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A Trauma-Informed Analysis of Resettlement Policies for LGBTQI+ Refugees and Asylees in the United States

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Abstract

Background: LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees often face unique challenges of exclusion and the threat of persecution across multiple stages of migration and resettlement. In this study, we investigated the current refugee resettlement policies in the United States through a trauma-informed policy analysis lens and compared them with those of three, similar high-income resettlement countries: Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. **Methods:** We collected data from policy documents from government and resettlement agency websites, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles discussing resettlement policies specific to LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees. A document analysis method was used to examine these materials within a trauma-informed framework. **Results:** Findings indicated that current United States policies for LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees lack many considerations from a trauma-informed framework. In comparison, while policies in the United Kingdom reflected similar limitations, recent developments in Canada and Australia demonstrated greater recognition of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQI+ communities, along with multiple pathways to support safer spaces in resettlement. **Conclusions:** These findings highlight the need for substantial policy development in the United States to better support LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees from an inclusive, trauma-informed framework.

Keywords: LGBTQI+ refugees; LGBTQI+ asylees; refugee resettlement policies; trauma-informed policy analysis

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1. Introduction

Individuals with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) identities often face threats of persecution and violence from their families, and communities in their home countries, leading to experiences of forced displacement (Alessi et al. 2021). Currently, over sixty countries still criminalize same-sex relationships, with several of them also explicitly criminalizing gender diverse expressions (Rainbow Railroad 2024). While structures for the resettlement of forcibly displaced persons were developed soon after the Second World War (United Nations High Commissioner for Ref-

ugees (UNHCR) 2010), explicit recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity-based persecution as a basis for granting refugee is fairly recent. Overall, refugee resettlement, the process by which the selection and transfer of those seeking refuge in a host country occurs, is discussed from a heteronormative perspective largely erasing the lived experiences of those who also identify as LGBTQI+ (Dixson 2024). Multiple studies document significant stressors and decreased mental and physical health outcomes from ongoing threats of persecution at the societal and family levels (Alessi et al. 2021; Estrada et al. 2021; Fox et al. 2020; Giwa et al. 2021). Racialized LGBTQI+ refugees additionally experience isolation and exclusion from both their racial/ethnic communities and the broader queer communities in the countries that they move to (Kahn 2015). As noted in a recent meta synthesis of qualitative studies, in addition to the general challenges of resettlement and integration faced by all forced migrants, LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees face unique stressors associated with their intersectional identities and social positions (Gottvall et al. 2023).

Recent efforts, however, are beginning to acknowledge the unique challenges of exclusion and persecution experienced by these communities. The Yogyakarta Principles (2007), a universal guide to affirming human rights, are widely recognized as a notable step toward establishing a framework for specifically addressing the challenges of LGBTQI+ migrants. Subsequently, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published several documents providing guidance on determining refugee claims for these communities (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2008, 2012). In 2019, thirty-seven countries were recognized as formally granting asylum to LGBTQI+ individuals (Shaw and Varghese 2022).

Until recently, the United States was one of the top destinations for LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees fleeing persecution. Recent changes in refugee resettlement and asylum policies (The White House 2025a) along with a rise in anti-LGBTQI+ legislation (American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) 2026) have resulted in a notable shift. Though the exact number of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees is largely unknown due to a persistent lack of systemic and inclusive assessment (Shaw and Varghese 2022), given the higher rates of mental health distress, there is a need for a wider adoption of trauma-informed approaches to practices while working with these communities (Alessi and Kahn 2023). In this study, we investigated current United States resettlement policies for LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees through a trauma-informed framework and compared them with those of three high-income, resettlement countries: Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. We provide a brief overview of the refugee resettlement and asylum claims policies in the United States below.

2. Background: Overview of Refugee Resettlement and Asylum Claims Policies in the United States

The definition of “refugee” used in the United States is derived from the United Nations 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocols related to the Status of Refugees where a “refugee” is a “person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her home country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution due to race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2010). In 1980, Congress passed the Refugee Act, which was the basis for the creation of the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP; American Immigration Council (AIC) 2025). Applications for refugee visas are submitted outside the United States from their home country or from another host country or a refugee camp. Upon the approval of refugee status, individuals and/or their families are aided with travel and resettlement in a host city through local resettlement agencies (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2026b).

The Refugee Act of 1980 clarified the objectives of the program and standardized protocols for admittance and the administration of assistance (Brown and Scribner 2014). Central objectives of the policy are self-sufficiency and economic independence—which refers to finding employment and earning an income sufficient to support a family without cash assistance from the government. These objectives are largely met through federal support of a network of refugee resettlement agencies (American Immigration Council (AIC) 2025). Refugee benefits are decentralized and vary by state and county. If refugees relocate to a different city after they have been placed in a particular city, access to assistance lags or is absent.

Asylum seekers, in contrast, arrive in the host country and apply for refuge either at the border or from within the country (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) 2026). Typically, while asylum seekers may file for employment authorization 150 days after filing for asylum, they must wait another 30 days or a total of 180 days to receive employment authorization while their case is still pending. Asylum seekers must demonstrate that they meet the criteria for a “refugee”, and once asylum is granted, they may be eligible for additional assistance through the ORR. While asylum on the basis of sexual orientation was first granted in the United States in 1994 (Migration Policy Institute 2008), there is no explicit mention of considerations for LGBTQI+ refugee or asylum seekers. The category of “particular social group” in the definition is considered broad enough to include them (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2008).

It is critical to note that several changes have occurred to the refugee resettlement and asylum claims policies in the United States since January 2025 that have widespread impacts. Significantly, there is an indefinite pause in refugee admissions through the USRAP and the suspension of all refugee-related funding (The White House 2025a). Refugee admission decisions are considered on a case-by-case basis with priority to White South Afrikaners (The White House 2025b). Current admissions are at historically low levels, with the ceiling for the fiscal year 2026 set at 7500 (Migration Policy Institute 2026). Additionally, the following changes have occurred to the asylum process: asylum applications were paused and recently reopened for all except forty countries; new fees were established for asylum applications; and the duration of work permits was shortened with a new rule proposing an end to the initial work permit issued while asylum cases are decided (Asylum Seeker Advocacy Project (ASAP) 2026). While there are ongoing legal challenges, these measures have drastically reduced the available support and dealt a devastating blow to federal and state-supported resettlement services (Gil et al. 2025).

Even though the United States resettlement program is undergoing these drastic changes with decreased funding and a reallocation of resources to resettle refugees from certain countries, understanding whether the existing policy is trauma-informed can provide us with a foundation for what might work in the future. There is still a need for specific considerations for LGBTQI+ communities in policies, and insights from this analysis might be useful for developing policies in the future. In this study, we examined the following: Is the resettlement policy for LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees in the United States trauma-informed? How do they compare to other resettlement countries that are perceived as welcoming LGBTQI+ individuals? For comparison, we selected three high-income countries—Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia—that also have formal resettlement programs, were predominantly English-speaking, and were perceived to have a higher social acceptance of LGBTQI+ individuals (Flores 2021). We did not find another study that examined LGBTQI+ resettlement policies from a trauma-informed lens across multiple countries.

3. Study Framework

In this study, we used a trauma-informed framework to analyze refugee resettlement policies. Trauma-informed policy analysis is a framework that borrows the principles of trauma-informed care, including safety, trustworthiness and transparency, collaboration, empowerment, choice, and intersectionality, to the analysis and advocacy of social policies (Bowen and Murshid 2016). Though more common in the discussion of intervention and prevention practices, a trauma-informed framework has recently been used to examine whether public policies recognize and address the structural conditions that produce trauma and health inequities (for example, Bowen and Irish 2022; Bowen et al. 2019; Hecht et al. 2018; Murshid and Bowen 2018). In its adoption to policy analysis, the six principles of trauma-informed practice are defined as follows by Bowen and Murshid (2016, p. 224) and Hecht et al. (2018, p. 1963), which we further developed as prompts in our data analysis (see Table 1). Safety encompasses the service recipients' physical and emotional safety and prevention of re-traumatization; trustworthiness and transparency refer to the extent to which trust is built among various parties of interest; collaboration includes active engagement with providers, service recipients with lived experiences in informing policies; empowerment and choice include efforts to provide service users with a strong voice in making decisions; and finally, intersectionality refers to awareness of the interplay of societal power and oppression on an individual's identities.

Table 1. Trauma-informed analysis of policy documents.

Principle	Definition (from Hecht et al. 2018, p. 1963)	Analysis Prompt	United States	United Kingdom	Canada	Australia
Safety	Ensures physical and emotional safety; prevent further trauma from occurring	Does the policy address physical and psychological safety?	No	No	Limited	Limited
Trustworthiness and transparency	Maintains transparency in policies and procedures with the objective of building trust among stakeholders	Are policies and procedures transparent to different communities of interest including resettlement service providers and recipients?	No	No	Yes	Yes
Collaboration	Views the policy's target population as active partners in policy development and implementation and as experts in their own lives	Does the policy encourage collaboration between various communities of interest to provide responsive services?	No	No	Limited	Yes
Empowerment	Shares power with the policy's target population, giving them a strong voice in decision making	Is empowerment/choice of refugees and asylees embedded in service provision?	No	No	Limited	Limited
Choice	Preserves meaningful choices for the policy's target population to maintain a sense of control	Is empowerment/choice of refugees and asylees embedded in service provision?	No	No	Limited	Limited
Intersectionality	Focuses on the awareness of identity characteristics and the privileges or oppression these characteristics can incur	Does the policy acknowledge multiple, intersecting identities?	No	No	Yes	Yes

Note: "Limited" indicates a finding where criteria of the principle was partially met.

This framework recognizes the link between individual experiences of trauma and social policies, which reflect sociopolitical and economic goals regarding how populations should be supported, or not, and shape broader behavioral expectations across sectors such as healthcare, education, immigration, employment, and social welfare (Bowen et al. 2019). The framework extends beyond policy analysis into advocacy by assisting professionals and communities in identifying and underscoring the need for social policies to become more trauma-informed and grounded in human rights (Bowen et al. 2019). Trauma-informed policy analysis is particularly helpful in examining policies related to human rights and gender-based violence, particularly in contexts where minoritized populations face structural vulnerabilities. Given the well-documented vulnerabilities of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees (example, Gottvall et al. 2023) and the current climate of increased hostilities toward both migrant and LGBTQI+ communities in multiple high-income resettlement countries like the United States, this analysis is timely, with implications for social work practice and policy development.

4. Methods

In this study, we used document analysis as a methodology to investigate our research questions given that our data were from policy documents, webpages, and published articles. Document analysis is a commonly used method in health policy research where data in the form of formal, written materials are systematically analyzed to describe their content, identify patterns, or more broadly inform new policies (Dalglish et al. 2020). Within the document analysis method, we used the READ approach developed by Dalglish et al. (2020) as a systematic procedure for collecting and analyzing policy information. The steps involved in this methodology are: (a) readying materials; (b) extracting data; (c) analysis; and (d) distilling findings. The first step involved establishing the scope and parameters of documents based on the research question. Data for this study primarily came from publicly accessible policy texts from the government webpages of each of the countries. For each of the countries identified, we began with an Internet search for policies using key words of “refugee resettlement”, “asylum seekers”, “LGBTQI+ refugee resettlement”, and “LGBTQI+ asylum”. We only accessed documents from government webpages, for example, for the United States, we examined policies published by the United States Citizenship and Immigrant Services, Office of Homeland Security, and Executive Orders from The White House. Similarly, we accessed documents from the Governments of Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Specific links to documents are provided in the analysis section below. Additionally, we used the search function available on the page to identify any documents pertaining to the LGBTQI+ refugee or asylee population.

We supplemented these texts with peer reviewed publications from journals examining resettlement and asylum claims policies in all four countries between 2020–2025. We limited the search for publications to the last five years (2020–2025), given that rapid shifts in migration policies occurred globally with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Koinova et al. 2023). We searched for articles on the research database Google Scholar with the following keywords: “LGBTQI+” AND “asylees”; “LGBTQI+” AND “refugees” AND “resettlement policy”. While our search yielded several articles examining resettlement and asylum claims more broadly, we included all available articles that specifically discussed LGBTQI+ resettlement policies in the United States (one article), United Kingdom (three articles), Canada (five articles), and Australia (two articles). We did not include any articles that were not country specific or those that included countries not being compared here. Finally, we examined publicly accessible webpages of resettlement partners that were identified as collaborative partners. For the United States, we accessed this list from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees webpage (United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) n.d.), while the resettlement partners for other countries were listed in the respective government office webpages. Triangulation of these additional data sources enhanced the robustness of document analysis (Wood et al. 2020) and provided further insights into the strengths and gaps in existing policies.

The next steps in the analyses were extracting and analyzing data. The authors divided tasks for these steps with each author taking the lead in identifying and gathering materials for each country. The policy documents then underwent three reviews by authors using prompts from the trauma-informed framework (Table 1). The primary reviewer first identified and listed sources and analyzed them using each of the questions from our framework. The primary reviewer developed a table for their analysis using the prompts for a trauma-informed analysis (Hecht et al. 2018). The second and third reviewers then analyzed the same documents and verified responses from the first round of analysis. Data were reviewed during monthly meetings with all reviewers from July 2025 through April 2026. When discrepancies arose, the team discussed and arrived at a consensus at team meetings. During this time, we noted rapid changes in resettlement policies in all countries we examined, especially in the United States. We conducted another rapid overview of any changes that could influence our findings before this manuscript submission. The final step in the analysis of distilling findings was conducted with the whole team reviewing and interpreting themes and developing a consolidated table comparing policies across countries (Table 1).

5. Results and Discussion

Using the trauma-informed framework, we examined whether the resettlement and asylum claims policies for LGBTQI+ individuals addressed the principles of: (a) safety, (b) trustworthiness and transparency; (c) collaboration; (d) empowerment and choice; and (e) intersectionality. Definitions of each principle and the questions related to them are listed in Table 1. We summarize our findings for each of the principles here, beginning with policies in the United States and comparing them to those in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.

5.1. Findings from Policy Documents

5.1.1. Safety

The principle of safety refers to ensuring physical and emotional safety to prevent traumatic experiences from recurring (Bowen and Murshid 2016). Several studies have documented the need to address the unique challenges of LGBTQI+ communities in their resettlement journeys. For instance, experiences and threats of persecution from their own ethnic communities and families are common, which is often cited as a reason for seeking refuge (Alessi et al. 2021; Lasowski et al. 2023). From a trauma-informed perspective, addressing physical safety (by ensuring adequate, safe housing in areas that are welcoming) and psychological safety (for instance, use of inclusive and affirmative questions in the interview process and connecting them to resources in their resettlement city) requires an acknowledgment of these distinctive lived experiences.

As mentioned earlier, in the United States, refugee resettlement policies have undergone drastic changes with a pause in resettlement, reduction in federal funding, reduction in the number of new arrivals, and a change in priority to resettle White South Afrikaners (The White House 2025a, 2025b). Though there have been previous efforts to adopt guidelines for interviewing LGBTQI+ applicants (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2012) and initiatives by the Biden–Harris administration to collaborate with LGBTQI+-specific non-government organizations (NGOs) to address unique needs (The White House 2021), these plans have stalled. Our review noted that while there are

still provisions for services to survivors of torture, sex trafficking, and gender-based violence, they still lack the specific inclusion of LGBTQI+ groups. For instance, the policy emphasizes and institutionalizes rapid economic self-sufficiency through employment-focused initiatives, such as the Matching Grant Program, while providing limited financial assistance (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2025b; U.S. Department of State 2026). By prioritizing rapid employment and reducing the reliance on government benefits, including Refugee Cash Assistance (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2026b), this approach may further compromise the physical, psychological, social, and economic safety of newly arrived refugees. The policy documents available do not explicitly mention consideration of the unique challenges of LGBTQI+ communities and instead emphasize proof of belonging to a “particular social group”.

This was similar to our findings from reviewing policies in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, where policies set the standard for assessments of credibility through testimony, evidence, and corroboration through family and friends. In the United Kingdom, where recent legislation, the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act, 2025, clarified that the definition of “particular social group” facing persecution as including those belonging to a group characteristic of sexual orientation, the burden of credibility is still on the claimants who must provide evidence in the form of testimonies and documents to the immigration officer (Home Office 2021). While policy documents for both Canada and Australia specifically included the unique lived experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals and the need for specialized services in resettlement (Department of Home Affairs 2025; Government of Canada 2025), the burden of proof was still present. In Australia, for instance, the Department of Home Affairs (2018) has published guidelines for processing claims related to LGBTQI+ identities while acknowledging that evidence may be challenging to gather due to fear of persecution. In Canada, we found that while the policy states that there is no standard set of criteria that can be relied upon to establish an individual’s sexual or gender identity, the State requires the claimant to provide testimonies, “corroborating evidence from family and friends”, and even “sexually explicit photographs, videos, or other visual material” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) 2021, ss. 7.2.1, 7.2.4). This requirement for refuge may in some cases endanger the safety of claimants by forcing them to disclose their LGBTQI+ identities to family and friends who may not have previously known their identities or are not welcoming of them.

5.1.2. Trustworthiness and Transparency

According to Bowen and Murshid (2016), this principle pertains to the clarity surrounding the policy’s intended objectives or results and the methods through which these objectives will be achieved. Trustworthiness and transparency are key ingredients in trust among various communities of interest. Of importance here is whether service providers and recipients have easy access to policies, and whether the policies and procedures are clear and transparent. In the United States, the current context includes rapid changes to policies. At the time of this data collection and analysis, we noted that the resettlement procedures had been halted and then reopened with revised numbers for approvals and arrivals (The White House 2025a). Additionally, asylum processing was also paused in January 2025 through an Executive Order under the Trump administration, and the newer, digital application method for asylum interviews at the border introduced by the previous administration had been halted (The White House 2025b). Some of these changes currently face legal challenges, and we note that there is much uncertainty about the protocols for refugee resettlement and asylum processing. All current policies on government webpages were easily accessed, with most documents primarily in English. However, we also noted that a few links to documents had restricted access. For example, at the time of this writing, the link to the required documentation for the eligibility of benefits for refu-

gee and asylees was unavailable to the public on the ORR webpage (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2025a).

Our review of resettlement websites by the government or their partnered agencies revealed significant gaps in transparency regarding LGBTQI+ specific services in the United States. A review of UNHCR-identified resettlement agencies showed little to no explicit mention of services for LGBTQI+ refugees or asylees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) n.d.). Only the Refugee Council USA indicated support for LGBTQI+ communities in its publications (Refugee Council USA 2020). Instead, specific supports were primarily found through localized community organizations (for example, *itgetsbetter.org* and *lgbtglobalfaith.org*), which are not formally recognized within the official resettlement systems.

Policy documents published in the United Kingdom were easily accessible to the public with much of it in English, with clear guidelines for eligibility for different pathways to resettlement. Additionally, similar to the United States policies, the United Kingdom's transparency in policy documents was largely procedural and written for institutional workers, with limited adaptation for refugee claimants themselves. A similar pattern of fragmented transparency was observed in the United Kingdom, where specialized resources for LGBTQI+ refugees were available but geographically limited and largely external to centralized government resettlement frameworks (Stonewall n.d.).

Policy documents published in Canada and Australia indicated some efforts toward transparency in information and procedures. For instance, the Canadian government has published clear information about the eligibility, sponsorship requirements for different pathways to refugee resettlement and asylum support (Government of Canada 2025), and targeted support, including pathways for LGBTQI+ refugees through UNHCR, Rainbow Railroad, and other referral organizations. Moreover, Canada has provided centralized, government-hosted information explicitly outlining services for LGBTQI+ refugees, enhancing accessibility and clarity for both service providers and claimants. Australia demonstrates emerging efforts toward trauma-informed transparency through the Australian Humanitarian Program's annual discussion paper (Department of Home Affairs 2025) and Bridge to Safety, a non-governmental initiative that explicitly identifies LGBTQI+ refugees (Forcibly Displaced People Network (FDPN) 2026).

5.1.3. Collaboration

This principle refers to whether the policy's target population is an active partner in the policy development and implementation as experts in their own lives (Bowen and Murshid 2016). In the United States, resettlement policies and procedures are dictated by the federal government in accordance with its priorities. In our analysis, we found that with the creation of the USRAP, though the implementation of resettlement procedures occurred through various resettlement agencies spread across the nation, there was little evidence of collaboration, especially between the recipients of services and various agencies involved in the process. It is important to note that there is evidence of some collaboration with the various resettlement partners in the United States such as through the Preferred Communities Program (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2026a). However, we did not find explicit mention or inclusion of LGBTQI+ serving agencies. One of the largest NGOs assisting LGBTQI+ asylees, the Rainbow Railroad, has submitted various recommendations for the development of a more nuanced collaboration between service recipients and agencies (Rainbow Railroad 2024). Specifically, one of the recommendations was to recognize Rainbow Railroad as a resettlement provider who could assist in the identification and resettlement of LGBTQI+ migrants. However, as mentioned earlier, this recommendation has not been implemented with recent changes in federal administration.

This top-down structure of policy development and implementation is also similar in the United Kingdom, where transfer of the responsibility of care occurs from the UN-HCR to the United Kingdom government to the local authorities. However, the local authorities (typically, the case worker) decide what services the applicant can access (Home Office 2021). The policies do not describe how the services (for example, employment, healthcare, and education) collaborate together. We did not find any documentation of policies in the United States or the United Kingdom that encouraged collaboration with LGBTQI+ refugees themselves. It appeared that input was usually provided by NGOs such as the Rainbow Railroad in the United States and Rainbow Migration in the United Kingdom, but it was unclear how much of this input informed policy. Across both contexts, collaboration appeared to occur primarily between institutions and community partner organizations rather than with the refugees themselves, restricting the integration of lived expertise into policy design and implementation.

In contrast, there appeared to be limited collaboration between NGOs, governmental agencies, and communities with lived experiences in the shaping of policies in Canada and greater, emerging collaboration in Australia. The Canadian government, for instance, reported that they work with several organizations such as the Rainbow Refugee Society (Government of Canada 2025) and From Borders to Belonging (<https://fromborderstobelonging.ca> (accessed on 21 July 2025)) for assistance with private sponsorships of LGBTQI+ refugees and input into resettlement service provision. In Australia, the development of the Humanitarian Integration and Settlement Program by the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs was informed by a collaborative effort to improve settlement services, enhance positive settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants, and guide government agencies delivering settlement services from planning through to programs and evaluation (Department of Home Affairs 2025). Moreover, government communications appeared to emphasize that refugees should meaningfully engage with and access a wide range of societal institutions in Australia, including public services, local and community programs, private sector systems (e.g., banks), as well as civic and political processes (Department of Home Affairs 2024). Additionally, in early 2025, they created the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP), a community-oriented program that includes support from trained community members (Department of Home Affairs 2025). Most recently, Australia has introduced the Rainbow Bridge pathway to entry, which was the result of grassroots advocacy by a grassroots community organization, the Network of Forcibly Displaced Persons (Forcibly Displaced People Network (FDPN) 2026).

5.1.4. Empowerment and Choice

The principles of empowerment and choice refer to whether the communities that are served have a voice in decision-making for themselves, promoting their capacity to make meaningful choices so that they retain a sense of control (Bowen and Murshid 2016). As noted in the preceding section, we did not find any evidence of representation of LGBTQI+ refugee and asylee communities or a mandate for their meaningful involvement in their resettlement process in the United States or United Kingdom. In Canada, as noted in the above section, the model of the private sponsorship of refugees allows space for greater involvement from organizations that address the specific needs of LGBTQI+ communities with some involvement from those also with lived experiences (Government of Canada 2025). Recent partnerships in Australia with the CRISP and Bridge to Safety pathways appear to indicate a potential movement toward gathering more input from the communities themselves.

5.1.5. Intersectionality

Within a trauma-informed framework for policy analysis, intersectionality refers to the awareness of identity characteristics and their intersections with privilege and oppression (Bowen and Murshid 2016). Overall, Canada and Australia demonstrated the strongest policy recognition of intersecting identities, while the United Kingdom and the United States showed weaker alignment, either by treating categories of vulnerability separately or by failing to maintain the significance of intersectionality in current policy directions.

Our findings revealed that in the United States and United Kingdom policy documents, though there is mention of different social groups (for instance, gender and race/ethnicity), there is no explicit acknowledgement of intersectionality. In both countries, policies identified categories of identities, such as gender and race/ethnicity, separately, but did not acknowledge the existence of overlapping, minoritized identities. In the United Kingdom, our analysis found that although policies identify groups, such as women and girls, children and adolescents, survivors of torture, and people persecuted based on sexual orientation, these identities are treated as separate rather than mutually shaping one another (Home Office 2021). Furthermore, there was no clear acknowledgement of how multiple identities may compound risk within asylum and resettlement systems. Similarly, our analysis of the United States found little to no evidence of a consistent intersectional framework in the current policy environment.

In contrast, policies in both Canada and Australia include more explicit recognition of intersectional identities, acknowledging how multiple social positions shape vulnerability. For instance, Canadian policies specifically suggest that LGBTQI+ individuals may face different risks because of other factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, faith or belief system, age, disability, health status, social class, and education (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) 2021). Similarly, the Australian framework identifies multiple groups, including women and children, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQI+ individuals, as priority populations within Australia's Offshore Humanitarian Program (2024–25), reflecting an awareness regarding the vulnerability of multiply-marginalized identities.

5.2. Findings from Current Literature on Policy Implementation

We included information about policies and their implementation found in peer-reviewed journal articles to supplement our review of the policy documents. This additional step assisted in triangulating data sources to provide a comprehensive perspective of information found in government-issued documents. Overall, while there were multiple articles on the experiences of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees, we identified a total of 12 articles specifically discussing policies for LGBTQI+ resettlement, with one on policies in the United States, three in the United Kingdom, five in Canada, and three in Australia. We did not find studies that analyzed all principles of the trauma-informed framework. Across studies from all four countries, however, a common theme emerged with the emphasis on burden of proof and credibility and the potential for re-traumatization in the interview process prior to admission. A few studies on policies in Canada and Australia discussed the lack of collaboration with LGBTQI+ communities and inattention to intersectionality in refugee integration.

Despite specific guidelines published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2008, 2012) for admission officers to ensure a safe and inclusive interview process for LGBTQI+ applicants, several studies indicated that implementation of the guidelines varies widely. For instance, a recent analysis by Ghosh (2024) underscored several challenges in adjudicating cases for asylum in the United States, including non-inclusive definitions of sexual orientation and gender identity, limited training for asylum officers, and the potential for hostility and stereotyping during asylum interviews. Frequently, applicants must demonstrate that they fit stereotypical expressions of gender

identities, sexual orientations that prioritize monogamy, and gendered roles from a Western-centric, heteronormative lens (Gordon-Orr 2021; Lack 2022; Powell 2021; Raj 2025).

This was also found in studies on Canadian policies, where proof of identity seemed to be prioritized over experiences of persecution without an explicit acknowledgement of the diverse expressions of sexual orientations, romantic relationships, and gender identities (Mulé 2020). For instance, the process of disclosing and proving LGBTQI+ identities were identified as highly traumatizing, as well as distressing and anxiety-inducing, as it forced claimants to relive past persecutions and potentially trigger painful memories. This re-traumatizing potential is further heightened when immigration and asylum officers do not follow affirmative and inclusive guidelines for questioning or are not attuned to diverse expressions of gender identity and sexual orientation or are not trained in trauma-informed practices (Anderson and Soennecken 2022; Jacob and Oswin 2023). This finding corroborated our analysis of the policy documents, where we found that safety for LGBTQI+ applicants was not explicitly prioritized or uniformly acknowledged across countries.

Scholars in Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia have further critiqued how the process of proving one's sexual or gender identity to the decision-makers re-informs homonationalists' assumptions regarding how claimants are expected to conform to a Westernized narrative of LGBTQI+ identities (Heimer 2020; Mulé 2020; Wolff and Cochrane 2025). Homonationalism is a conceptual frame for determining whether a nation is progressive or not and is often evaluated on their seeming acceptance of gay and lesbian citizens (Puar 2013). This frame is often critiqued because acceptance is conditional to conformity to Western expressions of sexual orientation and gender identities and treats other non-Western expressions as less than. For instance, in Australia, Wolff and Cochrane (2025) expand on homonationalism through the concept of queer legibility, which pertains to the manner in which queer refugees are assessed as either legitimate or illegitimate by the decision-maker who may possess stereotypes or misconceptions about the expressions (e.g., through clothing or mannerisms) of queer identity. Queer refugees must perform legible, state-recognizable forms of LGBTQI+ identities, presenting an outward expression of their sexual or gender identity, such as being a "loud queer person who marches... in glitter and a rainbow flag" (Wolff and Cochrane 2025, p. 107). Furthermore, the literature reviewed suggests that while the policies in Canada and Australia were clear, there is limited transparency and communication about the procedures. Multiple studies in Canada, for instance, found that often the reasons for denials of asylum claims are not transparent, which could erode trust in the system (Mulé 2020; Lee et al. 2021). Similarly in Australia, while recent policies and guidelines appear to be affirmative and inclusive, the literature has reported on the exclusion of migrants with LGBTQI+ identities in many of its practices, and persecution and abuse due to its policy of offshore detentions on islands that criminalized queerness (Dawson 2020; Talbot et al. 2024).

While these articles confirm the lack of attention to several principles of a trauma-informed framework in the policies in the United States and the United Kingdom, such as safety and transparency, they also provide a contradictory view of the policies in Canada and Australia. As noted in Table 1, both policy documents from government offices and resettlement webpages indicated more attention particularly to transparency and safety with specific mention of the unique challenges of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees. However, studies on the textual analysis of policies and implementation practices suggest that principles of safety and transparency are not consistently upheld (for example, Dixon 2024). Additionally, available studies on policy implementation in Canada noted a lack of intra-group diversities in integration efforts based solely on racial and ethnic identities (Karimi 2020). Furthermore, studies conducted on Canadian and Australian policies reported a top-down approach, where refugees are "clients" rather than co-creators of pol-

icies (Dawson 2020; Lee et al. 2021; Mulé 2020). As argued by some scholars, visibility in decision-making spaces is not sufficient. While our analysis of policies in Canada and Australia indicated a shift toward a better integration of perspectives of LGBTQI+ refugee communities themselves (Department of Home Affairs 2024; Government of Canada 2025), there is a need for a re-examination and re-distribution of power where those with lived experiences as refugees and LGBTQI+ can advocate effectively. This requires a fundamental shift away from defining “refugees” from cis-heteronormative, able-bodied assumptions, which inherently cast those with LGBTQI+ identities to the margins (Dixon 2024).

While our analysis provides key findings from a trauma-informed lens, our study is limited by its scope as we relied on available documents that were accessible to us in our position as academics. It is possible to have missed other information available to policy-makers and resettlement service providers. Additionally, we only included materials at the federal or central government level and did not include information provided by individual states or provinces overseeing the implementation of services. We also did not include materials from voluntary organizations that serve LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees that did not have a partnership with their respective governments. We found a robust network of online resources that offered a range of services and support that indicated potential for extensive involvement from people with lived experiences in policy development. Future studies may consider examining materials and services provided by voluntary organizations, local community groups, and other informal supports to provide a more comprehensive picture of support for LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees in each country. Finally, we did not gather primary data from LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees about their experiences in resettlement, which would have provided robust information on policy implementation on the ground. However, given the rapidly changing landscape of immigration and resettlement policies, this review of available documents still provides key insights into next steps.

6. Implications for Policy and Social Work Practice

In the countries studied here, recent reports indicate rising anti-immigrant sentiments and a shift toward tightening immigration laws and border controls (Kustov and Yates 2026; Australian Human Rights Commission 2025; Banerjee et al. 2025; Altman et al. 2025). In the United States and United Kingdom specifically, a rapid increase in anti-LGBTQI+ laws, specifically targeting transgender and gender diverse communities (American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) 2026; Human Rights Watch 2025), reflect a troubling trend toward the dehumanization of these communities. LGBTQI+ refugee and asylee lives are deeply impacted by both these shifts and we argue that in this context, it is crucial for policymakers to move toward a trauma-informed framework to better safeguard rights and promote well-being.

Given our focus on the policies in the United States, we provide the following recommendations from a trauma-informed framework:

- (a) Strengthen partnerships with grassroots organizations that work with and are led by LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees and recognize them as formal partners in the resettlement process.
- (b) Revise training modules for immigration officers based on UNHCR’s existing guidelines for interviewing asylees and refugees from a trauma-informed, affirmative perspective and ensure their consistent use.
- (c) Develop multiple pathways for resettlement, including private–public partnerships, humanitarian visas, and skilled worker/student refugees, following models in Canada and Australia.
- (d) Increase the transparency of adjudication processes.

- (e) Develop programs that prioritize LGBTQI+ community participation and partnerships to allow greater input in the process of designing and delivering services.
- (f) Integrate trauma-informed mental health care early in the process of claims submission and provide appropriate training in LGBTQI+ affirmative practices for all resettlement providers.

7. Conclusions

Overall, drawing from the three data sources, we found little evidence that resettlement policies in the United States and the United Kingdom followed any of the principles of a trauma-informed framework. In comparison, our analyses revealed a more nuanced picture for policies in Canada and Australia. Though published policy documents from the government appeared to highlight safety, transparency, and intersectionality, the available peer-reviewed literature indicated that it may not be implemented uniformly. Most of the available and emerging literature on policy implementation suggested that in practice, the process of application for refuge, adjudication of claims, and subsequent resettlement and integration efforts are, in fact, re-traumatizing and hostile to LGBTQI+ migrants. Across all four countries, the continued focus on proving identity often forces claimants to conform to narrow, Western expectations of what it means to be LGBTQI+, which can be deeply traumatizing and contrary to trauma-informed principles. However, recent shifts toward the increased participation of community-based organizations in Canada, and particularly in Australia, may provide opportunities for a more inclusive, affirming practice in resettlement. This study points to the need for more inclusive, trauma-informed, and community-driven approaches to LGBTQI+ refugee resettlement policy development. Meaningful change will require not just policy adjustments, but a shift toward centering the lived experience and expertise of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylees themselves.

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