



MICRO RAINBOW INTERNATIONAL

Addressing the situation of poverty of LGBTI people worldwide

HEAR organisational case study

Lesbian and gay refugees living in poverty in the UK

Micro Rainbow International is a new social enterprise, which aims to address the issue of poverty of lesbian, gays, bisexual, trans and intersex people worldwide. Our target groups vary according to the country we work on and in the UK we decided to focus on lesbian and gay refugees living in poverty. From December 2012 until July 2013 we carried out 50 interviews with lesbian and gay refugees living in London and Manchester.

It is difficult to estimate how many of those lesbian and gay refugees are actually living in poverty; however the British government estimates that 5-7% of the UK population is lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). If we apply this percentage to the number of people who claimed asylum in the UK in the last five years¹ we can estimate that approximately 1,300 LGB people seek refuge on an annual basis in the UK and, according to our research, the majority live below the poverty line. During our interviews, only 26% of respondents said that they "have enough money for living", while the rest live with less than £168 per week, before housing costs.

Lesbian and gay refugees in the UK face multiple types of discrimination: because of their refugee status, their race, their sexuality and their culture - broadly because they are different. They still live with traumatising memories of the persecution they suffered because of their sexuality in their country of origin, which have produced low self-esteem and confidence, and often continue to face problems in the UK, mostly because of their sexual orientation and refugee status.

86% of the people we interviewed felt they had been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation both in their country of origin and in the UK. Alongside the manifold episodes of persecution and discrimination that respondents had to face in their countries of origin, they explained that discrimination did not stop after leaving. On the contrary, they experienced additional forms of sexuality-based discrimination and exclusion in the UK, mostly coming from their co-nationals and other heterosexual refugees.

¹<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/immigration-asylum-research/?d-7095067-p=1>



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66% felt discriminated against in the UK because of their refugee status. Respondents talked at length about the difficulties of opening a bank account when presenting their refugee documents, or of the sudden suspicion of potential employers as soon as they became aware that the candidate was a refugee. They also talked about how they were always made to “feel different” and limited to certain jobs or conducting a certain kind of social life.

Moreover, 36% of the interviewees said that they did not socialise with co-nationals in the UK, unless they were also lesbian and gay, and mostly also refugees. They said that they did not want to risk encountering the same levels of homophobia to which they were previously exposed. To make matters worse, our research findings show that those who have ‘come out’ to their families have little or no contact with them. The lack of support from families and the lack of social contacts in the UK are obstacles to their financial stability.

Our experience with lesbian and gay refugees in the UK show that, despite the problems explained above, life in the UK is perceived to be better than what it used to be in their countries of origin. According to our interviews, their sense of living a ‘better life’ depended on two specific factors, namely, safety and freedom. All respondents referred to seeking safety and freedom as something that marked their migratory experience, in the light of the persecution and discrimination they had faced back home because of their sexuality. Some acknowledged that their general quality of life had declined since they moved to the UK, yet feeling safe and free were seen to be reasons worth undertaking the migratory journey. Very rarely lesbian and gay refugees feel that they have had an advantage compared to other refugees or to the British citizens. For example, a few lesbian refugees were able to access housing through a lesbian housing association and a lesbian cooperative. Overall, our beneficiaries feel privileged because they are now refugees in a country where “it is safer to find partners”, where “you are not forced to sleep with other men if you are lesbian” and where “[they] feel able to have a ‘normal’ life and freedom”.

As an organisation we are trying to support lesbian and gay refugees in setting up small businesses and in accessing credit. Our consultations have shown that several refugees were business owners, are educated and that they have valuable skills and experience. However, because they cannot work when they claim asylum, when they become refugees they do not have any working experience in the UK, which often penalises them in securing employment. In addition, because they have not built a credit history in the UK, they often cannot access credit. The



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result is that many lesbian and gay refugees feel “stuck” in very low paid jobs and often poverty given that their support networks, as explained above, are fragile. In our efforts to support those lesbian and gay refugees who are interested in setting up a small business we do encounter some barriers, however the most severe one is their ability to overcome trauma. The impact of the torture they suffered doesn’t disappear with gaining refuge and the support they can get for free or at low cost is limited. Even those with great business backgrounds do face serious challenges in building a small businesses without some regular coaching, mentoring or emotional support.

We only started our work with lesbian and gay refugees a year and a half ago; however, we can already see some good practices emerging. One of them is that lesbian and gay refugees who need credit and don’t have guarantees do not need to rely on street money sharks but thanks to Micro Rainbow International they can be referred to community development financial institutions (CDFIs) who can them offer credit. Another emerging best practice is about facilitating a space for peer-to-peer support. We do that in the form of monthly meetings where lesbian and gay refugees in business can come together, discuss the challenges they are facing, share best practices and offer support.

Example:

Margaret is a lesbian from Zimbabwe. In her country, her boss almost fired her when he found out she was a lesbian, “he started to change my shifts, hide me in the workplace, not give me tasks, not pay me properly”. She was “expelled from school and beaten up by gatekeepers and classmates. I was wounded, couldn't go home, spent a few nights on the street, I was starving”. In the UK, when she was looking for a solicitor to help her claim asylum, he didn't want to help her when she said she was a lesbian. Every time she tries to apply for a job, she is turned down when they find out she is a refugee. She would like to work with children. She loves children. Margaret lives on 71 pounds a week and it is not enough to pay for housing, transportation, bills and food; sometimes she can only have one meal per day. However, here in the UK she doesn't “have to hide anymore, run from the police, live a lie, I can be myself!”



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Mary is a 28 year old lesbian from Nigeria. In her own country, she has experienced persecution because of her sexual orientation. Her family and community have physically abused her and even locked her in the house just because they found out she had a girlfriend. They did not let her go out of the house for months. At that time she was just a teenager.

The abuse from her family and neighbours continued until Mary flew to the UK in 2007. In the UK she experienced verbal abuse by fellow Africans who also made sexual advances on her when they found out she was lesbian. In 2011, Mary obtained refugee status on the grounds of her sexual orientation. She thought that was going to be the beginning of a better life. However, the persecution she suffered because of her sexuality and the painstaking process of claiming asylum had left her with low self-esteem and confidence, no money, and not many friends to rely on. The material hardships of everyday life, emerging from the simple fact of being a refugee was often unbearable.

Every time Mary went to a job interview, she feels she experienced discrimination because she was a refugee. Mary thinks that employers became suspicious as soon as they became aware that she was a refugee, with the assumption that she had forged her ID papers and that she didn't have the right to work or be in the UK. Mary was always made to "feel different" and felt that she was only allowed to undertake very low paid jobs. Employers always asked for work experience in the UK, experience that she was never allowed to gain, while she was claiming asylum.

Mary also had difficulties in opening a bank account when presenting her refugee documents, as the staff at the bank did not know they could accept refugees ID. She could not apply for a loan because she had no credit history in the UK, which of course she was not allowed to build while she was an asylum seeker.

A specific issue that Mary faced because she is a lesbian refugee is poverty, and the inability to create strong social networks. Mary does not feel that she can socialise with co-nationals in the UK, unless they are also lesbian and gay, and mostly also refugees. She feels that the risk of meeting homophobic people who could abuse her as it happened in Nigeria is just too high.

"It is hard to survive in the UK when you don't have a job, you don't have friends with jobs and your family members hate you because you are lesbian".



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Because of the lack of support from co-nationals and family members, lesbian and gay refugees often live in situations of poverty and are more likely to become destitute. However, Mary did not accept such a prospect and after two years of being invited for interviews and being regularly refused, she decided to start her own small business. It took a lot of energy and determination to secure the first client, however, Mary now runs a small cleaning company, which gives her a small but stable income. With the help of Micro Rainbow International she is now planning to expand her services and hire some staff.

"I didn't have any choice, nobody would give me a job"

Overall, Mary perceives her life in the UK to be better than what it used to be in Nigeria, where she now feels "safe and free". She has a girlfriend, a growing business and a circle of friends. She also enjoys the support of a lesbian and gay group, which has helped her to connect with friends, share her stories and find support.

Discrimination operates at multiple levels and comes from various parts of society. Mary was ostracised because of her refugee status, her race, and her sexuality. Lesbian and gay refugees suffer traumatising memories of persecution because of their sexuality. Those memories don't disappear when they gain asylum, as they are compounded by the lack of opportunities and discrimination they still face because they are refugees. However, there are many exceptional and resilient refugees like Mary, who, despite everything, never give up.

[NB: Information that could identify the individual have been changed]