

**Stonewall**

# ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

**This resource is produced by Stonewall, a UK-based charity that stands for the freedom, equity and potential of all lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning and ace (LGBTQ+) people.**

At Stonewall, we imagine a world where LGBTQ+ people everywhere can live our lives to the full.

Founded in London in 1989, we now work in each nation of the UK and have established partnerships across the globe. Over the last three decades, we have created transformative change in the lives of LGBTQ+ people in the UK, helping win equal rights around marriage, having children and inclusive education.

Our campaigns drive positive change for our communities, and our sustained change and empowerment programmes ensure that LGBTQ+ people can thrive throughout our lives. We make sure that the world hears and learns from our communities, and our work is grounded in evidence and expertise.

To find out more about our work, visit us at [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)

**Registered Charity No 1101255 (England and Wales) and SC039681 (Scotland)**

Stonewall is proud to provide information, support and guidance on LGBTQ+ inclusion; working towards a world where we're all free to be. This does not constitute legal advice, and is not intended to be a substitute for legal counsel on any subject matter.

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# **NO PLACE TO HIDE**

**Briefing on survival  
strategies of LGBTQ+ people  
in Afghanistan**

***This briefing note is first in a new series to provide background to the work Stonewall does to support the protection of LGBTQ+ refugees in Afghanistan, give voice to the hundreds of refugees who have contacted Stonewall and its partners for help and to explain why we continue to call for safe passage and resettlement.***

Stonewall prioritizes the protection of LGBTQ+ refugees at all stages of their journey because it remains the case that in many parts of the world, individuals are subject to serious human rights abuses and discrimination because of their real or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Not conforming to dominant social and cultural norms can be fatal, as is the case in Afghanistan and the many countries in the region that LGBTQ+ Afghans are seeking safety.

From August 2020 to date Stonewall, working in close partnership with ILGA Asia and several other civil society organisations has continued to support individuals to reach safe passage out of Afghanistan, to access protection in countries of transit while gaining a longer-term protection outcome in the United Kingdom or a third country. The UK government, along with other countries of resettlement, have recognized that it is not safe for LGBTQ+ people in Afghanistan to remain in the country and in many neighboring countries. As a result, it is a key policy objective of Stonewall to secure the agreement of more countries to prioritize access to resettlement programmes and humanitarian support for the Afghan queer community.

Because of the immediate risks to the security of LGBTQ+ Afghans, Stonewall does not yet publish extensive reports on these cases. Most of those we support in Afghanistan, in the UK, while in flight, or in a third country in the region express a grave fear of being identified by authorities, their families, the diaspora or those who seek to assist them while in flight. There is no safety, even in hiding, for LGBTQ+ Afghans due to the pervasiveness of queerphobia in Afghanistan culture, both in the country and in the diaspora.

We have received credible and consistent information from our network of contacts both here in the UK and those who remain in Afghanistan or in neighboring countries that they daily try to hide themselves from being found by their families, communities, officials, and the Taliban. For many this means living lives in complete isolation, without ability to meet their basic needs including food, medical help or to access assistance from the outside world. **The range of threats they face, when considered in their totality, show that simply being LGBTQ+ in Afghanistan puts a person at risk of grave human rights violations and discrimination** including violence and torture; extortion, blackmail, and outing; forced marriage; coercive sex with spouses; no access to employment, education, or other public resources because of being shunned or excluded.

Given the criminal sanctions, the impunity for extra-judicial executions, the active targeting of LGBTQ+ people by family, community, and the Taliban there exists an atmosphere where LGBTQ+ people are sought out, there is no real prospect of 'hiding' who they are or any guarantees in being discreet. They live in a society that culturally, socially, legally finds LGBTQ+ people as abhorrent and counter to their values as family, community, and religion.

LGBTQ+ people continue to be targeted by individuals who try to 'out' them either to report them to officials, to extort them or to abuse and punish them. Efforts to hide in society by trying to "blend in" run the risk of being exploited, blackmailed, and even arrested when a person's social media use proves suspect or when authorities carrying out searches. In several cases, LGBTQ+ people are forced to live in solitary, appalling conditions severely affecting their mental and physical health.

Many of our clients report that for many years, since their adolescence they have been forced to deny that they are queer to maintain family relations, to be employed and to live free from violence. Many report that they were constantly harassed and questioned and even beaten by families and their neighbors on the basis that they appeared 'feminine' or were not 'masculine enough'. For many, they were rushed into forced marriages to save the family honor given a suspicion that they were queer.

**The case of M** was discovered by his family as being gay. After being beaten and threatened by his immediate family he was forced to marry. He was also at risk that his extended family would harm him and that his employer would not allow him to work. His liberal attitudes supporting human rights expressed before the fall of his country to the Taliban, create a present-day risk for him and even in exile, he lives in daily fear that his wife's family will find out he is gay. His family constantly monitors him even from afar.

**L** had been an active supporter of human rights within his local community, and this combined with his close personal friendship with a married man, his own status as being unmarried at an age when most were married, his 'feminine' characteristics and slight physical build, drew the attention of his family, employer, and local community. He reports being constantly teased, threatened, and harassed simply because of the suspicion he was gay. Following the takeover of the Taliban these threats took on a more sinister meaning, as he could no longer move freely about, was not able to stay in safety with his family due to the 'taint' he brought to the family name and household. He was forced to flee and even in exile he reports living in daily fear that his sexual orientation will be discovered and takes extreme measures to hide any information about his whereabouts and actively avoids interaction with the Afghan diaspora.

**J**, a cis-gay man in Afghanistan, has tried to "hide" his identity for over a year, but given he has no economic independence, complies with the cultural expectation that he lives with his family and his refusal to marry exposed him to suspicions that he is gay. His family physically and mentally abuse him and subject him to inhumane treatment, including locking him up in the basement with threats of family members coming to either kill him or deliver him to the Taliban.

**A**, suspected of being a lesbian was forced into marriage by her family to "hide" her identity and to prove to her family and community that she was not queer. Many of the lesbians' part of our casework live in fear of their families and suffer repeated beatings, rape and other sexual violence and deprivation.

**B**, a trans woman, is forced by their family to hide their identity by dressing according to social norms for men, reports living with the constant threat of violence, deprivation and exclusion because of their expressions and mannerisms that might give them away. Many trans people are shunned by their families, report being forced into sex work, subject to exploitation and live in constant fear of officials, including those from the Ministry of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

*For further information on our work with LGBTQ+ refugees contact us through our information services at [info@Stonewall.org.uk](mailto:info@Stonewall.org.uk)*