THE INTERNATIONAL PRIDE CENTRE
PROTECTION, RIGHTS, INCLUSION IN DISPLACEMENT & EMERGENCIES

BURUNDI

BRIEFING NOTE

Humanitarian Environment for Civil Society and LGBTQIA+ Communities in Burundi

DECEMBER 2025

Executive Summary

The International PRIDE Centre conducted field outreach in May 2025 in Burundi, and conducted interviews and focus group discussions with over 40 individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community, including civil society organisations (CSO) representatives and humanitarian actors. The analysis of findings from those interviews reveals an operating environment of extreme hostility, characterized by state-sanctioned persecution, pervasive social stigma, and acute security threats for LGBTQIA+ individuals and the organizations that support them. A Legal Analysis of the LGBTQIA+ environment in Burundi is available on the pridecentre.org website in English and French.

The President of Burundi has publicly called for violence against the LGBTQIA+ community, and homosexuality should be officially designated a national security threat, creating a climate of pervasive fear and surveillance.

In response, local LGBTQIA+ CSOs have developed sophisticated and resilient strategies for survival and operation. The primary strategy involves operating under the cover of socially and politically acceptable activities, mainly public health (HIV/SRHR) and economic empowerment activities through agricultural and trade cooperatives. These cooperatives not only provide vital livelihoods in the face of systemic employment discrimination but also serve as a protective mechanism by demonstrating community contribution and creating legitimate reasons for assembly.

> *'We have found the strategy of creating co-operatives, so that every member can have access to loans and are able to increase their financial capacities'*
>
> **Executive Director, LGBTQIA+ CSO**

> *'We are so worried about the USAID funding cuts. Before, we were able to be included in conversations about the national strategic plans – but since the funding cuts, we are not in those spaces anymore'*
>
> **Focus Group Discussion Participant**

A critical and recurring theme is the devastating impact of recent USAID funding cuts, which have decimated essential health and economic programs, leaving CSOs in a state of operational crisis and reversing any previous gains. This is compounded by the near-total lack of engagement from the mainstream humanitarian sector, which describes itself as "LGBTQIA-blind," citing a lack of capacity and fear of government reprisal. Consequently, the needs of acutely vulnerable groups—including transgender individuals, who face the most severe persecution, and LGBTQIA+ refugees isolated in camps—are almost entirely unmet by the formal aid system.

Methodology:

The International PRIDE Centre conducted research across Burundi in May 2025, as part of a wider regional research initiative across six sub-Saharan countries in 2025. The purpose was to identify the acute, multi-faceted needs faced by LGBTQIA+ communities in crises and LGBTQIA+ human rights defenders, drawing from firsthand testimony from local civil society organizations (CSOs) in these five countries. The data collection utilized a qualitative approach, primarily based on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with affected LGBTQIA+ persons in crises, local LGBTQIA+ human rights defenders, INGOs, United Nations agencies. The research was supported by desk-based legal and policy analyses of the legal and policy environment in each specific country. Over 22 LGBTQIA+ persons participated in six FGDs, and nine people participated in 11 Key Informant Interviews. Representatives from 15 organisations were interviewed, including local LGBTQIA+ led Civil Society Organisations, INGOs, and UN agencies.

I. The Political, Legal, and Social Context

The environment for LGBTQIA+ people in Burundi is defined by overt hostility from the state, a punitive legal framework, and deeply entrenched social and cultural prejudice.

Political and Security Hostility

- **State-Sanctioned Persecution:** The highest levels of government actively promote hostility. The President has made public speeches describing homosexuality as a "curse" and stating that LGBTQIA+ people should be taken to a stadium and stoned. A decision from the Burundi National Security Council in 2012-2013 officially classified homosexuality as a "threat to the security of the country," a policy that legitimizes state persecution.
- **Pervasive Surveillance:** The state employs a robust surveillance apparatus. One interviewee noted the government's use of Pegasus spyware and the presence of informants "listening everywhere." This creates a climate of perpetual uncertainty and fear, where individuals and organizations are constantly watched. This surveillance extends to monitoring international organizations; one INGO representative was directly questioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about programming for LGBTQIA+ people.
- **Political Scapegoating:** Political authorities, particularly during election periods, use the LGBTQIA+ community as a scapegoat to deflect from other societal issues. This rhetoric is disseminated through official channels and amplified by Members of Parliament, inciting public hostility.

Legal FrameworK[1]

- **Criminalization:** Article 567 of the Penal Code criminalizes same-sex sexual activity, with a penalty of up to two years in prison and a fine. While the law specifies "***homosexual acts***," it is used broadly by authorities to persecute individuals based on their identity and presentation.
- **Lack of Protection:** There are no laws that protect LGBTQIA+ individuals from discrimination. Any attempts to advocate for rights are met with state repression, as seen in the 2023 mass arrest of 24 individuals in Gitega who were attending a workshop on economic empowerment. They were accused of "promoting homosexuality."

[1] Refer to Resources - PRIDE Centre for further documented analysis of the legal environment in Burundi.

- **Discriminatory Policies:** Other policies institutionalize discrimination. A Ministry of Education decree allows for the expulsion of students merely suspected of being homosexual. A new law requires a father to be physically present to register a child, creating significant barriers for single mothers, including many LBQ women.

Social Barriers & Exclusion

- **Widespread Stigma:** Deep-seated prejudice is prevalent, with common narratives describing homosexuality as a "Western import" or something that "came from Europe." This is reinforced by influential religious leaders, including American and South Korean pastors, who hold significant sway.

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>
> **Participants of Focus Group Discussion**

- **Family and Community Rejection:** Rejection from family is a primary driver of poverty and homelessness. Individuals are often expelled from their homes, and families may force them into marriage or subject them to "corrective rape." One transgender organization runs a program specifically to sensitize mothers of trans children to foster acceptance.
- **Public Harassment:** Gossip, verbal abuse, and public harassment are daily realities. Individuals report being followed, threatened, and extorted. One interviewee noted, "When we started doing entrepreneurship, the stigma against us reduced," highlighting the link between economic contribution and social acceptance.

II. The Role and Strategy of Local LGBTQIA+ Civil Society

Despite the intensely hostile environment, a resilient network of local CSOs provides essential support to the LGBTQIA+ community. Their ability to operate hinges on a set of sophisticated adaptive strategies.

Primary Strategy - Operating Under Cover

The most critical survival strategy is to avoid registering or operating openly as an LGBTQIA+ organization. Instead, CSOs adopt a public-facing identity aligned with government priorities.

- **Economic Empowerment Cooperatives:** The most common and effective cover is the formation of legally registered cooperatives focused on economic activities. These initiatives are valued by the government, which prioritizes cooperative development. Activities include:
  - Farming (palm oil, rice, chickens, potatoes, rabbits)
  - Trade and Production (welding, sewing, mayonnaise production)
  - Services (hairdressing, decoration, IT services) This strategy provides a legitimate reason for community members to gather, generates income to combat poverty, and builds goodwill with local authorities by contributing to community development plans.
- **Public Health and HIV:** Many of the pioneering organizations, were established under the umbrella of HIV prevention. This remains a key strategy, as MSM and transgender people are officially recognized as Key Populations in Burundi's National Strategic Plan for HIV, providing a crucial entry point for health-related work.

Security and Protection Mechanisms

- **Strategic Alliances:** CSOs actively cultivate informal relationships with local authorities, including police chiefs and commune administrators. Strategies include inviting officials to human rights trainings (without explicitly mentioning LGBTQIA+ rights), collaborating on community work days ("Tiririza"), and even bribing police to secure the release of arrested community members.

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- **Centralized Security Response:** One specific mechanism was established in 2017 as a dedicated security body for the LGBTQIA+ movement[2]. It operates with staff embedded in CSOs across the country to monitor and report on security incidents, track political rhetoric, and coordinate emergency responses, including legal aid, medical support, and safe housing.

- **Data and Digital Security:** Organizations prioritize digital security, storing sensitive data on the cloud or secured laptops and using codes instead of names. However, many rural organizations still rely on handwritten notebooks for data collection, which poses a significant security risk.

Movement Building and Coordination

- **Shared Resources and Hubs:** A support centre, founded by four organizations, serves as a central hub in Bujumbura, providing a safe space for meetings and offering specialized mental health, wellness, and SRHR services for the entire community.
- **Collective Action:** The CSO network collaborates closely, particularly during crises. Following the Gitega arrests, organizations pooled funds to provide legal support, food, and shelter. A similar collective fundraising effort was mounted to assist community members displaced by floods.
- **Capacity Building:** Some organisations focus on movement building, providing training and organizational development support to CBOs in Burundi, Rwanda, and DRC to strengthen their administrative, financial, and programmatic capacities.

III. Key Challenges and Vulnerabilities

LGBTQIA+ individuals and CSOs face a compounding set of crises that threaten their safety, well-being, and operational viability.

Systemic Discrimination and Lack of Access

Sector	Nature of Discrimination and Barriers
Health	Pervasive stigma, mockery, and refusal of treatment from healthcare workers. Lack of access to specialized care (e.g., gender-affirming hormones). Individuals rely on a few "safe" centres and peers to access services without being reported to police.

[2] The name of the mechanism is not provided, to protect the identity of those involved and their work.

Education	High rates of expulsion from schools, sanctioned by a government decree. Students face intense harassment from both peers and teachers, leading to high dropout rates. This is especially severe for visibly trans and gender non-conforming youth.
Employment	Widespread discrimination makes formal employment nearly impossible. Individuals are fired upon discovery of their SOGIESC. This economic disempowerment is a primary driver of poverty and reliance on sex work for survival.
Justice	Police frequently refuse to investigate crimes against LGBTQIA+ individuals, often blaming or harassing the victims. There is a severe lack of lawyers willing or able to take on such cases, forcing CSOs to rely on a small number of trusted legal partners.

The US Funding Crisis

A recent freeze and cut of funding from USAID, primarily through the PEPFAR program, has been catastrophic.

- Program Collapse: The EPIC project, a cornerstone of HIV service delivery, was terminated. This ended the peer educator program, which was the primary mechanism for connecting community members to HIV testing, treatment (ARVs and PrEP), and prevention tools like condoms.
- Economic Impact: The funding cuts have eliminated stipends for peer educators, who were often otherwise unemployed, and halted numerous economic empowerment projects, including vocational training and small business support. One organization reported losing 85% of its funding.

Specific Vulnerabilities

- Transgender Individuals: Are described as the most persecuted group due to their visibility. They face extreme levels of violence, family rejection, and discrimination in accessing all forms of services, including healthcare and ID documentation.
- LBQ Women: Face high rates of "corrective rape" and are often forced into marriages. As single mothers, they are stigmatized and face legal barriers to registering their children.
- Refugees and Displaced Persons: Congolese LGBTQIA+ refugees are isolated within camps controlled by international organizations, making them inaccessible to local CSOs. Burundian returnees face stigma and poverty. Those displaced by climate-related floods are often excluded from official humanitarian aid responses.

IV. The Role of the Humanitarian Sector

The mainstream humanitarian sector in Burundi is largely disengaged from addressing the needs of LGBTQIA+ communities.

- Institutional Blindness: Representatives from international NGOs admit to being "LGBTQIA-blind," citing a lack of awareness, data, tools, and internal capacity. The topic is reportedly never raised in high-level coordination forums like the IASC.

- Fear of Reprisal: A primary barrier to engagement is the fear of government repercussions. An INGO Director recounted being interrogated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about LGBTQIA+ programming, stating that any such work would likely lead to being "investigated and forced out of the country."
- Lack of Leadership: UNHCR, as the lead of the Protection Cluster, is seen by local actors as providing no leadership on this issue. There is no evidence of proactive engagement from UN agencies or major INGOs to understand or address the needs of this population.

Humanitarian Presence and Coordination

As many as 30 international NGOs have reportedly left Burundi in the last decade, resulting the estimated loss of USD 280 million in development/humanitarian investment from the country. This is largely due to a shrinking space for civil society, human rights crackdown, limited funding availability, and restrictive NGO regulations. These withdrawals are significant due to the loss of critical services and protection - such as those organisations dealing with disability, legal aid, human rights, justice, civil society oversight, often provided to vulnerable or marginalized populations. Nonetheless critical support continues to be delivered by UN agencies, the Red Cross Movement and INGOs remain in Burundi.

In response to crises such as the latest influx of refugees into Burundi fleeing conflict in East DRC in 2025, UNHCR, as the mandated agency for refugee protection, leads the coordination of the refugee response in collaboration with Office National de protection des Réfugiés et des Apatrides (ONPRA). Regarding returnees, the Directorate General of Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration (DGRRR) oversees the repatriation process, with support from UNHCR and other partners. Given the mixed population movements—including refugees, refugee returnees, third-country nationals, and migrants—dedicated coordination forums are established to address the specific needs of each group.

Recommendations

Partnerships

1. **Partner directly with local organisations**
   - Help scale their services to reach more people, including those in forced displacement and development settings.
   - Ensure these organisations receive institutional support, not only project funding.
   - Adopt a community-led approach, starting with needs assessments conducted in partnership with the community.
   - Provide flexible funding and capacity-building support, particularly for emergency response and organizational development.
2. **Partner with and strengthen LGBTQIA-led economic cooperatives**
   - Including through capacity-building, micro-lending and grants, and integration into development and humanitarian livelihoods programming.
   - Use cooperatives as entry points for wider engagement and discreet service delivery.
3. **Facilitate two-way collaboration between CSOs and humanitarian and development actors**
   - Integrate LGBTQIA+ CSOs into the humanitarian response infrastructure, development programming including coordination platforms, case management systems, and referral pathways.
   - Consider joint trainings and experience sharing sessions between aid organisations development programming, and LGBTQIA+ CSOs to strengthen mutual understanding, opportunities and cooperation.

Service Provision

4. **Sustain peer-led programming**
   - Prioritise funding to replace recent cuts, particularly stipends for peer educators who form the backbone of LGBTQIA+ community work in Burundi.
   - Support these networks to expand to reach displaced and disaster-affected populations.

5. **Fund legal aid services for LGBTQIA+ individuals and organisations**

Protection

6. **Have contingency protection plans and processes in place**
   - Establish emergency protection plans, inclusive of resettlement options, in case of mass arrests or other high-profile/ high-risk events.
   - Connect with CSOs working on documentation to receive regular updates and identify protection concerns.

Government Engagement

7. **Leverage diplomatic and technical entry points**
   - In areas where government opposition is seen as the major barrier to SOGIESC inclusion, conduct thorough and consultative risk assessments to determine whether to discretely engage certain government actors – especially where no legal barriers are present.

8. Access to Education

- UNICEF, UNESCO, and INGOs engaged in education programming should engage the Ministry of Education regarding the expulsion of LGBTQIA+ students.
- Donors, diplomatic missions, and UN agencies should exercise leverage.
- INGOs and UN Agencies should engage education support programming on a wholly non-discrimination basis, including non-discrimination of LGBTQIA+ persons.

9. Provide 'cover' for local organisations

- UN agencies, Embassies and INGOs should be the ones to carry messages to government, as local LGBTQIA+ organisations continue to operate under health or economic mandates.

Capacity Development and Risk Management

10. Build internal capacity

- Train staff to recognise and respond to LGBTQIA+ protection concerns in their programming, ensuring inclusive access to assistance.
- Include LGBTQIA+ needs in needs assessments, programme planning, design, and service mapping exercises, in collaboration with local CSOs.

11. Conduct risk assessments and risk mitigation processes

- Before implementing any LGBTQIA-inclusive activities, evaluate potential legal and political risks. These are particularly necessary in relation to:

  i. Dissemination of SOGIESC-related information.
  ii. Training and awareness-raising activities.

The International PRIDE Centre

The International PRIDE Centre (Protection, Rights, Inclusion in Displacement & Emergencies) provides legal and policy analysis, preparedness, and programming tools for emergency response agencies to ensure inclusive programming for LGBTQI+ persons in emergency, humanitarian, and development settings. For questions about this briefing or to discuss how the PRIDE Centre may be able to support your operations, please contact *InternationalPrideCentre@pridecentre.org*.

The PRIDE Centre is rooted in a foundation of anti-racism and aid decolonisation across all outputs and operations. We embrace SOGIESC communities in all their diversity, inclusive of indigenous understandings of non-CIS sexual identity and gender expression and identity.

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