



MICRO RAINBOW INTERNATIONAL

Addressing the situation of poverty of LGBTI people worldwide

Why asylum seekers should be granted permission to work

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Micro Rainbow International (MRI) is committed to improving the lives of LGBTI people living in situations of poverty. At MRI, we believe that many LGBTI people around the world are poor because of persecution and discrimination and the consequent lack of opportunities available to them. Our mission is to devise tools and make recommendations as to how poverty can be alleviated for LGBTI people. Currently we are working on projects based in Brazil, Cambodia and within LGBTI asylum seeker and refugee communities in the UK.

In 2013, MRI published the report **Poverty, Sexual Orientation and Refugees in the UK**¹. This was the result of a long period of observation and listening to the life stories of many lesbian and gay refugees. The aim of the report was to investigate two main questions: *Are lesbian and gay refugees in the UK poor?* and if they are, *What relationships exist between poverty and sexual orientation?*

The research revealed that most lesbian and gay refugees, who have sometimes spent years battling the asylum process and won the right to remain in the UK, find themselves in situations of poverty that are difficult to overcome. This article will unravel some of the reasons why LGBTI refugees find themselves in cycles of poverty and will explore areas in which their lives could be improved, both while going through the asylum process and in the period of transition to starting a new life in the UK.

'Homosexuality' is criminalised in 76 countries in the world and many more countries, that either never had laws or have repealed their laws against LGBTI people still discriminate and do not protect these communities from hostility, hate crimes and community violence.

¹ https://www.micro-rainbow.org/wp-content/uploads/MR_REPORT_UK_digital-final-for-the-web-Reduced.pdf

LGBTI people from these countries have been forced to flee for their own safety and ask the UK government for protection.

Through in-depth interviews with LGBTI refugees, we know that not only have they experienced numerous episodes of torture and persecution in their home countries but have also experienced high levels of exclusion in education and been discriminated against at all levels of society, making finding jobs and homes an almost impossible task. Many have been compelled to end their studies early as their families have disowned them, or they left education to avoid constant bullying and abuse by both teachers and other students. Others have said that if they found work, as soon as they were perceived as 'different' they were sacked and ousted from the community, meaning they spent periods of time moving around and fearing for their own safety. The narratives in the MRI report tell of LGBTI people burdened by lifelong experiences of trauma, discrimination and persecution often starting in the family, then the community and finally within society at large. These experiences mean that the lives of some LGBTI people, including access to an education, career opportunities and a job market, have been extremely restricted. It is also true that other LGBTI refugees are highly skilled and well-educated and have had to flee only when they have been 'discovered' and outed. LGBTI refugees are not a homogenous group.

When LGBTI people come to the UK to ask for protection, carrying with them their traumatic life histories, they must then navigate a very complex and often degrading asylum process which exacerbates their trauma. To be granted protection, they must recount their life stories over and over again in an attempt to prove that they are LGBTI. Many are not believed. Many make the obvious point that the process of proving their sexual or gender identity when they have spent their lives concealing it in order to be safe, is extremely difficult.

When claiming asylum, they are obliged to fully explain every aspect of their identity. The details required are sensitive, intimate and highly personal, especially when talking about lifelong abuse including rape, beatings, torture and imprisonment. In LGBTI refugee support groups, it has been reiterated again and again, that divulging the most private aspects of your life, trying to prove your sexuality and talking about who you love, is a highly humiliating, harrowing and negative experience. People tell how, having relived their experiences whilst in a state of extreme anxiety about whether they will be believed, at the end of the process, they are left feeling physically and emotionally drained and stunted, making it extremely difficult to move on with life or make plans for the future.

It is common that once the euphoria of winning an asylum case dies down, people often break down with long-term mental distress. A survivor's guilt is experienced when leaving everything you know and love behind in the home country, on top of that there is the overwhelming stress of starting life afresh with little support in the UK.

The asylum process is a lengthy one, especially if you are not believed to be LGBTI and are stuck in the appeals system. It can take from many months to several years to gain refugee protection. Typically, if you have spent your whole life covering up your sexual or gender identity, it can be problematic to produce evidence. People have described this period as “living in limbo” as their lives are on hold. They cannot think about let alone plan for a future, as that future is so uncertain. This situation is seriously aggravated by the fact that asylum seekers are forbidden to work. For many, this creates further feelings of shame and hopelessness. The impact on physical and mental health is enormous and drives asylum seekers further into a spiral of poverty and exploitative situations such as informal work, sex work, domestic servitude and underground labour camps.

Many of the research respondents say that when they are granted status and become refugees, the time waiting in limbo, has a negative impact on finding employment as they have lost their former skills and have no work experience for the months or years they have spent in the UK. Additionally, due to common misinformation, employers tend to be suspicious of refugee documents - in fact, they frequently believe that they cannot employ refugees because they do not have the right to work.

MRI believes it is human right to have permission to work. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states it is the right of everyone to have the opportunity to gain his living by work. There is an argument that if you allow asylum seekers to work, the UK would be flooded with ‘bogus’ asylum claims. All governments have argued that the boundaries will be blurred between economic migrants and genuine asylum seekers. Not allowing asylum seekers to work and pushing them into extreme levels of poverty is seen as ‘best practice’ as it forces people to return to their home countries. From the perspective of LGBTI asylum seekers this is not the case, they have left only when reaching the point where going back is not an option. Most have faced multiple forms of persecution related to their sexuality and have clearly stated that they would prefer to live in absolute poverty rather than face further persecution and death. This is not a choice, many refugees we have spoken to have come from privileged or comfortable lifestyles and we must ask “why is living in destitution a better option?” All LGBTI refugees have said that their safety and freedom to express their gender or sexual identity overrides the poor and inhumane living conditions they face in the UK.

In the UK, few asylum seekers are allowed (many are denied) to claim National Asylum Support Services (NASS), which is usually dispersal accommodation and an allowance of £5.00 a day or food vouchers. £5.00 a day is deemed adequate for groceries, clothing, medical supplies, travel costs to solicitors and hospital appointments and socialising. Many LGBTI asylum seekers do not take this assistance, as dispersal means moving to rural areas or to hostels where they feel further ostracised and unsafe. Being LGBTI, in a small community or asylum hostel means risking violence and abuse as other residents have the same homophobic attitudes as people from their home countries. All asylum seekers on NASS support say it is inadequate and pushes them into further isolation and

poverty. More importantly asylum seekers do not want benefits. NASS support fuels negative stereotypes of asylum seekers seeking benefits – they want the right to work, to participate in and contribute to society.

MRI's research shows that living in poverty as an asylum seeker often continues when people gain their refugee status. Lack of money and poor physical and mental health go hand in hand. All of those interviewed describe long periods of isolation and loneliness, which affected their confidence and resulted in low self-esteem. It is important to note that **unlike other asylum-seeking populations, LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees do not have financial and emotional support from their home communities or their families in the UK** because of their sexual or gender identity. Likewise, LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees have found little support from mainstream LGBTI communities. Most cannot afford to access gay scenes and although it is contentious to state, some have found contact with LGBTI communities has put them in even more precarious situations - from experiencing negative attitudes about asylum seekers, racism and Islamophobia to being pushed into forms of sexual exploitation.

All the above reasons why LGBTI refugees remain in poverty have a cumulative effect. Being LGBTI in your home country means you are likely to be ostracised and punished by family and society and carry your trauma to the UK. It is common for these experiences to leave LGBTI asylum seekers feeling shame about who they are and mistrustful of mainstream society. A long asylum process and no right to work makes people poor and further aggravates traumatic experiences and self-loathing. As a result, many of the research respondents suffered from post-traumatic experiences and chronic depression, constantly reliving the persecution they had suffered. Likewise, no access to a job market or retraining programmes makes refugees more isolated and marginalised in society. MRI's report says: **“it appears evident that refugees 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”**. All these factors lead to 76% of LGBTI refugees living below the poverty line.

MRI has a range of programmes to help refugees step out of poverty. However, we must go back to one of the root causes that pushes refugees into cycles of poverty and that is the asylum process. We strongly support the right of asylum seekers to have permission to work and access to skills training. Not being able to work while going through the asylum process is one of the main causes of subsequent poverty once granted refugee status. Not being allowed to work has a detrimental effect on physical and mental health, leaving many feeling idle and worthless. Asylum seekers can be given permission to work if their **initial** claim has not been dealt with in 12 months. However, as they can only apply for jobs on the Shortage Occupation list², this results in a very small number being able to work. Shortage Occupations are highly skilled technical jobs for which few asylum seekers are qualified. Many people have said they felt overjoyed after fighting for

² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-k-shortage-occupation-list>

over a year, to finally have permission to work, only to find their hopes quashed as the jobs listed are out of their reach. This 'right to work' exists only so the real issue can be avoided.

It is argued that allowing asylum seekers to work would save the taxpayer millions of pounds by abolishing the NASS process, creating jobs, increased tax contributions and consumer spending. Working while claiming asylum would have an enormous impact on isolation and self-esteem and help build up a working history in the UK. By not allowing asylum seekers to work we leave vulnerable people in limbo producing a crisis of high unemployment amongst refugees, therefore creating yet another underclass.

MRI supports the *Still Human Still Here* campaign and the TUC *Let Them Work* campaign - both advocating that asylum seekers be given permission to work. MRI also supports the Refugee Action campaign *Back to Dignity* to raise asylum support to a fairer rate.

In Summary

- Many LGBTI asylum seekers are victims of torture and persecution;
- They are not allowed work;
- They are sick and need an immediate place of safety to heal and come to terms with what has happened to them;
- NASS benefits are insufficient to deal with adequate diets, medication, heating and access to therapeutic spaces;
- NASS payments spiral people into vulnerable situations, which not only create loneliness and isolation but also poverty;
- Many asylum claimants end up borrowing money and are not able to pay back their debts;
- Frequently they must juggle priorities such as food over missing a hospital or therapy appointment.
- Once gaining refugee status a person must live with the traumatic experiences from their home country, their fleeing that country and battling through an undignified asylum process;
- This is often the stage where refugees 'crash' and break down;
- MRI's research shows that during this transitional period people are very vulnerable;
- There is pressure to find housing and a job at the same time as confronting the past and coming to terms with the years of life that have been on hold;
- There are many practical issues to deal with such as acquiring bank accounts and a national insurance number;
- Since September 2011 Refugee Integration and Employment Services have been cut;
- Although at MRI we address some of these issues, there needs to be more practical and therapeutic support for refugees to transition to a new life and feel accepted in a

new society.

MRI urges policy makers to rethink the structure of the asylum process in particular giving permission to work, increase asylum support to a fairer rate and investigate the experience of refugees who need additional support when they gain refugee status. MRI asks for a fairer asylum system, which will enable refugees to get the best start to a new life in the UK and remove the barriers that leave refugees living in a cycle of poverty.