

How to....Respectfully Engage with LGBTQIA+ Persons and Groups

For LGBTQIA+ persons living in displacement, every interaction with a humanitarian actor is a test of trust. That trust is shaped, in large part, by how the community is engaged.

Respectful engagement is not a courtesy, it is a protection tool. When done well, it builds the trust that enables LGBTQIA+ persons to share their needs, access appropriate services, and participate meaningfully in humanitarian processes. When done poorly, it causes harm, reinforces stigma, and closes the door to protection entirely.

- **Engage on their terms:** Respect self-identification, preferred language, and the pace at which individuals choose to share information about their identity and experiences.
- **Safety over completeness:** In restrictive contexts, it is always better to engage less and protect more, than to gather data at the cost of someone's safety.
- **You are not the expert on their experience:** Lived experience cannot be replaced by training. Listen more than you speak, especially in early engagement.
- **Consistency matters:** One respectful interaction does not build trust. Sustained, predictable, affirming engagement over time does.

Practical Steps for Aid Organisations

1. Preparation

Before any venue or format is finalised, consult the person or group on their preferred location. They are the primary authority on what is safe for them, your role is to facilitate their choice, not make it on their behalf. Offer both physical and virtual options from the outset and make clear that either is equally valid.

- Ask first: *'Where would you feel most comfortable meeting—in person somewhere, or virtually? What feels safest for you?'* This question alone communicates respect and shifts power in the right direction.
- Virtual options: For many LGBTQIA+ persons in restrictive contexts, a virtual meeting via an encrypted platform (e.g., Signal, WhatsApp with disappearing messages) is significantly safer than any physical location.
- Physical location, if chosen by the person: If the person or group prefers to meet in person, work with them to identify a venue. Do not assume your office or a formal humanitarian space is the safest choice, it may not be. A community café, a trusted CSO space, or a location of their choosing may carry far less risk.

- Privacy: Whatever space is used, confirm it is genuinely private, conversations cannot be overheard by other staff, community members, or family members who may not be safe to hear the content.
- Neutrality: Avoid venues associated with authority, religion, or community leadership that may carry negative associations for the person or group.
- Safety planning: Establish exit options. If a person appears uncomfortable, feels unsafe, or needs to leave quickly, they should be able to do so without drawing attention.

In contexts where language barriers exist, the choice of interpreter is critical.

- Offer alternatives: Where possible, give the person of concern a choice of interpreter.
- Vet interpreters in advance: Assess their attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ persons through structured conversation before assigning them to sensitive cases.
- Brief on terminology: Ensure interpreters understand the correct SOGIESC terminology in both the working language and the language of the person of concern, including culturally specific terms.
- Confidentiality obligations: All interpreters must sign a confidentiality agreement and understand that disclosure of any information shared during engagement is a serious breach with consequences.

2. Engagement

- Introduce yourself and your role clearly: Explain what your organisation does, and how information shared with you will be used and stored.
- Share your own pronouns first: *'My name is [name] and I use she/her pronouns. What name and pronouns would you like me to use?'* This normalises the practice and signals that your organisation is inclusive.
- Focus on the person, not the identity: Do not focus the discuss on identity. Identity information should only be shared if and when the person chooses.
- LGBTQIA+ community groups, particularly refugee-led and community-based organisations, have the best knowledge of the local environment. Engage them as partners, not as beneficiaries or information sources.
- Avoid having a predetermined agenda or pre-designed programme when working with LGBTQIA+ CSOs. Developing and designing initiatives as equals together produces better outcomes and is far less likely to cause harm.
- LGBTQIA+ groups are not all the same and have different views on identity, visibility, and engagement with humanitarian actors.

In restrictive social contexts, it is common for some humanitarian staff to hold personal views that are not affirming of LGBTQIA+ identities. This must be managed proactively:

- Establish a clear professional standard: Staff do not need to personally affirm LGBTQIA+ identities, but they are professionally required to engage with all persons of concern respectfully and without discrimination, regardless of personal belief. This is a condition of employment, not a preference.

Additional Resources

- **The PRIDE Centre:** Templates, legal analysis, and tools for [LGBTQIA+ inclusion](#) in humanitarian settings.

☒ Checklist for Organizing Pride in Restrictive Environments

- ☐ **Safe space confirmed with the person or group:** Before finalising any venue or format, the person or group has been consulted on their preferred location. They are the primary authority on what is safe for them.
- ☐ **Interpreter vetted and briefed:** All interpreters have been assessed for attitude, trained on SOGIESC terminology, and signed a confidentiality agreement.
- ☐ **SOGIESC terminology reviewed:** Practitioner can use correct terms including preferred pronouns and does not use pathologising or outdated language.
- ☐ **Preferred name and pronouns requested:** Practitioner shared their own pronouns first and asked for the person's preferred name and pronouns before proceeding.
- ☐ **Confidentiality explained clearly:** The person understands who will have access to information shared and has given informed consent to any recording.
- ☐ **Engagement is voluntary:** The person has been told they can stop at any time without consequence to their access to services.
- ☐ **Identity not assumed or imposed:** No identity label has been assigned to the person. Their own terms have been used throughout.
- ☐ **Share Resources:** Direct staff to [The PRIDE Centre](#) for information and guidance.

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