



Sista Sista tackles the poverty of lesbians, bisexual and trans (LBT) women through empowerment.


Sara is a lesbian refugee from Uganda. When she was outed as lesbian, she was removed from education, beaten, humiliated and ultimately forced into a marriage with an older man. In the marriage, she was a victim of "corrective" rape and domestic violence. Sara hid her sexuality to avoid further persecution from her husband, family and the community. After a few years in this situation, Sara, who has a child from the marriage, managed to escape and leave the country to seek sanctuary in the UK. Fleeing Uganda, Sara had no means to take her child with her.

When Sara approached MRI, she said she was lonely, isolated and suffering from depression after her traumatic experiences. She was told about MRI's peer led support group Sista Sista which provides a safe space for LBT refugee women. Sara said she was too shy to meet other lesbians because she had been hiding her sexuality for so long.

She was afraid that people would judge her and asked, What should I wear? How should I act? She was reassured that she would be in a safe space and she should just be herself. Sara said she didn't know what being herself was anymore. She felt that after years of hiding her sexuality, repression, violence, alienation and going through the asylum system she had lost her self.

SARA'S STORY






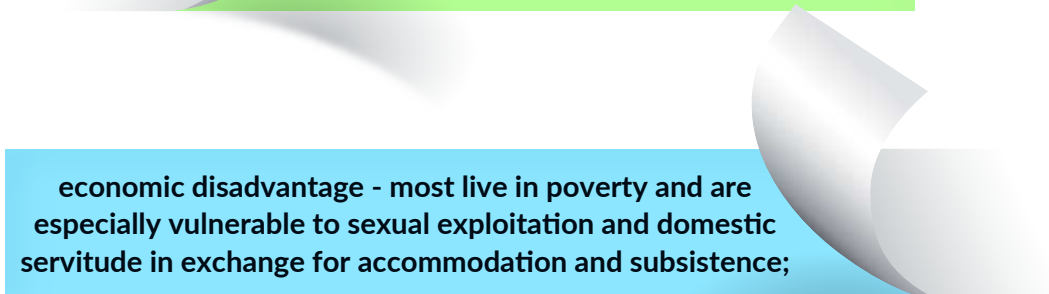
It was explained that many of the women who attend the workshops feel the same way and she was supported and encouraged to come to the first workshop.

Most of the 15 LBT refugee women who attended the workshops are victims of persecution and violence because of their sexual identity. They come from countries such as Algeria, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, Uganda and Zimbabwe where homosexuality is criminalised. They have been subjected to harassment, imprisonment, forced marriage, "corrective" rape, trafficking, gender based, sexuality based and domestic violence. The criminalisation of their sexuality means that these women rarely report crimes against them and do not seek medical or therapeutic support. In the UK, the stress of reliving their traumatic experiences whilst claiming asylum, together with the discrimination they experience as refugees, has increased their low self esteem and lack of confidence.

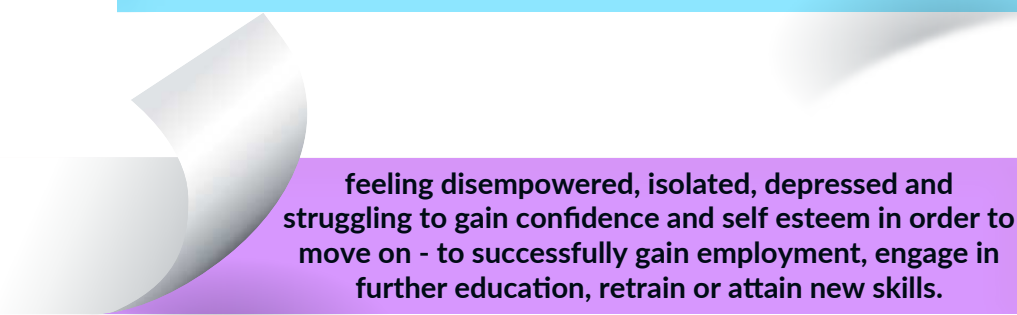
LBT refugee women like Sara continue to suffer from the trauma caused by their experiences in their home countries, as well as face additional challenges in the UK. These include:




exclusion by their families, co-nationals and religious spaces where refugees traditionally receive support;



economic disadvantage - most live in poverty and are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation and domestic servitude in exchange for accommodation and subsistence;



feeling disempowered, isolated, depressed and struggling to gain confidence and self esteem in order to move on - to successfully gain employment, engage in further education, retrain or attain new skills.



Workshops

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The focus of the workshops was to rebuild LBT refugee women's self esteem and confidence to empower them to realise their potential. Confidence building workshops equip them with new skills to cope with the stress, anxiety and trauma they carry with them because of the abuse and violence they have faced. The workshops also empower LBT refugee women to regain their confidence and independence enabling them to secure employment, to access education or public services such as medical care and housing.

The first workshop explored finding your inner self. The life coach, and the women in the interactive workshop ensured that everyone was included, welcomed and heard. At first Sara was shy, and hesitant to participate. On hearing her peers who had had similar life experiences, she started opening up and sharing her own experiences.



The second and third workshops focused on building self esteem and confidence. The focus was to support the women to rediscover their passions and realise their full potential. This in turn enables them to respond positively to issues that affect them and to tackle discrimination, isolation, exclusion and assists their integration into their new communities.




At the workshops, Sara was able to speak about the violence she has suffered in her past. She said:


"Sharing with the other women and through the workshops I could talk about things without reliving them, because I felt like I was in a safe space where people understood".

This sort of experience facilitates healing and empowerment. At the conclusion of the workshops, Sara said she hoped that MRI would be hosting more therapeutic workshops for LBT women. She was encouraged to join MRI's monthly women's peer support group. Some of the women who attended the workshops are also part of the women's group so she will see the familiar faces of women she has already met.

Having gained confidence through the workshops Sara feels more able to think about her future and she recently attended a hiring and employment workshop. She has engaged with the MRI team for further one to one support in tackling her housing issues. MRI hopes that with continued support Sara will be able secure employment, enabling her to step out of poverty. When she approached MRI Sara was isolated, lonely and suffering from depression. In engaging with her peers and attending workshops, she was empowered to start taking steps to resolve these issues. In the workshops she engaged with other women with similar experiences, making friends and reducing her isolation. Sara says:

"My journey has been a long, and exhausting road, but I am happy to know I will no longer be walking this road alone."






Nowhere in this world does being a woman mean that life is easier, offering better prospects for health, success, education and fulfilment. Add to this being a woman who does not conform to prescribed social roles for gender and sexuality and life becomes even more difficult. Finally, add that you are a lesbian, bisexual or trans woman who has fled persecution and become a refugee in an unfamiliar country and culture. This is the recipe for finding yourself in the least supported, least acknowledged, financially and spiritually poorest place in the world.

Within LGBTI movements worldwide, lesbians, bisexual and trans women are often underrepresented. Their positions in society, their economic status and their responsibilities for family make organisation amongst LBT women at the local, regional and international level, difficult. This results in a lack of publicity and awareness of their specific issues, which in turn leads to a lack of funding and a lack of representation in decision making processes - if LGBTI are represented at all, it is often by men. Progress on women's rights is stagnant in many parts of the world and in women's movements LBT women are also often underrepresented. Lesbian, bisexual and trans women's needs therefore remain unaddressed and invisible. There are obstacles to full engagement and success in society for all women, but for LBT women these are aggravated. Violence often affects women who are already marginalised and the most disempowered. The majority of LBT women face gender based, sexuality based and domestic violence. The socio economic factors that determine the level to which LBT women can participate in society and develop to their full potential can function as huge obstacles, but can also be a significant enabler of self empowerment.

If you want to know more about MRI's work with LGBTI refugees, please contact Moud Goba at mgoba@micro-rainbow.org or visit our website at www.micro-rainbow.org





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Addressing the situation of poverty of LGBTI people worldwide

MRI's work with LGBTI refugees in the UK including the Sista Sista project is supported by:

