

Supporting LGBTQI+ Newcomers in Canada: Considerations for Inclusive Programming

Introduction

Canada's commitment to diversity and inclusion extends to its approach to newcomers, and this commitment is especially pertinent when addressing the unique needs of 2SLGBTQI+ immigrants. For many 2SLGBTQI+ refugees, their journey to Canada is driven by a need to escape persecution, discrimination, and violence they faced in their home countries due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. To provide effective support and a sense of belonging, it is essential for programs to acknowledge the intersectionality of experiences, recognizing how factors such as race, gender, and disability can compound vulnerabilities. Therefore, the focus of this discussion will be on identifying key considerations for designing inclusive and effective programs to support the diverse experiences of 2SLGBTQI+ newcomers.

1. Structural Barriers in Accessing Services

Research on the experiences of 2SLGBTQI+ newcomers in North America points to several structural barriers in accessing services. These challenges can include:

- Limited awareness among service providers regarding the specific needs of 2SLGBTQI+ newcomers. This gap can lead to insensitivity, such as making incorrect assumptions about an individual's gender or their partner's gender when seeking services.
- The presence of biases, particularly when service providers hold racist, homophobic, or transphobic beliefs, can exacerbate the challenges faced by 2SLGBTQI+ newcomers.¹
- Language barriers present a significant obstacle, particularly when resources are only offered in English.

Profile of 2SLGBTQI+ Refugees in Canada

- From 2013 – 2015, **13%** of all asylum decisions in Canada were based on **sexual orientation**, with approx. 70% of claims accepted.
- The **Rainbow Refugee Assistance Partnership**, funded by the Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), sponsors 60 2SLGBTQI+ refugees annually.
 - An additional **150** spots are designated for 2SLGBTQI+ refugees from **Afghanistan**.

2. Safety, Health, and Well-Being

The safety, health, and well-being of 2SLGBTQI+ newcomers can be impacted in several compounding ways:

- **Lack of supportive and reliable social networks.** Cultural and religious communities, as well as families are among the most important sources of social support post-immigration. However, stigmatization within these social networks can lead to 2SLGBTQI+ immigrants not feeling safe, in fear of not having their identities accepted. This not only limits their access to support in the community but can place them in danger.
- **Burden of sharing.** The need for 2SLGBTQI+ immigrants to repeatedly disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity during service delivery can be an additional emotional burden that should be mitigated when possible. Confidentiality is key to ensuring that 2SLGBTQI+ newcomers are not inadvertently outed.
- **Trauma and Retraumatization.** Many 2SLGBTQI+ immigrants have experienced threats of persecution, torture, and death in their home countries due to their sexual and gender identity. These traumas can continue post-immigration, throughout the claims process, forcing claimants to re-live past experiences of violence and oppression², as well as during the settlement process.
- **Existence of intersecting vulnerabilities.** Trans and non-binary individuals within the 2SLGBTQI+ community often face additional layers of stigma and discrimination.

3. Housing

While accessing housing is a challenge for many immigrants, refugees and 2SLGBTQI+ community members face an elevated risk of homelessness. 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, and in particular 2SLGBTQI+ youth, are grossly overrepresented in the unhoused population. Specific considerations for 2SLGBTQI+ refugees in this context include:

1. **Immediate shelter needs** for individuals who may be disowned by their families upon coming out in Canada.
2. Recognizing that **not all shelters are safe for 2SLGBTQI+ immigrants**, who may be at risk of violence and harm due to their intersecting identities.

Income and Housing Data

- **63%** of immigrants in Canada reported household incomes of **less than \$30,000**.
- **15%** reported an annual income of less than **\$10,000**.
- **Newcomers under 5 years** reported annual incomes of **less than \$10,000**.
- Racialized immigrant communities are disproportionately overrepresented in the homelessness and poverty crisis in Canada.³

Key Recommendations

- Provide staff with diversity and cultural awareness training.
- Update intake forms and interview processes to be inclusive of gender and sexual identities.
- Facilitate or provide access to free and culturally sensitive therapy and counselling services for clients.
- Share information on a need-to-know basis only.
- Recruit gender and sexuality-diverse individuals within service organizations.
- Facilitate kinship support groups for 2SLGBTQI+ newcomers, including mentorship programs.

Works Cited

1. Giwa, S., & Chaze, F. (2018). Positive enough? A content analysis of settlement service organizations' inclusivity of LGBTQ immigrants. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services: The Quarterly Journal of Community & Clinical Practice*, 30(3), 220–243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2018.1463889>
2. Kahn, S., & Alessi, E. (2017). Coming Out Under the Gun: Exploring the Psychological Dimensions of Seeking Refugee Status for LGBT Claimants in Canada. *Journal of Refugee Status*, 31.
3. Navarro, J., et al. (2021). Health and Well-being Among Trans and Non-Binary Immigrants & Newcomers: Gender-based violence and barriers to accessing settlement services in Canada. *Trans Pulse Canada*. <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/blog/2022/2slgbtqia-housing-needs-challenges>