



MICRO RAINBOW INTERNATIONAL

POVERTY, SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND REFUGEES IN THE UK

OCTOBER 2013





CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 3 |
| FOREWORD | 4 |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 5 |
| INTRODUCTION | 7 |
| 1. METHODOLOGY | 9 |
| 1.1. Sample group and research tools | 9 |
| 1.2. Location, timeframe and data analysis | 9 |
| 2. DEMOGRAPHIC | 10 |
| 2.1 Respondents' profiles | 10 |
| 3. EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT | 12 |
| 3.1 Education | 12 |
| 3.2 Employment | 12 |
| 3.3 Perceived obstacles to employment | 13 |
| 4. DISCRIMINATION | 15 |
| 4.1 Discrimination based on sexuality | 15 |
| 4.2 Refugee status discrimination | 17 |
| 4.3 The cost of working without permission | 17 |
| 4.4 Being lesbian or gay and being a refugee: any advantages? | 18 |
| 5. LESBIAN AND GAY REFUGEES AND POVERTY | 20 |
| 5.1. Financial situations | 21 |
| 5.2. Benefits and other forms of financial support | 22 |
| 6. LIVING IN THE UK | 23 |
| 6.1. Exposure to multiple forms of social exclusion | 24 |
| 6.2. Everyday life restrictions | 25 |
| 7. PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH | 27 |
| 7.1. Mental health vulnerability | 27 |
| 8. LEISURE AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES | 29 |
| 8.1 Religiosity | 30 |
| 9. CONCLUSIONS | 31 |
| 10. RECOMMENDATIONS | 33 |
| APPENDIX 1. EPISODES OF DISCRIMINATION AND PERSECUTION IN REFUGEE'S HOME COUNTRIES | 35 |
| APPENDIX 2. ABOUT MICRO RAINBOW INTERNATIONAL | 37 |



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the result of a great team effort. Here we would like to thank particularly each and every one of the 50 lesbian and gay refugees who committed their time to the research and shared their stories, feelings and personal situations of poverty. We, the project team, feel privileged to have witnessed their determination, strength, and dignity.

We also want to acknowledge the support of two very dedicated and professional grassroots organisations, the Lesbian Immigration Support Group (Manchester) and the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (London), who helped us to create the research sample and arranged many interviews. Their work has already made a difference to the lives of hundreds LGBTI asylum seekers in the UK and we hope to continue partnering with them in the future and to improve the lives of LGBTI refugees living in situations of poverty.

A big thank you to our volunteers and staff and to our committed and professional external consultants, Calogero Giametta and Elena Roffi, for producing the questionnaire, analysing the data, drafting the report and for meeting the often challenging deadlines.

Lastly, this project could not have happened without the financial support of Awards for All of the Big Lottery Fund, which we thank not only for their generosity but also for their confidence in funding a newly formed organisation like Micro Rainbow International.

MRI Project Team

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Sebastian Rocca | Founder and CEO |
| Lucas Paoli Itaborahy | International Research and Business Development Coordinator |
| Jill Power | Project Support |
| Moud Goba | Project Support |
| Erin Power | Project Support |
| Prossy Kakooza | Project Support |
| Gavin Sharpe | Project Support |
| Calogero Giametta | Project Consultant |
| Elena Roffi | Project Consultant |
| Renné Ramos | Design and layout |

Published by

Micro Rainbow International C.I.C.
Registered office: 2-6 Cannon Street
London, EC4M 6YH
www.micro-rainbow.com

© Micro Rainbow International C.I.C. October 2013



FOREWORD

We are delighted to publish this paper on the situation of poverty of lesbian and gay refugees, the first time such a document has been produced in the UK. Homosexuality is criminalised in 76 countries in the world and society persecutes and discriminates against LGBTI people in even more countries. Those LGBTI people who fear for their lives are sometimes able to reach the UK and claim asylum on the basis of their sexual orientation, and/or their gender identity, and/or the way their bodies look.

This project is the result of a long period of observation and listening to the stories of many lesbian and gay refugees. The MRI team has observed for several years the journeys of lesbian and gay people who claimed asylum on the basis of their sexual orientation. We have witnessed, amongst other things, lesbians and gay men being detained, being kept waiting for several years, being sent back to their country of origin and winning refugee status. The focus of support organisations and lesbian and gay people themselves is often, quite rightly, on claiming asylum and winning refugee status. Their priorities often include finding good legal aid lawyers, preparing the asylum case thoroughly, improving the country of origin information reports, training Home Office officials and immigration judges.

Thankfully, the number of lesbian and gay people becoming refugees in the UK has increased over time, which has enabled us to witness also their struggles to become full citizens after having been through a difficult and terrifying process. This project originated from such observations and aims to give a voice to the many lesbian and gay refugees who find themselves in situations of poverty that are often difficult to overcome. Their voices are often silent for various reasons including the isolation and discrimination that lesbian and gay refugees face. We hope that, despite its limitations, this report will start a conversation that is desperately needed - a dialogue that is not only about equal rights, equal opportunities and equal access to services but also about caring and treating each other with respect and dignity.

Prossy Kakooza

Lesbian Immigration Support Group

Erin Power

Executive Director

UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group

Sebastian Rocca

Founder and CEO

Micro Rainbow International



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Homosexuality' is criminalised in 76 countries in the world and society persecutes and discriminates against LGBTI people in even more countries. Those LGBTI people who fear for their lives are sometimes able to reach the UK and claim asylum on the basis of their sexual orientation, and/or their gender identity, and/or the way their bodies look. After going through the asylum determination process, successful LGBTI claimants are subject to a number of further issues, including poverty, that extend their experience of marginalisation and exclusion in their new country.

The purpose of this project is to raise awareness about the lived experiences of lesbian and gay refugees in the UK by undertaking some preliminary investigations into their situation of poverty. In so doing enquiries concentrated on two cities, London and Manchester. The study aims to answer two main questions: **Are lesbian and gay refugees in the UK poor?** If they are, what relationships exist between poverty and sexual orientation?

Fifty lesbian and gay refugees were interviewed by using a structured questionnaire. They came from 13 different countries, 11 of which were from the African continent.

50% of the interviewees said that the qualifications they had gained in their countries of origin are not valid in the UK and **many expressed the desire to re-train or attend a more specialised course with the aspiration of "finding a better job" or starting a small business.** In the interviews 60% of respondents said that one of the major

obstacles to finding employment was the lack of UK-based work experience and qualifications as well as their refugee status, race, sexuality and gender which were intersecting issues that put them at the fringes of the job market.

86% of the respondents 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.

Only 17 respondents never felt discriminated against because of their refugee status, the remaining 33 said they did. Respondents talked at length about the material hardships of their everyday lives emerging from the simple fact of being a refugee. They referred to 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. Respondents also talked about how they were always made to "feel different" and limited to certain jobs or conducting a certain kind of social life.

The research findings show that respondents who have 'come out' to their families, have little or no contact with them. Respondents have been excluded because of their sexual orientation. 36% of 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. The risk of poverty also appears heightened for lesbian and gay migrants due to the constraints on them creating social contacts. **The lack of support from families and the lack of social capital are obstacles to financial stability for lesbian and gay refugees.**

Discrimination operates at multiple levels and comes from various parts of society. Lesbian and gay refugees are ostracised 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. These traumas mark their psyches and produce low self-esteem and self-doubt, which are difficult to overcome. **In examining the data from the interviews we noted that low self-esteem produces a lack of aspirations for the future.**

For all respondents, life in the UK was perceived to be better than what it used to be in their countries of origin. According to respondents' narratives, **the 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. 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. Regularly, after saying that their lives in the UK were "better" than their previous lives in their

home countries, respondents would also admit that they have suffered from and continue to suffer from segregation, racism and isolation. For many respondents the land of opportunity also represents a downward social mobility ladder. **It emerged from the study that often the material circumstances and conditions to live a "dignified life" in the new country were far worse than those the refugee had in their country of origin.**

One recurrent theme emerging from the interviews was **that it is hard to gain access to the job market given the suspicion of employers once they find out that a person is a refugee.** Respondents said that falling into the poverty trap is "far too easy" and this affects many other aspects of their lives. Feeling stigmatised for being a refugee and not feeling accepted for being lesbian or gay created the conditions for the person to feel "stagnant", and to be "stuck" in small social worlds that constrained their choices and aspirations.

Overall, **the research shows that the majority of the lesbian and gay refugees interviewed live below the poverty line.** During the interviews only 26% of respondents said that they "have enough money for living", however three of them added that they "just get by".

We end the report (in chapter 9) by making some conclusions and by making some recommendations (in chapter 10) to LGBTI organisations, refugee and community organisations, service providers and policy makers on how the poverty of lesbian and gay refugees could be addressed. We also highlight some of the areas where further research is needed in the hope of continuing this dialogue and improving the lives of lesbian and gay refugees.



INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans¹ asylum seekers² in the UK are required to prove their sexuality and/or gender identity to the satisfaction of the Home Office and immigration judges. This is frequently a complex process (Failing the Grade, 2010³) when, for example, a person may have never previously disclosed their identity and will struggle to articulate it especially to authorities; when there is no-one who can testify to their identity as nobody else knows; when they are ashamed of who they are and therefore struggle to talk about it (Power, 2013⁴). In addition LGBT asylum seekers frequently feel isolated because their families and community groups, both in their country of origin and in the UK, often repudiate them because of their sexuality or gender identity.

After going through the asylum determination process, successful lesbian and gay claimants are subject to a number of further issues that extend their experience of marginalisation and exclusion in the new country. Findings from existing research on lesbian and gay refugees (Stonewall 2010; UKLGIG 2010) have shown

that **poor living conditions have a huge impact on this group's sense of belonging and their prospects for a future in the UK.**

According to Smart's empirical research (2009) refugees and asylum seekers in the UK are at a particularly high risk of becoming destitute and homeless, despite the fact that "refugees should be able to access social housing and welfare benefits on the same basis as UK nationals, and most asylum seekers receive accommodation and support from the UK Border Agency while their claims for asylum are processed" (Fitzpatrick, Johnsen and Bramley 2012: 34).

The purpose of this project is to raise awareness about the lived experiences of lesbian and gay refugees in the UK by undertaking some preliminary investigations into the poverty of lesbian and gay refugees. In so doing enquiries concentrated on two cities, London and Manchester. The study aims to answer two main questions:

- › Are lesbian and gay refugees in the UK poor?
- › If they are, what relationships exist between poverty and sexual orientation?

Further, the research attempts to discover the causes that might keep lesbian and gay refugees in a situation of poverty. In this process we formulate recommendations on possible ways to enable this migrant group to step out of poverty, some of which are related to public service provision and financial inclusion, namely, access to credit, upgrading existing skills and training opportunities.

1 For a definition of trans, please see: <http://transactivists.org/trans/>

2 We do not have direct experience of people who actually claimed asylum solely because they were intersex. However we are aware that in a couple of cases intersex people have been subjected to invasive and humiliating medical examinations. There is a need for more research on the specific issues faced by intersex asylum claimants. For a definition of intersex, please refer to the Advocates for Informed Choice (AIC) website: <http://aiclegal.org/who-we-are/faqs/>

3 <http://www.uklgig.org.uk/docs/publications/Failing%20the%20Grade%20UKLGIG%20April%202010.pdf>

4 UKLGIG contribution to Detention Forum's submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee enquiry into Asylum. July, 2013.



For this specific study we consulted with clients of UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG)⁵ and of Lesbian Immigration Support Group (LISG)⁶. During interviews several refugees have said that claiming asylum is a stressful process that puts people's lives on hold for months and sometimes years. In that time asylum seekers feel unable to plan a future in the UK, as there is a distinct possibility that they may not have one. As our respondents highlighted, once asylum seekers are granted status and become refugees they have a number of issues that negatively impact upon their ability to find employment and earn income:

- a) Whilst seeking asylum they were forbidden from working so they have no work experience in the UK;
- b) Whilst seeking asylum they were unable to have bank accounts and therefore unable to build a credit history in the UK that would allow them, for example, to access bank loans or overdraft facilities;
- c) As lesbians and gay men frequently their community and/or family in the UK does not support them because of their sexuality;
- d) The trauma they suffered in their home countries because of their sexuality together with the humiliation of proving their sexuality during the asylum process means they often lack confidence and suffer from low self-esteem.

⁵ UKLGIG is a charity promoting equality and dignity for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people seeking asylum in the UK, or who wish to immigrate to the UK to be with their same-sex partner. More information on UKLGIG can be found at www.uklgig.org.uk

⁶ LISG is a group of women in Greater Manchester who are lesbian and bisexual asylum seekers and refugees and their supporters. More information on LISG can be found at <http://lesbianimmigrationsupportgroup.blogspot.co.uk/>

The first two points are common to the overall refugee population in the UK however the last two are specific to lesbian and gay refugees. As a consequence of having difficulties in accessing credit, research respondents are often unable, for example, to invest in education, to start small businesses or to manage cash flow issues, which make them feel left out of the formal financial system. Lack of a work history in the UK means refugees are penalised when looking for a job, as their qualifications and experience in their home countries are often not valued as much as those acquired within the UK. Those respondents who have been rejected or suffered trauma because of their sexual identity, experience isolation and may struggle to establish trusted support networks and safety nets in the UK. It is believed that these and other factors contribute to the poverty of lesbian and gay refugees.

Therefore the central question that runs through the overall study is: Once asylum is granted, what are the problems for lesbian and gay refugees? This study goes beyond analysis of what happens to an individual while experiencing the asylum process. It concentrates on the material living conditions and the manifold restrictions that also affect the mental state of these migrants who all too easily become exposed to poverty, exploitation and social discrimination.



1. METHODOLOGY

1.1. Sample group and research tools

The study examined the lived experiences of lesbian and gay refugees. We were unable to gain access to a reasonable number of trans, intersex and bisexual identified refugees and therefore decided to focus our study on lesbian and gay refugees only. We believe, however, that more research is needed to highlight the additional and often severe issues that trans and intersex refugees face in the UK.

Fifty lesbian and gay refugees were interviewed by using a structured questionnaire which had been tested and revised. **The sample** was selected through the support of project partners (UKLGIG and LISG). The selection aimed to achieve wide representation while ensuring that all the most relevant dimensions and experiences were included. 50% of the interviewees were UKLGIG's service users and the remaining 50% were users of LISG and UK Black Pride. They all identified as lesbian or gay.

The structured questionnaire raised questions about respondents' family life; education and employment; issues of discrimination; their financial situations and current living conditions; their health and the social activities in which they engage. The questionnaire aimed to elicit a complex picture of past and present issues that lesbian and gay refugees encounter in the process of migration and settlement in the new country. Interviews were carried out in English, which was spoken by all respondents.

1.2. Location, timeframe and data analysis

People were interviewed in London and Manchester over seven months, from December 2012 to July 2013. London is bigger, busier, has a larger representation of many different cultures and is more expensive to live in than Manchester. We focussed our research in both cities because they are places to which many lesbian and gay refugees gravitate not least because of their vibrant and open lesbian and gay scene.

Survey data was reviewed, sorted, and analysed by an experienced external consultant in August/September 2013. The evidence gathered from the research allows the production of scientific generalisations, although not of a strictly statistical nature.

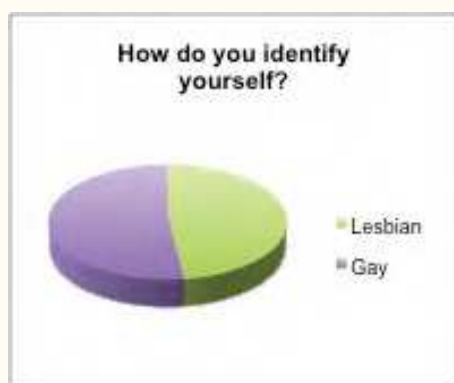


Refugee from Jamaica

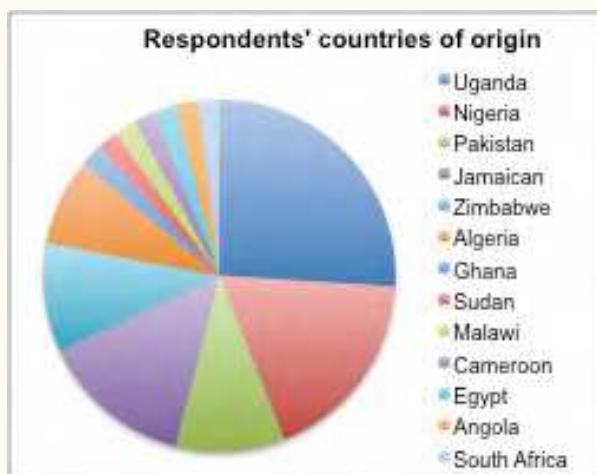


2. DEMOGRAPHIC

For the purposes of the research we aimed to interview an equal number of gay and lesbian refugees and were able to contact 24 lesbians and 26 gay men (see chart below). Four respondents were aged between 18 and 25, 30 were aged between 26 and 35, 15 were in the 36 to 45 age group, and one respondent was in the 46 to 55 age group.



The 50 respondents who took part in the study came from 13 different countries, 11 of which were from the African continent. Thirteen Ugandans formed the largest group of interviewees. It is important to note that these national groups are not necessarily representative of the larger population of lesbian and gay refugees in the UK.



2.1. Respondents' profiles

50% of respondents are in a relationship with a same-sex partner. Seventeen of them have an African partner and seven partners are also refugees. Fifteen respondents have children, four of them said that their children live with them in the UK; the rest said that they either live in the countries of origin with a relative or with an ex-partner. Ten respondents who have children said that they provide them with some form of financial support, mostly with regard to food, clothes and education related expenses.

Eleven of those respondents who are still in touch with some of their family members said that they support families or children in their home countries by sending money to them either regularly or whenever they can. At times the practice of sending remittances⁷ is perceived to be a necessity and a moral demand for the respondent, it becomes part of their ethics of care for family members whom they can no longer meet:

My sister is disabled I need to send her money for the medications. (Algerian gay man)

The majority of the respondents interviewed had established themselves in London (36 respondents) and Manchester (14 respondents) after being granted refugee status. From the data examined it appears that there are many commonalities across the experiences of lesbian and gay refugees in both Manchester and London.

⁷ The term 'remittance' refers to the transfer of money by a migrant worker to her or his home country.



In fact, the recurrent themes linked to the risk of poverty that respondents talked about are similar. However, one aspect that seemed to mark the experiences of those respondents based in the London metropolitan area was the issue of mobility. London was described to be more expensive in general, and specifically in relation to travel costs. This limits the mobility of those who cannot afford to pay for underground rail or bus fares on a regular basis. Limited mobility has an impact on respondents' lives with regard to their possibilities of socialising, looking for a job or travelling to a job. This issue was stressed

much more by the London-based respondents than the ones living in Manchester.

The Home Office had dispersed⁸ 15 respondents during their asylum determination process and they still reside in the place to which they were initially dispersed. Respondents suggested that they remained because they had established a network of friends, or had found a partner. Rose⁹ from Uganda said that after more than a year and a half of waiting for her asylum decision she was already established in Bolton, Manchester and no longer considered relocating after the long wait.



© Micro Rainbow International

Refugees from Pakistan

⁸ Dispersed means that an asylum seeker is sent to live in a place, which is different from the place where they were living when they claimed asylum. For example, an asylum seeker who seeks asylum in London might be dispersed to Leeds, where s/he would live until the asylum case reaches a conclusion. Those who do not receive government assistance are not subject to dispersal but must find another means of survival.

⁹ We have changed respondents names throughout the paper.

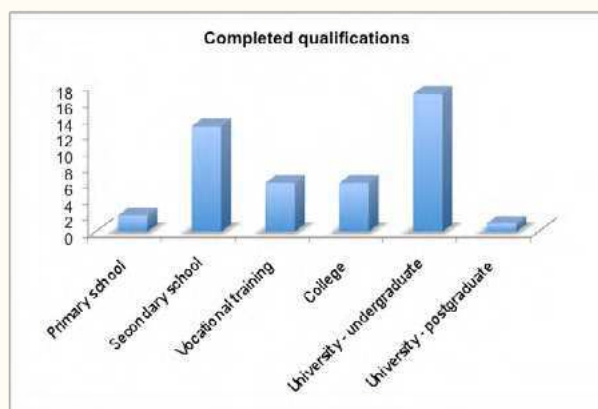


3. EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

3.1. Education

Respondents' completed education ranged from primary school to university undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Many respondents said that they were compelled to end their studies early because their parents could not afford to pay for further education, or to avoid bullying, both verbal and physical abuse, that took place within school due to their non-conforming expressions of gender and sexuality.

50% of the interviewees said that the qualifications they had gained in their countries of origin are not valid in the UK, meaning they could not make use of them. Only two respondents said that they were currently making use of their study qualifications. Seventeen respondents said that they were re-training in order to find a job that is relevant to what they studied. **Many expressed the desire to re-train or attend a more specialised course with the aspiration of "finding a better job"**.



3.2. Employment

Only 38% of respondents (19 people) were currently working, 14 of them in permanent posts. The main types of employment opportunities seem to be in the following sectors:

- › Security;
- › Care;
- › Cleaning/housekeeping;
- › Administrative work.

Eleven respondents had remained in the same job since they gained refugee status in the UK. As Kay, a lesbian refugee from Jamaica told us, "I could not find another job", or Lucy from Nigeria: "this is the only job I could find". Both of them were employed as domestic workers.

Only five respondents found jobs that were relevant to the studies they had undertaken in their home countries. **Thirteen out of the 19 employed respondents said they would like to change their jobs because of a lack of passion or interest in what they are currently doing as well as to get better paid positions.** A respondent told us:

I feel that I need to do something more passionate, I feel stagnant! (Mary from Zimbabwe)

I want to do something I studied for and that I really enjoy doing. I also want a better salary. (A gay refugee from Nigeria)



3.3. Perceived obstacles to employment

Those respondents who were unemployed were currently in search of a job, apart from those who suffer from acute illnesses such as severe depression or complex post traumatic disorders. To the question: “If you searched for a job and did not get one, what do you think the reasons were?” respondents replied that it was due to:

- › lack of experience (in particular, UK-based work experience);
- › lack of qualifications (in particular, recognition of the qualifications they gained in their home country);
- › discrimination due to their refugee status;
- › discrimination due to race, sexual orientation, gender.

In the interviews **60% of respondents said that one of the major obstacles to finding employment was their lack of work experience in the UK.** More specifically,

respondents said that **the lack of UK-based work experience and qualifications as well as their refugee status, race, sexuality and gender were intersecting issues that put them at the fringes of the job market.** People expressed the desire to work within a variety of industries in the UK, which included:

- › Information technology;
- › Tourism;
- › Public service (social work);
- › Health care;
- › Fitness;
- › Education.

Many respondents believed their ideal job was the one they held previously whilst living in their home country and some spoke about having an ‘ideal job’ in mind. In both cases respondents felt they could not do those jobs in the UK, not least because of a lack of resources to invest in their studies. Respondents often linked their ideal jobs to their natural predispositions and their passions. Some respondents said:



© Micro Rainbow International

Refugee from Algeria



I want to work as an airport security officer. I used to work as an air traffic controller back home in Sudan. (Sudanese gay refugee)

I want to be a hotel receptionist because I have experience in the field and it is the area I studied. (Ugandan gay refugee)

I want to be a social worker for a lesbian and gay organisation because I want to help lesbian and gay people the way I was helped when I arrived in the UK. (Pakistani gay refugee)

In addition, respondents perceived an ideal job to be one that would have a beneficial impact on their current financial situation. **Francis from Nigeria told us that he is not sure what an ideal job consists of because he is currently too focused on “finding work that pays the bills”.** Only three respondents said

that they managed to find their ideal jobs. The others saw the obstacles preventing them as:

- › lack of experience;
- › lack of opportunities;
- › lack of qualifications;
- › refugee status discrimination;
- › sexual and racial discrimination

Respondents felt that the obstacles preventing them intersected, in that they are confronted daily with multiple forms of marginalisation that impede them from accessing the job market. When they spoke of ‘lack of experience’ they referred both to the lack of recognition of their work experience outside the UK, as well as to the lack of opportunities to gain experience in their desired field of work.



4. DISCRIMINATION

Respondents' stories stress the numerous forms of abuse to which they are readily exposed as lesbians or gay men in regions where homophobia is state-sponsored, and/or socially encouraged. In fact, the abuse might emerge from different directions within the social fabric, namely, close family, neighbours, colleagues and authorities as well as one's own national or ethnic communities whilst living abroad.

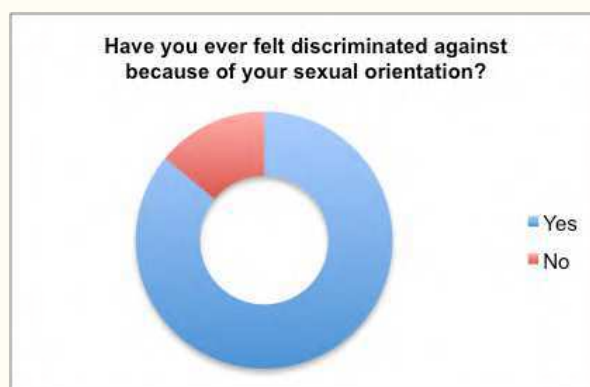
Within this section of the questionnaire respondents were asked to discuss some discriminatory episodes they had experienced. Certainly, some respondents talked about episodes of state and social persecution rather than discrimination (see Appendix 1 to read more about episodes of discrimination and persecution that refugees suffered in their home countries). They talked at length about the practices of 'corrective rape', imprisonment and torture that they had experienced in their countries. For instance, Camille from Malawi said that:

In my country in 2009 a gang of men raped me. They said they wanted to "cure" me to be a proper woman. I couldn't take any action...people don't care because you are a lesbian anyway.

Such episodes testify to the level of persecution, or risk thereof, that many respondents were confronted with in their lives. However, for the purposes of this analysis we only refer to episodes of discrimination without forgetting the broader persecutory context in which such discriminatory acts occur.

4.1. Discrimination based on sexuality

86% of the 50 respondents (43 people) felt they had been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation both in their country of origin and in the UK.



Those respondents who said they did not suffer from discrimination were the ones who had managed to keep their sexuality hidden whilst living in their countries by concealing their real identities. In this regard it is important to note that within British courts since 2010 (post HJ/HT case¹⁰) having to hide traits of one's identity in order to avoid harm, therefore to be safe, also amounts to persecution. Respondents told us (see Appendix 1 for more quotes):

In my country I was attacked by local people on two occasions and they tried to kill me. I still experience physical pain and mental health problems as a result. The police tried to intervene but then I got arrested and detained for being gay. (Ugandan gay man)

¹⁰ http://www.supremecourt.gov.uk/docs/UKSC_2009_0054_Judgment.pdf



In Nigeria when I was 16 a church usher asked me to leave as I was wearing men's clothes in church, after that I never went into a church again. (Nigerian lesbian)

The above excerpts from interviews indicate the extent to which discrimination against sexual minority individuals can be unquestioned and normalised. In some interviews respondents made clear that **discrimination begins as soon as they start to be perceived as different by their family and community**. Here we find a specific trait that characterises the experiences of a vast majority of lesbians and gay men, namely, that discrimination and persecution often emanate from within the family nucleus, which can become the primary, and often, the most dangerous source of abuse. Abbas from Pakistan said that after his one-year exchange programme in London he went back home and his parents and his brother realised he had changed and that he looked “feminine”. Abbas tells us that they began to abuse him, “they threw away my clothes and locked me in the house”. He also says that his brother tried to kill him using a gun.

© Micro Rainbow International



Refugee from Syria

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:

In the UK, when I applied for a more senior job, I wrote down “lesbian” in the questionnaire when they asked for sexual orientation; the interviewer asked me why I wrote that down and said that I did not look like one; I said I am in the UK I can be open about my sexuality. He did not like it! (Jamaican lesbian)

In the UK in 2012 my previous employer (the church of England), after coming out having claimed asylum, refused to give me a reference although I now had refugee status. (Ugandan lesbian)

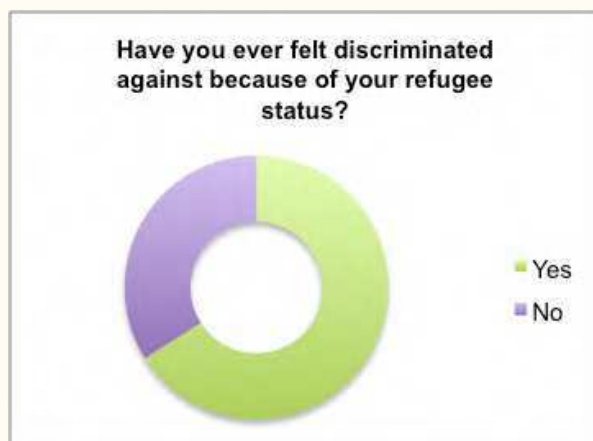
Two years ago in the UK during a job interview the interviewer asked me inappropriate questions about my sexuality. I didn't get the job - I still have fear to talk about my sexuality to anyone. (Algerian gay man)

These excerpts illustrate that although respondents feel safe to express who they are in the UK (i.e. ‘I can be open about my sexuality’) **they perceived their prospects to be obstructed by the ways in which people read their sexuality**. With regard to the British context, many forms of discrimination that respondents described took place during a job interview, or whenever the individual had to directly deal with an employer. It seems that sexual minority refugees feel particularly vulnerable after disclosing their sexuality to potential employers, when attempting to access the job market, or when already within the workplace.



4.2. Refugee status discrimination

Only 17 respondents never felt discriminated against because of their refugee status, the remaining 33 said they did.



Four of the group of 17 who had not felt discrimination on the basis of their refugee status, said that they had felt discriminated against because of their race or, as some respondents put it, due to their African origins or nationality - even though they did not disclose particular instances in which they were directly subjected to discrimination due to their refugee status.

Respondents talked at length about the material hardships of their everyday lives emerging from the simple fact of being a refugee. **They referred to 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.** Respondents also talked about how they were always made to feel different and limited to certain jobs or conducting a certain kind of social life. Some poignant quotes illustrate their predicaments:

In yourself you think you are different and you carry a barrier with you, you never know where you stand...Banks do not accept refugee documents for opening bank accounts. (Jamaican gay man)

It was very difficult to get a bank account, I was denied many times, for a long time I also feared presenting my travel documents. (Nigerian gay man)

When I went to the bank with my refugee's papers to open an account, the bank manager said that anybody could forge those documents and they did not open my bank account (Jamaican lesbian)

At the airport immigration officers are very discriminatory because they can see I am a refugee in the passport; this happens mostly when I travel because I cannot hide it. (Nigerian gay man)

When I went to the housing association to get a home they told me I was not a priority and it made me feel worthless. (Ugandan lesbian)

In the UK over the past two years my refugee status has been questioned. Employers are wary of status. I go to many interviews and don't get a job. (Zimbabwean lesbian)

4.3. The cost of working without permission¹¹

One respondent discussed the numerous issues she was currently facing because of her criminal record. Lucille is in her early 40s, she is a mother of three and a qualified teacher

¹¹ Here we refer to the social and legal construction of the illegal immigrant through law, media, and political discourses and to the observation that illegality is increasingly linked to crime. This way of understanding illegal immigration equates the undocumented immigrant to the criminally active individual.



from Cameroon. Recently she had come to realise that she has not been able to find work because she previously worked illegally within the UK. She told us:

A criminal record haunts me my whole life. My crime was not serious, I worked illegally to support my kids.

Existing research on 'illegal' work suggests that having been prosecuted for working in the UK without permission to do so, usually prior to claiming asylum, has a huge impact on the future of refugees. In 2012 Nando Sigona examined the lived experiences of young undocumented migrants in Britain. By looking at the impact of legal status on the social worlds of these irregular migrants he finds that the condition of 'illegality' permeates migrants' everyday lives, gradually invading their social worlds and social and community networks (2012:50). In other research conducted by Bloch, Sigona and Zetter (2009) on undocumented migrants in England it was found that respondents' legal status had an

impact on their possibilities of constructing social worlds and networks. The fear of being caught and having to lie about one's own status was perceived as a deterrent to establishing social relationships. Respondents seemed to be able to rely on family members and friends for protection and support. However, this help can be a double-edged sword - it is perceived to be a huge obstacle for the respondent, restricting the individual's independence and her or his desired sense of belonging to the broader social fabric. Further, **when such support is needed, the individual is compelled to remain 'closeted' as her/his family or national community within the UK is usually not aware of their sexuality.**

4.4 Being lesbian or gay and being a refugee: any advantages?

Respondents were asked to discuss if they felt that being a refugee or being lesbian or gay had ever brought them any advantages. Only 12 respondents said that they felt they had



© Micro Rainbow International

Refugee from Pakistan



advantages due to their sexual orientation. For instance, Lucy, a Nigerian lesbian, told us that: “in the UK I got my accommodation through a lesbian housing cooperative”. Another respondent, a Pakistani gay man, said that he has had better chances of being hired in the fashion business “because they like gay people, we have sense of fashion”. Therefore, respondents identified that for practical reasons, that is, for example the safeguard of minority groups’ rights or the commodification of sexual identities within the market place (Binnie and Bell 2000, Chasin 2000, Duggan 2003), it can be ‘advantageous’ to be lesbian or gay in the UK.

Only 10 respondents said that they felt they had advantages because of their refugee status. A Ugandan lesbian told us: “for my current job it is preferable to come from a refugee background”. Another respondent, a Ugandan gay man, said that by being a refugee in the UK he feels able to have a “normal” life and to enjoy freedom. For many respondents the fact of being able to be ‘who one really is’ and ‘being’ in the UK was perceived to be a privilege, therefore an advantage.

Being a refugee here in the UK means that I don’t have to hide anymore or run from the police and live a lie. I can finally be myself! (Lesbian refugee from Uganda)



5. LESBIAN AND GAY REFUGEES AND FINANCIAL POVERTY

Examining discrimination is imperative if one intends to make sense of the reasons why lesbian and gay refugees living in the UK are likely to fall into poverty. As discussed in the report's introduction, throughout this study we aimed to address a few key questions, namely:

- › What is the link between sexuality and poverty for refugees in the UK?
- › Can one talk about such a link?
- › Are there ways to improve the financial situation of sexual minority refugees?

In so doing, we sought to elicit data from the interviews in relation to the nexus between sexuality and poverty in the context of migration, in this specific case, of refugees' migratory experiences.

Do you have enough money for your living costs? was a central question during the interviews and, perhaps expectedly, only 12 respondents said that they did. Three of those who said that they had enough money to cover their living costs also added that they 'just get by', and that there are many things which they must renounce. A few receive financial support from their partners. If that was not an option, making ends meet at the end of each month depended entirely on the individual's physical and mental resilience to make the right economic choices. Respondents said:

I have to stretch and cover different bills at different times. (Ugandan lesbian)

I have to go without food sometimes. (Algerian gay man)

I just get by how I can. There is no money for luxuries. (Nigerian lesbian)

I feel that I am poor. I was forced to work and I only have money for essentials. (Lesbian from Jamaica)

Very difficult to find a decent job, I feel desperate and live in poverty. I would like financial help to do a counselling course; my dream! (Gay man from Algeria)

Financially it is not enough. Everything is too expensive. (Gay man from Algeria)

The research findings strongly supported the initial hypothesis that **respondents who have 'come out to' their families, have little or no contact with them. Respondents have been excluded because of their sexual orientation. 36% of 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. Meeting people from one's own country was perceived to be risky, a source of anxiety and a trigger, causing them to relive traumatic episodes (Shidlo and Ahola 2013).

I keep the reason of my refugee status a secret. I have told only one family member. (Lesbian from Jamaica)



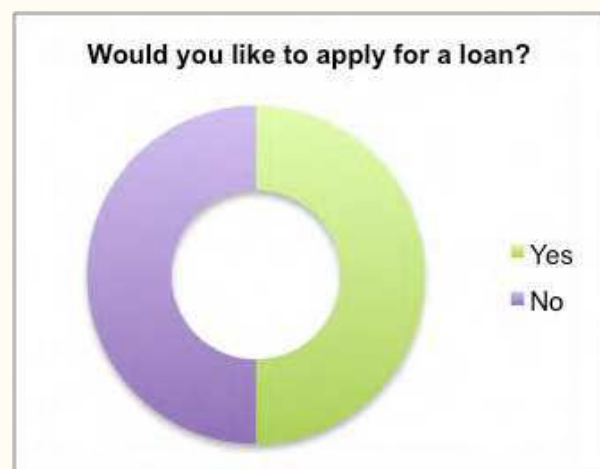
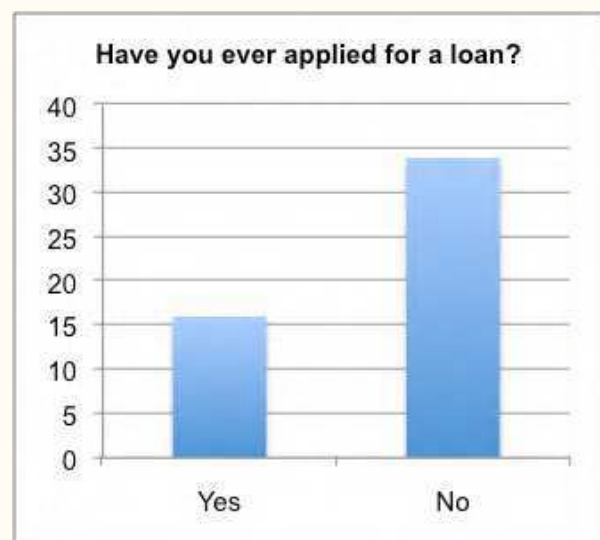
The risk of poverty also appears to be high for this migrant group due to their constrained possibilities of creating social worlds. When they arrived in the UK, respondents' social contacts were quite fragile; very often their friends and extended networks were not able to support them financially or help them find a job because they live under similar financial restrictions and are exposed to similar patterns of social exclusion. **Therefore, the lack of support from families and the lack of social capital are obstacles to lesbian and gay refugees' financial stability.**

How can we help with problems when people get status? Being a refugee is hard, no job, shared house, no friends can visit me. (Gay man from Uganda)

As we have explained above, discrimination operates at multiple levels and comes from various parts of society. This group of refugees is ostracised because of their refugee status, their race, their sexuality and their culture - broadly because they are different. Due to the persecution they suffered because of their sexuality they still live with traumatising memories. **These traumas mark respondents' psyches and produce low self-esteem and self-doubt, which are difficult to overcome.** By examining the data from the interviews we noted that **low self-esteem produces a lack of aspirations for the future.** It can be easy to feel that one is not able to do anything else or find a different, more skilled job. At other times, although respondents showed a desire to change their current lives by expressing their aspirations and hopes, frequently they did not possess the means or the possibilities to act on these hopes. We now explore more closely the data emerging from the fieldwork in relation to respondents' finances.

5.1. Financial situations

Three respondents did not have a bank account at the time of the interview and many only managed to open one after several attempts. Only 32% (16 people) had applied for a loan in the past. Of the 34 people who had never applied for a loan, 17 would have liked to apply for one (see diagram below). Those who did not want to apply for a loan feared being in debt and unable to repay the money they would borrow.





The reasons for applying for a loan were varied, the most recurrent ones were:

- › to buy household items and furniture;
- › to study;
- › to start a small business;
- › to bring a partner to the UK.

Despite the fact that many respondents seemed reluctant to apply for a loan, **78% of the interviewees welcomed the idea of starting a small commercial activity**, often in response to the perceived lack of employment opportunities available to them. Six respondents had thought about it sufficiently seriously to consider approximately how much and what kind of resources they would need to start a potential small business.



Four respondents had been refused a loan by a bank because of a lack of credit history in the UK, or because the institution told them that they would not be able to repay the loan due to their current financial situation.

5.2. Benefits and other forms of financial support

At the time of the research, 30 respondents were currently receiving welfare benefits. 42% of respondents received job seekers' allowance, while others were the recipients of housing benefits and council tax relief. Only four respondents said that the benefits they were receiving were sufficient to cover their expenses. Respondents said:

It only covers transportation and part of my meals, that's why I need to live with my sister. (Sudanese gay man)

Because it's only £71 a week and it's not enough to pay for housing, transportation, food, sometimes I can only have one meal per day. (Ugandan lesbian)

£360 a month is not enough to cover for everything; my weekly rent is £65; £60 gas and electrics; £15 council tax; plus TV, water and phone bill; so there is not much left. (Jamaica gay man)

Always in debt with bills, most of the time I do not have enough for food. (Malawian lesbian)

90% of respondents did not have other sources of income and relied entirely on their wages or benefits; only three respondents were supported by their partners, who sometimes helped them pay bills; two respondents used their sports skills to run workshops and training sessions, which provided them with extra income. Generally respondents did not have other sources of income. In the UK respondents had established bonds with other refugees, many of whom are also lesbian and gay, however, **none of the respondents received financial support from their social networks.**



6. LIVING IN THE UK

For all respondents life in the UK was perceived to be better than what it used to be in their countries of origin. According to respondents' narratives, **the 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. **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.** When discussing their lives in Britain some respondents said that although discrimination may still be strongly felt they could safely do things, such as living with a partner, that would never be possible in their home countries without being fearful of repercussions. Despite the daily struggles that defined their lives in Britain many respondents were quite optimistic when addressing their

current living conditions. All respondents appreciated a newly acquired sense of freedom, the sense of being 'normal' and the protection given by the state.

I don't have to keep watching my back to see if someone's coming after me. (Nigerian gay man)

It feels like there are a lot of people like me, people don't find me strange or evil just because I'm a lesbian. It makes me feel like I'm human again, I don't have to hide or live in fear anymore. (Ugandan lesbian)

I can express my sexuality freely without being afraid or living in fear. (Ugandan gay man)

I feel safe in the UK and everything is going well. (Lesbian from Algeria)

In the UK I met people who went through the same things as I did and that has been very helpful.... I finally found a family. (Ugandan lesbian)



© Micro Rainbow International

Refugees from Jamaica and Nigeria



Only a tiny fraction of the interviewees, however, could imagine the possibility of seeing and planning a future ahead.

6.1. Exposure to multiple forms of social exclusion

For many, coming to the UK and being exposed to complex and long legal proceedings, a distinctive feature of the British asylum process (Millbank 2005), became a source of anxiety. This had impacted negatively upon their lives. However, respondents' lives followed very different trajectories, and individuals' responses to the problems emerging when one is labelled a refugee were also different. Therefore the range of answers to the questions in relation to their current living conditions in the UK was varied. Despite the differences, we also found recurrent themes throughout the interviews. Regularly, **after saying that their lives in the UK were “better” than their previous lives in their home countries, respondents would also admit that they have suffered from and continue to suffer from segregation, racism and isolation.** Respondents talked about the “traces of racism against black people” still present in UK society, as Joseph from Uganda told us. They were very candid in discussing how they still felt discriminated against, although they were aware of the fact that they are protected by the system of institutions and by the law in the country.

One recurrent theme emerging from the interviews was that **it is hard to gain access to the job market given the suspicion of employers once they find out that the person is a refugee.** Respondents would

often refer to how people use the term ‘refugee’ as a negative and fixed label. Some said:

When looking for a job everybody wants experience but nobody gives you the chance to get that experience. (Algerian gay man)

I would like to be able to be like everybody else without the ‘refugee’ label; all my refugee friends are complaining that they can’t find jobs. I need training to get the experience they want or accept the experience we have from our country. (Nigerian gay man)

Not being able to fit into the social fabric by working kept respondents feeling that they do not have the necessary means to lead a ‘normal’ and dignified life:

I do not have a life in the UK yet; so what I would change is from “not having a life” to “having a life”. (Pakistani gay man)

Still facing some sort of discrimination, people don’t say anything but they still ‘look’, judging. (Jamaican lesbian)

Susan, a lesbian respondent from Cameroon said that she still has to deal with problems of discrimination in the UK and she says: “for being a refugee, African, black, and gay”. This statement locates her citizenship status, culture, race and sexuality at a critical intersection. These traits form the basis of her exclusion from society. For Susan, all these factors, both visible and invisible markers of difference, generate social marginalisation and create strong obstacles to the formation of her sense of belonging in British society.

Respondents said that falling into the poverty trap is ‘far too easy’ and this process affects many other aspects of their



lives. Feeling stigmatised for being a refugee and not feeling accepted for being lesbian or gay created the conditions for the person to feel ‘stagnant’, and to be ‘stuck’ in small social worlds that constrained their choices and aspirations. This impacted on their ability to feel like an active member of the broader national community in the new country. Rose, a lesbian from Jamaica who has lived in the UK since 1999 says: **“I hate being stagnant; I have been waiting forever; I feel worthless because I do not have the right to do what I should...”**.

To the question “What would you change about your life in the UK?” **30 respondents said that they would like to either find a job or change their current one, as both the lack of work and/or performing under-skilled jobs were perceived to be the most tangible obstacle to their well-being.** This also creates an obstacle to their sense of belonging in the new society:

...So that I can feel part of the society and fit in it.
(Ugandan gay man)

Because I want to be normal, like everybody else.
(Nigerian gay man)

I want to boost my self-esteem and be a productive part of the community. I don't want to feel an outsider. (Nigerian lesbian)

I feel like I'm idle, it really kills me that I'm not doing anything. I'm very active, feel like I need to do something but it's so hard to find (Nigerian gay man)

6.2. Everyday life restrictions

i. Housing

34% of respondents did not pay rent, but they normally contributed to bills in the households in which they live. 50% of respondents said that they liked the place where they currently live. The other 50% had problems with the size of their living space, or the neighbourhoods where they either had been allocated housing or could afford to live.

Neighbourhoods with a high concentration of people from their home community groups were seen as unsafe areas in which



© Micro Rainbow International

Refugee from Nigeria



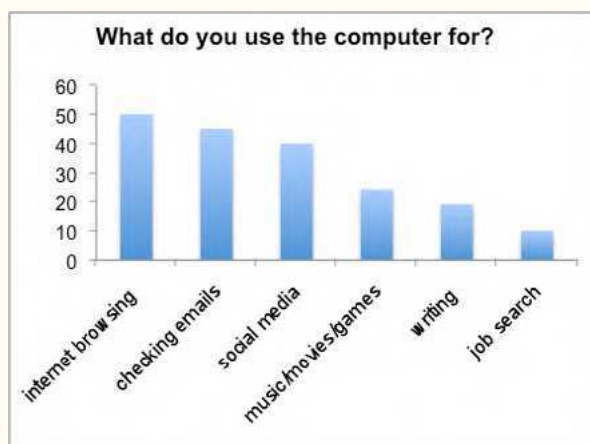
to live. Respondents would still be or feel exposed to homophobic threats from members of their own community. **Those people who were not happy with the areas in which they lived could not afford to move elsewhere, i.e. many of them said that they could not pay the required deposit.**

ii. Transport

Most respondents did not have their own means of transport. Only one respondent had a car, two respondents had a van, and four of them had a bicycle. 99% of respondents used public transport to move around the city or go to work. More than half of the respondents (26 people) expressed the desire to own a car. This was seen as being a great advantage, as it would improve their quality of life. **Fourteen people said that they could not afford public transport.** Others said they could, but often respondents who lived in the London urban area would add that they could only afford to pay bus fare and could not use the underground as although faster it is much more expensive.

iii. Being connected: phone, computer, television

All respondents had a mobile telephone, and 50% of respondents had a computer, which often had been given to them as a gift by a partner or friend. Those who did not have a computer said that they could not afford one. Eighteen of them said that they need one either to help them find a job or to study.



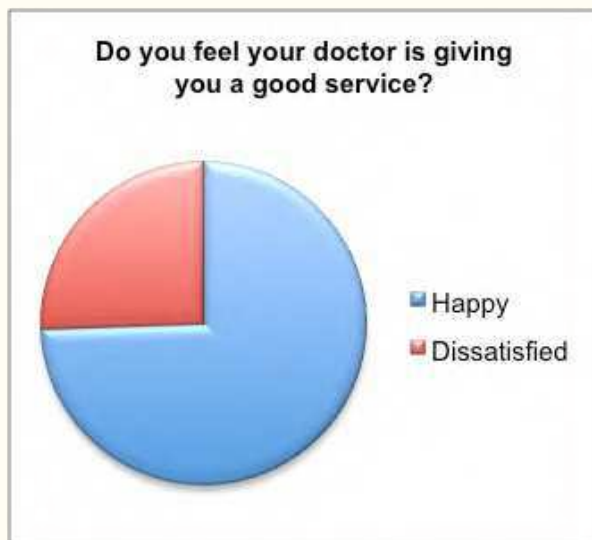
Eighteen respondents did not have the internet at home, however three of them could use it on their phones. They used internet facilities at friends' places, libraries or internet cafés. 76% of respondents owned a television.



7. PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Under conditions of acute financial instability respondents felt compelled to maintain mental and physical resilience; internal strength must be matched by an able body. Being ill or becoming disabled can produce catastrophic consequences. This can have a huge impact on one's possibilities of finding work.

Only three respondents were not registered with a doctor. Of the 47 people who were registered, 35 said that they were satisfied with the services provided by their doctors. The remaining 12 were very unhappy about the ways in which they were treated by the profession, in fact they felt neglected and they generally thought that medical care was ineffective.



28% of respondents said that their doctors did not know that they are lesbian or gay. One said that he doesn't know whether his doctor is aware of his sexuality, others said that they did

not see any reason why they should tell their doctors. Only five respondents said that they were afraid to disclose their sexuality to doctors for fear of being judged and treated differently.

24% of respondents said that they had either a physical disability or a chronic disease. Ten respondents said that they suffered from depression; four said that they were diagnosed with post-traumatic disorders. Seventeen respondents said they were taking medication for medical conditions. Seventeen respondents accessed counselling services, 13 of them said that they found these services helpful. The medications respondents were using include: anti-depressant drugs, sleeping pills, antiretroviral, blood pressure tablets, and inhalers.

7.1. Mental health vulnerability

The asylum process has strong effects on people's vulnerable mental states. Uncertain and precarious living conditions reinforce the fact that one has very little control over one's life. **The breaking point can come at any time during the asylum process and can easily occur after the person is granted refugee status.** The asylum determination process often reactivates traumatic memories. In their clinical work with LGBTI claimants and refugees Shidlo and Ahola (2013) identify that many people suffer from mental health problems as a result of cumulative trauma in the country of origin. They argue that:



Those who have a history of cumulative trauma may suffer from the symptoms not only of post-traumatic disorder (PTSD) but also of complex PTSD which include self-destructive behaviour, amnesia, intense shame, difficulties with intimacy, experiencing bodily pains in response to psychological distress, and despair about finding loving relationships (2013: 9).

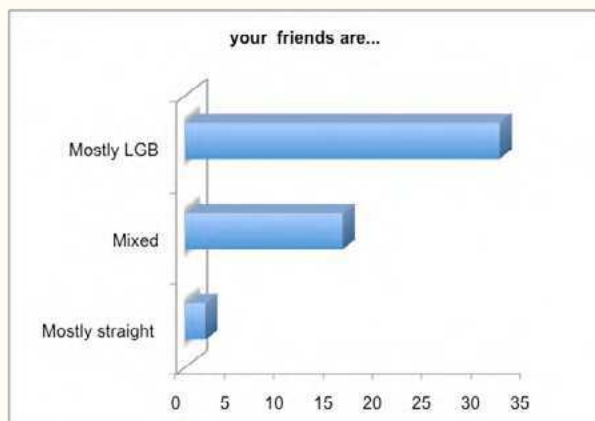
Throughout the interviews we saw that the dream of a land of opportunities and liberation that respondents construe was easily shattered after arriving in

the UK. This was a common feeling that respondents shared when facing the rigidity of the system of institutions and the often inhospitable behaviour of residents. **For many respondents the land of opportunity merely represents a downward social mobility ladder.** It emerged from the study that often the material circumstances and conditions to live a 'dignified life' in the new country were far worse than those the refugee had in their country of origin.



8. LEISURE AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

60% of respondents had made friends through associations such as UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group. 20% of the sample said that they socialised at church or in other places of worship. 32% said they frequented and made friends in bars and clubs and 20% said that the workplace was the main setting in which they socialised. Only two respondents, both of whom suffer from depression, said that they did not make any friends in the UK although they had been in the country for eleven and three years respectively. Three respondents said they met friends rarely, 14 said that they met their friends only on a monthly basis, 29 met on a weekly basis (once or twice a week) and two met friends on a daily basis.

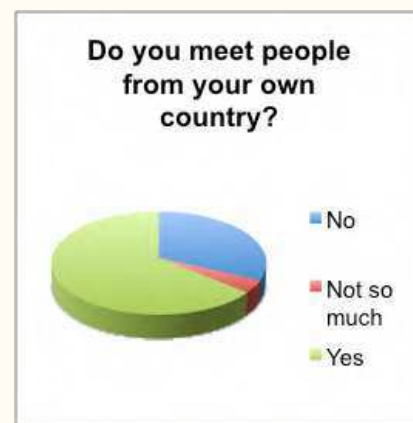


(Friends are: Mostly LGB: 32 respondents, Mixed: 16, Mostly straight: 2)

All respondents said that they were open about their sexuality with their lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) friends. Most of them were also open with their straight friends. Only one respondent said that:

I do not tell my straight friends because I do not want to face the reaction! (Jamaican gay man)

Sixteen respondents said that they did not meet (or tried not to befriend) people from their own countries, two respondents said "not so much", and the remaining 32 said they did meet people from their home country however these people were mainly lesbian and gay.



Those who said that they did not (or tried not to) meet co-nationals explained that this is because of 'bad memories' and the fear of facing homophobia, disapproval, and judgment from them.

Because they act the same way as they do back home, very homophobic. (Ugandan gay man)

They won't like gays and they keep minding people's business. (Egyptian gay man)

50% of respondents said that their co-national friends were also refugees. The same number of respondents said that their refugee friends from their own country were mostly lesbian, gay or bisexual and that they were open about their sexuality with them.



Yes, because they are also lesbian and gay. Otherwise it would have been impossible. (Ugandan lesbian)

Respondents also met refugees from other countries. Only four respondents said they did not. One of the four said: “they are difficult too”. All respondents said that their refugee friends from a different country were mostly LGB, only five said that the people with whom they socialise were a mixed group.

Thirty-five respondents attend LGBTI associations, 25 were members of UKLGIG. Seven respondents said that they did not go to LGB bars or clubs, the rest said they did. Four of the seven respondents said that they could not afford to go clubbing and pay for drinks.

8.1. Religiosity

Religion was an important feature of respondents’ narratives. Although respondents were fully aware of not being generally accepted by their religious communities for being lesbian or gay they have found strategies to keep their faith alive (Giametta forthcoming). Thirty-five people said that they were religious. Fifteen respondents said that they were not religious; one of these said that he used to be.



Only 34 respondents disclosed their religion: Nine were Muslims, 25 Christian (seven of who were Catholic). The remaining 16 did not say to which faith they belonged. Twenty-one people said that they were observant, 16 of them said that they socialised with other observant people of their religion. Those who were observant but did not socialise with other observant people explained why:

Because religion has done so much harm to me and other gay men back home. (Ugandan gay man)

Because churches are very homophobic places even here in the UK. (Jamaican gay man)

Because they don't know I'm gay. (Ugandan gay man)

I just pray and go. (Algerian gay man)

Only 10 of the 21 religiously observant respondents said that they felt they belonged to that group because of their religiosity. Others strengthened the notion of establishing a personal relationship with God, avoiding the mediation of religious leaders or the religious community.

Because they don't accept me as gay. (Egyptian gay man)

We are friends but they don't know I am a lesbian. (Malawian lesbian)

I just go to pray to God. They do not know that I am a lesbian. (Ugandan lesbian)

I don't feel accepted. (Nigerian lesbian)

Only nine respondents said that their religious friends knew that they are lesbian or gay.

If they knew, they wouldn't let me pray there. (Ugandan lesbian)

It's private. I don't tell them. (Jamaican lesbian)

I don't want to be judged. (Nigerian lesbian)



9. CONCLUSIONS

The majority of lesbian and gay refugees live below the poverty line¹². During the interviews only 26% of respondents said that they “have enough money for living”, however three of them added that they “just get by”. Marian from Cameroon expressed this succinctly when she said: **“it is a hand to mouth form of life”**. After analysing the research findings it can be concluded that **the risk of destitution for this sexual minority migrant population in the UK is very high**. This risk seems to be produced or reinforced by the complex nature of social exclusion which lesbian and gay refugees experience, especially after long and damaging asylum journeys.

Being part of a sexual minority produced a number of obstacles for the respondents interviewed. First, **being a lesbian or a gay man meant they were frequently ostracised by their families and co-nationals**. This sense of isolation puts people in a vulnerable position, on both mental and material levels. **Although respondents manage to form new social networks, their friends who are also lesbian or gay refugees are not normally able to support them financially**.

Being a refugee in the UK is difficult according to respondents’ narratives; one needs to face

societal mistrust, particularly within the job market, in fact employers seem to be very wary of refugee documents. **The financial difficulties that arise from lack of work and job opportunities impact on the individuals’ mental and physical wellbeing**.

It appeared clear that **there is much misinformation amongst UK employers in relation to refugees’ full entitlement to work in the country**. In fact, some employers seem to think that this migrant group does not have such a right. Further, not having UK-based work experience makes the person an unattractive candidate. Respondents argued that this is a sort of Catch-22. A person is never in a position to gain the required working experience in the UK if no employer is willing to give them the opportunity in the first place. The research data revealed another recurrent issue when respondents tried to apply for a loan or open a bank account. **Bank clerks would often question the validity of their refugee documents, with the additional accusation or suspicion of forgery**. Also when travelling, respondents faced discrimination from UK Border Agency officers. At borders, they felt treated badly and differently from other EU or UK citizens. All this cumulatively reinforces in the respondents a sense of marginalisation and non-belonging within British society.

Lesbian and gay refugees have been exposed to humiliation, discrimination and persecution in their countries of origin. They have grown

¹² In the UK, a household has a low income (or is in poverty) if its income after tax is less than 60 per cent of the average household income for that year. This threshold is sometimes referred to as the ‘poverty line’. For a single with no children (the majority of our respondents) in 2010/11 the poverty line was set at £168 per week, before housing costs. For more information consult the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/> or the Department for Work and Pension website: www.dwp.gov.uk



to feel ashamed of who they are and they have had to prove their sexual orientation to authority figures in the UK. Additionally, the long wait for their asylum cases to be resolved and the overall complexity of the determination system produce feelings of continuing persecution, mistrust and questioning, which ultimately undermine their chances of interacting productively with others and with institutions in the UK. These traumatic experiences, both at home and in the

UK have a long-lasting effect on respondents' sense of self. From the stories they shared in the interviews **it appeared evident that they often suffer from insecurity about their sexuality making their self-esteem very low.** This, in turn, becomes counterproductive when looking for a job in a very competitive British job market. The interviews also suggest that **refugees feel they lack opportunities to start employment and need to re-train in the UK in order to find better jobs.**



© Micro Rainbow International

Lesbian refugees from Africa and the Caribbean



10. RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR LGBTI ORGANISATIONS, REFUGEE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS, AND OTHER COMMUNITY VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS (CVOs)

The evidence of our research strongly supports the argument that lesbian and gay refugees in the UK live below the poverty line. Support organisations should be more aware of the needs of this particular group and access resources that would enable them to offer material support to lesbian and gay refugees. [This may apply to refugees other than lesbian and gay refugees]

The research supports the argument that lesbian and gay refugees are particularly isolated. This can have a negative impact not only on their mental health but can also limit their choices, aspirations and opportunities exacerbating their situation of poverty. LGBTI organisations, refugee organisations and other CVOs are encouraged to look for resources that would allow them to reach out and include lesbian and gay refugees in their activities.

Given the multiple forms of social discrimination to which LGBTI refugees are subject, it is important to provide training, information, advice and guidance in understanding the issues specific to LGBTI refugees to service providers, support organisations and groups that could improve the life opportunities of these individuals.

FOR EMPLOYERS

This research strongly suggests that employers need to be made fully aware that refugees have full entitlement to the right to work in the UK.

Employers should also be aware of the kind of identity papers they can accept as proof that refugees can undertake paid work in the UK.

Employers should be more flexible in accepting and valuing working experience gained outside the UK.

The above recommendations may apply to refugees other than lesbian and gay refugees.

FOR POLICY MAKERS

Most asylum seekers are not allowed to work while their asylum case is decided, a process which can take weeks, months or years. This research strongly suggests that not being able to work is one of the causes of poverty of lesbians and gay men after they are granted refugee status. We urge policy makers to reconsider this policy.

Evidence strongly supports the argument that lesbian and gay refugees in the UK live below the poverty line. Respondents maintained that when the asylum process ends they easily find themselves in precarious living conditions and there is a lack of support immediately after gaining refugee status. This time gap puts refugees at risk of poverty. Further investigation into the experience of refugees during this time is required



and specific recommendations should be formulated. Policy makers should commit to and engage in conversations with civil society organisations in order to understand how to change the support systems for refugees and promote the best start in their new life in the UK, as opposed to hindering it. We believe this recommendation to be only second best to the one previously formulated, which advocates for the right to work for asylum seekers.

It emerged that it is vital to monitor and change the language used by media and political discourses when referring to asylum seekers and refugees. Often stigmatising terms such as 'illegal' and 'bogus' are misused to describe this migrant group. This, in turn, affects refugees' confidence, self-esteem and contributes to creating negative stereotypes. It also creates a hostile living environment for refugees where, as is evidenced by this research, employers and bank staff assume that identity papers they are presented with are forged and therefore refuse employment, bank accounts or loans.

FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Staff at banks or other financial institutions must be aware that refugees have full entitlement to open a bank account in the UK. Refugees should never face discrimination from these services when presenting their identity documents. Staff should be trained and be fully aware of the kind of documents they can accept from refugees.

Several refugees interviewed for this research would consider starting small commercial activities, often in response to the lack of employment opportunities available to them. The interviews informing this research support the view that there is a need to provide credit to those lesbian and gay refugees with entrepreneurial inclinations in spite of the fact that they might not have a credit history or the usual credentials by which high street banks assess them.

The research reveals that lesbian and gay refugees suffer from low self-esteem and lack confidence. Lesbian and gay refugees should have access to self-esteem and confidence building training and opportunities. Increased self-esteem would not only increase their chances of earning an income and/or improving their skills but would also improve their emotional wellbeing and reduce the risk of poverty.

FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDED

There is an urgent need for research on the lived experiences of intersex and trans refugees in the UK and the risk of these groups falling into poverty. This migrant population has specific needs that differ from those of lesbian and gay refugees and deserve attention.

There is also a need for more resources to raise awareness and to further examine the intersections between poverty and the experiences of lesbian and gay refugees, including a comparative study with other refugees.



APPENDIX 1. EPISODES OF DISCRIMINATION AND PERSECUTION IN REFUGEE'S HOME COUNTRIES

AT SCHOOL

I was expelled from school and beaten up by my classmates and even the gatekeepers. I was wounded, couldn't go home, spent two nights on the street, had to find a shelter for two months with my partner. I was really starving. (Uganda)

When I was at the University, I was caught with a guy, and then I was humiliated by the other students. I was beaten up, forced to walk naked in the corridors etc. (Ghana)

In Uganda I was expelled from school when they found out I was a lesbian. (Uganda)

WITHIN THE FAMILY

My family kicked me out of the house when they found out. I had to leave my community. I was too scared they were very religious and a strong figure in the community. (Jamaica)

In Algeria when I was as a child my father caught me dressed up as a woman, beat me several times and burned my leg with a blowtorch.

In Uganda in 2007 I was caught with my girlfriend on New Year eve by my brothers and sisters. They beat me and took me to police station.

In Malawi in 2001 I was caught by my family kissing my girlfriend, my father disowned me, community were violent towards me. You can't report to anyone, you fear everybody, you are nothing.

My dad kicked me out of the house and tried to "exorcise" me, because he thought I was possessed by a demon. (Uganda)

When my parents found out about me, they called a witchdoctor to purify me and tried to "exorcise" me, they made him drink blood from a chicken etc. (Ghana)

IN THE WORKPLACE

My boss almost fired me when he found out I was a lesbian, he started to change my shifts, hid me in the workplace, wouldn't give me any tasks or even pay me properly. (Uganda)

In Jamaica nobody wanted to give me a job and I had no choice but to set up my own. I tried to be a waiter in Le Meridian hotel but when they knew I was gay they harassed me.

In Uganda when I finished my business course I was forced to marry my boss' son when he found out that I was a lesbian. After 6 months I ran away.

WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

In South Africa I went through corrective rape in 2005, the police didn't take the case seriously. I felt there was nowhere else I could go.

When I reached my teens, I decided to live, to open up my sexuality, and started to hang out with other gays. Suddenly people started to call me in names,



wouldn't let me enter the bars, clubs. I was violently attacked several times. (Uganda)

In Nigeria people would harass me and ask if I was a boy or a girl. I was too scared to do anything.

In Jamaica in 1980, members of the community attacked me because I was a lesbian. I have scars on my body. This happened often, every two months. I kept it to myself; I feared more people would attack me.

When I was 22 in Algeria I was attacked by 6 men, they dragged me to a car park and gang raped me. I was scared of reporting, people would say it was my fault.

In Pakistan all my life I was beaten, suffered verbal and physical abuse, mistreated, people used to spit on me. It became a normal routine and nobody would help me anyway.

When I was found with a guy, I was tortured, sent to hospitals; they tried to "exorcise" me so I decided to leave my hometown. (Nigeria)

In Jamaica in 1976 I was raped because I was accused to be a lesbian. I didn't understand what had happened.

ABUSE FROM THE POLICE

I was attacked by local people on 2 occasions and they tried to kill me, I still experience physical pain and mental health problems as a result. The police tried to intervene but I got arrested and detained for being gay. (Uganda)

In 2010 in Egypt I was with my friends in the street at night, the police insulted and arrested us because we were gay.

Between 2007 and 2008 prison officers raped me 5 times. I was beaten on a daily basis. (Uganda)

MULTIPLE PERSECUTORS

I was at school when it all started. At the age of 15. When the fellow students found out that we were gay (we were 3 boys), they set us up, began to beat us up, kicking us, called the teachers... They nearly killed me. I was taken to the police by the school authorities, but managed to walk away. But it didn't matter. I was expelled from the school and went to my parents. I opened up to them and they were in shock, but they were still protecting me. Then the people from the local council went to my house to look for me, together with the police; they came with guns, looking for me. It was Christmas evening. My parents denied that I was there but they saw my uniform and realized they were lying. So they shot them, as well as my two sisters. I only survived because I was hidden in the ceiling. (Uganda)



APPENDIX 2. ABOUT MICRO RAINBOW INTERNATIONAL

Micro Rainbow International C.I.C. (MRI) is a social enterprise, which was founded in spring 2013 by social entrepreneur and LGBTI advocate, Sebastian Rocca.

At Micro Rainbow International, we believe that

- › Many LGBTI people around the world are poor because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; and that
- › LGBTI people trapped in poverty can break the cycle if they are given the opportunity.

Our Micro Rainbow team also believes that addressing poverty could and should change social attitudes towards non-conforming sexual and gender identities. Our mission therefore at this stage in our development is to test our beliefs and subsequently to work towards our strategic goal of devising tools and making recommendations as to how poverty can be alleviated for LGBTI people. For more information visit our blog: www.micro-rainbow.com/blog

If you are working on issues related to poverty of LGBTI people, or have an informed opinion to share, we would love to hear and learn from you. Together we can address the issues that LGBTI people suffering from poverty face. info@micro-rainbow.com

The Micro Rainbow International Team

Micro Rainbow International C.I.C. (MRI) is a social enterprise, which was founded by social entrepreneur, Sebastian Rocca. Sebastian has approximately 10 years' experience in international human rights and specifically working within the LGBTI human rights field.



*Sebastian Rocca
Founder and CEO*

Sebastian's interest in poverty began during his academic years and is reflected in his Masters in both Poverty Reduction and Development Management and in Political Economics. Sebastian gained several years experience working in LGBTI organisations, including as the Executive Director of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), a world-wide network of national and local LGBTI organisations dedicated to achieving equal rights for LGBTI people and their liberation from all forms of discrimination everywhere.

MRI therefore reflects Sebastian's interest in global poverty, his international management expertise and his vision to create a more equal world for LGBTI people. In this start-up phase of MRI, Sebastian is joined by Lucas Paoli Itaborahy (Brazil), and Erin Power (London).



Lucas is MRI's International Research and Business Development Coordinator. He holds a Bachelor's degree in International Relations and a Master's in Human Rights Practice, and has attended the summer school on Sexual Orientation Law co-organised by Whittier Law School and University of Barcelona.

Lucas has diverse professional experience in LGBTI issues, both in Brazil and abroad. In the past he worked for governmental agencies including the Ministry for Human Rights in Brazil and the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations Office in Geneva. He has consulted with various NGOs and produced several academic and legal research papers including ILGA's State Sponsored Homophobia report on the legal situation of lesbian and gay people in the world.

Lucas is currently living in the city of Rio de Janeiro where he is developing MRI operations and research, including meeting and consulting with LGBT people who live in poverty and their allies.



*Lucas Paoli
Itaborahy
International
Research
and Business
Development
Coordinator*

Erin is the Executive Director of UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG). She has worked for UKLGIG since December 2000. She has worked for and held voluntary positions in various lesbian, gay, bisexual trans and

intersex (LGBTI) and community organisations for 37 years. We are very grateful to Erin for volunteering her free time in advising MRI on organizational matters, fundraising strategies and last but not least for shaping the work of MRI in support of the many LGBTI refugees who are living in a situation of poverty in the UK.



*Erin Power
advisor in
LGBTI refugee
issues and
organisational
development*

At MRI we are fortunate to be able to rely upon the support of many volunteers who not only dedicate their free time to the cause, but also their knowledge and expertise including on poverty, social sciences, LGBTI human rights, LGBTI refugees issues, business development, field work management, research methodology, editing and proofreading, bookkeeping, fundraising, social media, IT etc. You know who you are and we thank you all!

If you like what we do, stay in touch! You can do so in several ways and in several languages:

E: infor@micro-rainbow.com

W: www.micro-rainbow.com

TT: [@MicroRainbow](#) [@MRI_es](#) [@MRI_por](#)

FB: [MicroRainbowInternational](#)

Blog: www.micro-rainbow.com/blog



REFERENCES

Aldridge, Hannah, Kenway, Peter, MacInnes, Tom, and Parekh, Anushree (2012) *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2012*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Bell, David and Binnie, Jon (2000) *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bloch, Alice, Sigona, Nando and Zetter, Roger (2009) 'No right to dream': the social and economic lives of young undocumented migrants in Britain. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Chasin, Alexandra (2000) *Selling Out, The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Duggan, Lisa (2003) *The Twilight Of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, & the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Fitzpatrick, Suzanne, Johnsen, Sarah and Bramley, Glenn (2012) *Multiple exclusion homelessness in the UK: an overview of key findings*. Heriot Watt University and Economic and Social Research Council.

Giametta, Calogero (forthcoming) 'Rescued' Subjects: The Question of Religiosity for Non-Heteronormative Asylum Seekers in the UK in Sexualities.

Millbank, Jennifer (2005) A Preoccupation with Perversion: the British Response to Refugee Claims on the Basis of Sexual Orientation 1989-2003, *Social and Legal Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1.

Shidlo, Ariel and Ahola, Joanne (2013) Mental health challenges of LGBT forced migrants, *Forced Migration Review*, issue 42.

Sigona, Nando (2012) 'I've too much baggage': the impact of legal status on the social worlds of irregular migrants', *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie Sociale*, 20 (1): 50-65.

Smart, Kate (2009) *Tally of destitution among asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers and refugees in Wales*, Cardiff: Welsh Refugee Council.

REPORTS

Failing the Grade (2010), UKLGIG

Fleeing Homophobia (2011), VU University of Amsterdam

No Going Back (2010), Stonewall

ONLINE REFERENCES

Home Office statistics are available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2013> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2013>