refugee status in your country may continue to need your support with transition related care, bureaucracy, integration, finding a school, a job or an apartment, friends, trans-friendly social events or dealing with everyday difficulties as refugees.
Practical steps of social support

“The most important thing was that other LGBTQ people accepted me and I felt that I was in the right place. That it was worth it. To be accepted as a trans refugee who had so many problems, who took so many risks during the journey and who was isolated.”

Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

This chapter is intended to give you some practical ideas on supporting and working with trans asylum seekers and refugees. You will find a list of ideas that you could act on easily and quickly, and some that may take longer to implement.

Language is key!

Language is one of the biggest obstacles for asylum seekers and refugees who want to find out about trans groups and meetings, make friends or know about trans rights in your country.

“Everything was in Danish, everything. It was very unfriendly to foreigners, and to me. That was one of the biggest barriers for me to get into the LGBT community.”

Fernanda Milán – Guatemala, Denmark

“I tried my best to get closer, but I felt that they could not really accept me. I was really disappointed and decided not to go to any more meetings. It was really uncomfortable, being in a group when everyone’s talking in Hungarian and you can’t understand anything.”

Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

Right now you could...

• post an ad on your social media, website and mailing lists to find people who can help you translate your most important materials into some of the key languages or can provide interpretation services during meetings. It will depend on your country which languages you will need (for example, English, Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Russian)

• translate information about your meetings or the services that you can offer.

Decide what you have the capacity to do

When you are starting out your work on asylum, together with your community you should make a decision about what you have the capacity to do. You can then decide collectively how to implement this. In order to do this, you will need to know and understand the needs and requirements of asylum seekers and refugees.

Right now you could...

• Talk to trans asylum seekers and refugees and ask them how you could support them

• Talk to groups that work with trans asylum seekers and refugees and ask them about needs

• Organise community meetings and make a decision about what you could do

Over time you could...

• Add to or change these decisions depending on the needs and your capacity

Be reachable

Once you know what you will do, think of how you could make this visible. It is important to make it as easy as possible for trans asylum seekers to find information about your community and what you offer.

Right now you could...

• Post a supportive messages on your website and social media stating that you welcome trans asylum seekers and refugees (see section on language)

• Post a brief description about ways in which you can offer support

Over time you could...

• Make these messages available in more languages and add more detail to your descriptions

Reach out

Because of language and financial barriers, it can be difficult for trans asylum seekers and refugees to find information about your community or to come to your meetings. If you can possible, be proactive and reach out to them. A good starting point is to find out where and through whom you could reach them. The best way to get in touch with people will vary depending on your country.

Right now you could...

• Get in touch with organisations that might meet trans asylum seekers and refugees (legal aid, migrant and refugee, sex worker and LGBTQI groups etc.). Tell them to direct trans asylum seekers and refugees towards your group

• Prepare some simple leaflets about your group and how you can support asylum seekers and refugees

Over time you could...

• Visit camps and shelters to distribute your leaflets there

• For safety reasons, some trans asylum seekers (particularly in a mainstream camp or when detained) may try to hide that they are trans. If others see them with your leaflets, this may risk their safety. Even being seen picking up a leaflet is too frightening and dangerous for many. If possible, leave your leaflets where all the other ones are so no one can be “caught” merely by being there. You could also display information in a location that is easily visible to asylum seekers.

Examples:

A group that runs a hotline for LGBTQ asylum seekers in Greece always leaves some information leaflets at the Idomeni camp.

In Austria, queer base activists post stickers on bathroom walls in cafés, clubs, camps and shelters, where they hope refugees will see them. The stickers state that their group supports trans and LGBTQI giving information about how to get in touch. Refugees can take a quick photo of the sticker and contact them later.

• Consider disseminating information through others in the camp who meet trans asylum seekers in private: state officials, interviewers, staff of human rights organisations, medical staff, lawyers, interpreters, etc.

In a private room, they can easily pass on your leaflets to their clients. Deciding which officials are trustworthy will depend on the situation in your country.

• You can leave your leaflets and contact information with other organisations that are the first point of contact for trans asylum seekers and can direct them to you (legal aid, migrant and refugee, sex worker and LGBTQI groups).

• Consider visiting the camps to meet trans asylum seekers

Over time you could...

• Add to or change these decisions depending on the needs and your capacity

Tip: Trans migrants and refugees can play an important role in this work if they speak multiple languages. Work together!

Tip: Printing new leaflets may be costly. Try teaming up with other groups to share these costs. You can also post leaflets online and make sure that they are compatible with smartphones.

Example:

A Greek group always visits the local camp, with three volunteers who are LGBTQI refugees themselves, taking the lead. As they can speak some of the most common languages found in the camp, they can establish trust much more easily.

A joint protest organized by Fernanda Milán and T-Refugee Project to stop her deportation from Denmark. Copenhagen, 2012

Photo by Mette Kramer Kristensen
Be a community

“When you see that you are in the right group of people and they also have the same problems with the government, society, their parents, their family, it helps you to be stronger and keep going. And you start life from zero. In Hungary, it’s even lower than zero.”

Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

“A friend of mine introduced me to this queer group. We started to organize demonstrations together, work together and discuss what needed to be done.”

Fernanda Milán – Guatemala, Denmark

Trans asylum seekers and refugees are often rejected by their communities back home, fellow asylum seekers in their new country and the society that receives them. Trans communities are especially important in helping them find new families of choice, and also connect with other trans or LGBTQI refugees from their home countries.

1. Right now you could...
- Create a mailing list or secret Facebook group where trans asylum seekers and refugees can learn about your meetings and events.

Tip: Always ask for permission before you add anyone to a mailing list or group.
- Find one or two people who could interpret at your meetings.
- Go together with trans asylum seekers and refugees to an event.

Over time you could...
- Fully include trans asylum seekers and refugees in your meetings.
- Start groups and meetings whose purpose it is to bring local trans people and asylum seekers and refugees together or work on asylum issues.
- Support trans refugee-led initiatives (see the section below).

Tip: Always follow the lead of trans asylum seekers and refugees. Some of them might already be bringing together a group and would be happy to receive support from your group.
- Do not forget about the barriers that can make it hard for asylum seekers and refugees to join an event, such as language or covering entrance and transportation costs.

The buddy system

In some European countries (Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland), LGBTQI groups have set up a system where trans and LGBTQI asylum seekers have one or two buddies that support them. Buddies give personalised support: they help with what that particular trans asylum seeker or refugee needs.

Some ideas could be to:
- Just be in touch: regularly email, meet and spend time with the person(s) you support.
- Go to events and meetings together.
- Play a bridging role between the local trans community and the asylum seeker or refugee.
- Share information they already have about groups, services, events and activities.
- Help find a doctor or therapist.
- Help find accommodation or a job.

Such simple steps can make people feel safer and more connected.

The volunteers are trained and have to follow certain rules, such as no dating between the buddies. For more information, see TGEU’s list of groups that work with asylum seekers.

“Tip: Allow for learning on both sides. Misunderstandings, problems or frustrations are normal when people from different backgrounds come together.”

Tip: Trans asylum seekers and refugees may have less regular access to the internet, so it is important that the time and location of meetings and events are predictable, reliable and clearly announced.

Right now you could...
- Find one or two volunteers in your community who could be in a buddy role.
- Contact groups that currently run buddy systems and ask for ideas (tgeu.org/asylum).

Over time you could...
- Put together a leaflet about your buddy system and include it on your website, social media and leaflets (see section on language).
- Build a network of buddies who can give ongoing support.
- Train your buddies on a code of conduct so they feel safe and prepared to do this work.
- Try getting some funding for running your buddy system so you can cover transportation costs, food, drinks, tickets and so on.

Example: In Munich, a group of volunteers regularly organises free entrance to different events for asylum seekers. The volunteers pick them up, tell them more about the event and then go and have fun together.

Support trans refugee-led groups

“If we need to fight for my rights, I can say that I am ready. Because I’ve already started. I decided to leave my country, everything I had.”

Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

“I looked down at the table where I found a flyer saying “You Are Not Alone” in Arabic, “لا ت تكون منعزل.” I turned the flyer over, and it said that this is a self-organised NGO by LGBT refugees and black migrant people. I started it a few weeks ago and thought: I want to be a trans activist to empower myself and my trans refugee siblings. I think my whole life and all the feelings inside me changed at that moment. When I went to this new NGO organisation, they really helped me as a human being, not as a piece of paper.”

Maguy Merheb – Lebanon, Germany

Some trans refugees will want to participate in activist work in their new home. Some of them were activists back home, and for many of them this played a role in why they had to leave. You can play an important role as an ally by sharing your contacts and knowledge about organising in your country, providing some basic tools or offering a meeting space.

Right now you could...
- Ask trans asylum seekers and refugees you know if this was something they want to do.
- Think together about how you could support their activist work.
- Share your meeting space.

Over time you could...
- Put together information materials about registering an NGO, organising protests or any other technical things you have knowledge about.
- Think about how you could jointly raise some funds so they can cover their basic costs.
- Include the group at your events.
- Organise events together.

Example: In the UK, trans people are encouraged to participate in UKLGIG activities, including the male and female support groups, but they also have a trans-only support group, the first of its kind in the UK.

Example: In Denmark, LGBTQI refugees always have a stand at the Pride event to publicise their work and meet new people.
“Trans Pride Brighton recently made a conscious effort to include support for asylum seekers and refugees and anti-racism within the theme of their event. They reached out to UKLGIG and our trans support group, gave us a platform to talk, offered us a free information stall and paid travel expenses. A great example of an event in the trans community being genuinely thoughtful and inclusive. Far more so than the many big LGBT events we have in the UK!”
Paul Dillane, UKLGIG

**SHARE INFORMATION, KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCES**

“Most LGBTQI refugees do not know about their rights […] LGBTQI organisations would be very useful in that context. Hand out a brochure to everyone, so you do not put them in public, in different languages. […] I would not be where I am today if I didn’t know about my rights, if I hadn’t been able to read about it.”
Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta

Because you are a local and speak the language, you have access to a lot of information that could be really helpful for trans asylum seekers and refugees. Your knowledge and experiences can be a huge support for someone who does not speak the language and does not know how to navigate the system. For instance, you can share information about:

- trans rights in your country
- organisations and groups that could be helpful for trans asylum seekers and refugees
- services that could be useful, such as free legal aid or psychological support
- access to hormones or contacts for doctors who do surgery
- applying to school or finding a job

You can also more easily search for information. Helping trans asylum seekers, refugees and those who stay undocumented find information about their rights can be important. You can also put them in touch with others who know more.

**Right now you could…**

- put people in touch with organisations that can support them in what they need
- share your contacts, experiences and knowledge about hormones, surgery or changing documents

**Over time you could…**

- compile a list of organisations that trans asylum seekers and refugees could turn to (see General tips for some ideas). It may be helpful to put together an information sheet including the contact details of all these groups, what forms of support they can provide and if they have any specific services or experience working with trans people. For an example, see TGEU’s list of trans groups offering support at www.tgeu.org/asylum
- translate some of your key information materials into other languages

Sharing also works the other way around. Trans asylum seekers and refugees have lots to give: whether it is about their culture, journey, expertise, crafts or skills, they might be eager to meet and engage with other community members.

**EMOTIONAL SUPPORT**

“(Activists) tried to visit me regularly and invite me to places, so I didn’t feel so lonely. Because I was having the worst time of my life.”
Fernanda Milàn – Guatemala, Denmark

“Especially when I was in a really bad condition, [activists] always tried to convince me to go to their meetings and be with them, have fun, discuss issues I had. That helped.”
Fernanda Milàn – Guatemala, Denmark

“LGBTQI organisations can help have psychologists in place to help LGBTQI asylum seekers with therapy. I went through that. When I came here, I wasn’t even talking about my LGBTQI side. I was so traumatised from internalised transphobia since I was five years old. It took me eight months of therapy to crack the shell and even speak about it in an asylum interview. Most of us come with trauma from family, friends, our communities.”
Farah Abdi – Somalia/Kenya, Malta

**Support with accommodation**

“I couldn’t stay at the camp, but I didn’t have any support from the government so I couldn’t pay any rent. KLIT gave me a room for three months.”
Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

Trans asylum seekers are at a really high risk of violence in the camps. Because of this, some of them have to escape and need emergency housing. It is the state’s responsibility to give asylum seekers a safe place to live, but this often does not happen. You can play an important role in an emergency situation, because you have contacts in trans and activist communities, or because authorities might be rather inclined to listen to you.

**Right now you could…**

- ask people in your community if they could offer a sleeping place in emergency situations
- sign up to mailing lists where people may be able to help out in a housing emergency
- look for information about shelters that could host trans asylum seekers in an emergency, for instance, safe houses for victims of trafficking or shelters for LGBTQI people.

You may need to sensitise them about trans issues

**Over time you could…**

- build a network of therapists who can donate hours to trans asylum seekers and refugees
- put in place a system of support where local trans people can give ongoing emotional support to trans asylum seekers and refugees

**Do not forget about activist self-care!**

Supporting trans asylum seekers and refugees often means listening to tough stories and supporting people who were traumatised back home, on their journey or in the very country you also live in. Doing this work can have an impact on your mental and physical health. Activist self-care is important so you can continue doing this work in the long run without burning out or breaking down. Practising self-care is important for all of you who do political work on asylum, including trans asylum seekers and refugees.

**Right now you could…**

- read up on activist self-care and share what you learn with others in your group
- try doing simple activities that are good for your wellbeing: sleeping, eating, exercising, meditating

**Over time you could…**

- build your community in a way that activist self-care is a regular part of your work

Tip: TGEU is currently working on some materials on activist self-care. Keep an eye out for these!
Financial Support

“[The queer group] tried to make sure I had enough money to make a phone call, buy some food. Which is difficult, because organisations never have money.”
Fernanda Milan – Guatemala, Denmark

“The main problem is financial support. We do not have it. I had good pocket money in Denmark. It’s not comparable in Hungary. It hurts when I think about it. But that’s life – now I’m here. […] As a trans refugee, you need it, because most of us really want to start our surgery or hormone therapy and change our documents.”
Sam Shooshian – Iran, Hungary

Squatting and hosting

Over time you could…
• set up an informal network of activists and friends who can offer short-term accommodation
• be in touch with squats, shared apartments and community spaces that may be able to provide free housing

Example: In Germany, there is a mailing list for leftist activists called Reflektor. People often post on this list asking for a solidarity (soli) room for refugees. A soli room could be a temporary free room in an apartment. Some activists organise soli rooms such that a group of people regularly donate some money to cover its rent.

Example: In Budapest, an autonomous radical queer-feminist community and activist space called KLIT used to provide temporary housing to refugees in emergency situations, sometimes for months. KLIT has since closed down.

In many European countries, asylum seekers and refugees get very little money from the state to cover their basic costs, but they are not allowed to work. This makes life harder for trans asylum seekers than for others. They might need to pay for hormones or surgery. They might have to leave the camp urgently to escape violence. An asylum seeker may not have enough money to make a phone call in an emergency, buy bus tickets to go to meetings or pay a charge at events. You may already be working on raising funds for local trans people who are in a difficult financial situation. It could be a good idea to team up with each other and organise regular fundraising events together.

Organising Community Events

Any support that helps break isolation and makes people feel welcome and connected is an important step you can take.

Over time you could…
• team up with venues and performers and host fundraising parties
• run online fundraisers together
• host fundraising dinners
• if there is a need for phones, bikes, laptops, ask people in your community if they have spares ones they do not need
• set up a system where your members can make a regular contribution that you can redistribute among trans asylum seekers and refugees who are in emergency situations

Example: In Berlin, queer and trans asylum seekers and refugees regularly organise a performance night called Queens against Borders. All the profits go to the performers and the small team of asylum seekers and refugees who run the show.

Example: Members of the Greek Transgender Support Association pay a monthly contribution of 10 Euros (or as much as they can afford) to a joint budget. This money is later given to support trans asylum seekers and refugees in need.

Example: Stockholm Pride gives free tickets to a number of LGBTQI groups that can then redistribute them to LGBTQI asylum seekers and refugees.

Example: In Berlin, a group of queer activists hosts weekly bike fixing workshops for LGBTQI refugees. Another group gives free bikes to refugees and helps them fix them. You could contact such groups and ask them to invite trans asylum seekers and refugees to their events or organise activities that are specifically for them.

Safety Should Be a Priority

When you organise events or help people with housing solutions, do not forget about safety. In some areas, there is more police presence. This means that trans migrants or trans people of colour might be more likely to be stopped by the police. Undocumented migrants can get into serious trouble if the police check their IDs.

Tip: Do not organise events in areas where trans asylum seekers and refugees may be exposed to police harassment or raids (highly policed areas or squats).

Tip: Make sure that events do not require people to show their ID cards, which may out trans people.

Tip: Squats may be a good temporary housing solution in emergency situations. They may also be regular targets of police raids. Always keep asylum seekers and refugees aware of these dangers so they can make an informed decision.

Over time you could…
• reflect. People often post on this list asking for a solidarity (soli) room for refugees. A soli room could be a temporary free room in an apartment. Some activists organise soli rooms such that a group of people regularly donate some money to cover its rent.
• contact event organisers, performers and venues that could offer free entrance, food or drink tickets at their events, such as LGBTQI events and venues

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ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

Your group or organisation can also support trans asylum seekers and refugees by engaging with the government and/or the immigration authorities and advocating for better laws, policies and services. Every country will have different needs and gaps to address: trans asylum seekers and refugees in your country will be in the best position to tell you what you should be asking for. They should be your key partners in the process as long as they agree and their participation does not risk their safety or threaten their case.

Advocacy spotlights:

No more detention for trans asylum seekers in the UK

In 2015, the UK Parliament started a transgender equality inquiry to better articulate its position on trans rights. During this process, UKLGIG made a submission on the needs and experiences of trans asylum seekers. The state’s Transgender Equality report made over 30 recommendations to improve the lives of trans people in the UK, but asylum was entirely ignored. UKLGIG immediately criticised this in the media, jointly with its partners. Since then, a cross-party group of politicians agreed with them that asylum policies relating to trans people must be revised, and the government has accepted this position. Also, an independent inquiry agreed that trans people should not be detained, and the government accepts this as well.

You can read UKLGIG’s submission here: http://bit.ly/2bLtKPY
You can read the government’s policy paper on detention: http://bit.ly/2cpNKYm

Deportation of trans asylum seeker stopped in Austria

In 2011, the Austrian authorities decided not to give refugee status to Yasar, a Turkish trans woman. Until that point, the authorities had referred to Yasar as “homosexual,” and not as a trans woman. Yasar was put in detention until she was going to be deported. Vienna based TransX organised many protests. One of them was the largest trans demonstration in Vienna to ever take place.

TransX also asked people to send letters to the government to stop the deportation. In the end, the government changed its decision: Yasar was released from detention, and the authorities decided to reopen her case.

You can read more about the advocacy actions of TransX here: http://bit.ly/2cR2QGH.

Some of the most important advocacy priorities could be that

- the asylum law includes gender identity and expression
- trans asylum seekers can live in a safe place: in a separate shelter or in apartments
- trans asylum seekers and refugees have access to healthcare and transition related care
- trans asylum seekers are already recognised according to their gender identity during their asylum procedure: this would mean that their asylum documents include name and gender marker corresponding to their gender identity