
NO SAFE REFUGE

Experiences of
LGBT asylum
seekers in
detention

The logo for Baker & McKenzie, featuring the company name in white serif font on a dark red rectangular background. The background is accented with a horizontal gradient bar transitioning from yellow to green above and below the red box.

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About Baker & McKenzie

At Baker & McKenzie we take an active stance to support and protect the human rights of all individuals, including the LGBT community, wherever and in whatever circumstances they find themselves. We believe there should be a world where people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity are accepted, can live safely and without fear and contribute as equal members of society. We're delighted to have supported this important research by Stonewall and UKLGIG. Founded in 1949, law firm Baker & McKenzie advises many of the world's most dynamic and successful business organizations through our 13,000 staff in 77 offices in 47 countries.

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In countries where same-sex relationships are criminalised or where discrimination against LGBT people is widespread, lesbian, gay, bi and trans people are often excluded by society and may face prosecution, discrimination or harassment. Even when individuals are not prosecuted, the state fails to protect them when exposed to violence by their own communities, and may even support such treatment. Harassment and violence are a common experience for many lesbian, gay, bi and trans people.

This landmark report exposes the poor treatment of one of the most vulnerable groups within our society: those fleeing persecution and seeking asylum on account of their sexual orientation and gender identity. In recent years, unknown numbers of lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT) asylum seekers have been deprived of their liberty by the UK Government and locked up for indefinite periods of time in immigration detention centres where bullying, abuse and harassment are rife.

The treatment of LGBT asylum seekers in the UK has attracted widespread attention and concern in recent years. In 2010, UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG) exposed that 98-99% of gay and lesbian asylum seekers had been refused asylum and told to go back, often to violently homophobic countries like Iran and Uganda.

In 2014, Theresa May, the then Home Secretary, commissioned the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to conduct an investigation into the treatment of gay, lesbian and bi people claiming asylum. The investigation found a fifth of asylum interviews contained stereotyping and a tenth contained inappropriate questions likely to elicit a sexual response.

Seeking asylum is not a crime, it is a right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and yet over the past 20 years the scale of immigration detention in the UK has expanded rapidly. Until last year the UK was alone in Europe in operating the Detained Fast Track, a large-scale detained process where asylum claims were determined on a highly accelerated basis in a matter of days. The UK has one of the largest detention estates in Europe and detains more migrants and asylum seekers than the vast majority of other countries. Shockingly, it is alone in detaining them indefinitely. In July 2015, the High Court found that the process was 'systemically unfair and unlawful'. However, the UK Government has consistently stated its intention to introduce a new detained procedure.

The UK immigration detention system has faced unprecedented criticism in recent times. In March 2015, the cross-party Parliamentary Inquiry into the Use of Immigration Detention delivered a damning verdict and reported that the UK detains far too many people for far too long. It recommended the UK introduce a legal limit on the length of time that migrants can be detained as part of a radical overhaul of the entire detention system. The Detention Inquiry expressed serious concerns about the hidden abuses against LGBT people.

Our research finds that LGBT asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable in immigration detention and face significant disadvantages and dangers. In detention they experience discrimination, harassment and violence from other detainees and from members of staff. The detention environment has serious long-term effects on their mental and physical well-being.

The UK is a country that proudly seeks to promote human rights including those of LGBT people on the world stage yet it has for too long detained those who flee to our shores in search of sanctuary. In order to ensure LGBT refugees are respected and protected, the use of indefinite immigration detention must end.

FOREWORD BY RUTH HUNT

STONEWALL

In many countries lesbian, gay, bi or trans people face significant levels of violence and discrimination. In 72 countries sex with someone of the same sex is still illegal, and in some of those people face the death penalty because of who they love. The isolation and fear of being LGBT in a society that rejects and persecutes those identities is acute. The fact that people are forced to flee from their families, their homes, their countries, shows how desperate this situation can be for LGBT people.

Stonewall has been working internationally, in collaboration with local groups and campaigners, since 2012. We know the most effective and sustainable way to advance international equality for lesbian, gay, bi and trans people is by working in partnership with those most affected. We also know there is no single path to equality and that every journey will be different. For these reasons, our goal of achieving acceptance without exception for everyone, whoever they are, wherever they are, is inevitably going to be difficult, and it will take time. Unfortunately, before that time there will continue to be victims of state-led persecution, who have to escape their countries.

Sadly, as this report shows, for many the UK offers little respite. The way the asylum system deals with people who are persecuted for their sexual orientation and gender identity has improved since we released our 2010 report, *No Going Back*, but there is still significant work for the Home Office to do to improve the lives and experiences of LGBT asylum seekers.

This report is the first of its kind to evidence the harrowing experiences of detained LGBT asylum seekers and exposes an atmosphere of intimidation and discrimination in detention. Instead of sanctuary, the current detention system subjects many LGBT people to the same discriminatory abuse that forced them to flee their home.

LGBT people, while in detention, are often forced to hide who they are for fear of abuse, and yet those reviewing claims accuse claimants of not being visible enough, insinuating that they aren't really LGBT. In their weakest state, they are asked to prove how weak they are, without having the space or the resources to do this. Even when they are able to put together enough evidence to support their claim, some still face being forcibly removed because UK authorities deem their home country to be 'safe'.

At Stonewall we're working with international activists so that people do not have to live with the daily threat of violence and discrimination. But while LGBT people are forced to seek asylum, we urgently need to address the system in the UK that's meant to support them. That means the Home Office working with civil society organisations, advocates and other influencers like the All Party Parliamentary Group on Global LGBT rights to address the serious concerns raised in this report. We need to ensure that when LGBT people reach the UK they are finally free to be themselves.

To create this report we had to rely on the bravery of individuals who were willing to speak out and we are eternally grateful to them. They have shown true courage in sharing with us what are clearly upsetting memories and experiences in the hope that it will create change.

THE STUDY

Between November 2015 and March 2016, Stonewall and UKLGIG conducted 22 in-depth interviews with lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT) asylum seekers. We asked the participants about their experience with staff and other detainees, their physical and emotional well-being while in detention and their access to legal and health services. The report reflects the diverse experiences among LGBT asylum seekers. Participants are from 11 different countries in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean as well as Russia. Two thirds of interviewees were held in detention in the past year and all participants were held in detention in the last three years. The duration of time spent in detention varies from 3 days to 18 months. All names have been changed to protect the identity of participants. At the time the interviews took place just three participants had gained refugee status.

In the UK there are currently 9 detention centres, known as Immigration Removal Centres. Participants were held in different detention centres in England and Scotland including Brook House, Colnbrook, Dungavel, Harmondsworth, Pennine, The Verne and Yarl's Wood. There are currently no detention centres in operation in Wales. It was not uncommon for participants to have been placed in multiple detention centres over the course of their detention.

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KEY FINDINGS

Consensual sexual acts between same-sex adults are criminalised in 72 United Nations member states and only 50 countries recognise trans people's rights to have their gender identity legally recognised. In countries that criminalise same-sex relationships, or fail to protect LGBT people, they face persecution, discrimination and violence. People who face persecution on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity can claim asylum in Britain. UK Visas and Immigration, part of the Home Office, is responsible for managing asylum claims.

LGBT claimants feel that they are treated like criminals when seeking refuge in Britain. Having experienced abuse, torture and persecution in their country of origin, many are placed in detention even though seeking asylum is not a crime. It can happen at any time throughout the asylum process. The research found that LGBT asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable and face significant disadvantages when detained. In detention they experience discrimination and harassment from other detainees and even from some members of staff. The detention environment has serious long-term effects on their mental and physical well-being.

- **LGBT asylum seekers face discrimination and harassment in detention centres.** Those who are open about their sexual orientation or gender identity often experience harassment and abuse from other detainees. Some report discrimination from staff. Many feel forced to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity while in detention as they fear bullying and discrimination.
- **Trans asylum seekers face particular threats of violence in detention.** One trans interviewee reports being placed in multiple male detention centres, even though she made it known that she identifies as a woman. Trans detainees face particular danger in having to share bedrooms and communal showers with other detainees.
- **Detention staff fail to protect LGBT asylum seekers from abuse.** Staff often lack basic understanding of LGBT issues and even display discriminatory attitudes towards LGBT detainees.
- **LGBT asylum seekers cannot fairly pursue their legal claim while being detained.** They are required to collect detailed evidence to 'prove' their sexual orientation and gender identity. Due to a lack of privacy and resources, LGBT asylum seekers are gravely disadvantaged when fulfilling these requirements while in detention.

- **Detention has serious ill-effects on the mental health of LGBT claimants.** The challenging and unsafe detention environment causes constant stress and severe anxiety. Depression, self-harm and suicide attempts were reported by most interviewees as a result.
- **Medical treatment fails to meet the particular needs of LGBT detainees.** Lack of experience with LGBT issues and discriminatory attitudes from health care staff make it difficult for LGBT people to speak openly about their health concerns and receive the treatment and medication they require.
- **Health care staff aren't equipped to respond to the specific needs of trans people.** Trans detainees often can't continue their transition, which leads not only to emotional distress but has a direct effect on their mental and physical well-being.
- **LGBT asylum seekers find it difficult to settle back into society after their experiences of detention.** Many describe experiencing severe mental health issues, isolation, discrimination and financial hardship post-detention. They are often excluded or feel unable to access diaspora or LGBT communities and therefore miss out on the support those community networks could provide.

The guy grabbed me saying he's going to break my soul. I had to press the buzzer. I can't stay in this place. The officer that came down said there's nothing he can do.

**ACHEBE, NIGERIAN
ASYLUM SEEKER**

1

'THEY ALMOST KILLED ME'

LGBT PEOPLE IN THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

It was just really a struggle. Who you are was not accepted and people feel like you are a curse. People feel like you are not normal.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

In countries where same-sex relationships are criminalised or where discrimination against LGBT people is widespread, lesbian, gay, bi and trans people are often excluded by society and may face prosecution, discrimination or harassment. Even when individuals are not prosecuted, the state fails to protect them when exposed to violence by their own communities, and may even support such treatment. Harassment and violence are a common experience for many lesbian, gay, bi and trans people.

Being lesbian is something like an abomination. It is unacceptable, completely unacceptable.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Over there my parents are against it and society in general is not accepting of transgender people. To survive you have to be in a group of transgender people who support you or else you have to do prostitution or begging.

VANI, INDIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

We used to be told that homosexuality is not allowed in our country, in our culture, in our community. When you are growing up it has been put in your mind that a man should marry a woman.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

It is not just forbidden. It is seen as shame.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

Interviewees described how they have faced immense pressure, discrimination and violence in their daily lives. Many were living under the constant fear of being persecuted by their immediate communities.

If the government catches you they can send you to 15 years in prison. If citizens catch you, an angry mob, they kill the person immediately! Immediately! And nobody will challenge them.

RASHIDI, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I was being beaten because I was with a woman. They almost killed me. 'This is against the law! Why are you into women? There are so many men out there! Why can't you just be with a man?' I got raped and then I was taken to the hospital.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM

LGBT individuals in some contexts experience horrendous acts of violence and abuse. Several interviewees reported being raped and attacked. Some barely escaped being killed. The majority experienced physical violence.

I have been shot, I have been raped, I have been beaten. I just got fed up because Jamaica is a very homophobic place. They don't tolerate LGBT people. You have to live a life of lies.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

He said: 'Today I'm going to kill you.' I didn't know what was happening. I'm still asking 'what did I do?' He was beating me up. He boiled water and wanted to pour it over my body. I used my hand to throw the bowl out of his hand. This is what gave me this scar.

RASHIDI, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I got attacked several times. My ex-boyfriend got attacked several times. One of my friends was killed, as a result of the so called 'Grindr attacks'. He was in Moscow and there was a group of guys, who got with gay guys on Grindr, and they would come to their place and they would kill them. All over Russia, all of a sudden, it was like a new wave of homophobia. All those people being killed and raped.

ANDREI, RUSSIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

They beat the hell out of me. I was tied to the tree in the compound. Then they put me in the hot room and they locked me in there. I didn't have any food or drink. I was just treated like a slave. I was there for about two months. They would send these men to rape me. Maybe they were bringing them to come and sleep with me so that I forget about women.

IFE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

When the incident happened that my boyfriend was killed, I didn't know what to do. The only thing I had on my mind was how to get out of this country. It was very early. I was like 'you should not open the door', but he wanted to find out why there's banging on the door. He opened the door. Someone just grabbed him. The only thing I heard was him screaming for help. I still regret that I couldn't help. I just had to run. I jumped from the window and I just ran. I was trying to get out of that environment. I just kept running just to find somewhere to hide.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Interviewees described how family members had turned against them. This included being sent to facilities where they were tortured through so-called gay 'conversion' therapy, subjecting them to physical violence, or even making attempts on their lives. Participants explained that in many cases it is family or neighbours of LGBT people who inform the police, leading to their arrest.

Nobody will accept you. Nobody will actually think you deserve to live a life of a human being. They will treat you differently. They will call you all sorts of names. My father thought I had mental health problems. He took me to a mental hospital. It was too much. I experienced so much torture there.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

They locked me away and ordered these guys to come and stay the night in the room with me so that I won't run away. They raped me every night.

IFE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

One time they found me kissing a girl. They were really mad about it and beat me up. Some of my relatives said they did not want me to come to their houses any longer.

ANANDA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The very first relationship I had in Nigeria got me into trouble because when my girlfriend's family found out it was not good news. They made sure she didn't get in contact with me again. Her brother ganged up and raped me.

KEIRA, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I was attacked by my husband's family. I ended up separating from him. I went to my parent's house and even there I was abused. They attacked me with a knife. Homosexuality is considered a crime. They will kill you.

LISA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

He said: 'Your brother-in-law has sent us to kill you. You are gay and your brother-in-law isn't accepting you.'

BILAL, PAKISTANI ASYLUM SEEKER

Police, security forces and prison guards themselves are often the perpetrators of violence. Some interviewees were put in prison because of being LGBT, where they faced violence from other inmates while in custody.

I had guards who used to come to the room and ask me to show them horrible sexual acts, how lesbians have sexual relationships. It was horrific and they always would pick on me. I got raped by two guards one of them who really used to pick on me so much. They would just keep mocking me. They would always make sure that they do something horrific. They really tortured me.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I got raped in the prison cell. The prisons in Africa are very dangerous. They didn't take care of me. It stank. It was terrible. We were 10 people in one cell. It is the worst place you can think of.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Participants described having to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity by all means possible in order to avoid persecution, harassment and discrimination. Relationships are kept secret. People who are not perceived to be conforming to gender norms have a particularly difficult time. Many LGBT people are under immense pressure to create parallel lives to disguise their sexual orientation or gender identity.

It's my country, my background, my family and my society. For years and years and years, I had to hide and I had to live as two or three personalities at the same time; with my family or with my colleagues and then with my girlfriend. It is difficult, it is really, really difficult.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

The relationship was a secret, so I had to make sure that nobody knew what I was doing and what was going on because it was completely unacceptable in my culture, my everything – culture, family, friends, government, authorities.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

My mother said she was going to kill herself. So to make her happy I had to have two kids with a man.

TEMI, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I did agree to an engagement because my parents threatened that otherwise they are going to kill themselves.

SATHI, SRI LANKAN ASYLUM SEEKER

As a last resort Britain might promise a life of safety and dignity. Gaining refuge is considered by many the only chance to survive.

I would rather be a mother and a grandmother that doesn't see my kids but can talk to them than to be a dead one that they can't even talk to. If I go there they are going to kill me.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

It was time for me to move just to have a place where I can live as I am, without fear, just to be myself. I wanted to find security and safety so I came to claim asylum.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

2

'BACK IN A CELL'

SEEKING ASYLUM AND BEING DETAINED

To stay in the UK, they took my freedom.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

Each year thousands of asylum seekers are placed in detention in Britain. The government admits not knowing how many LGBT asylum seekers they place in detention. LGBT asylum seekers are fleeing countries where they fear violence and imprisonment. Some have been imprisoned because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and were subjected to profound violence and abuse. LGBT asylum seekers experience significant distress when they find that they will be then held in detention centres after seeking safety in Britain.

Asylum claimants can be detained at any point of their claim process. Some of the participants were detained under the Detained Fast Track system which has now been ruled an unlawful procedure. Cases under the Detained Fast Track system were considered to be able to be decided quickly, often because the claimant's country of origin is considered 'safe' by UK authorities. Countries are considered 'safe' when it is assumed that there is no serious risk of persecution of people entitled to live there. This system was inappropriate for LGBT asylum seekers, many of whom have experienced persecution and abuse in those 'safe countries' even if the country officially does not criminalise being LGBT. It also failed to accommodate for the complexity of LGBT related cases. Participants told how they were shocked when informed that they were being detained. Interviewees described feeling like they were being persecuted again for seeking protection.

It felt like I was betrayed because if somebody seeks asylum, they're just trying to get some protection, but then you're detaining them. It's like you're putting them in prison for having come to you for help. It didn't make sense to me.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

They said: 'We're detaining you.' I said: 'What is detain?' They said: 'You are going to detention centre. You are not going home again.' I said: 'What about my asylum? My partner is just there.' They said no. They detained me and they put me in the van to take me to detention centre.

RASHIDI, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Interviewees described feeling under constant threat of persecution in their country of origin. Those arrested because of their sexual orientation or gender identity suffered abuse, violence and rape in prison. LGBT people seeking safety in Britain experience significant distress when they find themselves held in a detention centre.

This was bringing it all back again. I could see exactly how it happened in Uganda. The same thing was in detention. The guards at the detention centre never abused me but that was the only difference. It irritated me just looking at them and sometimes at night I could wake up with a panic attack. My heart is pounding and I am scared. I just think I am in that cell in Uganda again.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I got flashbacks of everything I've been through in Africa. I've been free for two or three years and then here I am back in a cell.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I was crying the whole night. I could not eat. I had serious headache. I had to request for a paracetamol or anything. They said they couldn't provide me any medications and I could not sleep the whole night. I didn't sleep for 48 hours. I didn't eat for 48 hours because I was so scared.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

[On the way to the airport to be forcibly removed:] One officer said to me: 'I noticed while we were going through your bags you have a lot of boxers and you have a lot of hats, you wear a lot of men's clothing. We're here to protect you and when we go to Zimbabwe we don't want you to draw attention to yourself. So we're going to stop over in Kenya and we can maybe buy you some appropriate clothes in the airport before we leave for Zimbabwe. Maybe we can lose the boxers.' At that moment I said to him: 'Do you know that this actually shows how corrupt your system is? You've just met me and you know that you can't take me where you're trying to take me while I am who I am. You're trying to change me so that I don't have difficulties!'

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Not being able to leave the detention centre, limited access to the outside world and the presence of guards makes detention seem like prison to many interviewees. The accommodation, lack of adequate food and interaction with staff can be challenging. While prohibited to work outside of detention, detainees can work inside the detention facility for £1 per hour. The environment makes many LGBT asylum seekers feel like they are suspected criminals.

When we went to Yarl's Wood at night time, it was scary. It is in the woods. It isn't an urban zone. It was just a big building with big doors and loads of security. It was horrible, it was just horrible.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

I'm not a prisoner. I'm an asylum seeker. I seek asylum. I have never been in prison. I have never committed a crime in my life.

RASHIDI, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

We're denied so much. We can't do anything. It just breaks you down. We're not criminals. We have not committed any crime. We're just coming from a country that can't protect us. We're coming here to look for safety and instead we're being tortured again.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I can't say I felt safe because I felt like I was in prison. When you don't feel like you've done anything wrong and you are kept in a place like that you don't feel safe at all.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

It is not a place I even want my worst enemy to be in. It is not good.

KEIRA, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

People that are detained are given no information about the length of their stay. Britain is one of few countries in the world that practises indefinite detention. This lack of information causes severe stress in the detainees. The indefinite nature of detention is very challenging. The duration of detention can vary widely, from a couple of days to years.

You tell yourself 'it's not going to be long, you're going to be out soon', but obviously you're seeing people that have been in there for three years. You're thinking: 'Am I going to be like them?'

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The prolonged-ness of detaining people is what I feel is unacceptable. It is unacceptable in a country that really respects human rights and is internationally known as one of the countries that respects people's rights. It is unbelievable that they have a system like this detention centre and detaining people, women, indefinitely in there.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

LGBT detainees live under constant fear of being forcibly removed from Britain. The thought of what could happen to them in their country of origin causes great anxiety. This is fuelled by the experience of seeing other detainees injected with sedatives and being forcibly removed.

This girl had mental problems. She had come from Africa where she got raped. In detention they injected her and dragged her like a piece of cloth to deport her. While they were doing it they locked us down.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Yarl's Wood is not safe. They inject people, if they say you must go and you refuse. They have injected people in front of me. When they want to inject people they lock all doors. They lock everybody inside their rooms. They come and collect the person and take you to the airport.

LISA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

If you are resisting they will give you the injection and you just go to sleep all day. They will just drag you out unconsciously with your feet on the floor.

TEMI, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

'I DIDN'T FEEL SAFE'
LGBT ASYLUM SEEKERS
AND OTHER DETAINEES

People spat at me because they don't like
gay people.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

LGBT asylum seekers describe experiencing harassment and discrimination from other detainees because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many feel forced to hide their identity while in detention to avoid being bullied. As a consequence LGBT asylum seekers in detention also suffer particular isolation.

I couldn't tell anyone. This is prison for god's sake. You know I couldn't share that. There was a risk of being bullied or people take away your food. I had to keep to myself.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The reality for detainees who are known to be LGBT is stark. They are bullied, harassed and even physically attacked by other detainees. Many interviewees were afraid to talk openly about attacks that they had experienced in detention.

People used to say 'why are you getting boobs' and tease me.
VANI, INDIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

He was in the gallery and he called: 'Hey! Mr Gay, I love you! I want to fuck you.' I was so scared. I just went in my room. Here in detention it is the same as where I came from. I was so scared.

BILAL, PAKISTANI ASYLUM SEEKER

My cell mate was rude to me when I told him I was gay. He never talked to me again.

OMAR, PAKISTANI ASYLUM SEEKER

They told us: 'You're practising this thing lesbianism and you're a choir leader, you should stop it. Because of you, people don't want to join anymore!' She even said: 'I'm personally leaving because of you.'

KAMALI, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I didn't feel safe. People called me names and said not nice things to me. I just felt like this is the place where they may not harm you directly but will point fingers and say things. That's why I just kept to myself.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

For trans detainees this environment can be particularly challenging and dangerous. One participant told of being placed in a male detention centre despite making it clear that she identified as a woman and had been taking steps to transition. Participants described how detention centres failed to take basic steps that could help trans people to feel safer, like providing private spaces to shower and get changed.

I had to fight it out. I had to tell them that I should be having a private room. I can't share a room with other men. It is for my safety. The next problem is the communal showers. Obviously I can't go to the shower and people are watching me. If they see me, I would be in big trouble. I couldn't use the shower. For 15 days I couldn't use the shower. That was really bad.

VANI, INDIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Those LGBT detainees who do not conform to traditional gender expectations or identify as trans are often singled out for discrimination and harassment by other detainees.

There was another lesbian girl in detention. They told her: 'Okay if you want to be a boy show us if you have a dick! What makes you walk around like that? What makes you dress like a boy? You're a girl! You're a woman!'

KAMALI, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

There was one guy who was very camp. Everyone was making fun of him. I think this was the reason why I didn't want to be the centre of attention, like he was. He was a bit camp and everyone was whistling and calling him names. They were making fun of him about the way he was walking.

OMAR, PAKISTANI REFUGEE

I saw a trans woman from Thailand. When she was passing other detainees, they laughed at her and made some comments.

IFE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Most of them would look at me, a masculine presenting woman, like: 'Who is he like why is he allowed to walk around in the centre.' The other ladies would look at me like: 'What is he doing? He's a boy and he's walking around here. What's going on?'

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Isolation is a further consequence for LGBT asylum seekers in detention.

Nobody wants to stay with me. I was just alone. People were just looking at me like I am not normal.

BILAL, PAKISTANI ASYLUM SEEKER

The straight ones were like 'you people are so sick' and when they come to eat they stay in one section. We stay in a different section.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

You are sometimes preparing your case and you speak to your solicitor. I think my roommate heard me. He said: 'My god, you have HIV! Why didn't you tell me before? I can't stay with this person! I am going to catch HIV!' Then he went outside to tell most of the people from Uganda.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

Some of them in our group were not even lesbians but because they were hanging around with us they'd be called lesbians too.

KAMALI, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Until I got released, I never ever told anyone. I said that I am married to a girl. I have to be careful what I am talking about to my boyfriend on the phone because I am sharing with someone the room. I have to make sure that I am not exposing my sexuality when I am speaking with my partner.

SATHI, SRI LANKAN ASYLUM SEEKER

'THEY BULLY YOU'

STAFF IN THE DETENTION CENTRE

I see things in the detention centre that are not right. I don't care where we are from, what we do and how badly they want to get us out of their country. You don't do certain things to people. We are human beings. We are not animals. The staff looked at me like I was a disease.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Some staff demonstrate discriminatory attitudes towards LGBT people. LGBT asylum seekers report experiencing discrimination and bullying from staff due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Interviewees report that detention officers fail to protect LGBT asylum seekers from the abuse and harassment of other detainees.

AN ATMOSPHERE OF INTIMIDATION

Some interviewees reported accounts of inappropriate remarks, intimidation and even having their food thrown away as a form of punishment by detention officers.

They commented on a couple of girls eating, saying: 'Look at them, they're like animals.'

SARA, ALGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Some members of staff were very intimidating. They bully you. I had an experience where a member of staff always bullied me because I was a member of this refugee advocacy group.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

One of the officers said that we're criminals. That it is his detention centre. That he's British, and it's his country. There was this night when they wanted to lock me in and I was like: 'Officer, I have been asking for my medication, are you guys going to lock me up and not let me have any?' I was just trying to understand what's going to happen. And then he just pushed me. All I was asking for was my medication.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Many female interviewees described how they felt especially uncomfortable with the predominance of male staff. There is a lack of privacy with unannounced and frequent roll calls. Female interviewees reported feeling shame and discomfort when their rooms were searched by male officers.

What I found really disgusting: it is a woman's detention centre and 99% of the security were men. Come on we're ladies. I don't care where we're from, what kind of sexual orientation we have; we're ladies you can't have mostly men guarding us. I am in the room naked and they just open the door and come in on me.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Male staff entering the room unannounced or searching female detainees is a very upsetting experience. Many female detainees feel highly uncomfortable in this environment. There is no privacy.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

They are so disrespectful. They don't even knock they just open the door, they don't have any kind of respect, just no privacy and most of them are male guards and these are women.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

DISCRIMINATION BY STAFF

A hostile environment means LGBT detainees are reluctant to talk to staff about problems that they experience in the detention centre because they are not confident that they will receive support. Some interviewees stated that they experienced inappropriate remarks and discriminatory behaviour from staff because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

I told all the staff at the night shift that I am trans. There were a few officers who were not so welcoming. They emphasised 'Mister' when talking to me. I felt they have to be trained. They don't know how to approach a transgender person I suppose. It's making fun of me.

VANI, INDIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The officer didn't approach the heterosexual couple, she approached the lesbian couple straight away. She didn't even say to them excuse me. She said: 'There are different religions in here and different cultures in here I ask you to respect that and there are also children in here.'

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The chaplain said to 'stop doing this nonsense and go back'. He asked me if I am speaking with my parents. I said no because they are not happy with me because of my sexuality. He then told me that 'if you are not happy with your parents then God isn't going to be happy with you. So make your parents happy and go back'. It means leave my sexuality and just make them happy. I was so confused about the Home Office. The Home Office talks about my country, but I am having the same problems in their detention centre. They control their staff, but I am still experiencing discrimination.

SATHI, SRI LANKAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Sometimes they will make remarks that are abusive like: 'Oh but you are a lesbian! You said you are a lesbian so why are you sending a letter. I thought you were a lesbian are you sending it to your boyfriend?' I said: 'Why would you make such a remark I am sending post to my cousin!' It is very intimidating.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I tried as much as I can to keep things to myself because I was not sure if I would be accepted or how I would be treated seeing that some of the staff are not very nice to you in detention.

KEIRA, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I had no bag with me, no clothes and stuff. The officer there in Harmondsworth was saying feel free to wear the clothes you have on. It's like making a joke; in a male prison wearing female clothes. I felt significantly humiliated. They make you feel like you are different. That difference makes you vulnerable for all sorts of harm, physical harm. That's why I chose not to do it and asked them for the jumpers and trousers.

VANI, INDIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

FAILING TO SECURE SAFETY

Many interviewees said that they didn't feel safe and protected by detention staff. LGBT detainees experience harassment and discrimination from other detainees, however many detention officers fail to respond to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic incidents. This leaves LGBT detainees feeling vulnerable and unprotected.

The guy grabbed me saying he's going to break my soul. I had to press the buzzer. I can't stay in this place. The officer that came down, said there's nothing he can do. We had to deal with it. That was another nightmare for me.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Another detainee pushed me and he abused me. He said you look like a fucking gay. I said: 'Excuse me you don't need to swear at me like that!' I told the officers but they didn't take it seriously. I spoke to them but they didn't do anything. They just keep avoiding it. They said: 'You just stay away from him. He is not a nice guy'.

HUSSAIN, PAKISTANI REFUGEE

I had my head rammed through a door. I was bullied. The guy they put me with was a nightmare, the guy was a bully. I reported that but nothing was done about it.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Interviewees said that no specific support was given to them to report abusive and discriminatory incidents. LGBT detainees feel that complaints are not taken seriously by members of staff.

Even after presenting our opinions to the managers nothing has been done. It was never authorised. They're saying: 'If we authorise this, other people will come up with their problems'.

KAMALI, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

We put forward complaints and they disappeared. Nobody knows what happened to the complaints. When we went forward to the equalities manager he said we filled in the wrong form. So we filled in the right form and then he said he didn't see the form. These forms were actually handed directly to his office not to any box or any middle man. So we filled it out again and he didn't see that one either. Nothing was done about these complaints.

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Most detention centres offer the services of an Equality or LGBT Officer whose role is intended to provide advice and support LGBT detainees with any challenges they face inside detention. However, awareness of these services varies among detainees often because information about these services isn't accessible. The Equality or LGBT Officer is often not a full-time position but rather individuals volunteer to take it on as an additional task to their regular work. This limits the visibility and availability of these much needed services. Interviewees reported instances in which detention officers were reluctant to provide details on how to access the LGBT Officer.

The detention officer said: 'No, what is the LGBT officer?' I said: 'You don't know LGBT officer? Who is in your building? He's in your detention centre and you don't know?' They said: 'No, no, you explain to us.' I said: 'I am gay, and an LGBT officer means lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender. He is here in every detention centre to support us. So please call him. I want to meet him'. Then they very clearly smiled and it was a disgusting situation. I felt embarrassed. I said: 'Why are you doing this?'

BILAL, PAKISTANI ASYLUM SEEKER

I could not talk to anybody inside about me. They don't even provide any LGBT support or advice in there. If it was there then I didn't know. I looked around.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

When we went to this meeting with the managers, they said to us; 'We have officers that are responsible for LGBT and they should actually be coming up to you and speaking to you about everything.' I've been here for quite a while now and I've done nearly every single job in the centre. I never ever, ever have once seen an officer walk up to anyone and say hi I'm so and so. The only time that I've seen officers even bother to come and speak to you is when you have a flight ticket or you try to commit suicide.

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I wish I had got that information when I was in detention I wouldn't have suffered for a long time.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

Detention centres also offer faith guidance services. Faith is an important aspect for many LGBT asylum seekers. Some interviewees reported that their faith was a crucial coping mechanism. Therefore it is especially important that for LGBT people of faith inclusive religious support is available in detention centre.

When I went to the church in the detention centre, I was treated different because they didn't expect a gay person to be in church.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Even though I am a lesbian I still worship. I still go to church. I still worship because I am a Christian.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I am Muslim I tried to find an Imam but there was none there. It was the priest of the church so I used to go and talk to him.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

'I TRIED TO COMMIT SUICIDE'

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH IN DETENTION

I would have preferred to take my own life than being in there. It is very, very painful in terms of being stigmatised and not able to disclose my identity. You would prefer not to be there rather being in a cage or in the darkness.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

The impact that detention centres have on the mental health of LGBT detainees is stark. LGBT asylum seekers often have to cope alone with traumatic experiences in an environment where they run the risk of either isolation or victimisation by other detainees and staff. Many have a difficult time coping with limited access to adequate treatment. Feelings of complete loss of control, anxiety and fear are commonplace. It can be an immensely distressing experience which drives some to attempt to take their own lives.

MENTAL HEALTH IN DETENTION

Interviewees have suffered serious abuse, rape and torture in their country of origin on account of discrimination and inequality against LGBT people. Many experience significant symptoms of trauma such as flashbacks and recurring nightmares in addition to serious mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the violence and discrimination they have experienced. The Home Office agrees that people who have suffered torture, have suicidal intentions, and whose health is injuriously affected by continued detention should not be placed in detention.

I was having terrible nightmares, flashbacks. Just so many thoughts are coming back, things that I had forgotten. Things that I said to myself I would never ever even think about again. It started to become out of my control. It was difficult. It got to the extent where the officers had to come check on me every night to make sure I don't do anything to myself.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I was depressed. I couldn't sleep all night. I had sleepless nights all throughout detention. I had migraines all the time. Even the days of the interview, I just had migraines. I just had to keep sane, for the sake of it.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I am having very difficult moments. I get flashbacks of exactly what happened in Uganda. I get bad nightmares. When I was in detention I even heard voices of this man that raped me who would try to tell me I am worthless. I have tried twice to take an overdose when I was at detention because I couldn't take it anymore. The voice of this man would drive me mad.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Lost, regretting, deceived, disappointed, very weak, you know like lifeless.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

In some cases LGBT detainees feel that they can't continue living under these conditions. The constant threat of being forcibly removed to a country where they will face persecution, violence or even death, coupled with the stigmatisation and isolation many experience while in detention, pushes them to consider or even to attempt to take their own lives.

I was taught to be a good person. When I was detained my life completely changed. If I had the chance I would have committed suicide in detention.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

I tried to commit suicide twice. I didn't know how to do it but I had that urge in me to do it. I broke the mirrors and tried to cut myself.

IFE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Did you hear about the girl that jumped off the balcony? If you met her you would have spent the whole day laughing with her. For this girl to go to that extent where she would jump, it had to be really intense.

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

You find people there that do self-harm. They want to kill themselves once they hear that they are going to be deported to their countries. People do things there that people won't normally want to do to themselves but because of the situation they are in they are forced to do it. You are just depressed in there.

KEIRA, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

When I was in detention I tried to commit suicide. That was a period whereby the whole situation in detention really got to me. I never thought I would be in that situation where I would think of taking my own life.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The impact that detention centres have on the mental health of LGBT detainees is significant. LGBT asylum seekers often have to cope alone with traumatic experiences in an environment where they run the risk of either isolation or victimisation by other detainees and staff. Experiences of rapid weight and hair loss, anxiety, loss of appetite and sleeping problems while in detention were described by many interviewees. Most interviewees described their environment as directly causing a deterioration of their mental health and well-being.

You start getting mental problems because you can't talk to anybody. The walls are so high. The only fresh air you can get is going in the garden and that is just at a certain time.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

People there self-harm because they lose their heads. People do have panic attacks. People do stuff in there, strange stuff, but you just have to block everything out. You see stuff but you're trying for your own good to be sane, otherwise you lose your head as well.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Once I got so depressed that I couldn't stop screaming. It was the day when they found a 40 year old woman in the bathroom dead.

SARA, ALGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Sometimes when I was depressed in my room I didn't eat. I lost 6 kg in detention in 22 days.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

I felt isolated. There are no words that can describe how I felt. You feel like you are in a world of your own. You are in a place where you can't breathe. I feel like the whole place is caving in on me. I was so depressed. I didn't eat.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

FAILING TO PROVIDE TREATMENT

Interviewees described a culture of disbelief when talking to health staff about their physical and mental health issues. Such problems are often dismissed as a means of trying to get out of detention even if the detainee demonstrates an apparent suicide risk. For LGBT asylum seekers who are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues, failure to provide appropriate care can lead to severe deterioration.

The man is telling me that I am not depressed. I don't look like someone who is depressed. If I was depressed I wouldn't dress the way I was dressed because I am always clean. I said: 'Listen I don't like to be messy. I don't like messy places'. He said to me I am not a depressed person. I was like, 'what does a depressed person look like?'

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

You have been going through a mental breakdown and then you are being given a regular nurse because there is no mental health nurse in the centre. You are telling her that you are having flashbacks, you are having suicidal thoughts and she is saying: 'Look; go and read the bible!'

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I was so weak. I couldn't breathe properly. I pressed the emergency bell and officers came up and asked me what's wrong, I tried to explain to them that I can't breathe properly and I'm feeling really, really dizzy. Then they put me in a wheelchair to take me to the medical unit. But as we were going the officer was asking me: 'What's wrong? Do you have a flight?' I said to him: 'Even if I had a ticket, I'm not acting!'.

KAMALI, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Interviewees also reported problems with medication. All medicine is taken away from asylum seekers upon arrival at the detention centre. It can take weeks to receive a replacement. A lengthy wait for essential medication such as anti-depressants and HIV-medication that require a precise and regular intake can have serious consequences for the patient.

I had to give the doctor my heart medication. When I went there the next day they said that the medication is still under investigation. I didn't have my medication for like two weeks.

KAMALI, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

If your medication runs out, like for me my HIV medication, I have to wait for three weeks.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Confiscating medication can have additional consequences for trans people. Some trans asylum seekers have started their transition in secrecy in their country of origin, where they have had no other option than to self-medicate. Taking away their medication without offering alternative treatment can lead to physical disruption and severe mental distress.

The medical staff is really bad. I was self-medicating so they didn't provide me with any kind of medicine. I have to take regular cycle of hormones. I normally get hormonal implants. Then in detention they told me I can't have any kind of hormones. If I don't have the hormones I get hot flushes and all those hormonal imbalance things. I get like blisters, get depressed, get anxiety and all sorts of stuff.

VANI, INDIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I had been diagnosed with HIV and of course being a lesbian I never had any sexual relationships with men. I believe while I was in a prison in Uganda I could have contracted this virus because I was abused several times by four men.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

'HOW MUCH OF
A LESBIAN ARE
YOU?'

DETAINED AND ON TRIAL

I felt like a criminal.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

Legal cases concerning sexual orientation and gender identity are complex and require extensive preparation. LGBT asylum seekers in detention face specific barriers to being able to prepare a successful claim.

LGBT asylum seekers are required to provide witness statements as evidence of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many people fear persecution in the country of origin if they are associated with someone that identifies as LGBT. Being in detention makes it almost impossible to discreetly reach out to witnesses and gather those statements. Due to time and resource restrictions LGBT detainees are often unable to provide the evidence to pursue their case.

It felt like I was deprived of getting this evidence together, which is the reasons why actually I had my refusal. The first reason they gave was 'you couldn't get your statement from your partner' but how am I going to do this when you've detained me?

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

It took me weeks to get the bank to send my details to the detention. The two weeks expired and the legal aid told me they can't take me on because I wasn't within the time. They told me I couldn't provide any evidence that I was not working. I am detained! I can't pay for my legal fees. When I was there to go for my bail they ask for documents. You can't provide them because you don't have access to them.

KEIRA, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Most sites are blocked so if you wanted to do research on your country's LGBT situation all sites are blocked.

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

LGBT detainees have sensitive and complex cases. The cases require thorough preparation with the help of lawyers in a private setting that assures discretion and confidentiality. The constant presence of detention officers and other detainees makes it difficult for LGBT asylum seekers to speak freely with their solicitors and other people that could provide evidence.

There is no privacy. You are discussing on phone your case in front of other people. There's no place of privacy.

BILAL, PAKISTANI ASYLUM SEEKER

You don't have any privacy at all.

LISA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I didn't feel like there was any privacy for me to talk with my solicitor.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The screening interview is the first stage of an asylum claim. It is followed by a full interview, which assesses the credibility of the applicant's claim. For most LGBT detainees the substantive interview will take place while in detention.

Many participants reported that their interviewers lacked understanding of the diversity of LGBT identities and even used questions that were targeted to gain explicit content which has been strongly discouraged by the Home Office in a new guidance note issued in 2015. Interviewees said that some staff continue to hold outdated stereotypes regarding gender identity and sexual orientation.

The interviewing officer was surprised to see a person like me talking about these things. He doesn't believe I am transgender. 'You don't look transgender!'

VANI, INDIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

'When did I first have sex with my partner?' he asked this kind of questions.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

He said to me: 'So if you knew you were a lesbian why would you go with your girlfriend into a bar and kiss her yet you know in Uganda it's not allowed.'

KAMALI, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Before I ended up in detention I didn't feel the need to go outside and shout yes I'm a lesbian. Now everything I do I have to prove something. If I don't put pictures of myself or my new haircut up on my Facebook, they will be saying I'm not open enough. That's how it is: 'how much of a lesbian are you? Do you go to gay clubs? Do you hang around with other lesbians? How many lesbians can write a letter for you to say yes I know her she's a lesbian? And of those lesbians how many of those lesbians have been accepted by the Home Office or are British?'

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Bi interviewees reported that they felt their sexual orientation was doubted because they have been with both men and women. They felt that the interviewing officer considered their claim as not credible, even though bi people face persecution and abuse in their country of origin.

It's possible that the case worker was just a little bit homophobic herself. The whole interview didn't make sense: 'Were you naked, were you half-naked?' What does that have to do with me being bi? Maybe it's how she was trained or maybe she was trying to put in a few tactics of her own to make a decision.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

One relationship was a male person, the second male as well. Then I was with female whom I married and had four kids with. I think that's where the problem is.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

He said: 'I was expecting a woman.' Then I said: 'Cheeky, I am a woman!' Then he goes: 'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry!' It was funny but then at the same time I was thinking okay so if I can walk into here and you can actually mistake me for a man just like that, what'll happen in Africa.

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Some interviewees reported similar experiences with other people that were directly or indirectly involved with their case, such as judges, barristers and interpreters. One participant explained that after having complained to Home Office officials of experiencing homophobia from the interpreter, she was made to use that same interpreter again when continuing the interview for her claim:

When I went to court the barrister said to me 'you say you're a lesbian but you've never been involved in any groups or so on and so forth', I said 'well, I am a lesbian I don't need to be involved in a group to show that I'm a lesbian. Since I've been in this country I don't feel the need for protection of a group'.

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The interpreter was saying things that I didn't say. I was talking about my girlfriend and she was saying like he instead of she. I had to explain to her I am talking about my girlfriend it is not my boyfriend. She made me feel that I had to prove myself to her not to the officer. [The next time] when I went to the Home Office and I ask if it was going to be the same interpreter they said yeah. I said: 'I don't like her. I don't feel comfortable to talk to her!' The lady from the Home Office talked to her manager on the phone and she said that the interpreter was already booked and they couldn't change her. So I had the second part with the same interpreter.

KARIMA, MOROCCAN REFUGEE

Many found the approach of interviewing officers intimidating.

The immigration officer who interviewed me was intimidating. I found her very intimidating because the way she asks you the questions. It is like you are actually a criminal. She is being very patronising. You can tell that everything you are telling her she actually doesn't believe you. She believes you are telling lies.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The Home Office doesn't take time to really understand people's stories and treat them fairly. I don't know what it is but it seems like all they care about is looking for loopholes to send you back regardless.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I was intimidated. The interviewing officer said to me: 'I am the one speaking, when I ask you something you answer.' So to be honest I was not comfortable at all.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

I had this Home Office rep came in there and spoke to me. He said to me: 'You know you will never get your papers in this country. Don't ever try. We already booked a flight for you and when you go back to Jamaica what you have to do is call the Red Cross and let them give you refuge.'

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

The lady who was interviewing me was cold. I was in a bad state when she was interviewing me in the first screening. I was very emotional and I couldn't stop crying and she didn't even ask 'do you need any help'. She was just sitting there. She was just watching me.

OMAR, PAKISTANI REFUGEE

It was so horrible. I started crying and I said to her: 'Look, I don't really understand how these things work but I don't think you're really right to take my notes.' She said: 'No, I'm going to use these to refuse you.' It was just weird. It was like she was bullying me in the interview. She kept saying: 'This is my interview and I can conduct it as I see fit'.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

'I JUST LOST EVERYTHING'

POST-DETENTION

I lost everything in detention. I lost six months. I lost even friends. I just lost everything. Now I am in a jungle with nothing. I have nothing. Since I came out my life is upside down. I am traumatised. I have poor memory. I don't sleep.

TEMI, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

LGBT asylum seekers experience lasting effects from being detained, even after their release. Life after detention can be particularly challenging for LGBT claimants who often do not have the support of family, friends or wider community networks because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The experience of detention continues to have a negative impact on their mental well-being.

Released from detention without warning, they often don't have anywhere to stay and are given just enough money to buy a train ticket. It can take months to receive accommodation and financial aid from the Home Office. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work while their claim is ongoing and thus need to rely on other networks and sources of social support. This can be a specific disadvantage for LGBT asylum seekers who may not feel able to disclose their true grounds for asylum with these support networks.

You don't have any money, you know how difficult it is if you don't have a job. I had a guardian who used to support me but they've been asking me why is it that I don't want to return home? I've run out of answers.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Even if LGBT asylum seekers receive housing, some are exposed to harassment in their new accommodation.

For the last two months I was staying in Home Office accommodation and I was sharing it with another person. He stigmatised me for my sexuality. He told my neighbour that I am gay, he used the F word. It really affected me.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

One night my landlord fought with me. He threw my luggage out of the house and he bullied me, abused me directly 'gay, girly, fuck off' in my language like different words that were very rubbish things. So then I called the police.

BILAL, PAKISTANI ASYLUM SEEKER

Many LGBT asylum seekers find it a struggle to settle back into their communities resulting in further isolation.

I struggle sometimes to have conversations with people because the past life, what have you done with it, you have been in incarceration. I tried to like start going to gay bars and all that but when I go there, I don't know how to talk to people. I was struggling.

ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Some people don't have that support. Most of them don't. When you get detained no one wants to talk to you. No one wants to keep in touch.

OMAR, PAKISTANI REFUGEE

Interviewees described how their experience in detention has a long-lasting impact on their well-being.

I had to start my transition the second time. Now I am struggling to go back to where I was before 4 months in detention. My facial hair has grown back now. I look more male than I used to look before.

VANI, INDIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

It will always affect me because people look at you like you are nothing really. They look down their nose at you. You just feel like you are unwanted. I am suicidal. They had me on suicidal watch because I tried to kill myself a couple of times. The last time I tried to jump in front of the train. I was in the psychiatric ward at a hospital.

BRIANNA, JAMAICAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I'm still having flashbacks. Two weeks ago I almost committed suicide. You don't know your fate. This is what it's like to not know your fate.

IFE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

When I got released I thought I don't want to come here again because otherwise I will kill myself. If I come again to this place I'm going to kill myself.

SATHI, SRI LANKAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Since then I have not recovered well because it affected my life. I am not the same person who I used to be, even like now I am still taking this antidepressant tablets because it affected my life. I still have that fear in me, what is going to happen to me.

MUKASA, UGANDAN REFUGEE

I had to go to the hospital actually a couple of days because I still couldn't sleep. I thought that I was actually dreaming I am outside. I don't think I am, I think I am still in Yarl's Wood. I didn't believe I was out. I still could not sleep. I seemed to have flash backs too.

GASHA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

It's a constant cycle of seeking acceptance. A constant cycle in the whole immigration, detention, that whole sector is a constant cycle of wanting to be accepted, of wanting people to understand you. You want people to understand your situation, what you're going to go through if you go back there, what you're going through now being in this place. It's ongoing.

MAIBA, ZIMBABWEAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I have come to this country not because I want depend on public funds. I have come for my safety. My safety is paramount here because this is a country that respects people's rights, human rights. That's why LGBT live here freely. We admire this. We come here and we want help and we want safety. But nobody believes you. Nobody believes you. It is held against me that I didn't come out immediately but finally I have come out! Just listen to me and give me a chance to provide my evidence. People's cases are being refused and taken back to the detention centre three times, four times. For years you are going in and out of detention just because you are fleeing from persecution. This system has to change. **DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER**

Many interviewees have been held in detention for weeks or even months and many reported not understanding the reasons they were placed in detention. Most of them still have to battle with an ongoing asylum claim once released. It is easier to gather evidence outside of the detention environment, but financial and practical restrictions remain a problem. They are required to regularly sign in at a place designated by the Home Office, which puts an additional financial burden on claimants due to transport costs. This interferes significantly with their case preparation and their life outside of detention. They experience ongoing uncertainty as to whether they will be detained again.

To use the train going and coming back costs you almost more than £6.00 and for someone that isn't working that is big money. At times you stay one or two hours in the cold to get in there because the queue is quite long most times.

KEIRA, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

I sit here and wait every day, every day you wait for a letter from the Home Office. You don't even know what they are going to say to you. I could get a letter today that they refused me and the next day they are knocking on my door to take me back into detention. It kills me because I was told when I was going to claim asylum that England is going to protect me but they are confining me.

KAMALI, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Participants stressed the importance of the support they receive from charities. For LGBT asylum seekers self-help and support groups - particularly LGBT support groups - play an essential role in reintegrating LGBT asylum seekers in society, while helping them cope with their traumatic experiences. For many the money and services received are essential to survive. The emotional support helps LGBT asylum seekers and refugees re-establish their lives outside detention.

I attend the women's group which is twice a week and I found it very helpful. You can discuss your experiences. My only problem is paying for transport, but I am making an effort to go and attend the meetings.

DEMBE, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

This organisation gives me a food parcel every week and £5 when I go there. For Christmas they gave me £30.

LISA, CAMEROONIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

So it's good, it's been really good, it's been really helpful. Like I can't even explain, it's just you meet the people that have been detained, you meet people that, you know, are in the same situation, people that just want to talk about the same things that have been happening to you and then you feel like it's a safe space.

MIREMBA, UGANDAN ASYLUM SEEKER

RECOMMENDATIONS

Immigration detention is not appropriate for LGBT asylum seekers. Detention severely compromises their safety, health and ability to fairly pursue a legal claim. Measures must be taken to ensure that in the exceptional circumstance that an LGBT asylum seeker is placed in detention, their safety is ensured and urgent release prioritised.

- The Home Office should end the detention of LGBT asylum seekers.
- Asylum claims made by LGBT people should not be determined via the use of detained or accelerated procedures. It is widely acknowledged that LGBT asylum claims are inherently complex and cannot be fairly processed in this way.
- The Home Office should develop and implement alternatives to detention as a matter of priority, drawing on international best practice.
- Solitary confinement is not an appropriate way to ensure the safety and protection of LGBT people and should be prohibited.
- All staff working in immigration removal centres (IRC) should be trained to identify and tackle homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. The Home Office should ensure that privately contracted firms that run IRCs also provide clear guidance and training procedures to staff that homophobic, biphobic and transphobic discrimination and abuse are unacceptable.
- All individuals held in immigration detention should have access to free, good quality legal advice.
- An upper time limit of 28 days on all immigration detention should be introduced.
- The Home Office must prioritise improving the standard of decision-making in LGBT claims to ensure applicants are respected and protected.

NO SAFE REFUGE

Experiences of LGBT asylum
seekers in detention

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NO SAFE REFUGE

Experiences of LGBT asylum seekers in detention

The guy grabbed me saying he's going to break my soul. I had to press the buzzer. I can't stay in this place. The officer that came down, said there's nothing he can do. **ACHEBE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER**

[In Nigeria] They beat the hell out of me. I was tied to a tree in the compound. Then they put me in a room and they locked me in there. I didn't have any food or drink. I was just treated like a slave. I was there for about two months. They would send these men to rape me. Maybe they were bringing them to come and sleep with me so that I forget about women.

IFE, NIGERIAN ASYLUM SEEKER

Another detainee pushed me and he abused me. He said you look like a fucking gay.

HUSSAIN, PAKISTANI REFUGEE