UNDERSTANDING THE STATE OF GLOBAL LGBTQI+ PERSECUTION





Cover Photo of Steven Kabuye, Ugandan LGBTQI+ activist and human rights defender supported by Rainbow Railroad. Photo by Stephen Spencer, 2024.

Inside cover photo by Jose V. Matutina.

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FLEEING FEAR:

FROM PERIL TO PROMISE, A JOURNEY TO SAFETY AND NEW BEGIN-NINGS

Resettlement isn't a fairytale ending – but it's not the end, it's a first step into a new future

By Chase

If that terrified nineteen-year-old could see me now, he'd probably wonder who let this bitter, sarcasm-spewing guy steal his body. The scars from his misadventures in the Middle East – both mental and the raised welts on his back – tend to do that to a person.

Home sweet home consisted of being zip tied to our radiator with its chipping paint, and some truly creative uses for bamboo canes. Not exactly the décor you'll find in home improvement magazines. It turns out my family's views on interior design didn't quite align with my 'lifestyle choices.' I'd scrub myself under scalding water afterwards, trying in vain to wash off the sweaty smell of fear that soaked my skin. You see, my parents believed in tough love; specifically, the kind that leaves you looking like a zebra.

I learned early that joy is dangerous territory. There was danger in each shared smile with a guy, in every soft meeting of the eyes that held a



promise of what could have been. If I so much as brushed shoulders with a guy in some hallway, panic would claw at my insides. Did he think I was gay for not avoiding his shoulder? Did others?

Home wasn't an escape either. I would spend each night navigating the minefield of my parents' moods as if I were reading tea leaves. Would my father's clenched grip on the newspaper turn into clenched fists pummeling into me? Would the annoyed look on my mother's face translate into barbed comments from her venomous mouth?

They eventually found out I was gay. I have no memory of the precise moment, just of the world imploding. My father's fists slamming into me, his face inches from mine, spittle flying as he shrieked at me for being "a disgusting pervert who went against the natural order." I knew I had to flee.

Escape was a frantic leap into the unknown - Türkiye, where I lived with the bone-deep fear that the next knock at the door would be my parents coming to bring me back. You don't realize how deafeningly loud silence can be until it's an endless loop of every nightmare that brought you to that point.

Rainbow Railroad. Almost ironic, isn't it? I went from an underground existence hiding my true self from my parents, to an underground railroad leading to freedom. They tackled the resettlement process on my behalf, a twisted bureaucratic mess in which the possibility of falling through the cracks was all too real. Yet alongside that were Devon and Adriana, the Rainbow Railroad caseworkers who were by my side every day, even though they were a hemisphere away. They let me choke out my sob story without making me feel like the broken mess I was.

As for Canada? Well, YOU try surviving on cold smiles and minimum wage for a true taste of character-building. They have lovely winters up here, just cold enough to match the bleakness of my soul. It took a while, a lot of caffeine-fueled nights, and a not insignificant amount of rage-studying to turn things around. Now, I stroll alongside other fresh-faced hopefuls at U of T, reminding myself every time I get the urge to complain about essays and assignments, that it is a privilege for me to even have things to complain about, because it means I made it out alive. How fortunate must I be for my biggest gripe to be an essay?

Life's funny that way, I suppose. One day you're fleeing from country to country and continent to continent in a bid for freedom, and the next you're just another overworked student complaining about exam season and Toronto housing prices.

It's not a fairytale ending. In fact, it's not an ending at all, because thanks to Rainbow Railroad, I have my whole life ahead of me, to complain, to celebrate, to explore, to love, to hate, to be. Not only did they make survival possible, they gave me a shot at building a life even I didn't expect. Let's be honest, my odds weren't great. And for all those workers and supporters, my sarcasm probably isn't a great thank you! But my sarcasm is better than my silence, which is what would've happened to me if it weren't for Rainbow Railroad: Silence.

There are others still living in that world I so narrowly escaped from. It fuels me. It serves as a constant reminder that cynicism never built a safe haven and that complacency has not and will not save lives. Rainbow Railroad helps turn nightmares into futures. Darkness into hope. If my story, with all its rough edges and sarcastic quips aside, inspires even one more donation, one more act of kindness–well, that's how we chip away at the darkness: one brick at a time.

A MESSAGE FROM RAINBOW RAINBOW RAINBOW BOARD BOARD CHAIR

Photo by David Peinado Romero.

> In 2023, Rainbow Railroad navigated urgent calls for support amidst a challenging backdrop in the fight for global LGBTQI+ freedom. Our latest Strategic Plan, which you will see highlighted throughout this report, provided us with three key pillars guiding our work: Get More to Safety Now, Queer the System, and Strengthen our Foundation.

> Despite progress, anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment persists, necessitating our continued advocacy. We experienced major victories, including key partnerships with the Canadian Government, and the Welcome Corps program in the United States. Within an unjust system that prevents queer and trans people from accessing refuge, government referral pathways allow us to connect LGBTQI+ asylum seekers with the most urgent protection needs on their journey to safety. However, setbacks, like Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act, underscore the ongoing need for our advocacy and support.

> Over the past year we maintained a high volume of requests for help, a high percentage of which continue to come from LGBTQI+ Afghans. The disproportionate impact of global crises on LGBTQI+ individuals highlights the urgent need for tailored support. Looking forward, we remain vigilant, and will ensure effective crisis response amid funding gaps.

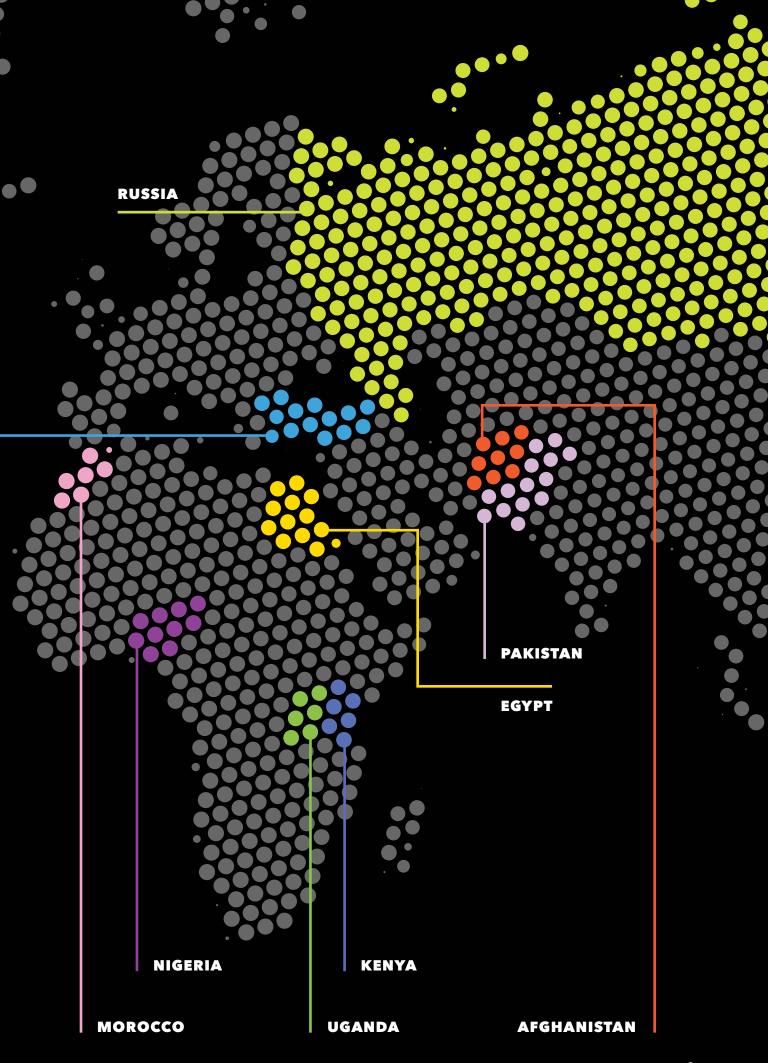
> Our Annual Report reflects the resilience of our community and the challenges we confront, offering insights from those we support. We are deeply grateful for the invaluable partnerships that have enabled us to provide safety and support to LGBTQI+ individuals facing persecution around the world. Your dedication and generosity have been the cornerstone of our success, and together, we can make a profound impact. As we look ahead, we invite new supporters to join us in this critical mission, helping us expand our reach and deepen our commitment to those who need it most.

While the global state of LGBTQI+ persecution is daunting, collective efforts sustain our fight for liberation. Let's persevere together, with hope, and fueled by our solidarity.

CALEB GOODMAN (HE/HIM)

Chair of the Board Rainbow Railroad





THE IMPACT OF OUR PROGRAMS

It is clear, from the volume of requests we receive, and the stories of the individuals we support, that the way we do our work is







WE VERIFY. We thoroughly verify and identify each case through interviews, documentary evidence, and supporting testimony to learn about the circumstances of the individual facing persecution and to determine how we can help.

WE INITIATE. Once we verify a case, we work with individuals at risk to identify the best outcome for safety. Through our comprehensive case management process, we research possible routes to safety and connect with local contacts who provide logistical support. This includes providing support to the individual in-country, through safehouses, shelter assistance, cash assistance, and complementary forms of support.

WE TRAVEL. Once a safe route has been identified, we facilitate travel, often to a country that accepts refugees and upholds the human rights of LGBTQI+ people. What "safety" looks like depends on the unique individual's needs. Travel may also mean relocation within the country of origin. If an individual crosses international borders, upon arrival, we provide limited, short-term support to help them settle and connect to resources in their new country.

WE ADVOCATE. Due to barriers for LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum and accessing traditional resettlement, we advocate for expanded and flexible pathways to safety for at-risk LGBTQI+ people, working in collaboration with governments, academics, local partners, affected populations, and civil society.

WE LEARN. It is important that we continue to learn, being the only organization of this size and scope engaged in this type of work. We monitor and evaluate our programs to enhance service delivery and impact, implementing insights gained from LGBTQI+ people at risk into concrete action. We also serve as thought leaders, sharing emerging trends, recommendations, and situational analyses.



THROUGH EMERGENCY TRAVEL SUPPORT IN 2023

CASH ASSISTANCE

Ш

RESETTLEMENT PATHNES

12

ENCY

GLOBAL

LGBTQI+ IDP

REFUGEE PROTECTION

SUPPOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

& REFERRALS

In 2023, Rainbow Railroad received 15,352 requests for help from LGBTQI+ individuals around the world. In the face of such staggering need, our commitment to addressing the unique circumstances of as many individuals as possible never wavered.

At the heart of our mission lies Emergency Travel Support (ETS), a critical program providing lifesaving resources to those in imminent need. Operating beyond the confines of government resettlement initiatives, ETS empowers LGBTQI+ individuals with the resources and support necessary to access safety. In 2023 alone, this program facilitated the evacuation of 434 individuals, each one a testament to our unwavering dedication to queering the system and centering the agency of people at risk.

Our efforts extend beyond evacuation to support the varied needs of individuals reaching out for support. Through the Cash Assistance program, we offer immediate relief by providing vital support for accommodation, healthcare, and local transportation. In the past year, 219 individuals found support through this program that enabled them to live with dignity.

Equally pivotal are our partnerships with grassroots organizations and human rights defenders, who serve as our eyes and ears on the ground. Together, we form a global network, identifying, verifying, and supporting LGBTQI+ individuals at risk in their own communities. Across 18 organizations spanning 15 countries, we touched the lives of 4,174 individuals in need in 2023.

Although we celebrated major victories last year, we also remained vigilant in the face of crises. From the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda to the crackdown on LGBTQI+ activists in Russia, our Crisis Response program allowed us to nimbly and flexibly confront state-sponsored persecution. In 2023, we supported 2,645 individuals through crisis response.

> Our commitment to support doesn't end with evacuation or crisis intervention. Through our Information Services and Referrals program, we provide essential resources and mental health support to LGBTQI+ individuals navigating the asylum process. With 188 individuals finding guidance and support through this program in 2023, we reaffirm our dedication to every step of the journey to safety.

Our advocacy for Government **Resettlement Pathways** has made major strides in recent years. In Canada and the United States, our team worked tirelessly to provide pathways to safety through private sponsorship programs and direct referrals. In 2023, we welcomed 10 individuals to Canada, submitted 4 applications to the Government-Assisted Refugee Program, and facilitated the resettlement of 3 individuals through the Welcome Corps and an additional 3 individuals through the US Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons.

Community members learn about how to get involved with Rainbow Railroad's Communities of Care program at an event in Chicago, IL, November 2023.

LGBTQI+ PEOPLE IN CRISIS

In the face of a troubling global rollback of LGBTQI+ rights, we know that our advocacy is an indispensable force for change and progress. We must challenge oppressive systems, demand accountability from governments, and foster solidarity internationally.

The crisis situations we have been tracking in Uganda, Afghanistan and Russia are all signs of the rising global anti-gender movement. The coordinated onslaught against queer communities knows no borders, fueled by resources flowing from the global north. Commenting on the current crisis in Uganda, Dr. Frank Mugisha, Nobel Prize nominee and Executive Director of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) noted, "I am hopeful that at some point we'll be successful, as long as we are able to hold the American evangelicals accountable for the hatred they have promoted."

In Uganda, where the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in May 2023 has had an immediate impact, our work has never been more urgent. Last year, we received 1,399 requests for help in Uganda, more than triple the previous year. The impact of the law has been swift and brutal, displacing LGBTQI+ people through violence, threats, evictions and pressure from landlords, as well as community pressure to leave home. Last year, we supported 1,140 individuals from Uganda through different Programs, representing 81% of the number of requests for help received.

The violent fallout from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 continued to impact all program areas in 2023, underscoring the sheer magnitude of this crisis and the unabated need to urgently respond. We received 4,093 requests for help from Afghanistan last year, a 47% increase from 2022. Rainbow Railroad's 2022 #SafeWayOut advocacy campaign effectively raised the alarm about the critical danger facing LGBTQI+ Afghans, resulting in a direct referral pathway with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada for up to 600 individuals at risk. In 2023, we resettled 303 Afghans in Canada through this program. We will finish relocating the remaining Afghans to Canada and complete this program in 2024.

As the brutal conflict between Russia and Ukraine drags on, LGBTQI+ rights in the region continue to hang in the balance. In Ukraine, Rainbow Railroad has seen a decrease in the number of requests for help in 2023. The Russian invasion has resulted in an increasing acceptance of LGBTQI+ rights in Ukraine due to the visibility of LGBTQI+ people serving in the military and solidarity in the face of Russian oppression. Still, any progress on the Parliamentary bill to legalize same-sex marriage was deferred until after resolution of the conflict.

In Russia, the Supreme Court decision to label the LGBTQI+ movement as an "extremist organization" continues to reverberate. Russia





REQUESTS FOR HELP FROM UGANDA IN 2023 remains one of our top ten countries for requests for help, with 464 requests from Russia in 2023. In 2023, Rainbow Railroad relocated 15 people from Russia through emergency travel support and funded two Russian organizations providing direct support to LGBTQI+ people at risk.

In the face of the escalating crises plaguing the global LGBTQI+ community, the urgency of Rainbow Railroad's mission stands clear. As the global anti-gender movement gains traction and discriminatory legislation tightens its grip, the need for our work has never been more stark. As we reflect on the challenges ahead, let us renew our commitment to the path of queer liberation, knowing that through collective action and unwavering resolve, we can build a world where every individual is free to live without fear.

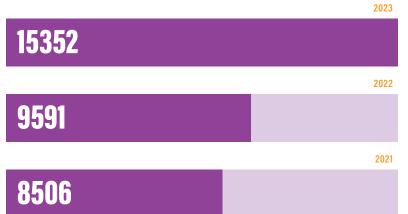
OUR UNIQUE DATA ON THE STATE OF GLOBAL LGBTQI+ PERSECUTION

The data collected by Rainbow Railroad is unique, allowing us direct insights into not only the identities and experiences of individuals who reach out to us, but also the broader landscape of the global queer experience. Included in this report is a snapshot of some of the key data we collected over the past year. For more detailed insights, please read our complete 2023 Annual Report.



THE FOLLOWING DATA REFER TO INDIVIDUALS REACHING OUT TO RAINBOW RAILROAD FOR SUPPORT:

INCREASING REQUESTS FOR HELP



Since 2021, Rainbow Railroad's requests for help have increased by 80%. We measure the total number of individuals requesting help, though there can be up to ten individuals associated with one request.

REGIONS OF REQUEST

- 1. South-Central Asia (5445)
- 2. Sub-Saharan Africa (3711)
- 3. Middle East and North Africa (2796)
- 4. North America (1986)
- 5. Eastern Europe (500)
- 6. Caribbean (347)
- 7. Latin America (280)
- 8. Western Europe (196)
- 9. Oceania and Pacific Islands (16)

There were 75 individuals from whom we did not receive data regarding their Region of Request.

THE FOLLOWING DATA REFERS TO INDIVIDUALS SUPPORTED BY RAINBOW RAILROAD:



Between 2020 and 2023, the number of individuals supported by Rainbow Railroad increased by 1,344%.

GENDER IDENTITY

- 1. Cis-Male (54%)
- 2. Cis-Female (11%)
- 3. Transgender Male (9%)
- 4. Transgender Female (9%)
- 5. Gender nonconfirming (6%)
- 6. Gender Fluid (5%)
- 7. Agender (3%)
- 8. Intergender (2%)
- 9. Aliagender (<1%)
- 10. Other (<1%)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

- 1. Gay (49%)
- 2. Bisexual (20%)
- 3. Lesbian (12%)
- 4. Queer (7%)
- 5. Straight/Heterosexual (6%)
- 6. Pansexual (5%)
- 7. Asexual (1%)
- 8. Other (<1%)

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INSIGHTS FROM OUR DATA

A COMPLEX JOURNEY TO SAFETY

1953

INDIVIDUALS FROM COUNTRIES WITHOUT ACCESSIBLE ROUTES TO SAFETY SUPPORTED THROUGH OUR PROGRAMS Harnessing the power of data is not merely an exercise in analysis; it is a journey toward understanding, empowerment, and advocacy. Our data help to illuminate the complex landscape of LGBTQI+ persecution worldwide. Through meticulous collection, analysis, and interpretation, we glean invaluable insights into the challenges facing our community, the impact of our interventions, and the pathways to progress. These insights not only inform our decision-making processes but also empower us to refine structures, enhance systems, and prioritize advocacy efforts.

At Rainbow Railroad, we seek to support as many individuals from various countries in any way possible. However, because of systemic barriers posed by widespread criminalization and the shrinking international commitment to uphold the right to asylum, LGBTQI+ individuals facing persecution are often prevented from accessing safety. We have termed countries where we are unable to provide travel support to people living there as 'no option' countries. In 2023, our data revealed the stark reality of 20 countries without accessible travel routes except where special government programs or partnerships have been established. This figure represents approximately 33% of the more than 60 countries where LGBTQI+ people are criminalized. Our suite of programs allowed us to provide support or assistance to 1,953 individuals from countries without accessible routes to safety, including Afghanistan, Kenya, Uganda, and Pakistan.

Our resolve to queer the system through Emergency Travel Support (ETS) remains consistent, as we adapt our strategies to the shifting tides of persecution and resistance. In 2023, our data-driven strategic review of emergency travel support led us to carve out new routes for those navigating the perilous journey to safety, forging pathways to liberation for at-risk LGBTQI+ individuals. However, challenges persist, particularly for individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa, Türkiye, and India, who grapple with heightened barriers to travel compared to their counterparts in South America.

In 2023, our efforts resulted in the relocation of 447 individuals across our programs, FEEDBACK FROM RELOCATED INDIVIDUALS REFLECTS SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PERSONAL SAFETY (91%) AND QUALITY OF LIFE (76%).

illustrating the breadth of our impact in reaching those in need within the LGBTQI+ community. However, the act of relocation is merely the first step in a complex journey. Post-relocation, LGBTQI+ individuals often encounter discrimination and face daunting asylum processes, highlighting the ongoing challenges they confront even after reaching a place of refuge.

Despite international declarations and domestic laws affirming the right to asylum, many LGBTQI+ individuals find themselves navigating exclusionary systems that deny them refuge, emphasizing the urgent need for systemic change. This journey is not just logistical but deeply personal, often marked by isolation and emotional distress, underscoring the necessity for sustained support throughout the displacement process. Recognizing the vulnerability of those we serve, we prioritize tailored support, rooted in trust and peer-to-peer assistance, acknowledging the historical injustices many in our community have faced. Our commitment to tailored support, informed by data and historical context, aims to address the vulnerabilities faced by those we serve.

Feedback from relocated individuals reflects significant improvements in personal safety (91%) and quality of life (76%), reaffirming our commitment to fostering resilience and community among those we support in their resettlement journey.

Through rigorous collection, analysis, and interpretation, our data shed light on the intricate landscape of LGBTQI+ persecution globally. These insights not only guide our actions but also embolden us to refine strategies, strengthen support systems, and champion advocacy initiatives. Our commitment to data-driven approaches underscores our dedication to advancing the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals worldwide.

THE POWER OF GLOBAL QUEER ADVOCACY

Rainbow Railroad, its partners, and community of newcomers meet with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the Toronto Freedom Party. June 2023. Photo by Adam Scotti.



In 2023, Rainbow Railroad redoubled its commitment to advocacy, recognizing it as a cornerstone in the ongoing global struggle for LGBTQI+ freedom. With a sharpened focus, we intensified efforts to secure government referral pathways, amplifying protection and resettlement opportunities for LGBTQI+ individuals confronting displacement.

Through strategic partnerships with the Canadian and US governments, we achieved pivotal policy victories, signaling tangible progress in safeguarding LGBTQI+ rights.

Moreover, leveraging our international credibility, Rainbow Railroad actively promoted and defended LGBTQI+ rights globally, underscoring the need to Queer the System in order to advance equality and justice for all.

Securing additional refugee pathways for LGBTQI+ people has been our priority advocacy call to action for years. Marking a new chapter in our journey as an organization at the Toronto Freedom Party on June 8, 2023, <u>Canadian Prime</u> Minister Justin Trudeau announced a partnership with Rainbow Railroad to directly refer at-risk LGBTQI+ refugees through the Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) Program. This new historic pathway built on our 2022 advocacy success that secured a landmark partnership to bring 600 at-risk Afghan refugees to Canada.

Rainbow Railroad has been pressing the US government since 2020 to allow more LGBTQI+ people to resettle in the US, including through partnership with LGBTQI+ civil society. Our engagement on the Welcome Corps initiative as the only major LGBTQI+ organizer of private sponsor groups, has enabled us to continue to lead the design, development and early implementation of this program. We continue to advocate that this pathway must be accessible to queer and trans refugees.

Beyond Welcome Corps, we are pursuing numerous points of entry to partner with the US government, including through close collaboration with the US Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons. In partnership



Rainbow Railroad staff at the second-ever Global Refugee Forum, December 2023.

with the Dignity Network Canada and other Canadian LGBTQI+ organizations in this network, Rainbow Railroad co-led the facilitation of Special Envoy Jessica Stern's official visit to Canada. We've partnered with her office before during our early evacuation efforts to move LGBTQI+ Afghans to safety, and we will continue to pursue all available opportunities to secure government referral pathways with the US.

Increasingly, we have been leveraging the UN space to share our unique data insights, and serve as a voice at the table for LGBTQI+ forcibly displaced persons, who are often relegated to the margins of both conversations centering the rights of LGBTQI+ persons and forcibly displaced persons.

In June 2023, on World Refugee Day, we shared our unique data, Understanding the State of Global LGBTQI+ Persecution, at the Canadian Permanent Mission in New York, to UN State officials and international policy subject matter experts. Our data is one of the only sources on queer forced displacement in the world, and representatives from 22 States and seven permanent representatives at the UN attended to learn more.

In UN spaces, LGBTQI+ issues are almost always considered too sensitive for discussion or engagement; data on LGBTQI+ persons of concern are not shared publicly as it is considered to be too controversial. Presenting data on LGBTQI+ refugees to UN representatives was an important step forward in combating the invisibilization and marginalization of queer people in multilateral fora.

In December, Rainbow Railroad participated in the <u>Global Refugee Forum (GRF)</u> in Geneva with a six-member delegation. Our involvement reflects years of advocacy efforts to advance LGBTQI+ rights within the refugee protection system. Rainbow Railroad's presence at the GRF marked a significant shift, with increased engagement and recognition of our work by various governments. We used this platform to unite LGBTQI+ civil society organizations in a joint statement signed by nearly 80 groups, urging states to establish dedicated pathways for LGBTQI+ individuals facing persecution, including through funding, resettlement, and partnerships with LGBTQI+-led organizations.

In reflecting on the milestones of 2023, Rainbow Railroad stands resolute in our commitment to advocacy as an indispensable pillar in the ongoing global pursuit of LGBTQI+ liberation. Our intensified efforts to secure government referral pathways have not only amplified protection and resettlement opportunities for LGBTQI+ individuals navigating displacement but have also yielded tangible policy victories through strategic partnerships with the Canadian and US governments.

Our unwavering presence in international arenas has not only promoted but defended LGBTQI+ rights on a global scale, reinforcing the imperative to Queer the System in our collective quest for equality and justice for all. As we navigate the challenges ahead, Rainbow Railroad remains steadfast in our advocacy, determined to continue shaping a world where every individual can live authentically and without fear of persecution.

LEARN More

This executive summary offers a glimpse into the critical work being done to address the pressing issue of LGBTQI+ persecution worldwide. As evidenced by the staggering number of requests for assistance and the increasing challenges faced by individuals seeking safety, the need for action is more urgent than ever.

This summary only scratches the surface of the comprehensive data, insights, and stories contained within the full report. To grasp the complexity of the global state of LGBTQI+ persecution and our efforts to fight it, we urge you to delve into the complete report. Together, let us continue to advocate for the rights and safety of LGBTQI+ individuals around the world, standing in solidarity with those who face discrimination, violence, and displacement. Your engagement and support are crucial as we strive to create a more just and inclusive world for all.

TO READ THE FULL REPORT PLEASE VISIT:

<u>RAINBOWRAILROAD.ORG/</u> THE-LATEST/ANNUALREPORT

RAINBOW RAILROAD HELPS TURN NIGHTMARES INTO FUTURES. DARKNESS INTO HOPE.

If my story, with all its rough edges and sarcastic quips aside, inspires even one more donation, one more act of kindness–well, that's how we chip away at the darkness: one brick at a time."

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