

# SUCCESS STORY

## Offering mental health services for LGBTQI+ people in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia

### Introduction

Between September 2021 and October 2022, FHI 360 partnered with Pragma Corporation to implement MENA Moves, a project intended to address the high unmet need for mental health support for HIV program providers and beneficiaries in Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. Funded by the United States Agency for International Development, MENA Moves provided free, confidential, mental health care to program implementers and vulnerable groups, including young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex people and those of other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQI+).

Undertaken in collaboration with 10 HIV civil society organizations (CSOs) in Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, MENA Moves connected those interested in mental health support to trauma-informed, non-stigmatizing psychologists via an [Online Reservation and Case Management App \(ORA\)](#) that was developed by FHI 360 and is now available in 35 countries. ORA is a website that allows users to easily make reservations for in-person or virtual services using a smartphone, tablet, or laptop. ORA's design allowed CSOs to book services for their clients or for clients to self-book. After each booking, the client could opt to receive an SMS that reminded them about their upcoming appointment while keeping the nature of the appointment private. The client could then reach out directly to the booked psychologist to change or cancel an appointment, if needed. All subsequent sessions were booked by the psychologist seeing the client. This expert determined the needed course of treatment (e.g., the type of therapy used — most often cognitive behavioral therapy — and the number of sessions).

The telehealth feature, with virtual services generally provided via WhatsApp, combined with the ability to self-book, made mental health services available to those who may have been reluctant to seek support in person and to those for whom distance from a psychologist was a barrier to access. It also allowed for easy adaptability during COVID, with some clients alternating between virtual and in-person services depending on what felt safe and feasible with lockdowns, COVID-19 spikes, and other challenges presented by the pandemic.

### Building a foundation for accessible mental health services

To quickly address the need for greater access to mental health care providers, the program identified psychologists, ensured programming — including telehealth offerings — aligned with local laws, and adapted ORA for each country.

Local CSO partners, all of which are led by and/or serve vulnerable populations such as LGBTQI+ people or people living with HIV, identified psychologists with whom they wished to work. These were mental health professionals known to these organizations who were trusted partners in addressing the mental health needs of those marginalized by society. As a local partner involved in MENA Moves implementation in Tunisia noted, "Some psychologists in Tunisia are held back by taboo issues [such as being queer and living with HIV]. The first step was going through a list of psychologists to make sure that they were allies." FHI 360 and Pragma Corporation then conducted screenings and interviews with the nominated providers and hired eight individuals; a ninth was hired a few months after implementation began. All those hired were trained on telehealth, the ORA platform, and basics of LGBTQI+ and other key-population-friendly services.

Next, a local lawyer conducted a legal review of the policy environment across the three countries to ensure that any data collected on users could be safely stored and that any services offered virtually aligned with local law. Given nascent legal frameworks related to the safe online storage of mental health information, the project opted to collect almost no identifying information. The platform included questions on name, gender, age, and phone number that could be filled out during booking, but only phone number had to be verifiable to ensure text messages could be sent.

Finally, ORA was revised so that each country had its own landing page. This allowed each user's location to automatically direct them to a page with the providers available in their country. Each landing page included information for the user (terms of service) that described how data were collected, how these data would be used, and how to ask for the removal of one's data from the website. The terms of service reflected the legal review and the understanding that marginalized groups, many of whom are criminalized, have serious concerns about privacy and security that must be addressed transparently.

### Addressing a long-standing need

While MENA Moves served a large group of marginalized populations, young LGBTQ+ people were some of the biggest users of the service. This makes sense for many reasons. Globally, LGBTQI+ youth bare a [disproportionate burden of mental health problems](#). Furthermore, in Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, both men and women are penalized under law for same-sex sexual activity. Laws against “sodomy” in [Tunisia](#), against “lewd or unnatural acts” in [Morocco](#), and against “acts of homosexuality” and “public indecency” in [Algeria](#) all carry the potential for imprisonment. There is substantial evidence of the law being enforced in recent years, with LGBTQI+ people frequently subject to [arrest](#) and [abuse](#).

This pre-COVID reality was exacerbated by the pandemic. Stresses from the global pandemic are known to have had [negative effects on the mental health of young adults](#) worldwide. Young LGBTQI+ people were especially affected. Family pressure often intensified during lockdowns. Young people living at home are at risk of being kicked out if they do not comply with their families' visions for their lives, and many young LGBTQI+ people reported being forced to marry or take steps to demonstrate their conformity to traditional gender norms during the pandemic. Furthermore, law enforcement used the inability of LGBTQI+ activists and individuals to move freely during lockdowns to find and arrest individuals who had previously been difficult to locate.

Finally, many of the CSO partners have strong LGBTQI+ leadership and links to LGBTQI+ activists. While the nominated psychologists did not all specialize in meeting the unique needs of LGBTQI+ individuals, they were all trained under MENA Moves to be LGBTQI+ friendly, and all indicated a desire to support individuals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The nonjudgmental mental health support they offered — which can be very difficult for LGBTQI+ people to find — quickly caught the attention of activists and allies, who shared information about the services via closed Facebook groups or simply person-to-person.

One young person who benefitted from these LGBTQI+ friendly mental health services was Marwa, age 19. During the lockdowns, they were kicked out of their parents' home for expressing their gender identity. Marwa uses they/she/him pronouns and has chosen not to label their gender identity at this time. Marwa said, “It is terrifying [to be queer in Tunisia] because it's not legal here. Probably 90 percent of people are homophobic, so it is not safe at all for us.” Marwa has been able to move back into their house to finish their last year in high school but on the condition that they present as a female and use the name they were given at birth (a name that Marwa feels strongly is not an accurate reflection of themselves).

Additionally, many of the spaces where queer people were safe to meet and express themselves are being targeted by police. Reda, another young person who benefited from these mental health services said, “We had a nightclub which used to be [queer] friendly, but since the police found out about it, we found [them] wearing normal clothes ... at the bar, just waiting for someone to do something.” Reda is a 22-year-old nonbinary person who identifies as gay and lives in Tunisia. “[It was] the only place where gays could go, dress as they want, wear makeup, or do whatever they want.... We are no longer safe or comfortable there,” they shared.

### Rebuilding trust in mental health care

Not only is there widespread stigma around being queer, but seeking mental health services is also highly stigmatized in Tunisia. “There is a lot of stigma around mental health in Tunisia. If you seek out mental health care, people think it means you are unstable or unreliable,” Regheb, an activist from Tunisia, noted. Because of the risks involved, seeking out mental health services as a queer person can be a daunting task. A member of the community vouching for a mental health provider can be the difference between a client reaching out or not.

Reda initially found the mental health services provided by MENA Moves while researching associations that fight for LGBTQ rights in Tunisia. “I was feeling a little bit discouraged about my sexual orientation. I want to be a politician in Tunisia, a country that is very homophobic and religious, so it was a little bit difficult for me to come out.” They were hesitant to reach out. Reda had tried to access mental health services before. “At the time, I had many problems, so to be honest I was looking for a psychologist for that, but it wasn't that good. In the end, I found out she was homophobic. By the time when I told her about my sexual orientation, that psychologist was really afraid of me. [After that,] I did not want to go to her anymore or to any other psychologist.” But not long after Reda read about the program, Reda's friend, who was seeing a psychologist with MENA Moves, also recommended the services to them and they agreed to try it.

Marwa was struggling after being kicked out of their house and had unresolved post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from being sexually abused earlier in life but could not afford mental health services. Marwa is friends with Regheb and heard about the services through him. Bilel was also recommended to the program by Regheb. Bilel, age 20, was assigned female at birth, identifies as agender and bisexual, and uses he/they pronouns. He has struggled with gender dysphoria, a sense of unease that a person may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. “When I look into the mirror, I still look feminine. I can't recognize myself. Whenever I try to make a change [to my appearance], I get rejected from my family and from my university,” he said.

Like Reda, Bilel had bad experiences with previous mental health services. He felt a lot of anxiety and had suicidal thoughts when he first began to question his gender identity. The college he attended at the time sent him to a therapist. “It was awful. They said I was using drugs and that I was definitely a female.” Their invalidation of Bilel's self-knowledge and understanding led him to stop seeking care, even while he continued to contemplate self-harm. Because of his trust in Reda, Bilel agreed to try the MENA Moves service providers.

### Friendly and accessible services

It only took a few months for MENA Moves service use to reach full capacity. Initially, each psychologist was able to see clients for about 30 hours per month, but this initial supply of monthly hours was quickly used. Based on feedback from both the psychologists and CSOs, more hours were added in March, giving psychologists closer to 50 hours each month. Another psychologist was also added. These new appointment slots were quickly booked, and there have been persistent requests

by clients and CSOs for more hours, a request that has been balanced with maintaining service availability through the end of the project in October 2022.

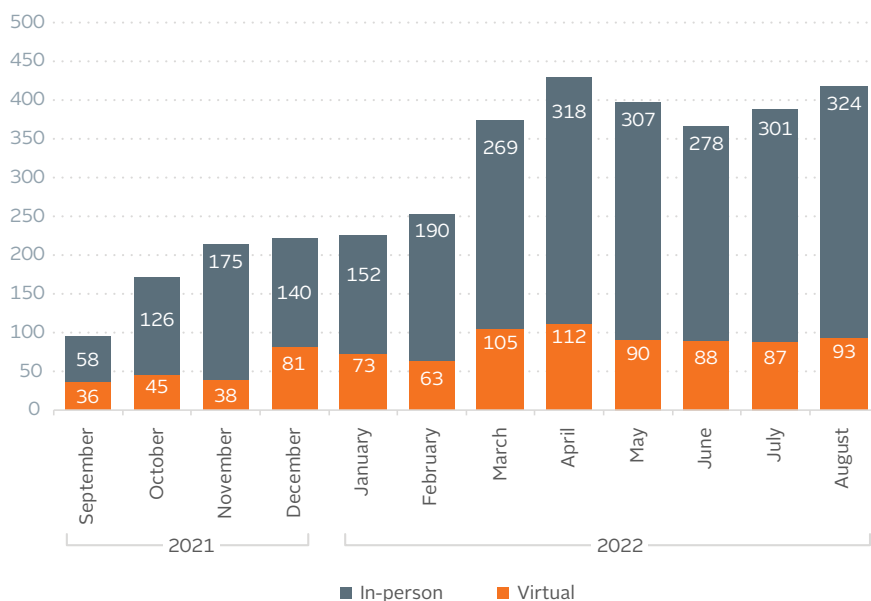
COVID-19 spikes and containment measures accelerated the acceptance of the telehealth feature of the intervention, helping avoid decreases in service use during periods of high transmission (the increase in virtual services in December is a product of Omicron). Both providers and clients became more willing to use telehealth when it was the only option, speeding up the transition to virtual service delivery. As a provider in Morocco noted, *“You have people who need to be listened to and worked with by telephone. Therapeutic care is best done in person, but everything we have been able to offer [via telehealth]... I think it has been an impressive contribution, especially for young people today.”*

In total, from September 2021 through August 2022, 3,549 sessions were delivered to 1,494 unique users (Figure 1). The percentage of sessions delivered virtually differed by country. In Algeria, only 1% of sessions were conducted this way. In Morocco, 27% of sessions were delivered virtually; in Tunisia, 37% were virtual.

In each country, the MENA Moves psychologists created a safe and welcoming environment for their young queer clients. Reda shared, *“I felt safe, to be honest. Even the atmosphere was so safe, the environment was so safe. And the psychologist was really good with us. All of them are friends; all of them are friendly. They support you; they want to know about you and how you feel. I would say it’s so good there.”*

Initially, Bilel wanted to have in-person sessions. He traveled four hours to Tunis for his first session but decided to see how he would do continuing his sessions virtually. Bilel shared that the virtual sessions were just as useful as the in-person sessions and that connecting virtually for sessions made it possible to reach out at other times. *“I can text her at 2 or 3 a.m., and she will reply once she wakes up.”* She helped him identify and work through the causes of his anxiety and suicidal thoughts. *“The feeling that you have someone available to listen to you and that they actually understand you is quite helpful,”* he said.

Figure 1. Completed sessions through MENA Moves, Sept. 2021–Aug. 2022



### A model to build on

MENA Moves has demonstrated that mental health services, including via telehealth, are needed and that they are acceptable and desirable when offered. The ORA website also proved an effective way to make bookings. The program had a very low rate of no-shows — 2% in Algeria and 10% in both Morocco and Tunisia.<sup>1</sup>

Providers see the project as valuable, including in reaching those who had not been reached previously. As a psychologist in Tunisia shared, *“Today, here in Tunisia, I think the program has connected us to people who otherwise cannot access [mental health] services....”* MENA Moves providers note that they have seen important changes in their clients, including finishing education programs, gaining employment, improving relationships, and perhaps most importantly, strengthening self-acceptance. As one client noted, *“It was really, really good for me because I discovered more about myself. I developed many, many personal skills. I am more friends with myself.”* All the MENA Moves providers have noted the need to keep offering care and to expand their reach.

Young LGBTQI+ people also support more access to care, including via MENA Moves. Reda noted, *“Each time I find someone who needs help, I share the contact of the [mental health] association with them. I just hope that those kinds of services will get in more areas of Tunisia.”*

This need is not unique to the region, and the promising model employed by MENA Moves can easily be integrated into other programs seeking to address the mental health care needs of clients, particularly those who have had limited access to high quality and non-stigmatizing care in the past.

1 This is markedly different than completed referral rates in other health interventions, which can be [under 40%](#).

i Names of clients have been changed for their privacy.

