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A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah

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FORTHCOMING SPECIAL ISSUE: LGBTQ+, DIVERSE SEXUAL ORIENTATION  
AND GENDER IDENTITIES, AND FAITH IN DEVELOPMENT



## Trans refugees, faith and SOGI protections: global development frameworks and international relations

A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah 

Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Brunei Darussalam, Gadong, Brunei

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection between transgender (trans) refugees' rights, faith and global development frameworks, emphasising the gaps in protections afforded to this vulnerable population. Despite recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) claims under international law, trans refugees often face systemic discrimination, inadequate legal recognition, and barriers to inclusion within global development initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through an interdisciplinary lens that combines human rights, faith, critical migration, and queer theory, the article identifies structural limitations in refugee protection systems and development policies, highlighting how these frameworks often fail to address the unique challenges of trans refugees. The study proposes actionable solutions, including integrating SOGI-specific indicators into faith and global development frameworks, enhancing culturally competent Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes, and fostering international cooperation for inclusive policymaking.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG 5: Gender equality,  
Faith; SDG 8: Decent work  
and economic growth; SDG  
10: Reduced inequalities;  
SDG 16: Peace, justice; and  
strong institutions

## Introduction

Transgender refugees, a marginalised subgroup within the refugee population, face unique vulnerabilities due to the intersection of gender identity, displacement, and systemic discrimination. Trans individuals fleeing persecution based on their gender identity often go through severe barriers at every stage of the migration process, including violence in transit, discrimination during refugee status determination (RSD), and inadequate protection mechanisms. Although SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) claims are recognised under the 1951 Refugee Convention, trans refugees frequently face stigmatisation and a lack of cultural competence in asylum systems (UNHCR 2022).

The inclusion of SOGI protections and faith within international refugee law and global development frameworks (GDF) is critical to ensuring the safety and dignity of trans refugees. Development frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to “leave no one behind”, yet the unique needs of trans individuals are often overlooked in practice (Scolaro 2020). SOGI protections intersect with multiple SDGs, including Goal 5 (gender equality) and Goal 10 (reduced inequalities). Moreover, international refugee law, through instruments like the 1951 Refugee Convention, provides the legal basis for protecting individuals fleeing persecution, including those persecuted for their gender identity (Ullah 2014).

This article addresses the growing recognition of SOGI-based claims within international relations and development contexts. With an estimated 100 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, the needs of trans refugees remain underrepresented in both academic literature and policy discussions

(UNHCR 2023). This article illuminates on structural gaps and proposes actionable solutions. This also aligns with global trends in human rights advocacy, particularly as more states and international organisations prioritise LGBTQIA+ rights in their agendas. For example, initiatives by the UN Independent Expert on SOGI highlight the urgent need for inclusive legal and development frameworks to protect trans refugees (UN General Assembly 2022).

This article seeks to answer some critical questions: How are trans refugees addressed in current international development policies and frameworks? What role do international relations and faith play in advancing or hindering SOGI protections for trans refugees? The article argues that the intersection of SOGI protections and international refugee law reveals significant gaps in the current global development frameworks. This article focuses on two sets of frameworks: global development frameworks such as the SDGs and the Global Compact on Refugees, and international legal instruments including the 1951 Refugee Convention and UNHCR Guidelines. These were selected based on the commitments to inclusion and non-discrimination, with attention to how they conceptualise or omit SOGI-specific protections for trans refugees.

## Literature review

While much literature emphasises the victimhood of trans refugees, recent scholarship (e.g. Byström et al. 2023; Shakhsari 2020) has highlighted their agency in resisting normative asylum structures, building solidarity networks, and advocating for legal recognition. This article incorporates this emerging lens of resilience and activism.

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011) foregrounds the role of faith-based actors (FBAs) in humanitarian responses to forced displacement, challenging the presumed neutrality of secular humanitarianism. She argues that faith is not merely a private matter but a dynamic and public force shaping both the experiences of displaced populations and the interventions designed to assist them. Crucially, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh highlights the dual potential of FBAs: while they can offer culturally and spiritually resonant support, they may also reinforce exclusionary norms – particularly around gender and sexuality. This is particularly salient for trans refugees, who often navigate faith-inflected aid systems that may simultaneously offer solace and reproduce stigmatisation. Building on this, Ager and Ager (2015) argue for a more integrated and dialogical approach to faith and secularism in humanitarianism. They emphasise that religion is often a vital source of identity, resilience, and meaning for displaced communities, and thus must be recognised in development and humanitarian frameworks rather than sidelined in the name of neutrality. Their work calls for “faith-sensitive” programming that acknowledges the legitimacy of religious worldviews while safeguarding human rights. This resonates with Ferris’ (2011) critical reflection, which contends that the relationship between faith and humanitarianism is “complicated” due to divergent values, operational principles, and accountability structures. Ferris notes that while FBAs have been indispensable in service delivery, their positions on gender and sexuality can be deeply ambivalent or even hostile. For trans refugees, these dynamics are especially fraught – religiously grounded humanitarian efforts may offer shelter and community, yet simultaneously deny affirmation of gender identity or SOGI rights.

Faith plays a contentious and often contradictory role in the lives of trans refugees, particularly in mediating their access to SOGI protections within global development frameworks. Religious institutions and beliefs can simultaneously offer sanctuary and perpetuate systemic exclusion. While scholars such as Yip and Page (2013) highlight the role of faith-based organisations (FBOs) in providing critical support – such as shelter, legal aid, and counselling – these same actors frequently uphold doctrines that stigmatise non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations (Wilcox 2020). The resulting friction is acute in FBO-managed refugee camps or shelters, where religious ideologies often clash with the inclusive mandates of international agreements like the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR 2018), undermining commitments to non-discrimination and dignity.

From a global development standpoint, the role of faith in either advancing or obstructing the rights of trans refugees exposes a deeper failure to reconcile religious authority with international

human rights norms. Tomalin (2015) rightly calls for critical engagement with FBOs, especially given their entrenched presence in Global South contexts where state capacity is limited. Yet these engagements remain fraught when doctrinal conservatism overrides inclusive practice. This disjuncture reveals a structural blind spot in global development policy: the persistent neglect of intersectional dynamics involving faith, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Rather than viewing FBOs as inherently benign or hostile, scholars like van Klinken and Chitando (2016) argue for a pragmatic, critical approach that seeks to transform faith-based spaces into more inclusive environments.

Foundational works such as Powell (2021) and Spijkerboer (2013) offer invaluable insights into the legal frameworks governing SOGI-based asylum claims. Powell critiques the inconsistent interpretation of “membership of a particular social group” under the 1951 Refugee Convention, emphasising how cultural biases and normative assumptions hinder trans refugees’ access to protection.

The application of queer theory to migration studies has been richly examined in foundational works such as Luibhéid (2008) and Giametta (2017). Luibhéid interrogates how migration policies reinforce heteronormative logics, systematically marginalising LGBTQIA+ individuals – particularly trans refugees – through exclusionary state practices. Giametta offers a critical account of how humanitarianism and biopolitical control intersect in LGBTQIA+ asylum regimes, revealing the ways in which asylum is granted through narrow and often stereotyped understandings of queerness. However, while these studies provide important critiques of Western asylum systems, they pay comparatively limited attention to global development frameworks – an analytical gap this article seeks to address.

Complementary to these perspectives, Hathaway (2021) explores how refugee rights are – or are not – integrated within international development frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). Their analysis underscores the absence of concrete SOGI protections within these instruments, which results in the continued marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ refugees within global governance. Sanders (2021) similarly critiques the United Nations’ evolving, yet ultimately constrained, role in advancing LGBTQIA+ rights, pointing to the non-binding nature of instruments such as the Yogyakarta Principles. Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality remains pivotal in illuminating the layered vulnerabilities of trans refugees, particularly at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and displacement. More recent work by Osella and Rubio-Marín (2021) extends this framework to show how trans refugees confront compounded forms of exclusion throughout both transit and resettlement processes.

Despite these contributions, much of the existing literature remains overly focused on Western asylum contexts – primarily in Europe and North America – while paying insufficient attention to the lived realities of trans refugees in the Global South (Fernández-Rodríguez and Freier 2024). This geographic bias obscures the specific challenges trans individuals face in regions such as the Middle East and Africa, where criminalisation, religious orthodoxy, and state-sanctioned violence continue to shape deeply hostile environments for LGBTQIA+ persons. While the integration of SOGI protections in refugee law and global development frameworks is a recurring theme, the literature often treats these issues in isolation (Byström et al. 2023). Powell (2021) and Sanders (2021) point to the disconnect between international norms and domestic practices.

## Conceptualising faith, trans refugees, and SOGI protections

Trans refugees have historically faced systemic barriers in RSD due to the exclusion from SOGI-based claims. The lack of legal recognition of trans identities has made substantiating persecution claims challenging. Many legal systems still demand evidence conforming to cisnormative norms, an often unattainable standard for trans individuals from discriminatory contexts.

Faith, as a multidimensional concept, encompasses not only personal beliefs but also institutional structures, community practices, and moral frameworks that influence social dynamics and policy-making. In the context of trans refugees and SOGI protections, it functions both as a source of resilience and a potential site of exclusion – offering belonging, spiritual support, and coping

mechanisms amidst displacement and marginalisation (Wilcox 2020). However, religious institutions and doctrines often perpetuate exclusionary attitudes toward non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations (Peng 2025; Yip and Page 2013). From a development perspective, faith interacts with human rights and international relations in complex ways (van Klinken and Chitando 2016).

The Yogyakarta Principles represented a pivotal moment by explicitly linking SOGI protections to international human rights law and advocating for the recognition of trans rights within refugee frameworks (ICJ 2007). Trans refugees remain highly vulnerable, facing violence in refugee camps, insufficient access to healthcare, and limited opportunities for social integration in host countries (UNHCR 2022).

Trans Refugees refer to individuals who identify as transgender and are forced to flee their countries due to persecution or broader structural vulnerabilities, including but not limited to their gender identity. Their transgender status often compounds other risk factors, such as conflict, economic instability, or displacement-related violence. Under the 1951 Refugee Convention, persecution on the grounds of membership in a “particular social group” includes claims based on sexual orientation and gender identity (UNHCR 2022).

GDF refer to multilateral initiatives, such as the SDGs, which address social, economic, and environmental challenges worldwide. These frameworks emphasise inclusivity and equity but often fall short in addressing the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ populations, particularly trans refugees, due to cultural, political, and institutional barriers (Scolaro 2020). Human Rights Theory focuses on the universality of human rights, advocating for the inclusion of SOGI protections as a fundamental aspect of human dignity (Donnelly 2013). Critical Migration Theory examines migration through the lens of power dynamics, structural inequalities, and intersectionality (De Genova 2017). Queer Theory challenges heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions in social and legal systems, emphasising the fluidity of gender and sexuality (Butler 2006).

## Theoretical framework

This section focuses primarily on three core bodies of thought: *human rights theory*, *critical migration theory*, and *queer theology/queer theory*. Explicitly referencing key scholarly debates, e.g. in queer theology: the conflict between liberationist and traditionalist interpretations (Cheng 2011); in critical migration studies: bordering as biopolitical exclusion (De Genova 2017); and in human rights theory: tensions between universality and cultural relativism (Donnelly 2013). Human rights theory provides a normative basis for advocating protections for individuals based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. This underscores the universality and indivisibility of human rights and the Yogyakarta Principles (International Commission of Jurists 2007).

Building on this normative foundation, I examine how these human rights principles are operationalised – or resisted – through contemporary multilateral mechanisms and diplomatic engagements that shape SOGI protections. Multilateral engagements have become increasingly pivotal in shaping the global discourse around SOGI protections, particularly in relation to LGBTQIA+ refugees. One notable mechanism is the UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on SOGI, established by the Human Rights Council in 2016. This mandate has provided visibility to SOGI-based persecution and has issued recommendations urging states and humanitarian actors to ensure inclusive asylum procedures and protection mechanisms. However, this multilateral progress is unevenly received. While some global South states have aligned with these initiatives, others – particularly in regions like ASEAN – have resisted institutionalising SOGI protections, often invoking religious and cultural sovereignty. For example, the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012) omits any reference to sexual orientation or gender identity, and Indonesia and Malaysia have consistently pushed back against LGBTQIA+ inclusion in regional rights discussions (UNDP & USAID 2014).

In contrast, progressive models in Latin America, such as those championed by Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Argentina, has integrated SOGI protections into both asylum systems and foreign

policy, often advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights in multilateral fora. Argentina, for instance, was among the first to adopt a gender identity law that recognises self-determination and has extended this inclusive legal logic to refugee protections (ICJ 2021). Meanwhile, religious diplomacy within the UN has produced both enabling and constraining effects. On one hand, faith-based actors like the World Council of Churches and certain progressive Catholic and Quaker groups have supported LGBTQIA+ inclusion in refugee frameworks. On the other, conservative religious coalitions – such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Holy See – have often mobilised to dilute SOGI language in key resolutions (Wilkinson 2022).

Critical migration theory situates the struggles of trans refugees within the broader structural inequalities of the global migration regime. For example, trans refugees from the Global South seeking asylum in the Global North often encounter systemic barriers, such as detention in facilities that do not align with their gender identity or discriminatory asylum adjudication processes (Powell 2021). In 2020, for instance, while countries like Canada adopted relatively inclusive policies recognising gender-based persecution, many ASEAN countries lacked legal frameworks to protect trans individuals from deportation or violence (UNHCR 2021).

Queer theory disrupts binary and normative assumptions about gender and sexuality, offering critical tools to expose the limitations of global development frameworks that marginalise non-conforming identities. It highlights the cis-heteronormativity embedded in many refugee protection systems, which often overlook the fluidity and diversity of gender identities (Nicholas 2018). For example, trans refugees frequently face exclusion from gender-specific services – such as shelters or healthcare – due to their non-binary or transitioning status (Shakhsari 2020). This critique gains further depth when placed alongside liberation theology, which, following Gutierrez (1973), emphasises a moral imperative to side with the oppressed, and post-secular theory, which repositions religion as a continuing force in global politics and policy discourse (Habermas 2008). Both frameworks shed light on the dual role of faith-based actors, who can either bolster or undermine inclusive development efforts targeting trans refugees.

Complementing these approaches, queer theology challenges heteronormative and cisnormative religious interpretations, advocating for inclusive faith-based responses to SOGI issues (Cheng 2011). It reimagines sacred texts through affirming lenses that recognise the lived realities of trans individuals. The notion of “faith as resilience”, articulated by Lane, Taylor, Ellis, Chiu, & others (2025), further foregrounds spirituality as a vital coping mechanism for trans refugees facing statelessness and discrimination. Combined with insights from the sociology of religion – which examines how institutional faith structures shape social responses – these theories help explain how religious ideologies are both embedded in and capable of transforming global development frameworks (van Klinken and Chitando 2016). Bringing these strands together, this article engages with broader debates on biopolitical bordering (De Genova 2017), the contested universality of queer rights (Donnelly 2013), and the theological reimagining of SOGI inclusion (Cheng 2011), applying them to expose and critique systemic exclusions in protection and development discourses.

## Trans refugees within international refugee law

International refugee law, primarily based on the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, provides the legal framework for the protection of individuals fleeing persecution. The Convention defines a refugee as someone with a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR 2022). SOGI falls under the category of “membership in a particular social group”, allowing individuals persecuted for their SOGI to claim asylum.

The UNHCR’s Guidelines on International Protection No. 9 recognise the unique vulnerabilities of LGBTQIA+ individuals, including transgender persons, emphasising cultural and contextual factors in asylum claims (UNHCR 2018). These guidelines are meant to protect trans refugees, who often face



intersecting discrimination, including faith-based exclusion. While countries like Canada and the Netherlands explicitly protect SOGI-based claims, others lack adequate frameworks, reflecting a gap between international norms and domestic practices (Spijkerboer 2013). However, despite the existence of these legal and policy frameworks, they continue to face widespread structural and procedural barriers that undermine the protection promised under international law.

**Discrimination and Stigmatisation:** Trans refugees routinely face multilayered discrimination and violence, both in their countries of origin and throughout the asylum process. This reflects entrenched transphobia in legal, social, and institutional systems. The UNHCR (2023) has documented numerous cases where trans refugees in detention centres across Europe and Latin America were subjected to physical assault and sexual violence – often exacerbated by their placement in facilities that do not correspond with their gender identity. Moreover, even within supposedly inclusive spaces, such as LGBTQIA+ safe zones in refugee camps, trans individuals frequently encounter intra-community exclusion.

**Lack of Proper Identification:** The inability to access or retain accurate identification documents constitutes a significant structural barrier. Without documents that align with their self-identified gender, trans individuals face persistent misgendering, heightened vulnerability to discrimination, and bureaucratic disbelief regarding their claims of persecution. UNHCR (2020) has emphasised how mismatched documentation often results in the rejection or delay of asylum claims. This issue is particularly acute in countries such as Uganda and Malaysia, where transgender identities are criminalised and legal gender recognition is either denied or procedurally inaccessible (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Even after securing asylum, they face significant integration hurdles, often due to inadequate legal recognition of their gender identity. Many in EU countries routinely struggle to update legal documents (FRA 2022; Grant et al. 2011).

**Cultural Insensitivity in RSD:** The process frequently exhibits a lack of cultural competence and sensitivity to SOGI-related claims. Decision-makers may harbour biases or hold limited understanding of transgender identities, resulting in the unjust dismissal of valid claims. Spijkerboer (2013) highlights that asylum adjudicators in several European countries commonly impose stereotypical expectations on trans refugees, requiring them to conform to rigid notions of transgender identity – such as specific physical appearances or behaviours – as evidence of their persecution. This approach reinforces harmful assumptions and imposes undue burdens on those who do not fit narrow constructs. For example, Uganda's anti-LGBTQIA+ laws have forced many trans individuals to flee the country. A notable case involved a Ugandan trans woman seeking asylum in Canada after facing violent persecution in her home country (Sinclair and Sinatti 2022). Her claim was initially rejected due to insufficient documentation and a lack of understanding of trans issues by the asylum officers (Spijkerboer 2013).

In Central America, trans refugees fleeing violence face extreme dangers during transit to the U.S., including sexual violence, extortion, and murder by gangs and authorities (Human Rights Watch 2022). Restrictive U.S. immigration policies often overlook their specific vulnerabilities. In Lebanon, where faith heavily influences societal norms, they face compounded discrimination; one Syrian refugee was denied healthcare and harassed in a refugee camp due to lack of legal recognition (Amnesty International 2021).

## **GDF and SOGI protections**

This section examines how current global development frameworks address – or fail to address – the protection needs through four key dimensions: development policy, SOGI integration, intersectionality, and the role of faith-based actors. These are essential to understanding the structural and normative gaps that shape the lived realities of trans refugees and to evaluate the extent to which global development and international relations frameworks align with inclusive protection standards.

Development Frameworks: Global development frameworks such as the SDGs promote inclusivity and equity, particularly through Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which aim to eliminate discrimination and ensure no one is left behind – including refugees and LGBTQIA+ populations (Scolaro 2020). However, despite these broad commitments, refugee-related SDG indicators remain general and often overlook the specific needs of trans individuals. For instance, while the GCR emphasises responsibility-sharing and inclusion, it lacks provisions for SOGI-based vulnerabilities, revealing a normative and policy gap in addressing trans refugees.

SOGI Protections in Development: The integration of SOGI into global development agendas has progressed unevenly. Only a few countries – such as Nepal, which formally recognises a third gender – have meaningfully incorporated SOGI in their national SDG strategies (Dalton and Smith 2023). While UN agencies like UNDP and UNHCR have piloted LGBTQIA+ -inclusive programs, such as the *Being LGBTI in Asia* initiative, these efforts rarely intersect with refugee policy, leaving trans refugees in a policy blind spot (UNDP 2018). This policy fragmentation has concrete consequences for trans refugees, who face multiple, compounding barriers in accessing legal protections (Spijkerboer 2013).

Intersectionality: Intersectionality offers a critical analytical framework to understand the compounded marginalisation. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), it explains how overlapping identities – gender identity, sexual orientation, and refugee status – create unique vulnerabilities. Trans refugees are subjected to legal erasure, social stigma, and heightened risk of violence across multiple systems of power. For instance, a trans refugee from Syria may be persecuted in their home country, criminalised in transit countries with anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, and denied access to services in host countries due to a mismatch between their gender identity and legal documentation (Camminga 2024). This layered exclusion is further compounded in contexts where religious ideologies strongly influence development policy and refugee reception.

Faith, SOGI, and GDF: Faith remains a powerful force within many development and humanitarian contexts, with FBOs playing dual and often contradictory roles in the treatment of trans refugees. In regions where religious conservatism shapes public policy, FBOs may perpetuate exclusionary norms that undermine SOGI protections. As van Klinken and Chitando (2016) argue, such resistance stems from perceptions that LGBTQIA+ rights conflict with traditional religious values. This disconnect challenges the universality of human rights, often translating into denied asylum claims, inaccessible healthcare, or the absence of legal recognition for trans refugees.

Nevertheless, the potential for progressive engagement with faith actors should not be underestimated. Queer and liberation theologies offer inclusive interpretations that affirm trans dignity, although they remain marginalised in dominant religious discourse (Cheng 2011; Gutierrez 1973). Rights-based training and the creation of interfaith platforms – aligned with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) – could bridge the gap between religious communities and global development goals. Strategic partnerships with UN agencies, including UNHCR and UNFPA, could incentivise FBOs to adopt inclusive, SOGI-sensitive programming that centres human dignity over dogmatic divides.

## International relations and SOGI protections

I here examine how international relations shape SOGI protections for trans refugees across diplomatic, regional, institutional, and faith-based dimensions – each essential for understanding the complex power dynamics, cultural specificities, and normative tensions that influence efforts to advance inclusive protection within the global system.

Diplomatic and Political Dimensions: International relations are instrumental in shaping SOGI protections, particularly for trans refugees whose rights are highly contingent on political will and diplomatic engagement. Countries like Canada and the Netherlands have integrated LGBTQIA+ rights into their foreign aid and asylum policies, using diplomatic tools to advocate for global SOGI protections (Nematy, Namer, and Razum 2022). Such states leverage multilateral platforms to promote



decriminalisation efforts and reinforce human rights obligations; however, the implementation of these commitments often remains inconsistent and flawed.

However, global progress remains inconsistent due to ideological divisions. Many Global South countries resist integrating SOGI protections, citing cultural or religious sovereignty (Chase 2016). These tensions often play out in United Nations debates, where state coalitions block or dilute resolutions on LGBTQIA+ rights (Sanders 2021). This tension between progressive diplomacy and sovereignty claims underscores the need for sustained multilateral engagement and inclusive norm diffusion.

**International Relations in Regional Perspectives:** Regional dynamics reveal the uneven landscape of SOGI protections and the unique challenges trans refugees face depending on legal, political, and cultural contexts. This is key to understanding why global frameworks often fail to be uniformly applied. In Europe, progressive frameworks like the EU Qualification Directive and ECHR rulings have established recognition of SOGI-based asylum claims (Spijkerboer 2013). Yet, implementation varies – Hungary and Poland have actively opposed LGBTQIA+ inclusion, exposing intra-EU contradictions.

In the Middle East, trans refugees face heightened risks due to pervasive criminalisation and entrenched societal stigma. Even in comparatively more permissive contexts such as Lebanon, the absence of legal gender recognition significantly restricts access to asylum (Human Rights Watch 2022). Latin America offers more inclusive examples: Argentina's Gender Identity Law and Uruguay's policies allow legal gender changes and protect trans asylum seekers. Yet enforcement remains inconsistent, especially in transit states like Mexico (UNHCR 2023).

Asia shows wide divergence. South Asian countries like India and Nepal recognise third genders in legal frameworks (Knight 2018), while Southeast Asian states such as Malaysia and Brunei criminalise LGBTQ+ identities under religious laws (ILGA 2020). East Asia is mixed – Taiwan legalised same-sex marriage, while China and South Korea lag in formal protections (UNDP 2019). These regional disparities highlight the fragmented nature of SOGI protections and the necessity for locally grounded, culturally sensitive advocacy strategies.

**International Organisations:** This subsection analyses how international institutions and NGOs shape global norms and policies on SOGI protections. Their role is central to bridging gaps between national politics and human rights standards.

UNHCR has played a pivotal role which call for the recognition of SOGI-based persecution (UNHCR 2018). NGOs like Rainbow Railroad and OutRight Action International provide practical support – relocation, legal aid, and psychosocial care – for LGBTQIA+ refugees. The Yogyakarta Principles (2007) offer a normative blueprint for integrating SOGI protections into international law, influencing some national policies (O'Flaherty and Fisher 2008). However, their non-binding nature limits enforcement. Thus, while international organisations have expanded recognition and support mechanisms, structural limitations and geopolitical resistance continue to impede the full realisation of these protections.

**Faith, International Relations, and SOGI:** Faith actors and religious ideologies intersect with international relations in complex ways, often reinforcing or undermining SOGI protections. This subsection is necessary to unpack the role of religion in shaping both global norms and local implementation. FBOs like Islamic Relief and Jesuit Refugee Service have supported refugees, including LGBTQIA+ individuals. While some FBOs align their work with human rights, others oppose SOGI inclusion on doctrinal grounds. These tensions are visible in UN forums, where countries such as Canada promote faith-inclusive diplomacy, while ASEAN and GCC states invoke religious sovereignty to resist LGBTQ+ protections (O'Brien and Noy 2020; Thoreson 2014).

Regionally, the governments of Southeast Asian Muslim-majority countries often oppose LGBTQ+ rights based on religious interpretations, while in Buddhist-majority Thailand, state and civil society actors have invoked compassion-based values to support SOGI inclusion (Boellstorff 2007). In Latin America, liberation theology has empowered faith-based SOGI advocacy within organisations like the Organisation of American States (Corrales 2015). These dynamics reveal the ambivalence of

faith in international relations – simultaneously a barrier and a potential enabler of inclusive development and protection frameworks.

Building on the previous analysis of diplomatic, regional, institutional, and faith-based dynamics, here I outline actionable recommendations to bridge the protection gaps faced by trans refugees. Global development frameworks and refugee regimes must integrate SOGI-specific indicators into SDG and GCR reporting. National asylum systems should implement culturally competent RSD procedures with mandatory SOGI training. Host countries must legally recognise self-identified gender to facilitate access to services. International organisations should promote inclusive dialogue with faith-based actors. Finally, donor agencies should tie funding to the inclusion of trans refugees, particularly in healthcare, housing, and employment support.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the profound and intersecting vulnerabilities faced by trans refugees at the nexus of global development frameworks, faith-based engagement, and international relations. Despite formal commitments to inclusivity under instruments such as the SDGs, the Global Compact on Refugees, and the 1951 Refugee Convention, these frameworks remain insufficiently responsive to the lived realities of trans individuals. The exclusion of SOGI-specific indicators, the failure to incorporate culturally competent Refugee Status Determination procedures, and the ambivalence of faith-based actors all point to a systemic disconnect between rights-based ideals and operational practice.

By applying an interdisciplinary lens grounded in queer theory, critical migration studies, and human rights, this article has highlighted the urgent need to reframe trans refugees not as peripheral subjects, but as central to conversations on global justice, dignity, and development. It argues that transformative change requires the integration of intersectional protections into international law, targeted support for trans-specific needs, and the recalibration of faith-based partnerships toward inclusive humanitarianism. Recognising the agency of trans refugees – as activists, claimants, and rights-holders – is vital to dismantling structural exclusions and achieving the principle of “leaving no one behind” in both refugee protection and global development agendas. Trans refugees are not merely passive recipients of aid or protection but are active agents navigating hostile systems, building coalitions, and demanding recognition. Recognising their agency is essential for moving toward inclusive development and refugee frameworks.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## ORCID

A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1441-141X>

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