

# Preventing sexual and gender-based violence in migrant communities and strengthening support to survivors in EU cities

Update May 2020: LGBTQI+ migrants



[#EqualCity](#) [#GenderEquality](#)

[#SGBV](#) [#LGBTQI](#)

Five months have passed since the start of the regional Equal(c)ity project, coordinated by the Country Office of Belgium and Luxembourg of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and funded by the European Commission. The project aims to improve urban services in 4 different EU cities to tackle sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against migrants, by each developing a specific toolbox:

- Brussels: SGBV against LGBTQI+ migrants and the creation of safe spaces
- Luxembourg: SGBV against female migrants
- Rome: SGBV against unaccompanied migrant children (UMC)
- Gothenburg: SGBV in a family context, focusing on honor-related crimes

Now, more than ever, urban services are under pressure, first line workers are at the forefront of a relentless, strenuous battle whilst socio-economic inequalities are exacerbated. COVID-19 has the world in its grip and continues to put a strain on local, national and global resources. Despite the challenging circumstances, the project Equal(c)ity project partners are continuing their activities.

With this thematic project update, the project team would like to brief you on the activities already conducted, the future steps, and the impact of COVID-19 on migrant communities.

You can access the other three project updates here: [Female Migrants](#) / [UMC](#) / [Migrant Families](#)

## Objectives of the project in Brussels



IOM Belgium and Luxembourg is partnering with [Rainbowhouse Brussels](#) and [equal.brussels](#) (the equal opportunity department of the Brussels-Capital Region) to address SGBV against LGBTQI+ people from migrant communities. LGBTQI+ is used as an umbrella term for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, Queer and Intersex people, while the plus (“+”) refers to all other marginalized gender identities and sexual orientations. The objective will be realized through setting up safe spaces and improving existing urban services to better serve [LGBTQI+ migrants](#). In this context, “migrant community” is understood as everyone perceived as being from a migrant background, from asylum seekers and refugees to diaspora members from 2nd and 3rd generation.

LGBTQI+ people represent approximately 10% of the global population with a relatively equal repartition everywhere in the world. Violence targeting LGBTQI+ people is in itself sexual and/or gender-based. People with a migrant background who are also LGBTQI+ face very specific challenges. This is why Rainbowhouse Brussels and equal.brussels have decided to take an intersectional approach towards the notion of safe space and the definition of the targeted audience.

The developed toolbox will contain (1) guidelines on [safe spaces](#), (2) standard operating procedures on [how to manage them](#), (3) an [awareness-raising strategy](#) aimed at LGBTQI+ migrants to promote the existence of safe spaces and their importance, as well as (4) a [training program](#) for the frontline workers involved with them. This toolbox will be created with the understanding that the target group is far from being monolithic and encounters a large array of needs and experiences.

### Activities – State of Play

The project partners are currently in the midst of extensive theoretic and field [research](#). The objective of this research is to get a thorough understanding of what constitutes safe spaces for different people in different contexts, to assess the needs, difficulties, and challenges faced by the targeted audience and to collect good practices for the professionals and volunteers working with them.

Part of this research involves [interviews](#) with these frontline workers, LGBTQI+ individuals from a migrant background, and workers from institutions and public services. Other EU cities with experience on the topic are included in this initial research phase.

### Future steps

The upcoming summer months will be employed to develop the [four elements of the toolbox](#) detailed above. To ensure the efficiency of the awareness-raising strategy, the project partners plan on organizing focus groups. Of course, this will depend on the evolution of the sanitary situation and current lockdown in the weeks to come.

An [independent and diverse expert panel](#) will provide feedback on the developed tools after the summer 2020. This will guarantee that the tools and instruments are checked by

Some [test-training sessions](#) already took place before the COVID-19 lockdown in order to assess the needs of different publics and the efficiency of the training methods.

independent practitioners, both from a conceptual/theoretical perspective as from a practical perspective, ensuring replicability of the tools at EU level.

## COVID-19 and the impact on migrants



Photo: © IOM

The COVID-19 pandemic affects everyone, everywhere, and at the same time [amplifies and deepens existing inequalities](#). Migrants, especially when undocumented, are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic. They may face obstacles in accessing health care and other support services, are subject to increased stigmatization and discrimination, and risk income loss due to less favorable employment conditions. [Migrant workers are at the frontline of the response to COVID-19](#), whilst at the same time enjoying less favorable working conditions which may also have a direct impact on their health. For

migrants relying on sex work, the crisis and consequent social distancing has deprived people from income and protection, facing even more precarious financial and housing situations. The organization UTSOPI, a collective of sex workers in Belgium, has developed a guide for sex workers during the COVID crisis and Alias, an association for male sex workers in Brussels, has produced a video regarding the safety of sex workers working online.

For migrants in reception or detention or newly arrived persons in need of international protection, conditions are also particularly challenging. They might have no certainty on their procedure, face suspensions of counseling and group activities, whilst not being able to self-isolate.

As shown many times in the last weeks, marginalized communities, such as the [LGBTQI+ community](#), are hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 crisis. These uncertain times come with a rise in [discrimination and stigmatization](#) blaming [LGBTQI+ people](#) and people being perceived as [migrants](#) for COVID-19.

The current crisis impacts the physical, financial and emotional security of our target audience and will probably force a great number of LGBTQI+ people to migrate in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, with borders closing abruptly, many migrants find themselves stranded in transit. Furthermore, unlike most migrants, LGBTQI+ migrants flee not only legal prosecution, but often also unsupportive communities or cultures. This means that they tend to be even more [isolated](#) than others upon arrival in Europe as they usually are not able to seek the support of the local diaspora and other migrants. The absence of a supportive community (be it perceived or assessed) puts people at higher risk of extreme precarity as well as mental health conditions.

These risks are also exacerbated in a time of social isolation, especially for LGBTQI+ migrants who reside in [reception centers](#) where it is impossible to practice social distancing and get privacy (for video chats for example) while being forced to maintain social distance with the outside world (where most LGBTQI+ residents may find solace). These asylum seekers also face even higher-than-usual levels of stress and anxiety regarding their application for international protection. In the context of the current pandemic, interviews and court appointments are suspended or delayed, and access to information, lawyers, and support groups is becoming very scarce when existing at all.

Levels of stress and anxiety are also extremely high for LGBTQI+ people with a migrant background who have to [stay with unsupportive relatives](#), who may not accept their sexual orientation or gender identity and might therefore be forced to conceal their identity or face domestic violence or enforced total deprivation. The inability to connect with positive and supportive influences may have serious (health) implications.

It is known that overall, in case of health issues, outcomes are generally worse within the LGBTQI+ population and within migrant communities because of persisting stigma and discrimination leading to disparities in access, quality and availability of [healthcare](#). Prejudice held by medical professionals can have disastrous consequences in times like these, especially during piques of contamination and overloaded medical facilities. It is important to highlight the fact that our target audience counts a considerable amount of people living with HIV. The delay or lack of access to their treatment, a (in)direct consequence of COVID-19 measures, can lead to compromised immunity and heightened vulnerability to the coronavirus. For a lot of people, getting access to testing and treatments is becoming more difficult under the new circumstances. For more information, please read the [guide on "Coronavirus and HIV"](#) by the Belgian organization EX-AEQUO.

Another example is trans\* and intersex people who need specific treatments and specialists, as they can encounter difficulties accessing them during the lockdown, be it for administrative, financial or geographical reasons. On top of that, procedures deemed "non-urgent", such as transition-related medical care, are mostly postponed or canceled. This can have serious consequences on the physical and psychological health of those needing it, including anxiety and depression, sometimes leading to suicide.

Recent observations confirm that, in the current conditions, people are more susceptible to develop new [mental health](#) issues and to see the existing ones worsen. This situation proves particularly detrimental to people with trauma related to medical procedures, situations of isolation, or imprisonment. LGBTQI+ people are still often subjected without consent to invasive physical and psychiatric medical procedures, including corrective surgeries on intersex individuals and conversion therapies. As ILGA Europe states in its [COVID-19 briefing document](#): "past experience of discrimination, stigma, gatekeeping, misgendering, and non-consented procedures can deter LGBTI people from seeking medical care, leading to later entry into medical systems or no entry at all".

Lastly, there can be added impacts on LGBTQI+ people from a migrant background due to the intensified police presence put in place to enforce the lockdown measures. For a start, social distancing rules are drawn around the concepts of household and family which are usually understood in a heteronormative way. Same-gender partnerships tend to be dismissed especially when combined with racial bias. Furthermore, more frequent identity

controls lead to greater risks of verbalization, arrests, and harassment for undocumented people and trans\* individuals whose documents may not reflect their correct current name, gender, and/or appearance.

For more information on how COVID-19 impact migrants, and links to interesting initiatives undertaken to protect migrants, please click on the image:



17 May is International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. The theme elected for 2020 is 'Breaking the Silence'. This year again, tens of thousands will speak up. The global LGBTIQ+ community and allies will fill the space with their voices and the stories of their lives. The intention by all coming together on one global day is for the voices of hope and solidarity to reach those LGBTIQ+ individuals all over the world who are still not in a position to safely speak up



Join us and make your voice heard on 17 May 2020.

[#IDAHOBIT](https://twitter.com/IDAHOBIT)

Click on the image to access the IDAHOBIT 2020 website

Photo: © IOM

The tools created by Rainbowhouse Brussels will be discussed and shared with the following interested cities/actors:

- Milan (ITA)
- Ghent (BE)
- Leuven (BE)
- Vienna (AUS)
- NGO Dona Daria (NL)

Interested in receiving the finalized tools? Find our contact details below!

## General info on the Equal(c)ity project

Financed by: the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020)

Implemented by: IOM Belgium and Luxembourg, in collaboration with IOM Italy

With the Support of: Brussels Capital Region and City of Luxembourg

Geographical coverage: Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy and Sweden.

Duration: 24 months, started in November 2019

## Implementing Partners



## Contacts

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This project is funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020)



This project supports the implementation of the following Sustainable Development Goals



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