

Double Vulnerability: Challenges Faced by Russian-Speaking LGBTQI+ Refugees in Seeking Asylum

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1. Executive Summary

Amid ongoing conflicts and a conservative shift, the need to protect the rights of vulnerable groups has become particularly urgent. Russian-speaking LGBTQI+ refugees, forced to flee due to persecution and discrimination, face dual vulnerability, exposing them to rights violations both as refugees and as members of the LGBTQI+ community. This report, based on a survey of 90 Russian-speaking LGBTQI+ refugees in the Netherlands, highlights systemic issues this group encounters in their asylum process and calls for immediate action from the international community.

International law guarantees the right to asylum and protection from persecution, notably through the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Numerous international frameworks, including the Johannesburg Principles, recognize LGBTQI+ rights and emphasize the need for protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

According to Article 2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, human rights protection in the covenant should apply "without distinction of any kind"¹, while Article 26 provides "protection against discrimination on any grounds such as

¹ *Международный пакт о гражданских и политических правах — Конвенции и соглашения —*

Декларации, конвенции, соглашения и другие правовые материалы. (n.d.).

https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pactpol.shtml

race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Article 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also prohibits discrimination on these grounds².

Although sexual orientation and gender identity are not explicitly listed in these covenants, UN treaty bodies consistently affirm that, under international law, these characteristics are prohibited grounds for discrimination. For instance, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights confirmed that the non-discrimination guarantee in the ICESCR includes protection against discrimination on the basis of both sexual orientation and gender identity³.

In its 1994 decision in the case of "Toonen v. Australia," the Human Rights Committee mandated that states must protect citizens from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Additionally, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is interpreted as offering specific protection for lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender women, recognizing that they may experience intersecting forms of discrimination.

The Committee Against Torture has asserted that, in accordance with the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, states must protect "individuals or groups who are particularly vulnerable to torture, including those marginalized due to their sexual orientation or transgender identity."

Despite these obligations, the situation for Russian-speaking LGBTQI+ refugees in the Netherlands and other host countries remains crucial and emergent.

In response, LGBT World Beside developed and conducted the "Cultural Diversity and Mutual Respect" training program to foster intercultural communication skills, raise awareness of cultural differences, and promote a tolerant environment.

Key Findings:

² *Международный пакт об экономических, социальных и культурных правах — Конвенции и соглашения — Декларации, конвенции, соглашения и другие правовые материалы.* (n.d.).

https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pactecon.shtml

³ Amnistía Internacional. (2021, June 1). "Менее равные": ЛГБТИ-правозащитники в Армении, Беларуси, Казахстане и Кыргызстане - Amnistía Internacional.

<https://www.amnesty.org/es/documents/eur04/7574/2017/ru/>

- **Multiple Layers of Discrimination:** Russian-speaking LGBTQI+ refugees experience significant discrimination in areas such as healthcare, housing, and social integration. Homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia present constant threats.
- **Mental Health Impact:** Identified issues severely impact the mental health of refugees, leading to social isolation, anxiety, depression, PTSD, and suicide risk.
- **Urgent and Coordinated Action Needed:** The government of the Netherlands, civil society organizations, and international institutions must take immediate steps to address these issues and create safe, supportive conditions for Russian-speaking LGBTQI+ refugees.

2. Methodology

The survey involved 90 Russian-speaking LGBTQI+ refugees in the Netherlands, selected considering factors such as age, gender identity, country of origin, and duration of residence. Conducted online, the survey combined closed and open-ended questions, yielding both quantitative and qualitative data. Distribution was facilitated via social media, partner organizations, and refugee support centers.

Russian-speaking LGBTQI+ refugees are not a homogeneous group. They share a language and the experience of forced migration, yet their backgrounds span various ages, genders, sexual orientations, and gender identities. Many fled countries where homophobia and transphobia are deeply ingrained, facing threats of persecution, violence, and denial of basic rights. Years of living in fear and silence have likely affected their mental well-being, with many accustomed to concealing their true selves to avoid rejection, judgment, or violence. This experience intensifies the trauma of forced migration, creating feelings of isolation, shame, and distrust—both of themselves and their surroundings.

3. Main Findings

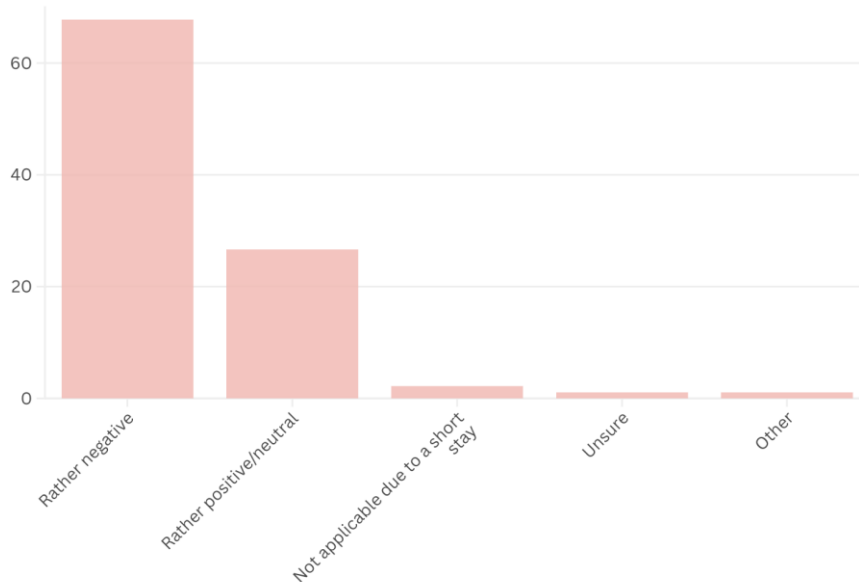
3.1. Demographic Characteristics

- **Age:** Most respondents (41) are between the ages of 25 and 34.
- **Gender Identity:** 65 respondents identify as male, 25 as female, which may indicate that women are less likely to seek help or face additional barriers.
- **Country of Origin:** 79 respondents are from Russia, likely due to the political climate and increased persecution of LGBTQI+ people.
- **Residence:** 61 respondents live in asylum seeker centers (AZCs), often associated with issues like poor conditions, lack of privacy, and limited resources.
- **IND Decision Wait Time:** 32 respondents have been awaiting a decision on their case for over a year, which exacerbates stress and impacts mental health.

3.2. . Key Issues

- Social Isolation and Lack of Support:** Respondents report acute feelings of loneliness and isolation, worsened by language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of adequate social support. Many fear disclosing their orientation or gender identity due to potential backlash. As one notes: “Loneliness, language barrier, fear of going out—these are all consequences.”

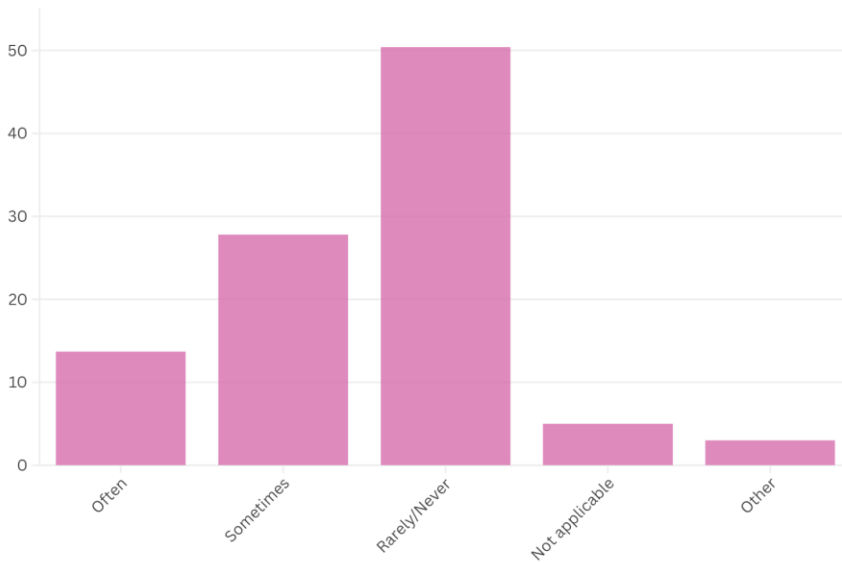
Impact of prolonged stay in the camp on mental health



Prolonged Stay in Camps: Most respondents (67.8%) report negative mental health impacts from extended stays in refugee camps, indicating a significant effect on their well-being.

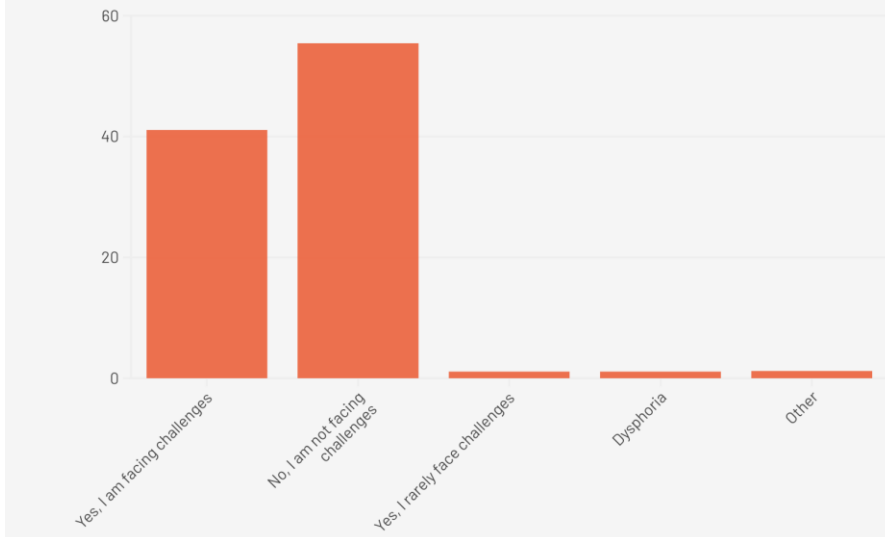
- Living Conditions:** Respondents describe unsatisfactory and even unsafe conditions in AZCs, mentioning overcrowding, lack of personal space, sanitation issues, and frequent homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia from both other refugees and staff. One respondent shared: “The AZC director banned rainbow flags in the camp. It’s very hard to know who is LGBTQI+ in these camps. In my last camp, I faced homophobic harassment from COA staff and security—the complaints weren’t properly addressed.”

Frequency of experiencing discrimination from AZC/GZA staff



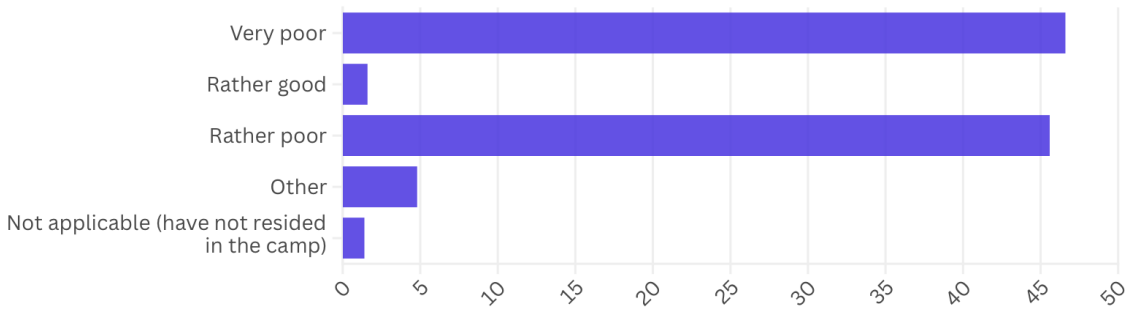
Discrimination by AZC Staff: Although most respondents (50.4%) report rarely experiencing discrimination by AZC staff, it's important to note that those experiencing it "often" or "sometimes" (13.7% and 27.8%, respectively) represent nearly the same percentage as those who have not faced it.

Are you facing any challenges in the camp related to your sexual orientation or gender identity?



Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Issues: 41.1% of respondents have faced difficulties in the refugee camp due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

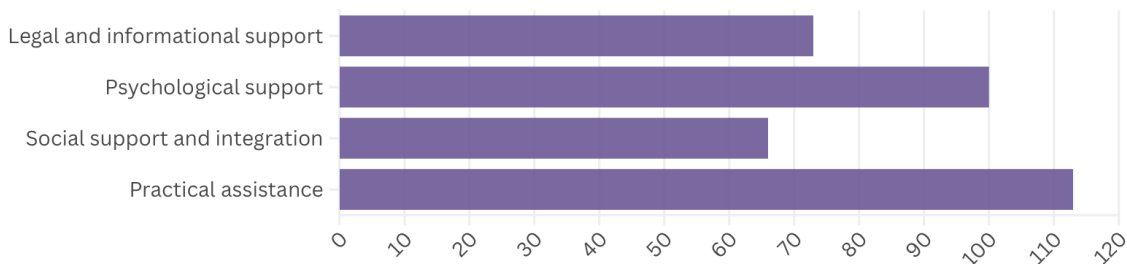
Evaluation of the quality of housing conditions in the refugee camp



Housing Quality: Most respondents (46.6% and 45.6%, respectively) rate their camp living conditions poorly, pointing to structural issues within refugee accommodations. In particular, it is important to pay **proper attention** to the issue of sexual harassment in the refugee camp: “I spent a month in Ter Apel, and during that time, I learned about two cases of violence against transgender people in the camp. One woman was beaten by another applicant from a Muslim country. Another 16-year-old Russian-speaking applicant was raped by an African man. Personally, I encountered a stream of harassment and obscene propositions.”

- Integration and Adaptation:** Language barriers, difficulty finding employment, and cultural adjustment challenges create significant obstacles to successful integration. Many respondents cite a lack of information about their rights and absence of programs addressing the specific needs of LGBTQI+ refugees.

What types of help and support for LGBTQ+ refugees do you consider most important in the Netherlands?

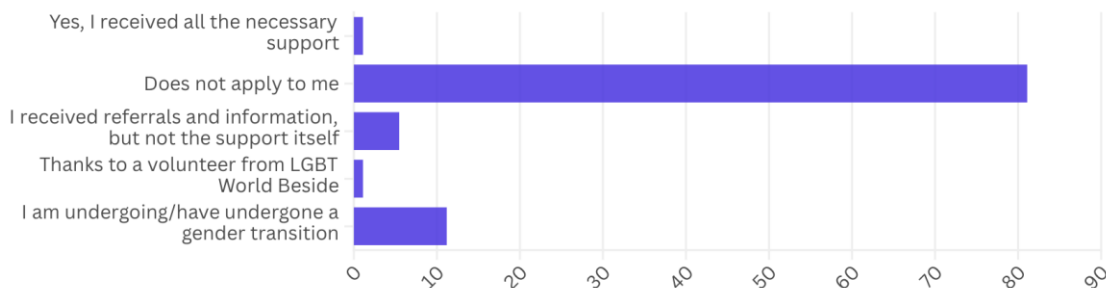


Need for Practical Assistance: The majority (113 respondents) emphasize the need for practical support in areas such as employment, language courses, and access to essential (social, medical, etc.) support, highlighting a shortage of centers aiding integration and a lack of language proficiency necessary for employment.

- Medical Care:** Respondents face limited access to healthcare, including mental health support, and report dismissive attitudes from medical personnel. Transgender individuals encounter additional barriers in accessing gender-affirming care. One respondent shared: “I spent months trying to get gallbladder

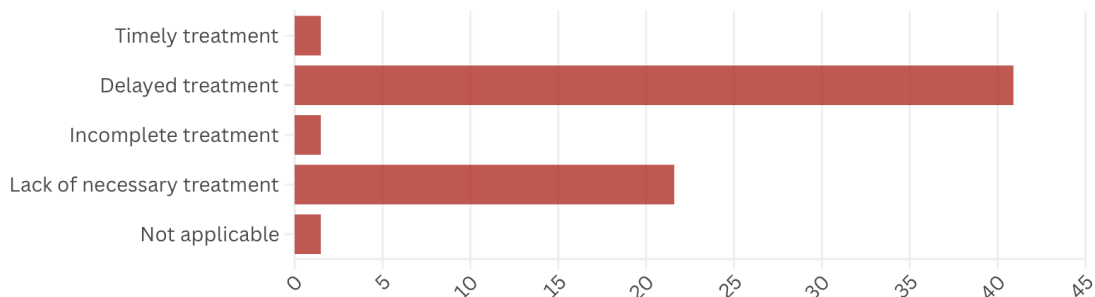
surgery. They kept refusing, leaving me on morphine for pain management as I couldn't bear it anymore.”

Access to support for transgender individuals undergoing transition after arriving in the Netherlands



Challenges for Transgender Persons: 5.5% of transgender respondents report receiving informational support but lacking access to hormone therapy or necessary surgical procedures.

Timeliness of receiving necessary medical treatment after arriving in the Netherlands



Delays in Receiving Medical Assistance: The majority of respondents (40.9%) report delays in receiving medical examinations, which may be attributed to limited access to healthcare services.

- **Bureaucratic Issues:** Long waiting times for case resolutions, uncertainty, and bureaucratic delays lead to feelings of helplessness, fear, and anxiety among refugees. Many complain about the lack of transparency in the asylum process and the insufficiency of information.
- **Discrimination and Safety:** Respondents report instances of direct discrimination, attacks, and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity, both from other refugees and from AZC staff. Many do not believe that their complaints will be investigated properly and fear retaliation.

3.3 Training on “Cultural Diversity and Mutual Respect”

In response to the identified issues, LGBT World Beside developed and conducted the "Cultural Diversity and Mutual Respect" training aimed at:

- **Raising Awareness of Cultural Differences:** Participants in the training gained knowledge about the cultural characteristics of various countries, including Russia, Middle Eastern countries, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Turkey.
- **Developing Intercultural Communication Skills:** The training helped participants learn how to effectively communicate with people from different cultures, overcome language barriers, understand non-verbal cues, and consider cultural nuances in the communication process.
- **Creating a Tolerant Environment:** The training fostered an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect, where each participant could feel safe and open about their identity.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Participants learned nonviolent communication strategies and methods for resolving conflicts arising from cultural differences.

Interactive teaching methods such as role-playing, group discussions, case studies, and simulations were used in the training.

4. Examples of Specific Situations

In the survey, respondents provide concrete examples illustrating the identified issues encountered while living in the refugee camp:

- A year-long wait for a knee X-ray without receiving a diagnosis.
- Difficulties in scheduling dental appointments and receiving treatment for chronic pain.
- Homophobic insults and threats from roommates in the AZC.
- The need to seek assistance from external organizations due to lack of support within the AZC.
- Emotional stress and deterioration of mental health due to a breakup with a partner.
- Ignorance of chronic illnesses and health complaints by medical staff.
- Refusal to register a discrimination complaint by the police.
- Lack of information and support at the start of a transgender transition.
- Denial of medical assistance due to homosexuality.
- Problems accessing necessary surgeries.
- Stress and humiliation during interactions with the police and municipal services.

5.1. Recommendations

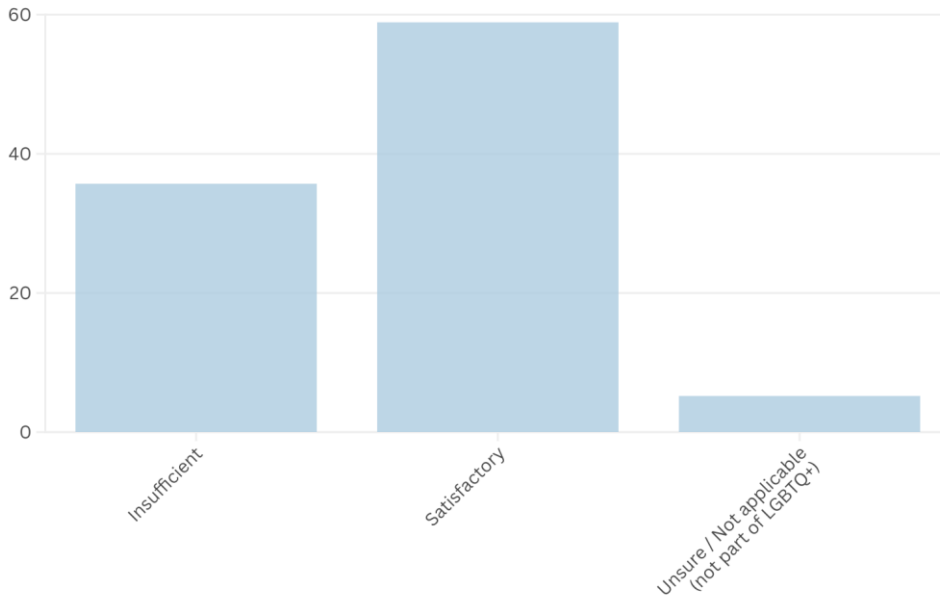
5.1 Recommendations for the Dutch Government:

- **Ensure Effective Access to Medical and Psychological Assistance:** Develop and implement standards for providing medical and psychological care for LGBTIQ+

refugees, including a culturally sensitive approach that takes into account the specific needs of this group. Ensure access to hormone therapy for transgender individuals.

- **Guarantee Safety and Protection:** Take effective measures to prevent and combat all forms of discrimination and violence in temporary accommodation centers, and ensure effective and independent investigations of all such cases. Create separate safe spaces for LGBTQI+ refugees.

Assessment of the level of support for LGBTQ+ refugees in the Netherlands



- **Address the Need for Improved Support:** Most respondents report insufficient or unsatisfactory support for LGBTQI+ refugees in the Netherlands, which requires action.
- **Promote Social Integration:** Develop and implement programs aimed at overcoming language barriers, supporting employment, and integrating LGBTQI+ refugees into Dutch society, considering the specific needs of LGBTQI+ refugees in integration programs.
- **Simplify Access to Legal Assistance:** Provide accessible and high-quality legal assistance to LGBTQI+ refugees regarding asylum processes, rights protection, and social guarantees. Develop informational materials in Russian about the rights of LGBTQI+ refugees.

5.2. Recommendations for Organizations Working with Refugees:

- Expand Support Programs for LGBTQI+ Refugees:
- Create specialized programs that address the specific needs of LGBTQI+ refugees, including psychological support, legal assistance, language courses, employment assistance, and housing support.

- Conduct regular mental health assessments and consultations, focusing on trauma care to address PTSD, depression, and anxiety.
- Ensure access to legal consultations to help refugees navigate the asylum process.
- Develop educational programs and vocational training to enhance the skills and qualifications of refugees.
- Ensure refugees have access to general and specialized medical services.
- Provide specialized services to vulnerable refugee groups, including women, children, elderly people, and LGBTQ+ individuals.
- Conduct Awareness Campaigns:
 - ◆ Raise public awareness about the issues faced by LGBTQI+ refugees, fight stereotypes and prejudices, and foster tolerance.
 - ◆ Launch campaigns against xenophobia and discrimination.
- Enhance Cooperation:
 - ◆ Strengthen cooperation between civil society organizations, government bodies, and international organizations to effectively address the issues faced by LGBTQI+ refugees.
 - ◆ Exchange best practices and experiences.

5.3 Recommendations for International Organizations:

UNHCR:

- Develop and disseminate guidelines for protecting the rights of LGBTQI+ refugees, taking into account the specific needs of Russian-speaking refugees.
- Provide technical and financial support to host countries to create programs and services aimed at meeting the needs of LGBTQI+ refugees.
- Monitor the situation of LGBTQI+ refugees in various countries and publish regular reports.
- Collaborate with LGBT World Beside and other civil society organizations working with LGBTQI+ refugees to exchange experiences and best practices.

Other International Organizations:

- Include issues related to the protection of LGBTQI+ refugees in their programs and projects.
- Support civil society organizations working with LGBTQI+ refugees.
- Conduct awareness campaigns to raise awareness about the issues faced by LGBTQI+ refugees.

5.4 Recommendations for LGBTQI+ Refugees:

- **Seek Community and Support Networks:** Actively seek and connect with support networks and community groups, including those specializing in assistance for LGBTQI+ refugees.

- **Utilize Psychological Support Services:** Take advantage of available mental health resources, including counseling and support groups.
- **Engage in Social Events and Integration Programs:** Participate in language courses, cultural integration programs, and other activities.
- **Access Legal Assistance and Know Your Rights:** Seek legal advice regarding your asylum process, rights, and any specific challenges you may face as an LGBTQI+ individual.
- **Education and Skill Development:** Take advantage of educational or professional training opportunities available for refugees.
- **Self-care and Building Resilience:** Prioritize your mental and physical health through regular exercise, maintaining a healthy diet, and taking time for relaxation.
- **Report Discrimination and Violence:** Do not hesitate to report instances of discrimination, violence, or neglect that you encounter.
- **Stay Informed and Proactive:** Keep yourself informed about the asylum process, your rights, and available resources.

6. Conclusion

This report highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to address the challenges faced by Russian-speaking LGBTQI+ refugees in the Netherlands. Implementing the proposed recommendations, as well as further developing and improving training programs such as "Cultural Diversity and Mutual Respect," will create more just and favorable conditions for this vulnerable group, facilitating their successful integration and protection of their rights. Only through joint efforts can we ensure that every individual, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, feels safe and can live a full life.

Sources:

1. Amnistía Internacional. (2021, June 1). "*Менее равные*": ЛГБТИ-правозащитники в Армении, Беларуси, Казахстане и Кыргызстане - Amnistía Internacional. <https://www.amnesty.org/es/documents/eur04/7574/2017/ru/>
2. *Международный пакт о гражданских и политических правах — Конвенции и соглашения — Декларации, конвенции, соглашения и другие правовые материалы.* (n.d.). https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pactpol.shtml
3. *Международный пакт об экономических, социальных и культурных правах — Конвенции и соглашения — Декларации, конвенции, соглашения и другие правовые материалы.* (n.d.). https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pactecon.shtml