

LGBT AFRICAN ASYLUM SEEKER RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

Funded by the Big Lottery Fund

Commissioned by the Metropolitan
Community Church of
North London

September 2019





Supported by:



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The findings of the LGBT
African Asylum Seeker
Research Project

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Interviews transcribed by Jordan Dyck, Florence
Kobutetsi and Jen Ferguson

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Enfield LGBT Network

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Introduction

Introduction to the Report

This report results from a story that began in 2012, at a small church in Camden Town, North London, which will be told immediately below. The document presents the findings of 33 interviews that took place, in 2018 and early 2019, at that church. These conversations were with LGBT African asylum seekers, and concerned the issues they face in their applications for asylum in the UK. There is also a particular angle on how faith interacts with these issues, though the study is by no means limited to issues of faith. Before releasing the findings in the form of this report, a launch event was held on 17 May 2019, in the building where most of the interviews had taken place. It was attended by 47 people, which included many asylum seekers, as well as representatives of various charities (both faith-based and secular) who work with LGBT+ asylum seekers.

In what follows you will find a full summary of what was said in those interviews, touching on everything that was mentioned more than just once or twice, with a full description of the methodology employed, and some recommendations that proceed from the findings. There is also information about the participants and the volunteers who helped. It is hoped that this research will be useful to any organisations seeking to support and help LGBT African asylum seekers, as well as to policymakers and researchers.

Background to the Research

The following was written by Rev. Shanon Ferguson about the events that led to the application for funding for this research. Shanon was the Senior Pastor of MCC North London up to the time the research project was commissioned, and it was through their work supporting the many asylum seekers that attended the church that they became aware of the need for this particular research study. Shanon also supervised the research project.

One Sunday evening in 2012, a young man attended a service at MCC North London for the first time. An unremarkable event: we had new people attend most weeks; some returned and some didn't, but I hope all felt they had been made to feel welcome. This young man did return, and on his next visit he brought some friends. They also returned and brought along some friends, and so on...

That first young man was Edwin Sesange, and he was working with a new group called Out and Proud Diamond Group, an African LGBT support and activism group. Most of its members were from Uganda, and evidently they had been expressing concerns about not being able to find a church where they were safe to worship.

Edwin had heard about this 'gay' church, and so decided to check us out. The result was that they found a new home, and we all embarked on a new journey together.

It wasn't long before we started to realise the extent of the situation. Within a few months we had over 50 people who were seeking asylum



Some of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

attending every Sunday night. The original members of the church didn't just open their hearts, but also their homes, as we provided beds, couches and floor space for those in need – not to mention meals and travel cards.

As we listened to their stories and learned about the process they had to go through in order to find safety in the UK, we started to offer further assistance by writing letters of support and attending hearings. The extent of the support needed was well in excess of what we could realistically provide, and so we started to look for sources of funding to allow us to continue our work.

The barrier we met each time was that there were other organisations already being funded to provide the service we were proposing. Prospective funders failed to see that if these organisations were meeting their needs we wouldn't be asking for funding to continue the work we were currently doing voluntarily.

We are very aware these days about intersectionality and the impact that the relationship of our different identities can have on each other, and on our quality of life and wellbeing. None of us live in a vacuum. For those we were supporting these different identities were: African, LGBT and people of faith. The very reason that Edwin came into this church in the first place was because his members had come from a culture that was based on their religion, and even though that same religion had rejected them and often been the cause of great hurt, including physical and psychological abuse, the loss of that community was yet another pain to endure.

Extra burdens and stresses were added to the asylum application process by having lost their families and communities in their home countries, and being unable to connect with African-led churches and mosques here due to fear of being discovered. Finding a faith community where they could bring all of themselves, without hiding or deceit, just total acceptance, was often the beginning of healing. We were also able to offer a safe space to explore sexual orientation and gender identity in conjunction with faith, for those who were struggling to reconcile these parts of themselves.

After one particular failed application for funding we were advised to find research that showed how the asylum seeker benefitted from being supported by an organisation that also connected with their identity as a person of faith. We found reports on all sorts of aspects of being an asylum seeker: race, age, education, gender etc., and issues such as housing, employment, family etc.; but although religion was covered, it was not linked with LGBT identity and the extra issues that this can raise.

Consequently, we decided to apply for funding to look at this particular issue alongside all of the other issues, and so here we are today!

There have been many people who have supported this ministry over the past seven years who are remembered with grateful hearts, as we would not be here today without them. However, there are three people I want to mention in particular: we have only got to this point thanks to the hard work and persistence of Tim Fellows, the financial advice from Richard Gore, and the unwavering love, energy, and commitment of Jen Ferguson.

Rev. Shanon Ferguson

Introductory Sketch of the Findings

The intention of this study, based on the original application for funding, was to look at all issues facing LGBT African asylum seekers, without any particular angle or expectation about what these might be. In line with this, and influenced by the social research methodology ‘grounded theory,’ the approach was to start with as few presuppositions as possible about the issues that might be found. A large net was cast asking asylum seekers first what general issues they faced, and then (in the focus group detailed below as well as the individual interviews), a slightly more specific question about how faith interacted with other elements of being an LGBT African asylum seeker. In line with this wide range of inquiry, the findings of this report reach beyond issues related to faith, as faith is intertwined with other issues faced by asylum seekers, and we wanted this to emerge naturally (if at all) rather than in response to direct close-ended questions.

As of the date of writing (April 2019), asylum seekers in the UK are not permitted to work. While they can apply for some financial assistance from the government, none of those we interviewed mentioned receiving any, and three discussed attempts to get this financial support that were unsuccessful. Many of the issues discussed in this report stem from the prohibition on working, which has a wealth of implications for asylum seekers, particularly with respect to the high cost of living in London.

Two issues that can be caused by the asylum application process itself are limited financial resources and emotional/psychological difficulties. Through some of the ‘catch 22’s’ listed near the end of this report, both of these can then negatively impact the success of the asylum application (which is circular, because these issues can be caused by the application process, but then also negatively affect it).

While discussing psychological issues the participants in this study revealed a particular need for information, as they talked about not knowing whether they were permitted to access certain services, or not knowing how to access them. Many also were told by the Home Office that they would have caseworkers but did not get one, and lacked fundamental information about support services (both from the

government and charity or religious organisations), as well as lacking information about their own asylum applications.

Issues were discussed with respect to how the participants' African origins interacted with the asylum application process and their lives in the UK, as well as how religion and faith interacted with these areas. Various forms of discrimination were mentioned, both within their interviews and asylum application processes, as well as with respect to wider British society and their connections with other Africans in the UK. Religious aspects of discrimination and individuals' psychological difficulties are part of why support from faith-based LGBT communities is of particular value.

Other issues that arose concerned parts of the asylum application process itself. These included reports of the sorts of questions asked to asylum seekers during their screening and substantive interviews, as well as other issues to do with signing in, distance travelled for interviews and access to information about the process.

The findings are presented below, grouped into chapters for each of the five questions we asked in the research interviews, followed by a chapter on 'catch 22's.' Finally, the recommendations that follow from this report are in the concluding chapter.

The Participants

Initially, attempts were made to find participants (interviewees) from outside of the church that applied for the funding, in line with the intention stated on the funding application. However, it proved difficult to motivate participants to follow through with prearranged visits, and even more so with prospective participants from outside the church. One of the volunteer interviewers attempted six times to arrange an interview (with multiple people), and then gave up on being an interviewer. The primary reason for this is likely to be that, without being allowed to work, asylum seekers do not have the financial stability required to commit ahead of time to travel somewhere in London, with emotional and psychological issues potentially compounding the problem. Although we offered to reimburse travel costs, the project funding was limited, so we could not afford to pay travel costs in advance for interviews that ultimately might not occur. As a result, we decided to conduct all of the interviews at the church, drawing participants from the community of asylum seekers and refugees there.

Within that community, every attempt was made to seek out as diverse a representation of the LGBT+ African asylum seeker community there as possible. This resulted in the following demographic breakdown of participants:

Nationalities:

- 21 from Uganda
- 5 from Ghana
- 2 from Cameroon
- 2 from Kenya
- 2 from Nigeria
- 1 from Zambia

Ages:

- Range: 20-64
- Median: 40
- Mean: 38

Genders and Sexualities:

- 18 Lesbians
- 15 Gay men
- 0 Bisexuals
- 0 Trans*¹
- 0 Other (self-define)

Faith Background:

- 2 Muslim
- 31 Christian
 - 8 Catholic
 - 6 Pentecostal
 - 2 Anglican
 - 2 specified 'just Christian'
 - 1 Protestant
- Some were still active in their faith; others were not.

Marriage:

- 17 Previously married
 - 4 specified traditional marriage only
 - 3 specified forced marriage
 - 1 specified marriage by proxy
- 0 married at time of interview

Children:

- 17 had been or were parents to at least one child
- Participants were or had been parents to at least 31 children in total

Residence status:

- 27 asylum seekers
- 6 refugees

¹ We are using "Trans*" in this report to recognise the diversity within the trans* community, such as those who identify as transgender, transsexual, non-binary or genderqueer to name a few.

Detention:

- 3 mentioned having spent time in detention.

A few things are worth mentioning about this demographic breakdown. Firstly, the diversity of gender identities and sexualities that we would have liked to see proved difficult to attain. Many reasons for this are possible, though ultimately speculative, and a few of them are given here. It is possible that bisexual asylum seekers might claim to be gay or lesbian out of fear of jeopardising their asylum claims, or being sent home and told that they would be safe if they only have partners of the opposite sex; this fear could be present whether or not it results from any actual practice on the part of the Home Office. Additionally, coming out as trans* could be even more difficult than coming out as gay or lesbian (perhaps even more so in some African cultures), and there could be less cultural awareness of trans* people and the problems they face in order to enable those people to come out in the first place. Also, a fear or experience of biphobia or transphobia within the LGBT community could make one less likely to come out as bisexual or trans*. Regardless, we did try to find bisexual and trans* people to interview, but did not succeed in finding anyone who openly identified as such. Demographic questions within the interviews were worded as openly as possible, in order to make sure that close-ended questions about identity did not limit honest responses. Self-identification was encouraged. Since, for the reasons given above, it is likely that there were bisexual and trans* people interviewed who just did not identify themselves as such, the acronym 'LGBT' is still used throughout.

On other fronts we had more success. Despite deciding to draw participants from a church community, two of the participants were Muslim, and the Christians were of diverse denominational backgrounds. There was a range of those who identified as having a deep faith to those who do not necessarily still hold religious beliefs, despite currently attending church. There was a very good age range and spread of people within that range. Only six were already refugees when interviewed, so the majority were speaking of ongoing experiences. Most were Ugandan, which is reflective of the makeup of the asylum seeker community at the church where the interviews happened.

The Volunteers

Two volunteers made themselves known to the lead researcher immediately following the focus group at the beginning of the research. One of those was Mathias Wasswa, and the other is still an asylum seeker and does not yet wish to be named. A few months into the project it was pointed out that some female participants might feel less able to open up to a male interviewer, or might not put themselves forward for interviews in the first place. In light of this, Florence Kobutetsi volunteered to

conduct some of the interviews, and turned out to be another incredible asset to the project, along with the other two volunteers.



Mathias Wasswa



Florence Kobutetsi



Anonymous

Methodology

The interview style was semi-structured. Being conducted in a setting where the researcher had already been a part of the community from which the participants were drawn, and so was already aware of some of the basic issues that would surface in the study, means it was not possible to opt fully for a grounded-theoretical approach, using inductive (rather than deductive) methods to gather the most basic qualitative data from which the research question might be composed. However, in order to get as close to this as possible, the study began with a focus group, simply asking the group what issues they faced, and what the positive and/or negative effects of their faith on the asylum application process had been. The findings of the focus group are summarised at the beginning of the following chapter. There was also a steering committee, composed of members of MCC North London's Board of Directors, a representative of the Enfield LGBT Network, as well as some of the project's participants and volunteers, which met bimonthly and provided valuable oversight and feedback.

The interviewers asked the questions in as open-ended a way as possible. Interviews began with a preamble, identical to that on the consent forms, stating how the data would be used and anonymised, as well as that the data would be stored for ten years in a secure way (accessible only to the pastor of MCC North London), in line with the Data Protection Act (1998 and 2018) and GDPR. There were some introductory demographic questions,² then an icebreaker question to establish some rapport between

² Although asking for this information ran the risk of increasing the participant's concerns about the way the data is being used, this was explained to them, and was necessary in order to discover any elements of the findings that might vary by country of origin, age, gender, etc.

the interviewer and participant, and set them at ease. The main part of the interview was composed of five open-ended questions, detailed below. The lead researcher also prepared some possible prompts and follow-up questions, with which the interviewer might encourage some additional responses. In practice, these were not used very often, as most of the participants had plenty to say in response to the initial questions (with the exception of the more difficult second question). When prompts were used, this was noted in the spreadsheet used for data analysis, to enable the lead researcher to make definitive statements about issues that arose without being specifically prompted by the interviewer.

Although the interviews were semi-structured, special care was taken to ensure that the findings were influenced as little as possible by the expectations of the researchers. The research questions and follow-up prompts were formed as a result of the findings from the focus group. The volunteer interviewers were all trained to ask open-ended questions as much as possible, and then use suggested prompts for follow-up questions only if they felt there was more to tease out or clarify.

Following the completion of the interviews, they were transcribed, and the data from them entered into a spreadsheet alongside relevant quotes (which included most of the text from each of the interviews). This report was written on the basis of the figures and quotes in that spreadsheet. The researcher did read other reports and research on issues facing asylum seekers before the focus group and interviews began (see bibliography), but this information was only used to attain a general sense of the issues at hand, before allowing the project to take its own form and be led by the issues raised by the participants. Regardless of the researcher's previous knowledge, the questions and follow-up questions used in the interviews were written on the basis of the issues that arose in response to open-ended questions in the focus group. For this reason, the report that follows does not cite a great deal of corroborating secondary evidence, but is intended to reflect only the stated experiences of the participants. The bibliography can be consulted for further research, and it does indeed point towards research done into related groups of people (LGBT asylum seekers; refugees in London; asylum seekers in detention etc.), much of which has found similar issues to be present.

Finally, a few notes should be made about the report itself:

- Quotes from asylum seekers and refugees are in red, to make it easy to pick them out from the text, and also to distinguish between them and the words of the interviewers where both are given.
- In cases where the gender of the participant does not seem relevant to the experiences they describe, gender-neutral or a different gender of pronouns are sometimes used, to preserve anonymity.
- The phrase 'asylum application process' is used to denote an asylum seeker's interactions with the Home Office from the moment they

claim asylum to the point of being granted some sort of leave to remain (whether that be refugee status, humanitarian protection or exceptional leave to remain) or being removed.

- The word 'Africa' is sometimes used rather than people's individual home countries in order to preserve anonymity, but this should not be taken to mean that all of Africa shares one homogenous culture. As much as possible reference is made to African 'cultures' or to the participants' countries of origin, pluralised for this reason. If anonymity were not a concern, there would likely be no reason to include the collective term 'Africa' for the participants' nations of origins at all. Further, the remit of the report is to look at the treatment of LGBT asylum seekers 'from Africa.'
- All quotes are given verbatim, except where they are otherwise unintelligible. English was not the first language of many of the participants, but quotes are unaltered so that asylum seekers are speaking in their own words.
- Where there are many quotes in a row, they are always from different asylum seekers unless otherwise stated. Sometimes many quotes are used because there are many unique experiences to represent, or it is important to demonstrate the frequency a certain issue was mentioned, and/or how it was frequently described.
- All of the pictures in this report are of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London, including the volunteer interviewers, with some pictures also including the lead researcher of this project. This is the same community of people from which the participants in the study were drawn; but captions do not label who participated in the study and who did not, in order to ensure the anonymity of those quoted in the report. Only those who gave written consent to have their pictures included in this report are shown.

The Questions

Based on what was discussed at the focus group, the lead researcher wrote five questions to ask in the interviews, as well as the possible follow-up questions/prompts. These were:

1. What issues do/did you face as an asylum seeker?
2. How does being African affect being an LGBT asylum seeker?
3. How has your faith or religious background interacted with being an LGBT African asylum seeker, for better or for worse?
4. What support do you receive, and what support would you like to receive?
5. Do any other issues now come to mind?

We started with the most open-ended question possible, to hear what issues were most pressing to the participants, before anything had been mentioned specifically by the interviewer.

We then moved onto a question about the relationship between one's African origins and being an LGBT asylum seeker. Many participants were confused by this question, so it had to be reworded (without giving away what answers might be expected) in most interviews. This is discussed more in the relevant chapter below.

The third question also asked about an intersection, but this time between being an LGBT African asylum seeker and one's faith. This produced a wide variety of answers, with many noting the positive contributions their faith has had throughout their asylum journeys, as well as the negative effects of religion in various ways. Some of the issues raised in the focus group informed the possible follow-up questions/prompts.

We asked about what support participants were getting and/or would like to receive. We very rarely used follow-ups at this point, so most of the responses we received were the things that were on the participants' own minds. Consequently, the figures for what they mentioned denote how often a type or source of support came up naturally, not the answers to direct questions.

Finally, at the end of the interview we asked whether any more issues now came to mind as a result of having discussed other things.

The Focus Group

A focus group met at the start of the study, on 14 January 2018, in order for the lead researcher to begin to understand the issues facing LGBT African asylum seekers. The primary purpose was to ensure that the questions asked in the participant interviews followed from the issues the participants themselves first mentioned, rather than following lines of inquiry that might originate from the researcher's own presumptions. The meeting consisted of 11 asylum seekers and refugees, the pastor of the church and the lead researcher.³ Of those 11, one was a Pakistani LGBT asylum seeker, and the other ten were African. Since not all of them went on to participate in the interviews, we do not know how many of the 11 were asylum seekers and how many were refugees, but all were one or the other.

The focus group meeting lasted approximately eighty minutes. It began with the lead researcher explaining what the research project was, how it

³ By the time of the focus group, this was the newly appointed Interim Pastor.

would happen, and what the interviews would consist of and be used for. Then everyone was asked to confirm that they were asylum seekers or refugees. The participants asked some questions about the research, and then everyone signed a consent form to be involved in the study. As an icebreaker, everyone shared a bit about themselves, as well as what led to them attending the church. This took about 30 minutes, and already many issues were mentioned, without any specific questions yet having been asked.

The first question asked was, 'What main issues or difficulties do you face or did you face as an asylum seeker?' Immediately, one person said '**Being judged,**' and another said '**Where you're not believed.**' They mentioned many different kinds of fear that they have while living in the UK and seeking asylum: fear of coming out; fear of rejection by other Africans or religious groups here; fear of being physically attacked, especially when exiting any LGBT safe space; and the constant fear of being removed or deported back to a country where they would be persecuted. This latter fear is triggered every time they hear of a deportation, or of a friend's asylum claim being refused.

With respect to the application process itself, they raised many concerns about their interviews with the Home Office, and the expectations and presumptions made about them by officials. Many of them mentioned how distressing it is to be accused of lying so frequently, and how this makes it difficult to stay calm and collect their thoughts during the asylum interviews. They mentioned that the Home Office expects them to be very 'out' about their sexual orientation if they want to be believed, which forces them to come out to friends or family they are living with, and then go through that rejection (and threat of homelessness) while already going through the other difficulties associated with the asylum application process. This creates a 'catch 22' situation in which the lack of financial or housing support sometimes forces asylum seekers to reside with homophobic friends or family, but staying with homophobic friends or family prevents them from being open about their sexuality, which can negatively affect the asylum application process.

Another common theme in the discussion was the lack of information. Many of them did not know where to access legal support. Several of them shared that the Home Office had told them they would be assigned a caseworker, but they were never informed who that was. They did not know how to access NHS services, which was particularly problematic for the many who experience acute mental health difficulties, connected to their experiences before entering the UK as well as the stress of the asylum application process. Not having English as a first language made accessing information difficult, and some reported that the Home Office does not provide appropriate interpretation services once one has demonstrated a limited ability with English. One key aspect of the problem of a lack of information that was highlighted was how circular it

is: even if a charity were to provide good information, how would it get to those who need it? Not having basic information about where to access other information can be a barrier even when there is good information provided somewhere.

On top of these were the more general problems one would perhaps expect: financial difficulty, emotional instability, feelings of idleness caused by the restrictions placed upon them, and trouble with basic things such as setting up a bank account without yet having official status as a resident of the UK.

More questions had been prepared, but since the group had been speaking freely, without the need for further prompting, only one more question was asked: 'In what ways has your faith affected your asylum journey?' This question was not immediately comprehended, so some clarification was provided: 'Maybe officials don't expect someone who is Christian or another faith to be LGBT, so maybe that will get in the way of your asylum process? Maybe as an LGBT person you find it difficult to find a church outside of this? You've already mentioned how having Christian families makes it difficult to be out to them before you even get to the Home Office.' This clarification of what was being asked referred back to issues they had already mentioned in the focus group, but had not been discussed in depth.

Firstly, it was reported by some that Home Office officials questioned how it was possible that one had been involved in religious charitable work and organisations if there is a conflict between one's faith and sexuality. Some participants found it difficult to deal with questions about how they reconciled their sexuality with the Bible, when complex thought about the meaning of scriptures was not necessarily a process they had been through. One reported that a judge accused her of lying because none of her church friends attended the court hearing. When she said that she was not able to be 'out' to her church friends, the judge accused her of lying about her sexuality. Another was actually interviewed by an official who was also an immigrant from nearby in his home country, who said 'If you're Christian, how come you're gay?' The focus group clearly revealed a tension resulting from officials' presumptions about faith and sexuality, sometimes including the presumption of a complete incompatibility between the two, and that any sincere religious person who resolves this alleged incompatibility does so through a deep intellectual process. There are many possible reasons why it is not the case that every religious LGBT asylum seeker has gone through an intellectual journey to reconcile faith and sexuality, but one thing that was pointed out was that it takes time to do this, especially if coming from a country where there are few examples of LGBT-affirming religious groups. One may well be discovered to be LGBT and have to flee one's home before one has successfully reconciled one's sexuality with one's beliefs.

The focus group was very helpful in pointing towards the structure of the interviews, and the formation of the interview questions. Further, it provided the possible prompts and follow-up questions for the interviews. It also served well to introduce the study to the participants, and begin finding people to interview.

Participant Interviews

As outlined in the introduction above, the participants were asked five open-ended questions: on the issues they face; on anything unique to being an LGBT asylum seeker who is African; on how their faith interacts with being an LGBT asylum seeker; on what support they are getting and/or would like; and whether they have anything else they would like to mention. While answering these questions, there were a few common ‘catch 22’s’ mentioned, in which an aspect of being an African LGBT asylum seeker put them in a trap between two contradictory requirements or expectations (which are discussed in their own chapter below). There were also some words or phrases that they repeated, unprompted, which will be discussed below in the sections where they are most relevant.

Of course, there was also much overlap, as, for example, a lot of issues faced (Question One) were also people’s support needs (Question Four). In what follows, responses are grouped either under the question to which they are most relevant, or to which they arose most frequently. The researcher’s aim is to mention in the report every issue that was frequently raised in the interviews, even if every fine detail of that issue cannot be relayed in full. In each section we will first look at the issues that were mentioned most frequently, but then also briefly discuss any of the issues that were mentioned less frequently but are nonetheless particularly problematic or difficult for those experiencing them.

Question One: What Issues Do or Did You Face as an Asylum Seeker?

Introduction

The first question asked was ‘What issues do or did you face as an asylum seeker?’ There were very rarely any prompts needed, aside from asking for any further issues faced. Some of the issues raised here pertained to the other questions, so have been accounted for in subsequent chapters of this report. In response to the first question, the issues that arose were:

- Financial and work restriction (97%)
- Psychological and emotional difficulties (79%)
- Being disbelieved (42%)
- Limited quality of life (55%)
- Other issues

Financial and Work Restriction

When asked what issues they are facing as asylum seekers, all bar one of the 33 participants mentioned financial issues. They often mentioned financial issues first, as their primary concern. Asylum seekers are usually not permitted to work.

Though several people mentioned awareness of the possibility of some financial support from the government, at least one person stated that she could not figure out how to fill in the form. Two more had worked out how to apply but were refused. In total, *not one of the 33 asylum seekers and refugees interviewed mentioned receiving any financial support from the government*, even though 32 of them mentioned financial problems as an

issue. They were also asked, as the fourth question, what support they were getting and would like to receive (see below), but no one mentioned receiving financial support from the government.

It might also be worth clarifying that even though there is a lack of direct financial support from the government, the vast majority did not actually express their financial desperation in terms of a plea for financial support. For example, consider these fragments of quotes from 12 of the participants:

‘As an asylum seeker you’re not allowed to work, so [it’s a] pretty huge challenge.’

‘The most difficult things are I’m not employed, and it’s very hard to get around places to do things you need to do.’

‘I do have financial problem because I’m not working, so I rely on people to give me something small.’

‘I am not allowed to work and I have some issues; I have to buy clothes, food, everything.’

‘So I just think that [the Home Office] can consider and let the asylum seekers get something to do like working.’

‘When you get here you realize that your status doesn’t allow you to work, so you can’t be able to earn any money, so you have to rely on people for all sorts of needs – I’m talking about basic needs: you have to be housed, you have to be given food, you have to be given everything that you need.’

‘If I got no job I can’t rent my own room to live.’

‘One major problem is staying for so long without working.’

‘You’re not allowed to work.’

‘You are not allowed to work... You are not doing anything with your life... You feel pain, and then you thinking “I’m a human being, I can do this, I can do this, but they don’t allow me to do it.”’

‘When you are seeking asylum you are not allowed to work; and some of us grew up in a country, from society where begging is not like something which is acceptable. You can’t keep people asking money, money, money, money when you are an able-bodied person.’

‘Depressing thing because first of all you cannot work.’

The participants in this project are seeking refuge from persecution, and are not seeking financial support from the state. Instead, the vast majority just want to be able to work and support themselves. Whether a policy permitting work would be the right decision for the government or not, it is clear that permission to work, and not handouts, is the main thing the participants wanted; and it is perhaps striking that even in a situation of financial destitution leading to complete dependency and even

homelessness, these are people who voice that destitution in terms of a desire for independence, not handouts.⁴

Some other issues accompany the obvious implications of destitution and the dependency it causes. These will be discussed more in the next two questions, but being forced to depend upon others for help has resulted in many African LGBT asylum seekers depending upon homophobic people for help, often whom they know from religious and/or African cultural groups. This creates an anxiety-inducing instability, in which they cannot be out to those closest to them, and constantly worry that if their host families discover why they are applying for asylum they might be made homeless, while being barred from work. Yet, as one participant reported, the government responded to his application for financial support with a demand for evidence that he has contacted as many people as possible asking for money and/or accommodation. The expectation that asylum seekers depend upon friends or family for support fails to account for the fact that being out as LGBT usually means one's friends and family have already rejected them and are likely to be hostile. This is especially the case if they were outed while already in the UK, and only then claimed asylum.

One last issue bears mentioning here: the further complication of the cost of living in London. 31 of the participants lived in London, with the other two nearby. This not only often entirely precludes the possibility of paying for one's own housing (even in a flat-share), but also means that transportation is necessary and difficult, even for things like mandatory signing-in. This will be discussed more under Question Four, but was borne out already at this point:

'It's very hard to get around places to do things you need to do.'

'The financial element [was an issue] because each time you go to report you need money to move.'

'You don't have money to even buy a bus pass for yourself.'

Psychological and Emotional Difficulties

Of the 33 participants interviewed, 26 (79%) mentioned some sort of emotional or psychological difficulty without having been asked specifically about it. Another one talked about psychological issues when asked directly.

⁴ As discussed in the results from Question 2, even as a refugee, many employers are unsure about whether or not they are allowed to hire asylum seekers *or refugees*, making it difficult to find employment even after being granted leave to remain. Allowing asylum seekers to work would not necessarily be allowing them equal access to work.

The emotional and psychological issues faced were many, but a few themes recurred frequently.

Three of the participants specifically mentioned emotional difficulty as a result of rejection from their families (including siblings, parents and children). 'I think the biggest problem I face is not being able to talk or to relate to my family, especially my son. That one is the biggest of all my problems in my life.' Another one said 'I really miss my daughters, even though they're old enough, but as a mother I miss them. And it really hurts when also the family doesn't like to talk to you... When they start hating you, discriminating you, to me it's really really hard.' In addition to the effects of continuing to be rejected by one's family, and barred from all communication, we will see in the next two questions that things can be even more difficult when contact with family back in Africa continues, or when one also has family in the UK.

One source of extreme distress was the requirement many asylum seekers face to sign in on a regular basis, which is often attended by the fear that one might be detained or deported. For some of the participants this fear was overwhelming. This is amplified further if the person has been detained in the past: 'Whenever I go for signing I feel sick. I feel like somebody who's going to be detained. Because of that, I've got that mentality, because I was detained before.' Similarly, another person reported feeling suicidal every time they have to walk over a bridge towards the location to sign in, out of the fear of being detained again. They told this to their psychiatrist, who wrote a letter asking the Home Office to reduce how often they are required to sign in. The Home Office did not reply to this, or to a subsequent letter from the participant's solicitor, asking for a response. Here is some of the description of how that person feels when they are required to sign in, though only a small part so as to avoid anything identifiable:

'Every time I have thoughts of committing suicide, most especially when I get towards that sign-in section, you know [the sign-in location], I usually walk around [that location]. I said, instead of going I kill myself, because I'm fed up of all these things. I've been in [detention before]... Which I know how detaining was – I've made up my mind. If they are willing to take me back there, let me die instead of going back there. That was my decision.'

One person reported regularly getting flashbacks to the events surrounding when they were caught as a LGBT, which now means they need antidepressants and sleeping pills at night, and are still so upset that they often struggle to eat during the day. Another person said something very similar:

'It's not very easy to get out of torture in Africa. But once you have managed to get out of it, then, even here, you don't get support. Then

after all this has happened, I sleep using sleeping pills. I can't fall asleep. Because as soon as I lie down, everything comes back. I'm scared, most of the time. Let's say if I'm in the kitchen or somewhere doing my own stuff, and somebody comes, without alerting me, and then I see, my heart just goes into my mouth, because I get scared for no good reason.'



Two of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

There are many different sources of fear for asylum seekers, as well as various implications of that fear. Fear from the memories of what has happened leads to anxiety and paranoia; but others also reported feeling afraid when they hear about deportations, and then not telling people that they are asylum seekers, and so not knowing that refugee status on the basis of sexual orientation even exists. When asked what issues they faced, one asylum seeker said, 'First of all, the most important thing, is living in fear all the time. Wherever I go, whatever I do, we are not free. Everything you do, you are living in fear. That is my worry. That is my problem. I'm not free.' As with the person quoted above, this person's fear was worst whenever she had to go to sign in, for fear of being detained or deported. Another person

described fear connected to the way he was treated in Africa, meaning he could not tell his GP in the UK that he was gay, for fear that the GP (like one back home) might then refuse to treat him. Of course, there is also the constant fear of what will happen to them if their claim is refused and they are removed, and sleeplessness caused by it: 'If I go back there life will be - I fear it will be to be killed. Not even to be killed, but to be tortured.'

Another asylum seeker put most of the above together, and gave the following as an initial response to the first question:

'The first issue is lack of stability, both financial and emotional... The emotional is mainly about depression and insomnia, but mainly depression, because of the kind of situation I am in. It even took me a very long time to go to the Home Office for the screening, because I was in scare, thinking that maybe if I go I might be detained. And I really really

didn't know what to do, because even the thought of me not being with my children and because of what my family thinks of me because of my sexual orientation, that alone gives me at times suicide thoughts.'

Though there are many reasons for emotional and psychological difficulties, one of the asylum seekers was precise in assigning blame:

'Well, I fear them [the Home Office], you know. The Home Office makes me shiver. They make me tremble. Entering that Home Office is like entering the lion's mouth. Every time I report at the immigration place I feel like, because I think that this issue was designed to throw me away, to resist me. Everything I say wouldn't be believed, so sometimes a person will feel like giving up.'

Three reported loneliness, from having left everyone they knew back home, and then not having the financial means to go out and meet new people here. Many said they had great difficulty sleeping, due to the traumatic memories of what they had been through, or the constant fear that they might be attacked by members of their community in the UK (be that people of the same religion whom they knew before coming out, or people from their home country, or family). For others, not having the means to leave the house often was either their key issue or was something that exaggerated other issues. For example, one said, 'You know, when your mind is in one place, you tend to think about very many things, to the extent of saying "Why am I living? Why me?"'

In addition to all of these factors, many of the participants reported emotional and psychological difficulty brought on by the asylum application itself. One participant described not knowing what to do, and 'going mad,' because they had been depending upon a friend for accommodation for 11 months by the time of their interview for this project, and had still not had the substantive interview with the Home Office. They had not heard anything since they first applied for asylum and had the screening interview. Other participants said it had been well over a year since they originally claimed asylum. Another participant described travelling up to the north of England from London for their substantive interview, with only four days' notice:

'When I applied for my asylum, it was a bit frustrating because my interview was, my screening, was postponed. Then I did it after two weeks. Again, doing my main interview, I went to [a city in the north of England], which was a bit far, and I travelled in the night. My coach was at 11:00, I got there at 5:00am, I had nowhere to go and my interview was at 12:00. I had to sit for hours. It was cold. When I went in I was so exhausted, and my caseworker was not fair at all. She was intimidating, asking questions which are not related to my life at all. She was so harsh, so I panicked and my interview didn't go as I expected, so I became so depressed, I became ill, sleepless nights up to now.'

Another reported having to wait six hours in a chair before the interview: 'For my screening interview I have to face like six hours waiting in the chair, which I think is quite inhumane. You're kind of tired by the time you get into the room to talk about some personal stuff.' Another person called the process 'intimidating,' when, as an African growing up never talking about sex, you are expected to reveal intimate details. The individual who was required to travel to the north of England for the interview did not even have their travel costs covered. Yet another participant talked about how he came here to escape the trauma of life back home, but the process of getting refugee status forces him constantly to relive, discuss, and prove that trauma. Several more talked about how their experiences back home involved being verbally and physically assaulted by the authorities, but now their safety is made to depend upon placing trust in the authorities.

Many more factors behind emotional and psychological issues will be discussed in what follows, so not everything mentioned in response to the first question is reported here. There are simply far too many issues, including the next two recurring themes that came out of this question: being disbelieved (which ties into emotional problems that result from the interviews), and limited quality of life (which, likewise, is largely an effect of the rules applied to asylum seekers during the asylum application process).

Being Disbelieved

Another issue that often arose in response to the first question was frustration with not being believed. 14 participants mentioned this (42%), plus another one in response to being asked specifically. For example, this is an extended quote from someone who, despite this, was actually granted leave to remain quite quickly:

'There is disbelief. You are talking to somebody – I went to the Home Office for interview, screening interview. When I was talking to the interviewer there's a question he asked. And when I gave my answer he didn't believe me. And he showed it to me, that he didn't believe me.' 'How did he show it to you?' 'He said "That is impossible!" and he hit the table. I didn't know what to say. I'm the one telling you what happened, or what I saw, or what exactly it is. And you are hitting the table and telling me it's impossible. So what am I supposed to do next? When you ask me the next questions, it means everything else I say is not going to be believed. Where the sort of thing came from I have no idea. I was shocked by the time he asked me the next question, I was shaking like a leaf. Because what next should I say if somebody reacts like that and hits the table and say "No that's not possible." 'It throws you off for the rest of it.' 'Absolutely.'

Of course, it is unsurprising that in interviews whose purpose is to discern who is telling the truth, people are going to go away frustrated with not being taken at their word. Yet, for 14 of those interviewed, participants believed this went too far. One mentioned how intimidated this made them feel. Another said: 'I just felt some of the things they put me through are really not necessary. It is hurtful enough to be abandoned by your people because of your sexuality; and then to come and have to prove it to other people is really hard, and I don't know whether it's just me that did feel like the Home Office person did not, obviously didn't believe me, because I just felt like from the beginning they looked at me like I was a liar, which really hurt me.' And another said this: 'Yes, when you go to seek asylum they don't believe you, they tell you you're a liar. You're a liar. They repeat it a million times.' 'How does that feel?' 'Very angry. And then you keep on being threatened: any time you'll be deported, any time you'll be removed, so that even gives you more fear, more fear.'

This feeling of intimidation was also perceived to be related to race. One participant was sure that the reason he was presumed to be lying was because he is Black (though he didn't clarify whether he believed it to be because the interviewer distrusts Black people, or imagines them to be less likely to be LGBT). Another person felt that it is unfair that if a White person says they are a lesbian then they are taken at their word, but a Black African has to produce 'evidence' of this, and prove it – she is still not sure how it is possible to provide 'evidence' of a sexual orientation, and says that as an African she finds it difficult to talk openly about sexuality. One participant pointed out that sexuality is not like a trade or profession where you have a paper trail of evidence. Furthermore, when she was fleeing her country she did not stop to grab what documents and photographs might have been available, and while she was there she was specifically trying *not* to leave evidence that she is a lesbian! In oppressive settings where LGBT relationships are forbidden, those relationships necessarily exist with as little trace as possible.

Whilst being presumed to be lying until physical evidence to the contrary has been judged sufficient is distressing in itself, the participants in this study also highlighted some reasons why the demand for physical proof that one is not lying might be particularly problematic for LGBT asylum seekers from Africa. Treating all asylum seekers as liars until proven otherwise is often very distressing, and risks intimidating them into sounding more confused about their stories than they are. This is compounded by the demand for evidence that they are likely to be incapable of producing, even if telling the truth, because they are likely to have fled without thinking to grab evidence or had the time and/or opportunity to do so, and would have had good reason to avoid creating the evidence in the first place.

Limited Quality of Life

Without being specifically prompted, 18 of the participants (55%) talked about some aspect of a limited quality of life as an issue. We have already discussed this to some extent in describing how the vast majority of them see not working (rather than not being financially supported) as their main issue, which also results in an inability to get around London, affecting quality of life. Additionally, some aspects of quality of life have been mentioned in terms of the emotional/psychological difficulties of loneliness, fear and depression. A few other points bear highlighting.

Firstly, the lack of financial support or employment results in total dependency upon someone else for accommodation and financial support, which then means organising one's life around someone else's: 'You can have your programme that you need to go, and you have, you want to go to groups, and your friend who you live with has programme, you have to change your programme.'

If this prevents someone from going to one of only one or two possible social outings that they might have in a week, this could have a tremendous impact. This is even greater if the person had normally been a very socially active person, such as the person who said this: 'I was a person who used to socialise a lot. I can't, because I don't have, you don't have the money for transport, you don't have the money – to socialise, you know, you need some bit of cash.'



Some of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

There is not just the financial barrier, but for many African LGBT asylum seekers dependency inevitably means living with homophobic people, around whom they cannot be open. As one person pointed out, this means being afraid of being seen if they go to an LGBT venue, and instead staying home and regularly hearing hurtful homophobic conversation, which there is no way to escape. This was echoed by another participant, who called it a 'problem of association:' not being able to come out to most people you know, even in the UK. This will be touched upon again under Question Two and Catch 22's.

One person pointed out that being an asylum seeker makes it impossible to go on holiday, or to study. While these things might not seem terrible if the process takes a month or two, for some it can take years between claiming asylum and being granted leave to remain. This not only affects

quality of life directly, but is also a contributing factor to emotional and psychological difficulties, when there is no way to take a break or do something to better one's situation. Two people also talked about how difficult it is to get a partner (which will be discussed a bit more in the section on Catch 22's). In brief: they were told that having a partner would help one's asylum claim, but one effect of the restrictions placed on asylum seekers is an increased difficulty in finding romance. This is due to not being able to afford transportation to get to venues where they might meet someone, as well as potentially having no where to take a partner home to, particularly if their hosts are not LGBT-friendly.

Participants also mentioned a reduced quality of life because members of the British public do not understand what asylum seekers are, and treat them with a constant air of suspicion. Another talked about being isolated, because most people he knew were from the same religious background and so no longer talk to him. Another talked about having had to leave where she was staying (in the UK) once the family found out she was a lesbian. Another talked about simply not having friends here, because he is a recently arrived asylum seeker. These factors are not necessarily results of the asylum seeker application process itself, but they pose support needs that need to be addressed. There are many reasons why asylum seekers clearly experience a loss of livelihood, and the ones that directly result from the application process simply compound the ones that do not.

A final note on the issue of quality of life is that existing as an asylum seeker took an even greater financial toll on some than others. Many of the participants had had high-profile professions in their home countries, such as head teachers, architects, nurses, etc., or even in the UK before claiming asylum. Two of those who participated had been bankers, with considerable incomes, with one having worked in the UK before claiming asylum. Reduced quality of life isn't always a brief state following an extended period of desperation before it; sometimes the asylum application goes on for months or years, and drains a person's resources – financial, social and psychological.

Other Issues

Many more issues were mentioned in response to the first question, and will be covered elsewhere. However, one last issue arose here and does not fit in any of the other categories is difficulties related to language.

Three people mentioned finding communicating in English very difficult, and one of those said they were provided an interpreter for the wrong language. Two of those people communicated in good English during the interview for this study, but it is not their first language, and although they can get by, they find it difficult. Being expected to communicate in English during asylum interviews, while being presumed to be lying

unless able to prove otherwise, adds a layer of stress that makes it harder to seem confident even when telling the truth. Many of the people interviewed for this study had difficulty communicating clearly in English, and although English is an official language of Uganda (where the majority of the participants are from), according to the participants in the study it is not usually a first language there. Though only three of the participants complained about the language barrier, it certainly raises the question of whether people who find it difficult to communicate in English are routinely being provided with interpreters for interviews, particularly as most of them are unlikely to be aware that they are entitled to one.

Question Two: How Does Being African Affect Being an LGBT Asylum Seeker?

Introduction

The second question was the most difficult to formulate. The first two people to be interviewed were asked ‘In what ways do you think being a lesbian asylum seeker from Africa is different than from other places?’ and ‘Are there any issues that you think you face as an *African* lesbian asylum seeker?’ The second person did not understand that question, so it was then clarified, with reference to some of the prompts: ‘So, ways that coming from Africa and having African family and friends while you’re here as well, ways that that make it harder to be a lesbian asylum seeker?... LGBT asylum seekers come from all over the world, and being a lesbian in different cultures has different issues. How does being a lesbian relate to coming from Africa and having African family and friends while you’re here as well?’ By the end of the study, the question had morphed into this form: ‘Are there any parts of your story, before and after arriving in the UK, where something that happened to you might be unlikely to happen to someone who wasn’t African?’ Although this question was difficult to communicate, the interviewers always tried to ask it neutrally, at least at first, without suggesting whether we were looking for positive or negative answers. Although occasionally we had to use prompts (and when we did, that was noted so that it could be clarified in the report), this was avoided as much as possible, to ensure that any allegations of racism that the participants might make would not come from being directly asked, or from feeling that that was the answer expected of them. One person was not asked any form of this question or Question Three, and did not touch upon these issues at all, so figures below are out of 32 people, not 33.

In response to the second question, the issues that arose were:

- Restricted social life or discrimination from other Africans and/or Black-British people in the UK (47%)
- Negatively affected by members of the family who are still in Africa (41%)
- Alleged discrimination within asylum application process (34%)
- Discrimination within wider UK population (16%)

There was also one positive point that was often made:

- Life perceived to be much better in the UK (30%)

Restricted Social Life or Discrimination From Other Africans and/or Black-British People in the UK

The most common responses given to this question concerned experiences with other African or Black-British people in the UK; though this was by no means the only source of prejudice, and others will be discussed below as well. Of the 32 participants who were asked, 14 (44%) mentioned experiencing a restricted social life with other Black-British people or Africans in the UK, and 13 (41%) mentioned experiencing some sort of discrimination from other Africans and/or Black-British people in the UK. Though these categories mostly overlap, there were some people who only specifically mentioned one or the other (who restrict their social life out of a fear of discrimination rather than an experience of it, or who experience discrimination but socialise in these contexts nonetheless). 15 people (47%) mentioned something that fell into at least one of these categories.

Reasons for feeling that they could not socialise with other Africans varied. One person said ‘I can’t express myself as I would express myself back home, with the people I know that are my fellow Africans... So, my experience is that I can’t really mingle with them.’ Many more expressed, in one way or another, that they feel they lack any sense of community because they cannot socialise with their own people. Others said that it was an effect of prejudice against asylum seekers and refugees (or a lack of understanding) from other Africans or Black-British people, blended with the effects of limited finances restricting the ability to travel: ‘We don’t have the necessary documentation even to mingle with people, or to move around has been a problem.’

This is not simply a reduced opportunity for social life; it can be a crippling fear that arises whenever an asylum seeker hears one of their national languages in public: ‘What if they find out I’m a lesbian, or see me with a woman, and they know some of my family back home, or someone I live with here?’ It leads to them being afraid to tell family or

friends, even the ones they are staying with, that they are applying for asylum.

A reduced social life doesn't always mean deciding not to begin socialising with others from one's home country, but often means cutting off ties with friends one already had (or being abandoned by them), especially if one has been outed or come out after having arrived in the UK for other reasons (like study, or, in one example, to attend a family wedding). One person described having been an active part of many social groups of people from his home country, but having had to stop going to them after being outed. This was devastating, so that 'Mentally I think sometimes it's very very difficult to take it, because there's no way you can express yourself, there's no way you can even talk about things that make you happy as an LGBT person.'

One participant pointed out how even though as a White person one might feel as though one understands homophobia in the UK, he feels that Black people in the UK do not treat a Black LGBT person the same way as a White one. 'The whole point that you're Black, that and you're gay, those two don't match. You could be gay and White, that's fair.' Though prefaced with a bit of positivity, another asylum seeker echoed this sentiment: 'Being a gay and an African, to me I would say is blessed. But to my African people, I can't. You can't show it in any way.'

Experiencing prejudice from other Africans in the UK can have an extreme effect upon the mental health of LGBT African asylum seekers. For example, one person first described this prejudice, but then went on to describe how it affects him:

'Being African and homosexual, nobody else helps me. Nobody else helps me in the community. Everybody is trying to abstain from me as much as possible... Me being an African, and also a homosexual, a gay, I find it difficult. I can't go to people. I am always alone, in a tight corner. Being in a tight corner, it kept me thinking a lot. Like, what am I doing? Should I commit suicide? I don't know. It keeps me in a tight corner like I don't know what to do with my life.'

Another participant described what it was like to live with their uncle and his wife after coming out:

'She [his wife] didn't like the idea, I mean she treated me like someone who actually had like leprosy or something. She didn't want me to use the plates, the fork, like basically everything. And then when some of the Africans, her friends, come, to keep like insulting me and doing a whole lot of nasty things. So I couldn't take it, because I couldn't even use the plates in the house. I couldn't use anything at all because she thinks I'm going to wash. She said I was going to introduce [homosexuality] to her kids and all that.'

Negatively Affected by Family in Africa

As we have already seen in the above section, many of the participants in this study live with members of their immediate or extended families in the UK. Some of them are out to their families, and so likely experience prejudice within the home. Some of them are not out, and so live in fear of them finding out, or are unable to disclose that they are seeking asylum, or why they are seeking asylum. However, not all of the effects of prejudice from other Africans came from people within the UK. Thanks to the wonder of modern technology, as well as the lasting psychological effects of life 'back home,' 13 people (41%) talked about the impact of their families on them now (only one of whom was asked directly). More of the prejudice experienced by LGBT African asylum seekers from other Africans will be detailed in further sections, on how their faith affects things, and on some of the language that recurred in the interviews.

Over half of the participants (17 of 33) revealed that they have children back in Africa, with most having no contact with them. It is unsurprising, then, that four of the participants disclosed acute emotional distress at being separated from their children (both minors and adult children). Often this was something that was not planned, but resulted from being suddenly chased out of their homes, and out of their home countries, with no time to say goodbye to their children, or being specifically rejected by their children themselves. This has a lasting effect, even many years later. So one asylum seeker said, **'I think the biggest problem I face is not being able to talk or to relate to my family, especially my son. That one keeps on wearing me and eating me out. That one is the biggest of all my problems in my life.'** Another



One of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

specifically said that the thought of never being able to see her children because of what they think of her orientation gives her thoughts of suicide.

Others talked about family members back home still trying to contact them with homophobic abuse, or hearing from one family member about how, at a family gathering recently, the rest of the family had refused to hear anything about her, even though one family member was still in contact. Despite having claimed asylum in the UK, technology means that they do not have complete refuge from things being said by those who live elsewhere, or from the fear that people back home might contact people in the

UK to harm them. On the other hand, another asylum seeker does occasionally have contact with her adult children, despite being out to them. She reports that the Home Office is repeatedly telling her she should go home and be looked after by them, even though she is sure that, because she is a lesbian, her children would not look after her (despite being willing to talk to her).⁵

There is more to be said about how the particularly intense homophobic environment found in much of Africa leaves lasting psychological effects on asylum seekers, but that will be discussed more in the next chapter, where it interacts with religious upbringing.

Alleged Discrimination Within Asylum Application Process

When asked specifically about whether they thought that their ethnicity had affected anything about the asylum application process, one asylum seeker said that they did not think it had. Another person voluntarily said that they did not think race had entered into the process itself, in response to the second question. However, seven people (22%) did indeed think that they had in some way been discriminated against for being African within the asylum application process, and mentioned this in response to the open-ended question detailed at the start of this chapter. Eight people (25%) detailed an experience in which their African cultural background had presented a specific difficulty for their asylum claim. Between these two, a total of 11 individuals (34%) talked about some sort of experience in which being African was perceived to be detrimental to the success of their asylum claims.⁶

- One participant directly accused the Home Office of not understanding the scope of homophobia in Africa: 'What they are not understanding is the impact, the much negativity you face within amongst your own community, your own people. They don't seem to understand it. That's what I'm thinking, they don't seem to understand it... Though it's there, and though I say though it's there in the media, in the online, you know, all the write-ups and you know it's there. But I don't know why they don't seem to take it. They don't seem to understand it. I don't know why that is.'
- Another person said that, coming from Africa, she was so used to living in constant fear that she did not seek to make friends when

⁵ Indeed, from the stigma and homophobia described by many who took part in this project, there would seem to be a large difference between being willing to communicate in private with one's own mother, and being willing to be known within the community to support an LGBT family member. However, this is speculation beyond the remit of the present report.

⁶ This includes the one person from the end of the previous section who seems to have been a victim of the Home Office failing to understand the depth of the homophobia and stigma against LGBT people in her home country, in expecting that her children must be willing to take her in, if they are willing to communicate in secret online.

she arrived and claimed asylum. This was not taken into account, and she was not believed when she said that this was why she did not have letters from friends to corroborate her story. Another one said that coming from Africa he had not been open about his sexuality in the UK, so had not told his friends he is gay, which the Home Office held against him. Both of these people felt that the Home Office did not understand the impact of these parts of their African cultures.

- One individual said that she feels like the Home Office expects her to be 'like' the lesbians here, and does not understand that she is not going to have a lot of friends to whom she is out, even back in Africa. Similarly, two more participants said that being from Uganda makes it very difficult to come out, even here, as well as making it difficult to look for a partner. These facts make it harder to prove to the Home Office that you are out and living as an LGBT person. So these participants accuse the Home Office of failing to account for the psychological barriers that might prevent an African from living the openly LGBT lifestyle expected of them, even in the UK. Another participant also talked about how difficult it is to adjust to how open LGBT people are in the UK, particularly with things like holding hands or kissing your partner in public.
- There was one participant who stated that the Home Office finds it difficult to believe he is gay only because he is Black and African, and they are not used to seeing Black Africans who are LGBT.
- An individual also felt very strongly that the reason asylum seekers can be made to wait for hours when signing in, or made to feel unhappy or otherwise treated badly by the Home Office, is because 'the government' sees asylum seekers as 'the last people of society.' (It is unclear in context whether this is due to being African, an asylum seeker or both.)
- One participant said that no allowance is made for how difficult it is to talk about intimate matters when coming from an African culture: 'The truth I will say the whole asylum process is quite frustrating for LGBT people, especially from Africa like myself, because am from a culture where being a lesbian or being gay is considered an abomination or taboo... It's illegal back home, so I couldn't really come out... It's not like when you come over here you just integrate immediately into the system, I still had that fear because I wasn't used to the system. Even though it's gay friendly, we are not used to the system. I didn't have the confidence to talk about sexuality with something that's quite intimate... I didn't have the courage, I didn't have the confidence. I wasn't comfortable talking about it openly. So I would say the process itself is quite intimidating somehow, because you need a lot of courage for someone to talk about certain aspects of their sexuality.' Another participant, already mentioned in one of the points above, said that they would have liked to have had advance notice of what the Home Office interview questions will be, because it is quite 'intimidating'

to be asked questions about one's sexual history. While advance notice of interview questions might not be sensible, the point is that, particularly when coming from Africa, talking about sexuality openly can be difficult, and participants did not feel this had been sufficiently accounted for.

- Another said that not only was there no acceptance of the fact that coming from Africa he is not open with people about his sexuality, they also questioned why he does not do certain things on the internet (presumably meaning using gay dating apps), not accounting for the fact that he comes from a place where there is less use of this technology. According to this participant, the Home Office interviewer then proceeded to quiz his knowledge of British LGBT culture and media references.
- One person felt that it was held against her that she was perceived as an intellectual due to her career back home, and so had higher expectations made of her. She spoke some English, but needed to use an interpreter so she could confidently speak in her first language for the interview. The interpreter heard her speaking a bit of English during the interview, then exclaimed to the Home Office interviewer, 'This woman might not even be from Uganda.'
- Another person was given an interpreter for a language they did not speak. Their interpreter was from the same country as the asylum seeker, but there are many languages spoken in that country, and it seems as though whoever chose the interpreter presumed it just needed to be someone from the same country. Consequently, the asylum seeker had to do their substantive interview without an interpreter, and without being confident speaking in English. Further, the person really struggled to understand the regional accent of the interviewer.

Discrimination Within the Wider UK Population

Five of the participants (16%) detailed their experiences of racism in the UK (outside of the asylum application process). Two participants talked about discrimination towards asylum seekers and refugees, one of whom also mentioned racism.

This racism from the wider UK population can still affect the asylum application process indirectly. Many of the participants talked about having their claims refused because they waited too long to claim asylum after arriving in the UK. As we will see in the chapter on Catch 22's, this is usually because they were not aware that claiming asylum on grounds of sexual orientation was even possible.⁷ In the words of one of the

⁷ The UKLGIG report *Still Falling Short* (2018) details on pp. 20-22 that a delay in claiming asylum should not affect the success of a claim as long as it can be explained. See also the chapter 'Catch 22's' below.

participants, racism in the general population was a contributing factor in this:

‘Before I got to know anything in this country, it’s really hard to interface with other people, they really don’t care about that. They really don’t want to know what a Black person really wants or needs help or something. Because I really faced that problem, until I had to interface with a Black person. That’s the only way that I got help. Otherwise, I couldn’t get help.’

Other forms of racism can best be described in the words of the asylum seekers themselves:

- ‘You know, when you go... from other people’s experiences, when you start hearing what they say... people have now started to think that every Black person probably is a conman, or is a liar, or is a thief, and has all these behaviours. They are not educated. They are stupid. That perception is portrayed to everybody.’
- ‘They think you’re the same, you know? So he’s just drunk, or just stupid. He doesn’t know what to do. You don’t get to learn. It takes us more time to adjust to some situations, because we are not given the chance, you know?’
- ‘There are a lot of issues which come to me particularly as an African, simply because of my skin. Simply because of my sexuality. So there’s a lot of segregation. A lot of racist things. There’s a lot of underrating which is taking place. So in fact that sometimes you feel so much humiliated, and sometimes it can really push you to such a corner whereby the imagination takes you sometimes to suicide or that kind of thing.’
- ‘I just realise on this application, it’s called Grindr, like very many people would say, what shall I say, stereotype. Well, he will send you a message, “Oh we hear you have big bits and all that, I want to experience that.” And I’m like, you don’t say that, it’s not about colour that you have big whatever. So that’s the only thing. People categorising you in some way, being Black and having something strange, so that’s the only thing I can say.’
- ‘It’s not the heaven I thought it would be. It’s not only the police, or – I went to [a prominent London LGBT venue] to get a membership, and they kicked me out because I didn’t fit a certain class of LGBT type they thought I should be, you know. Well they didn’t kick me out, but they refused to give me membership. I don’t know whatever sort of class they wanted, but I couldn’t get membership. And it wasn’t just me, it was my friends as well. I think it was because we were Africans, none other than that.’

And, on the stigma felt as an asylum seeker or refugee:

- ‘Even now as a refugee, the main problem I’ve got is that there is... an outgoing stigma towards refugees... As an asylum seeker, everywhere I go I’ve got a tag on me that my status in this country shows that I’m a refugee. So, everywhere I go there is this stigma. If I put my paper on the table, I’m a refugee. The way people look at me, they’ve already boxed me into that – I’m a benefits scrooge you know, or people think I’m here for benefits. People think – if I add on that I’m a gay man some people still don’t want to see that, so to me – well some people say that I’ve got a chip on my shoulder, but that’s not really the case. It is the attitude I’ve got towards me from different people that makes me feel that I’m sub-human. I don’t feel that I’m really human – I’m fully human.’
- ‘I think even that now the stigmas... Because you hear every time, you hear in a newspaper, you hear “Asylum, asylum, asylum, asylum, bogus asylum seekers, bogus asylum.” So all that, when you are in – when they talk and you are the person affected [by] anything, being categorised into asylum seekers, and you hear it in newspaper – “oh, failed asylum seeker”... it brings [to] your mind that I’m not needed. I’m not welcome. I’m not welcome.’

Participants Preferred Life in the UK

Finally, it is worth recording that at some point during the interview (and usually during the second question), ten of the participants (31%) talked at length about how much better life in the UK is, particularly as an LGBT person. This was often mixed with talking about how bad things were for them back home. Yet, it is noteworthy how intent they were on expressing gratefulness to the UK, even while experiencing so many problems during the asylum application process.

Question Three: How Does Your Faith Interact With Being an LGBT African Asylum Seeker?

Introduction

The third question also went through some minor changes throughout the study, but was not as difficult to word as the second. It started as ‘How has your faith affected your experiences as an asylum seeker, for better or for worse?’ Eventually some participants were being asked questions such as ‘How has your faith interacted with being an African LGBT asylum seeker?’ or ‘Now that we’ve looked at how being African interacts with being an LGBT asylum seeker, we’d like to talk about how being a Christian or a Muslim interacts with being an LGBT asylum seeker.’ Again, attention was paid to ensuring that we did not reveal whether we were looking for positive or negative experiences, and the presumption from participants may even have been that we were looking for positive experiences, since we had said at the start of the interviews that we were looking for how we as a church could support them. We also ensured that we asked the right questions for different people; i.e., asking Muslims about their Islamic faith, and people whose faith has been different at different points about how it affected them at the time they were asylum seekers. The answers varied considerably, with some talking about how their personal faith has helped them, others talking about how their faith was held against them in the asylum application process, and others talking about experiences with religious groups both in Africa and the UK. As with Question Two, one person was not asked Question Three, and had too brief an interview for it to be mentioned naturally, so has been excluded from the statistics that follow.

Although prompts were rarely used in this study, one thing we did want to find out was whether any asylum seekers had had negative experiences with secular LGBT support groups and charities. Since, as is discussed below, many LGBT asylum seekers find they are not supported or are actively rejected by religious groups that otherwise support asylum seekers, we were curious whether the opposite sometimes happens: people in LGBT charities who have had a bad experience with religion themselves being inhospitable to the faith of asylum seekers. We were pleased to find that no asylum seekers mentioned anything like this at all, and the four participants who were asked about this all reported that the secular LGBT organisations of which they were a part had been actively supportive of their faith.

In response to the third question, the issues that arose were:

- Lasting effects of religiously-based homophobia in Africa (47%)
- Having been told that they were cursed or were a curse (55%)
- Homophobia in faith settings here (31%)
- Faith used against them in Home Office interviews (13%)
- Positive effects of LGBT-affirming faith-based support (94%)

Lasting Effects of Religiously-Based Homophobia in Africa

Though probably as a result of sample selection (everyone was interviewed in a church they attended), all of the study participants were actively religious at the time of the interview, at least to the extent of attending church. It is also unsurprising that all of the participants should have a religious background since the majority are from Uganda, which (according to the latest census) is 85% Christian, 14% Muslim and only 0.2% irreligious.⁸ However, beyond that fact there was quite a mix of faith backgrounds. Despite all participants being at least somewhat actively religious, some would not have been coming to church had it not been recommended by another asylum seeker, and do not consider themselves to be of strong faith. Although most of the participants were brought up in very religious families, many had changed denominations at some point, or had become less religious as time went on. For example some had changed from Catholicism to Pentecostalism, or now experience their faith in a more liberal setting (liberal Anglican, Unitarian or the church in which the study was conducted).⁹

As a result of them all having experienced homophobia fostered in a religious setting (whether that was their immediate families or wider

⁸ Ugandan census data can be found on the website of the Ugandan Bureau of Statistics, at www.ubos.org. The latest census data is from 2014.

⁹ Few details will be given of the present faith and faith journey of the two participants of Muslim background, because with such a small sample size there is increased risk of them being identified, and they also identified a large risk of harm were they to be identified.

society), distinguishing between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ homophobia in their histories is not feasible. The fact is that the vast majority of the participants who mentioned the long-term psychological effects of past homophobic abuse did so when talking about their conservative religious upbringings. Those who did not specifically link past homophobic abuse to religion still experienced that abuse in a culture in which religion’s role in the history of homophobia is complexly interwoven; and all of the participants (again, perhaps because of sample selection) experience the long-term effects of that homophobia as something related to religious worldview, because they are still actively religious, after having fled the effects of a religiously-induced homophobia.

Consequently, in this section we will look at the comments participants made about the long-term effects of homophobia in their upbringings, most of whom specifically referred to religious factors behind that homophobia. Trying to distinguish between religiously and non-religiously-motivated homophobia would be too complex and subjective to be feasible, so instead we will look at all long-term effects of homophobia. These are inevitably experienced as interwoven with the religious lives of the participants, who all come from religious backgrounds and are currently in a faith community.

15 of the participants (47%) specifically mentioned the lingering effects of homophobia back home, which they may or may not have directly tied to religion. This extended quote is representative of the sorts of things we were told:

‘In the culture where I used to live, in [my home country], people who are gay are criticised so much. They are treated – you can’t even find a church. There is no church open to LGBT there. You can’t even start; it doesn’t exist. Once you’ve started they come and they burn you; even the pastor or the preacher, even the government doesn’t like LGBT. It is against the law. That’s why we Christians, we’re not used to being in most of your churches; because of the experience we have there. We can feel so painful, that there’s nothing you can do, you understand? An example to give which is evil, they raped us. You don’t feel like you have freedom. You don’t feel yourself. Even you lose confidence. You lose self-esteem. You feel like life has no meaning.’

This quote illustrates a few things. Firstly, it ties together the way that homophobic attitudes are deeply embedded in culture, state and church, and it is difficult for someone experiencing those attitudes to identify the primary source. Secondly, it illustrates the traumatic events that can take place in the participants’ home nations, with LGBT people being at risk of physical, sexual and verbal assault, including what they are told within and outside of religious institutions. Thirdly, it mentions things that are inevitably long-term in their effects. Not just physical and sexual abuse, but also being made to feel as though one’s life is meaningless.

Two of the participants mentioned lasting physical effects of abuse, including brain and bone damage.



Some of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London, including the volunteer interviewer Mathias Wasswa (centre).

The psychological effects run deep, leading to 49% of those who participated in the study saying they wish they had had more psychological and emotional support than they received. In addition to the psychological and emotional problems discussed under Question One, most of which were di-

rectly related to the asylum application process itself, participants described a specific psychological effect of their religious and cultural upbringing: not being able to express same-sex affection publicly, and/or feeling the need to avert their eyes and try not to be noticed when witnessing other people demonstrating same-sex affection in public. Naturally, not feeling able to interact publicly with LGBT people in the UK can limit one's ability to prove to the Home Office that one is LGBT. Some participants expressed this concern directly, which will be looked at in more detail in the section on Catch 22's.

The extent to which religious ideas underlie African LGBT asylum seekers' psychological and emotional wellbeing should not be underestimated. Although the present study is not a psychological one, the qualitative data attests to this. For example, take this quote, in response to the question 'How has your faith affected your journey, for better or for worse?'

'Well, for the first time it was hard, because of where I, the kind of family that I grew up in, very religious people. And my dad did not like the idea of me being lesbian. He totally despised it. And at church I was told, "It is a sin, it is an apostate behaviour. You cannot whatsoever be a Christian and be a lesbian at the same time." It troubled me, but, coming here, in [this church], I felt welcome, I can still serve my God as I am who I am: I'm a lesbian, and I love God.'

Or this quote, from a Muslim asylum seeker:

'I feel trapped, I feel very trapped, being a Muslim and also a gay. I feel very trapped because I don't know where to go. Because being a Muslim,

they say Muslims are your brothers. So wherever I go I should feel at home. But I don't get that. To the extent somebody threatened that if I would be in Africa he would get me killed. So to that extent I will say I don't feel safe at all. That is what has kept me trapped, where I am.'

In these quotes, we see how homophobia was embedded in the family and in religion. Another asylum seeker said, 'Church condemns and condemns it with all the might, so you can't come out, you can't feel free to talk about it. So, you have to live in hiding, in self.' Another said, 'You will do everything secret, because one, your family, the community, and the state. None of them don't want to have anything to do with a gay or LGBT people, absolutely not.' Yet another one said, 'Being gay and Muslim doesn't connect at all. You have to hide everything, you have to pretend.' And further, 'Growing up as a Catholic, we were taught and told that being gay is not allowed, it's a sin. And then you feel like you are, but that's what they have told you, from a young age. So I didn't feel as Catholic because what I was. They didn't want to know or say because you are a sin or a curse.'

In the quote from the Muslim asylum seeker above, we can see how being told these things does not necessarily stop once one has entered the UK – and in the other quotes above, it is clear that living with religiously motivated homophobia, as a person of faith yourself, has psychological and emotional implications. Many of the Christian asylum seekers still attend homophobic churches here (either because they need the financial/housing support, or because they still want to out of sincere belief), and both of the Muslim participants still encounter other Muslims, and are told things such as above. Religion and its psychological effects, as well as the potential risk of physical harm, do not stay 'back home.'

'Curse' Language

One example of the lasting effects of specifically religious homophobia was the use of 'curse' language that frequently arose as a theme. Even though participants were asked not to talk about their stories leading up to entering the UK, 11 people (33%) mentioned being told that they were a curse/cursed, or a closely related term.¹⁰ Occasionally this was by other Africans in the UK, but mostly it was while being out or recently outed in their countries of origin.

¹⁰ Of those 11, the three who did not use the word 'curse' specifically said 'Being gay is considered an abomination or taboo;' 'No one wants to sit behind me because maybe I'm taboo or *palo*, they always tell me that I am *palo*' (which the participant then said translates as 'taboo' and means one who will bring bad luck) and, 'They would just call them they are devils in the community, as Ugandans they call it, it's a devil thing, it's for Satan.' Note also that the percentage given here (33%) is out of the total number of participants, not just those who were asked the third question, because the issue of curse language arose out of studying the language used by participants throughout their whole interviews, not just in response to this question.

‘Curse’ language came in several forms: either being told that one is cursed, or that one is a curse upon others, or that one will bring curses to others. One participant described this in detail:

‘My family don’t want me anywhere near, because I’m a curse. My village, people, the neighbours, they do not want to know, because I’m this kind of person that is going to bring the curse to the village, and then the whole village will be demolished, diminished, get finished, because the village has been cursed, because there is a curse in the village... I had five acres that I was doing agriculture and farming. All that was cut down, because it belongs to a curse.’

Similarly, another participant explained why his family do not talk to him: ‘At the moment they think I am a curse, and they don’t want to talk to me. They think I’m a burden to their whole plan, so they’ve cut contact.’ And likewise, another said, ‘In my family and my culture, it’s like they say, “Oh, you brought shame to the family or clan.” It’s kind of like you are a curse, like they don’t want to get involved with you at all.’

Even when not reporting being told they were a curse, others mentioned feeling as though they were cursed, which is likely related to coming from a culture in which the idea of being cursed is so prevalent. For example, while talking about having wondered why they were LGBT before having found an LGBT-affirming church, one participant said, ‘Was it like I am cursed? Was it like someone did bad things to me, out of the whole family of so many people? Why is it me, why not him?’ In a culture in which one can be regarded as a curse to others or as cursed, it is not surprising that, when wondering why one has wound up with a certain lot in life, this is expressed in the same language.

In the next section we will look at homophobia in faith settings here, but one of the people reported that people in a Pentecostal church in the UK had told him: “It’s a curse, I’m against you.” I really believed. I really saw the curse coming on me, every kind of situation that I have gone through, sometimes I would just kneel down and pray to God and say “I’m sorry, I know what I have done.” It was so tormenting me.’

In this section we have seen several dimensions to ‘curse’ language for LGBT African asylum seekers: it is connected to what people have heard in churches; it profoundly affects them emotionally and psychologically, with potentially lasting effects; it can be an aspect of one’s own wondering about one’s lot in life and it can be experienced in faith settings in the UK as well. In terms of the support needs of LGBT African asylum seekers, this is a case in which faith-based support groups could have something uniquely valuable to offer.

Homophobia in Faith Settings Here

Although two of the participants were asked about whether they experienced homophobic language in church here and said they had not, ten (31%) said that they had, without being asked. Another long quote illustrates the effect this can have, from a participant who was speaking about a house church he used to attend:¹¹

“The house church was Pentecostal, mainly Black congregation. When I suffered the discrimination and isolation, that was another terrible stage. Because it was like out of this torture I was suffering psychologically but I couldn’t understand it. So because of that I had difficulties, I was having nightmares and that. And then, because of my situation the church was having to pray for me, in their way of handling things, and when this story came up, the pastor said to this girl, “you can’t stay with such a person.”

Prior to this, the participant had been living with a family he knew through church, and when he was found to be LGBT (in the UK), he had to move out. Even when UK faith-based homophobia does not lead to a loss of housing, it can cause fear for other reasons, as for this person: ‘I first landed in a church for Ugandans where the first time you would feel scared that maybe they would see me, maybe they heard about me in my country, and then they would tell them, “Yes, we’ve seen the person around here.”’ Attending a faith community that fits with one’s life-long experience of faith can cause fear that a channel of communication will be opened with those who have been violent back home, and lead to verbal or even physical abuse in the UK.

Yet, when one has sincerely held religious beliefs, it is natural to seek a community in which to nurture and express them, even though that religious tradition might not accept you in the UK either. ‘Most of the community where I used to go are still African churches, much of them Christian African churches; but still you cannot easily reveal who you are because they will look at you as if a sinner, like a devil.’ Additionally, both of the Muslims who participated in this study found that they could not at all countenance the thought of trying to find an affirming faith community, until they wound up attending an affirming church: ‘Being a Muslim and also a gay, I don’t feel accepted anywhere. I don’t feel accepted anywhere.’ It is a testament to the extent to which a sincerely religious person needs a faith community that this study, based on interviews of asylum seekers who attend a Christian church, includes two asylum seekers from Muslim backgrounds.

¹¹ A ‘house church’ is a church that meets in a private home.

Faith Used Against Them in Home Office Interviews

Four of the participants in this study (13%) said that their faith was in some way held against them in the asylum application process. This is significant, because they were not asked whether their faith was held against them. Rather, when asked how faith interacted with being an asylum seeker, they mentioned a way in which the person interviewing them had used their faith against them. If four people mention this without being prompted to do so, it is likely that this is even more representative of the LGBT African asylum seeker community than that.

One of those four people was asked how they harmonised their faith with their sexuality in an interview, and they responded that they go to an inclusive church where it is not a problem. Another one talked about how she has three children, and when she explained to the immigration officer that due to her religion she felt as though she had to get married and have children, and furthermore that her culture meant she did not have a choice, she said: **'The screening lady did not understand that.'**

The two other cases were perhaps more severe, as in both cases the participants reported being directly accused of 'contradiction' for claiming to be LGBT and Christian. One reported being asked the following questions: 'How can you be lesbian and Christian? Isn't the Bible against being gay?' 'Doesn't that contradict with your Christian belief or your belief?' The other participant recalled a similar line of inquiry: 'Oh, your faith says this and this is not right, and you still claim you are a Christian. How does that match up?' 'Don't you think you're contradicting yourself?' That participant also said **'I felt they were trying to put my faith against me, and that's not how it works. Yes, to put my faith against me, yes.'** Both of these participants remember being asked to explain how they reconcile their sexuality with Christian scripture, and then having their own ways of interpreting the Bible challenged by the interviewer.

Positive Effects of LGBT-Affirming Faith-Based Support

With all of the ways mentioned so far in this chapter that faith and religion interact with being an asylum seeker, it should be unsurprising that, when asked the third question, 30 of the participants (94%) talked about the positive effects of being a part of an LGBT-affirming faith community. It is not the purpose of the present report to advertise the merits of the church in which it was conducted (see the Afterword for more information), but, for the benefit of any other faith communities interested in ways they can support asylum seekers, let us explore some of details mentioned specifically by the participants of the study.

A few quotes stand out as representative of the things participants said about the benefits of attending an LGBT-affirming faith community.¹² This quite long one expresses perhaps the primary benefit – simply being a part of a community in which one is loved and accepted:

‘Having found this church is my greatest thing that I have ever found since I have been in this country. Because when I come here I socialise, I talk to people, I find it relieving. I find myself happier, the happiest day of my week when I’m here. And the last time I went to [an LGBT charity], after the meeting we went to the pub, to the gay pub, and there was music, and people were dancing away. Oh my God that was very nice. I enjoyed that bit so much. Yes, I did. I went to the pub, and I went dancing, it was beautiful. Gosh, it was; I felt like my head was going “Oh my God, I’m living a life again!” That’s why when I come here I like going to the choir. There’s something it gives me. And I want to come here early and help preparations, and talk to people. I feel I’m a useful member of the community. Rather than sitting home and feeling sorry for myself.’

This quote illustrates how necessary it is for there to be some sort of relief from sitting at home every day as an asylum seeker. Whether a faith community or not, having some sort of social opportunity creates a necessary break from sitting at home. As we saw in the responses to the first question, without permission to work or money with which to socialise, asylum seekers often suffer with emotional and psychological difficulty. Having one or two opportunities to socialise with others and feel a part of a community can make a large difference, especially if that is an LGBT or LGBT-affirming community in which one feels safe and free.

Religious communities can offer another form of psychological support: the feeling of hope. As one participant put it, ‘When you pray, when you sing, things like that help you psychologically. It helps you to overcome. It helps you when you pray. It’s like you have a gold, when you’re praying, it’s like you’re asking something, it’s like you are blessing. So it’s a feeling that you are having something back, from the church.’ Another individual said something similar: ‘It has given me hope, and it has given me confidence to realise that the way I am was what God made for my life... Whether you are gay or not, all human beings, created by God. And everybody is created with a purpose.’

With one more long quote, we can see another form of support that is perhaps exclusively offered by participation in a religious community, and counteracts the negative impact discussed in every other section of this chapter:

¹² A fuller collection of quotes like these can be found in the Afterword.

'I've listened to many pastors [in Africa] preach. They say it's because of the act of homosexuality; that's why God destroyed the city of Sodom. Meanwhile to me, after coming to – the moment I came to [this church], and I went through the doctrine and everything, the way they preached about the Bible, that's when I realized that to be quite honest, what these pastors have been preaching, it's not really true. Because I need to be in the right environment to know the truth. Because when like, because I didn't see anything written about homosexuality in the Bible. They just make us look bad. They just make us look like we are evil. When it's not... God created us because he loves us. And we preach that there is no shame in love, so I don't see why there should be a boundary between anything like relationship.'

Being part of an LGBT-affirming faith community, with actively pro-LGBT religious teaching, helps to heal the psychological damage of homophobic teachings one may have experienced in one's upbringing (including 'curse' language) and helps to counteract the effects of homophobic preaching that may well still be heard in other religious settings in the UK. So, apart from the psychological and emotional benefits of being part of a community, membership of a faith community helps with problems that are acutely felt by African LGBT asylum seekers.

That final point is crucial: there are elements of the interaction between faith and asylum seeking that are acutely felt by African LGBT asylum seekers, and being a member of an affirming faith community can be a



Some of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

part of the solution. While LGBT people worldwide have been subject to verbal and/or physical homophobic abuse, and in many countries this can be religiously motivated, for the African LGBT asylum seekers we interviewed this abuse was particularly and almost without exception interwoven with a religious upbringing.¹³ And while asylum seekers of any cultural background are likely to find themselves in social settings with people of a similar background in London, this often results in African asylum seekers being a part of a religious group in London in which they are at risk of hearing the same sorts of messages they heard back in Africa. For some of these asylum seekers, involvement in one's traditional religious communities also results in depending upon homophobic people for housing and support, which affected at least 12% of the participants in this study.¹⁴

On the other hand, if a particular asylum seeker is someone who experiences a conflict between faith and sexuality, then an LGBT-affirming faith community here could be a space in which to resolve that conflict. Since questions about faith and sexuality do sometimes get asked in asylum interviews, it could for that reason be particularly helpful to have had a space in which to consider these issues.¹⁵ Also, if an asylum seeker were to go to a religious group in search of housing and financial support, as many in this study had done, then an LGBT-affirming faith community could be a space to find housing and other support that is not from a homophobic source (see the section on Catch 22's below for more on the extent and gravity of this problem). We can thus conclude that LGBT-affirming religious communities have an important, and in some ways unique role to play in the support of African LGBT asylum seekers.

¹³ That is not to say that it is only African countries where homophobia and religion are closely linked; but, rather, with the Ugandan census cited above claiming that only 0.2% of Ugandans are irreligious (source cited above), and so many of the participants specifically saying that their experience of homophobia was religious, it does seem that regardless of the state of things in other nations, religiously-motivated homophobia is acutely problematic in the African countries represented in this study.

¹⁴ See the chapter on Catch 22's below.

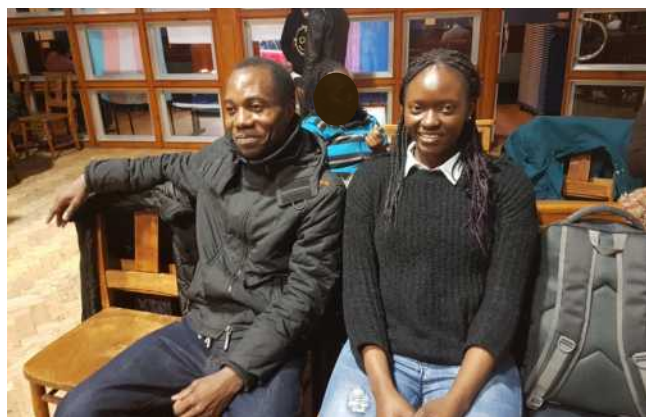
¹⁵ This is not to suggest that all religious LGBT asylum seekers have experienced a conflict between faith and sexuality, or that all are still experiencing such a conflict when they arrive in the UK. However, for those who are in that situation, an LGBT-affirming faith community can be helpful.

Question Four: What Support Are You Getting, and What Support Would You Like to Receive?

Introduction

The fourth question was ‘What support are you getting now, and what support would you like to receive?’ Refugees (as opposed to asylum seekers) were asked, ‘What support did you get while you were an asylum seeker, and what support do you wish you had received?’ Occasionally the second question was clarified by adding that we would like them to imagine infinite resources were available, and then tell us what forms of support would ideally be most helpful to them.

The findings can be summarised in the following table, where we can see the types of support mentioned along the top, and the sources of support received along the side. The bottom row, ‘Wanting,’ shows what forms of support participants said they would like to receive (i.e. the answers to the second part of the question). This table acts as a summary of issues mentioned for this chapter, as it includes everything mentioned even once.



Mathias Wasswa (volunteer interviewer, left) with another one of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

	Housing	Transport	Food	Financial	Information	Legal	Medical	Emotional/ Psychological	Education	Support Letter	Interview Practice
Friend	24	8	8	10	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
State	0	-	-	0	0	5	6	3	1	-	-
Church	5	1	1	2	7	1	0	23	0	6	0
Charity	1	9	11	8	6	5	4	14	2	1	0
Wanting	13	15	7	24	15	12	7	16	4	3	4

It is important while viewing this table to understand that the information does not represent responses to a survey or to a set of direct questions about individual forms of support.¹⁶ Rather, for the most part it shows what was mentioned when participants were merely asked what support they receive and would like to receive. Prompts were rarely used beyond prompting for further response, and any information obtained through direct close-ended questions is clarified as such in the comments below. So, for example, the first column means that:

- 24 participants mentioned, in talking about support received, that they are staying with a friend.
- No one mentioned successfully receiving any form of government assistance towards housing.
- Five of the participants stated that the church played a part in helping with accommodation (though from the above table alone it is unclear whether all/any of these overlap with the 24 who are staying with friends – which in fact they all do).
- One person had help from a charity in securing accommodation (which, again, was a charity through which they met the friend with whom they live).
- 13 of the participants mentioned wishing they had some/additional support in finding and/or funding accommodation.

Most of these forms of support have been mentioned in the previous three chapters, so we need pass only brief comments below, where the figures could benefit from some interpretation, or where it is clarified that the results include some ‘prompted’ responses (to follow-up, close-ended questions).

¹⁶ For this reason percentages are not usually given in this chapter. Actual percentages of those either receiving or desiring these forms of support are likely to be much higher than those who mentioned them in response to a single open-ended question.

Housing

Of the 25 participants who mentioned something about accommodation, four were asked directly, in order to prompt further answers to the question. Three participants had tried to apply for housing and/or financial support and either been refused or found the forms too complicated to complete. Two participants were homeless at the time of the interview. Most participants who talked about accommodation were staying with friends or family (both included in the above category 'friends' – four participants explicitly said they live with family). As noted elsewhere in this report, staying with family can come with the risk of being outed, and then possibly evicted, and not being able to be fully open about one's sexuality can negatively impact the asylum decision. Whether fearing eviction or not, participants mentioned other related worries, such as the stress of depending upon hosts for financial support; fearing that any form of support from the host might end if the host loses financial stability or worrying that an argument might suddenly lead to homelessness. However, with limited access to accommodation support, staying with family (or with people who are not LGBT-affirming) can be the only option.

Transport

Although eight people mentioned getting help with transport costs from friends, and nine had help from charities, transport in London is expensive. This is compounded by the fact that cheap or free accommodation is not likely to be found in inner London, raising the costs of transport further. (One asylum seeker managed to find lodging in Waterloo; three more were in Battersea, Hackney and Lewisham; and the other 29 were further from the centre or outside of the M25.) Transport was often mentioned as an issue with knock-on effects, leading to loneliness; difficulty accessing other forms of support; difficulty attending mandatory signing in; difficulty attending meetings with solicitors and/or feelings of uselessness. Further, when depending upon the same friend for accommodation, food and transport, several asylum seekers mentioned a sense of instability as one cannot commit to any sort of plans when one's host might lack the ability to offer financial support on a consistent basis.

Food

The table above lists the number of participants who received some sort of support with food. From charities, this meant either a voucher for Tesco or some non-perishable goods. From friends, this meant meals being frequently or occasionally provided by the person giving accommodation. From church, the participants were mostly talking about the refreshments provided after the service, though sometimes they were talking about being given food or meals. Seven people said they would like to have some support or additional support with food, meaning money for food or meals

provided by religious or charity groups. Perhaps notably, no one mentioned using a food bank.

Financial Support

Much has already been said about the need for financial support in Question One. Of those receiving financial support from a friend (again, usually the friend with whom they were living), one mentioned having a solicitor funded by a friend. One specifically mentioned being unaware whether or not they were supposed to be getting any money from the government (i.e. not knowing whether financial support for asylum seekers even exists as a possibility). Two of the people listed in the table above who said that they would like financial support were asked directly. As mentioned in Question One, 32 of the 33 participants mentioned destitution as a main issue, but only 22 of them mentioned it in response to an open-ended question about support needs.

Information

15 participants mentioned information as an important support need, two of whom agreed that it was a support need when directly asked. At least four clearly noted the potential circularity of this problem: without some very basic information being provided, they do not know where to get information. One expanded on this: since they had been a teacher back home, they were presumed to know how to access information, but this was not the case in a setting so culturally and technologically different from that from which they had come. Another person said how much they wished they had had someone designated to tell them which support to access, and what they need to do at each stage of the application process. Most of the discussion of information as a support need involved wanting to know where to go for legal support, or wanting to know more about what is involved in the asylum application process from start to finish, or wishing that from the start they had had a leaflet or booklet listing the charities they could go to for help.

Legal Support

Discussion about legal support was intertwined with discussion about information support, as much of the legal support need revolved around the desire for lists of solicitors open to working with asylum seekers, or information about the legal side of claiming asylum. For example, one person mentioned that an immigration charity sometimes invites solicitors to speak at events, and they find this very helpful. At least five of the asylum seekers were receiving legal aid, but they did not all know how to access it. Asylum seekers also said they wanted people to go with them to Home Office interviews and support them there, and to write letters of support for them (see below).

Medical Support

Asylum seekers are permitted to access NHS services, though some restrictions apply if their claims have been refused and they are appealing in the courts; nonetheless, participants mentioned some specific barriers that led seven of them to describe medical support needs. One participant said that even though the Home Office had told her she could register with a GP, the GP surgery did not think that asylum seekers were eligible (even with the asylum seeker ID card), and so refused to register her. Another participant said that his ID card took two months to arrive, during which time he had urgent healthcare needs that went unmet; while a different participant's healthcare needs went unmet because he did not know he was allowed to go to Accident and Emergency. As discussed earlier, one asylum seeker said that he did not feel able to open up to GPs as a result of how he feels gay Black men are perceived. Two participants mentioned accessing counselling services through a charity, and two more mentioned receiving healthcare through a medical charity. Combined with the problems in information support discussed above, we can see that many of the medical problems faced are not a result of services being unavailable, but services not being *known* to be available.

Emotional and Psychological Support

Again, the details of these support needs were largely covered in Question One. Of the 30 people who explicitly mentioned the benefits of coming to church and/or of faith, 23 qualified those benefits as emotional or psychological. This refers to the social benefits of church community, as well as individual support from the pastoral team, the emotional benefit of participating in the music and worship and the spiritual and psychological benefits of LGBT-affirming religious teaching.¹⁷ Three people mentioned some sort of psychological support (i.e. counselling) from the NHS. 14 mentioned emotional/psychological support from a charity, which was either the benefits of attending groups and social activities, or referred to counselling that they accessed through or from a charity (some of that is likely to be NHS services that a charity helped them to access). The importance of emotional and psychological support, wherever it might be provided, should not be underestimated, in light of the difficulties summarised in Question One. These formal and informal ways that churches and charities offer psychological and emotional support were specifically mentioned as helping with confidence, depression, loneliness, stress and hope for the future.

¹⁷ These are all things mentioned multiple times in the participants' elaborations on the forms of support provided by church attendance, rather than extrapolations made by the researcher who also attends the church.

Education

Four of the participants said they would like to be able to study, with one mentioning how it would help with feelings of idleness caused by the restrictions placed on asylum seekers, and another saying it would help them feel as though life is heading somewhere. One person was getting help with funding through a charity, in order to access education (this is the one getting education 'from the state,' though funded through a charity), and one more was doing short courses at a charity. One of those wanting education knew that it is now permitted, but was struggling to find funding for it. All of those who expressed awareness that accessing education is now permitted were also very grateful for this.

Support Letter

Three of the participants mentioned wanting support letters (to use as evidence to support their asylum claims), with six saying they had received them through a church, and one through a charity. The church in which the study was conducted frequently provides support letters (given certain conditions are met, and the individual is well-known to the church), so the data in this study probably does not reflect what might be found with a random sample of LGBT African asylum seekers, since most of those participating already had this form of support. Note that only those who happened to mention letters as a support need are included here, so those who did indeed receive them are less likely to mention it without being asked directly.

Interview Practice

Four of the participants said they would like help with interview practice. Two of them were asked directly. While this might indeed be a valuable form of support, only two of the 33 participants came up with this as a form of support they would like, without having been asked directly.

Support Organisations Accessed

Many of the participants mentioned which organisations in specific provided the support they received. As with the rest of the figures in this report, the numbers below refer to how many participants happen to have mentioned these organisations, and are not definite figures for how many out of 33 participants received support from these organisations. Also, no attempt was made to find the full names of these organisations, lest this result in listing similar-sounding charities by accident. Instead, these are the names as the asylum seekers and refugees gave them.¹⁸

¹⁸ MCC North London is not included on this list because that is where the study was conducted, so it is not a like statistic to the figure of organisations that were mentioned without being asked about specifically. 30 of the 33 participants mentioned the benefits of attending MCC North London as an LGBT-affirming church.

- A synagogue in East Finchley (6)¹⁹
- Red Cross (5)
- Movement for Justice (4)
- Out and Proud (4)
- Rainbows Across Borders (3)
- Doctors of the World (2)
- London Friends (2)
- Refugees and Migrants Project (2)
- UKLGIG (2?)²⁰
- Act Now
- Bloomsbury Institute
- East London Lesbian and Gay Centre
- Queer Strike
- Rainbow Sisters
- Refugee Council
- Safe House Drop-In Centre
- Say it Loud
- A Unitarian Church in Croydon

¹⁹ One participant recalled the letters NNL, so this is probably the New North London Synagogue in Finchley.

²⁰ One participant seems to have said they get support from UKNGNG, but it is possible either that they meant UKLGIG, or that the recording was just difficult to understand.

Question Five: Do Any Other Issues Now Come to Mind?

Introduction

The final question was ‘Is there anything else you would like to mention?’ or ‘Do any other issues now come to mind?’ It was intended to allow a time to talk about anything the participants had wanted to discuss but did not fit into the other questions, or that fit into the first question but had not been thought of until we discussed the other questions in more detail. Most of the participants either did not say anything in this section, or repeated what had been said already. A few other things did come up, though, so here we will summarise things that were mentioned often at this point, or that seem important even if only mentioned once or twice, or that were mentioned at some other point in the interviews but did not really fit into that section.

In response to the third question, the issues that arose were:

- Lack of a caseworker (18%)
- Various other issues

Lack of a Caseworker

The most often mentioned issue at this point was the lack of a caseworker. It should be noted that Home Office practice has changed, and asylum seekers are no longer given individual caseworkers. However, the participants in the study still revealed problems that arose when that was the practice, as some had been told they would have a caseworker and then were not informed who that was. Some also discussed the desire to have an individual person to contact about their cases, which is perhaps more relevant now than when caseworkers were meant to be provided. Regardless of current Home Office practice, this issue repeatedly arose without being prompted, so should be included in this report.

Six people (18%) mentioned or strongly implied that not having a caseworker was an issue with which they struggled. It was first mentioned near the beginning of this individual's first response:²¹

'You don't know where to start from... You are waiting on the decisions of the Home Office, of which you don't know how long it's going to take. And they don't give you enough information. Okay, they gave me a pamphlet, "If you want to do this you can do this," but at the end of it all they say is they are going to give me a caseworker. I never got one. Because when they wrote me a letter, they said, "Another letter is going to come through the post, telling you the date and the name and the place where you are going to meet your case worker, who's going to answer all your questions." They never sent one... And I have asked other people if they have got that kind of letter, and most of us don't have it.... Most of us don't have.'

Though the claim that most other asylum seekers also do not have a caseworker should be regarded as anecdotal, it is corroborated by the fact that six asylum seekers mentioned not having a caseworker as an issue, and only one asylum seeker actually mentioned having one.²² References to not having a caseworker ranged from the implication of the person who said: 'I feel like there should be that one person who should tell you "Okay, now, let me help you do this. This as well, you should start from, since you are still new. This is where you should go. These are maybe the where some lawyers sit, or give you numbers of lawyers to call, or maybe introduce you to a lawyer, good lawyers,"' to those in a similar situation to the person quoted above, like the one who directly said: 'Nobody wrote to me and told me "I am your caseworker."' In total, three of the participants gave responses like the former that strongly implied they had no caseworker, and three directly said that they did not have a caseworker (with two of them mentioning that they had been promised one, and yet did not get one). Only once in the study was a participant directly asked whether they had a caseworker, and that person did not.

We are working from a limited sample size, but the above can be collated as follows:

- 18% of participants described not having a caseworker in response to the open-ended questions 'What issues do you face?' or 'Do any other issues now come to mind?'
- Only one person mentioned their caseworker at any point in their interviews for this study.

²¹ Ellipses in this quote edit out two of the interviewer's responses and one case of repetition, but otherwise leave the quote intact.

²² The participant did seem to be referring to a Home Office caseworker, so might have been talking about when this was still the practice. Again, this particular figure is less relevant now that providing a dedicated caseworker is no longer Home Office practice.

- The one person who was asked directly asked whether they had a caseworker said they did not.
- One participant mentioned asking others, and none of them having had caseworkers.

The combination of these four facts suggests that this is an issue with which many asylum seekers struggle, and that there are still asylum seekers who were told they would have caseworkers and do not.

As can be seen from the above quotes, participants wished they had caseworkers, so that they would have someone to ask about how things are going with the application, where they currently stand, what is going to happen and for what they should prepare. Even though Home Office practice is not currently to have individual caseworkers for each asylum seeker, this was the understanding that many of the participants had, and some had been told they would have a caseworker, while others expressed that they would like to. This feeds into the problem of not having information, discussed briefly in Question Four. One of the reasons participants wished that they had caseworkers was to point them towards relevant charities or government support. Some of the issues mentioned by those expressing a wish to have a caseworker could perhaps better be solved by them having a good solicitor, particularly regarding information about the asylum application process and what their actions should be throughout.

Other Issues

Some of the participants had had problems that might have proceeded differently had there been a caseworker (either at the Home Office or an external professional), or if they had had better legal representation. For example, one of the participants specifically said that, as a result of not having any one main person to talk to throughout the process, she accidentally gave false information, not knowing what information she was meant to be giving. She then said that they refused to change what was written afterwards, leaving her scared that it might be used against her. Another participant said that the Home Office refused to recognise their real name, insisting upon continuing to use the false name that the person had had to adopt while fleeing home. Another participant (in addition to the six who probably had no caseworker) was confused and anxious when they simultaneously received two letters calling them to interviews, one with only four days notice and another with a month's notice. The short notice was very distressing, in addition to the confusion caused by the discrepancy with the other letter.

Some of the participants took the occasion of Question Five to reiterate how trapped they felt, and the causes and effects of this. They reported that feeling trapped involved them feeling idle, depressed, anxious and afraid. One of them said: 'Apart from emotionally not being a happy

person, to be a free person, I can't do anything. I'm still a young person who is capable of doing a lot, but I can't do anything. So that makes me feel unhappy that I can't do anything.' Another one said something similar, about feeling financially trapped by having to depend upon others for support, and then added, 'As a female there are certain things that you like to go, you need to spend. Someone's not just going to wake up every day and give you, just give you money, just like that. It does not come easy.' Another mentioned finding it 'extremely very very very difficult' to have been waiting for so long (in this person's case, well over a year since they first claimed asylum): 'My issue is about how long you wait for Home Office to get a decision, and that also makes you like as if you are sitting on a time bomb.' Another one, while talking about not feeling free, and instead feeling like a criminal, said they were 'living in fear, all the time.' Three participants also mentioned frustration with how long they have had to wait for a final decision on their asylum applications, which could also be a cause for feelings of depression and anxiety.

One interesting issue that a participant mentioned was the way that growing up in their home country affected their ability to understand their own identity:

'But then I didn't comprehend [being LGBT]. The way I understood it while I was growing up – because back home there were things that could happen: you get beat, you could be flogged, you could be scolded – and you just think it's one of those childish things, and you keep going. So I was growing up, and then you realise that there were real real serious issues, amongst the community, amongst the family and stuff like that.'

While this might seem trivial, it could affect one's ability to prove sexual orientation in an interview, or in other forms of evidence. This is particularly acute if one has fled due to being discovered in a romantic or sexual context with someone of the same sex, as was the story for many of the participants who did talk about their lives leading up to UK entry. In such a situation, one has not necessarily processed and understood oneself as LGBT, despite needing to flee for that very reason.

Finally, there were a few other things mentioned by only one participant, but which might be significant nonetheless:

- One participant said that they tried to contact some other charities, and upon finding out that they did not meet certain conditions, gave up trying to find help.
- Another participant complained about being required to find new evidence in order to submit a fresh claim, and said 'I am totally a gay person... I am not going to tell them that now I am a gay plus plus plus.'
- One person felt that their difficulty in finding housing was as a result of landlords not understanding what an asylum seeker is,

then being afraid of housing illegal migrants and having to explain to authorities why they did so.

Catch 22's

Introduction

The final issue to discuss in this report is a handful of 'catch 22's' that emerged in the study, as participants explained their experiences of the asylum application process. Eight of the participants talked about feeling 'trapped' by some aspect of the process, but many more talked about a specific way in which they felt that a situation caused by a part of how the asylum application process works made it difficult to meet the requirements of another part of the process.

The catch 22's that participants mentioned were:

- Being penalised for claiming asylum late, which was due to a lack of information about the application process (30%)
- Having to depend upon homophobic people for support, making living openly as LGBT difficult (12%)
- Struggling to navigate one's way through the process due to psychological/emotional effects of the process (15%)
- Being told that having a partner would help the claim, but dependency and one's psychological situation make this difficult (6%)
- Other catch 22's mentioned by only one person each.

Some other ways in which individuals expressed feeling trapped by parts of the application process are discussed in Question One, in the section on psychological and emotional issues.

Waited to Claim Asylum Due to Lack of Information

The most-reported issue leading to a catch 22 was waiting to claim asylum, as a result of a lack of information. Having a gap in time between arrival in the UK and claiming asylum can be problematic for the success of a claim, even though legally it should not be, if the individual can explain the delay.²³ There are several reasons why one might have a gap in time between arrival and claiming asylum, all of which are related to being an asylum seeker:

- One participant had a gap of over a decade between arriving and claiming asylum. This was because they were outed to family back home while visiting the UK, and did not feel safe going home afterwards. They gave two reasons for the long delay: not knowing that asylum on grounds of sexual orientation was possible, and not wanting to confirm sexual orientation to the family with whom they were staying, whom they knew through church and perceived as homophobic.
- One participant had been encouraged, by the person helping them to flee their home country, to get into the UK on a student visa. They did not know for some time after arriving and studying that they had to claim asylum formally. After that they were staying with a homophobic family they knew through their church, and so feared what might happen when claiming asylum on grounds of sexual orientation.
- Another participant was also living with a homophobic family, and did not know that claiming asylum on grounds of sexual orientation was possible.
- Another person did not know that claiming asylum on grounds of sexual orientation was possible. They were also afraid of what would happen, due to hearing many stories of removals and deportations.
- Another participant talked very specifically about a lack of information: ‘As an asylum seeker, from the point of coming into this country, I think the one major problem would be lack of information, not knowing what is available for me, not even knowing that there is an asylum process. So all that wasn’t available for me for a very long time, and unfortunately that also came back to bite me; not knowing came back to bite me.’

²³ As stated in a note in the chapter on Question Two, above, the UKLGIG report *Still Falling Short* (2018, see bibliography for details) contains a section on delayed claims (pp. 20-22), which also provides evidence of a delay in claiming asylum negatively impacting the success of many asylum claims. It concludes that despite being legally required to take into account explanations for a delayed claim, ‘The Home Office places excessive reliance on delay and insufficiently acknowledges the practical impact of a lifetime of concealing one’s identity’ (p. 22).

- One participant first mentioned the fear of what would happen after claiming asylum, and then said that they did not know about claiming asylum, and then said they depend upon people from their home country for support.
- One participant did not know that it was possible to claim asylum on grounds of sexual orientation and felt that this was because, in the participant's view, White British people do not reach out to help Black African people in the UK, so the participant did not know how things work here. Further, the participant said that their goal had been to escape their home country, and they were not thinking about what the formal process for things would be afterwards.
- One participant said that, though they have been in the UK for seven years already, they are still in the closet and do not have many LGBT friends, so did not know about claiming asylum on grounds of sexual orientation. The participant mentioned homophobic family in the UK, and fear of being in public with their partner that is caused by the lingering psychological effects of their experiences in Africa.
- Another participant, similar to one mentioned above, waited over a decade to claim asylum, first from not knowing that it was possible to claim on the basis of sexual orientation, but then out of fear from hearing stories of removals and deportations.
- One participant talked about how fleeing quickly meant they did not come with papers or knowledge about UK asylum law, and did not know about asylum on grounds of sexual orientation. They then elaborated that in their home country there are many asylum seekers from neighbouring countries, so the participant already had an idea of what an asylum seeker is, which certainly did not mean someone fleeing due to sexual orientation.

These ten participants' experiences fit into the following categories (with some in multiple categories):

- (10) Did not know one could claim asylum on grounds of sexual orientation
 - (4) Did not research asylum-seeking application process while fleeing, or think to do so immediately upon arrival
 - (1) Lack of information caused by social isolation from LGBT community, due to fear of African family in the UK
 - (1) Lack of information attributed to racial barrier in UK society
- (5) Not wanting to come out of the closet due to staying with homophobic hosts or still being part of African community/family
 - (2) Met host family through church
 - (1) Host family is the participant's family
 - (1) Hosts are from same country of origin
 - (1) Friends, family (and perhaps hosts – unspecified) are from country of origin
- (3) Fear caused by stories of removal and deportation

Something notable about these explanations is just how many of them were experienced by the participants as connected to their African origins, in various ways. Whether it was church friends, family or other connections, four people said they did not want to claim asylum on grounds of sexual orientation due to living with other people from their home countries. Another said that coming from Africa had left them with a fear of coming out, even if doing so should be easier here; this person also lacked information on asylum seeking and sexual orientation due to isolation from the LGBT community. Also above, two people connected a lack of information about asylum seeking with their African origins: one felt that there is a racial divide in the UK when it comes to access to information, and another had a pre-established view of what asylum seeking is in Africa. These seven people had a reason for waiting to claim asylum that they experienced as connected to being African or being from their particular home countries, and in some way felt this was held against them in the application process. Further, the extent of the persecution faced in their countries of origin, described elsewhere in this report, was the reason for the sudden desperate flight of many of the asylum seekers, which four participants said contributed to a lack of information about the asylum application process. The above data justifies the claim that being from an African country can, in various ways, be experienced as the cause of a gap in time between arrival in the UK and claiming asylum, which is sometimes then used against asylum seekers in the application process. Though asylum seekers from other nations also experience phenomena such as these (a delay in claiming asylum due to lack of information; prejudice from others with similar origins in London; racism in the UK; etc.), it is nonetheless concerning that so many LGBT asylum seekers from African countries perceive this fact (their African origins) to be detrimental to the success of their asylum claims.

Even when African origin was not a contributing cause, ten of the participants said that they waited to claim asylum because they did not know that they could, and this gap in time was then held against them in the process. Since this was not a question that was directly asked to any of the participants, and does not immediately fit into any of the five questions that were asked, it is likely that this was the case for more than just the ten who happened to mention it. It is problematic because all ten people who mentioned waiting to claim asylum (and that fact being used against them) gave a reason for waiting that was a partial or full effect of being an asylum seeker. For all ten it had to do with a lack of information, but the cause of that was connected to being an asylum seeker, and there were sometimes additional causes for the delay in claiming asylum that were also connected to being an asylum seeker. This means that for ten people an effect of seeking asylum was used as an argument *against* them needing international protection.

Dependency Makes Openness About Sexuality Difficult

In conjunction with the figures from Question Four on financial and housing support, a catch 22 arises between necessary dependency when no financial support or housing is provided (and work is not permitted), and the expectation that an LGBT asylum seeker will be living openly and clearly as an LGBT person. As mentioned in the previous section, many of the asylum seekers (and four of those above) live with homophobic people, who are often family, connections made at non-LGBT-affirming churches or people from the same country. Living in such a situation means that asylum seekers might feel afraid to come out, or else need to work hard to be simultaneously out in some circles but not to those with whom they live.

One participant, parts of whose story were mentioned in the chapter on Question Three (faith), lived with people they knew from an African Pentecostal church in London. They did not feel able to come out, for fear of being evicted, and when eventually they did come out, they were indeed evicted. Likewise, another participant waited years before claiming asylum, because they were depending on people they knew from church for a place to live, and feared what might happen after coming out. Eventually they could not depend upon them anymore, so had to claim asylum, and risk coming out or being outed. They still live with that family, but cannot tell them about the asylum application because it is on the grounds of sexual orientation. So the participant talked about how difficult it is not to have support from their family or from their friends at the non-affirming church. They even said that the judge at an appeal case for their asylum claim asked, 'You said you were receiving support from your church; how come even now that you are having this case, none of your pastors, none of your church members... are in court?' It seems, from the participant's point of view, that the judge did not understand that one can be claiming asylum on grounds of sexual orientation, but also attend a homophobic church where one cannot be open about one's sexuality. Yet, when one needs to depend upon someone for financial and housing support, rejecting that offer is not always possible.

Another one of the participants, who lives with a family to whom they do not feel safe coming out, felt as though



Some of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

this was a barrier to the asylum application: 'But in the application process, in my case, everything that I was doing I was doing it in secret, so I got to a point that Home Office is asking me "Where's the proof?" and it's very difficult for me to come out with proof, because I'm doing this in a way that my [family members] will not find out who I am.' The participant also said of their family: 'I don't have the right to work. So if these people kick me out, where am I going? So, that was the reason why it took me a long time for me to come out [as] who I am.' For this person, not being able to come out made claiming asylum difficult in the first place, but then was also a barrier to providing evidence.

In total, four (12%) of the participants described a way in which their dependence upon others for support (as made inevitable by the prohibition against working and difficulty in securing financial support or housing) worked against the success of their asylum claims. Put in simpler terms, for them, claiming asylum means involuntarily depending upon homophobic people for support, but depending upon homophobic people for support can mean refusal of the asylum claim. (At least two of those four have already been denied asylum and are appealing the decision.) As noted above, this problem is related to faith issues, because dependency upon homophobic supporters often resulted from membership of one's traditional religious community.

Psychological Situation Makes Application Process Difficult

We have already described the psychological and emotional impact of the asylum application process, as well as the impact many participants described of life before coming to the UK, in Question One and Question Three. However, this can be exacerbated by another catch 22: the asylum application process causing depression, which then makes it difficult to navigate one's way through the asylum application process. Of the 26 (79%) who talked about psychological or emotional issues, five explicitly mentioned issues that were both caused by and detrimental to the application process.

The main form of this was that four of the participants said they experienced great psychological difficulty (directly related to the asylum application process itself) every time they had to go to sign in. One person, who had already spent time in a detention centre, said, 'Whenever I go for signing I feel sick, I feel like somebody who's going to be detained.' Having been detained as an asylum seeker, this person then found it difficult to go on with a part of the asylum seeking process (signing in). Another participant said 'You're subject to reporting weekly. I've always been going weekly, at some point when I was a bit down health-wise I couldn't go, and then a case worker started chasing me up, "You must come report, else blah blah blah."' That person had already said that 'emotionally, I mean, so many ways... it can be like a torture, honestly. Like a torture. You are asked not to work. You must come report. You must go around. You are just living a lot dependent on people.' They also said that they are being denied any financial support due to the amount of time between entering the UK and claiming asylum (for one of the reasons discussed in the previous section). So they are feeling tortured by the

requirements of the process, are being denied support, and as a result of this find it very difficult to sign in, which is also required. Another asylum seeker also reported being depressed and afraid of removal or deportation, and so not feeling able to sign in, which led to one of the times their case was refused. Further, a fourth asylum seeker said that stories of removal, deportation and detention make them very afraid of signing in.

Beyond the fear of signing in, depression brought on by both one's past experiences and difficulties in the application process can be crippling. As discussed elsewhere in this report, 27 of the participants talked about some sort of psychological or emotional difficulties, and 16 said they would like support for it. Since all of these were talking about psychological/emotional distress during the application process, this distress naturally affects how well one handles that process. However, one participant in particular tied the two together:

'The process for application was quite difficult, because if you don't have knowledge from the beginning, it's really really really difficult, because you cannot be able to start processing application, not until you get some counselling. And with counselling, you cannot get counselling out of the blue. You need again someone to assist you, and give you direction where counselling can be accessible... All of this will give you trouble, give you trauma. When you reflect the life you had before, which made you run out of your country. And you can't do anything about your safety. And you meet such problems as well where you cannot get proper help. It is strange. It is strange whereby sometimes you find yourself in a lowly situation, and you begin questioning yourself why that happens to your life.'

As seen in Question 4, many of the participants did find a way to access psychological help. However, it was also reported in that question that there was often difficulty in working out how to access NHS services, and whether one is permitted to do so. The quote above demonstrates that this difficulty can be exacerbated by the very problem one is trying to solve: psychological distress and depression that needs counselling. As reported in Question One, this psychological distress is caused both by the inevitable traumatic memories of life before the UK and the complexities of the asylum application process. This catch 22 is a particularly complex one: the application process is a partial cause of depression (alongside simply being an asylum seeker), then the depression is a barrier (alongside lack of information about asylum, lack of a caseworker etc.) to accessing support for that depression.

Expected to Have a Partner Despite Restrictions on Asylum Seekers

Two of the participants talked about being asked about their relationship statuses. Not much can be said of one of their stories, at risk of sharing personal details; but the person was asked at multiple points in the process whether they had a partner, and found it difficult to get a partner while being an asylum seeker. When the person did get a partner, the Home Office interviewer did not believe that the relationship was genuine.

Another asylum seeker talked at length about the presumption that he perceives the Home Office to have: that gay asylum seekers will be in monogamous relationships, which in his view ignores the fact that many LGBT people, just like many straight people, do not reserve sexual experiences for stable monogamous contexts.

'The Home Office... assumes that every gay person must be in a relationship because they always mean, like it's a sort of insistence or a yard stick that... you must be in a relationship. If it's like a casual relationship, we are like normal people... You decided to have a casual relationship; you can decide you have a permanent relationship; you can choose not to have, depending on your situation. But now they ask you: don't have a permanent, a long-time relationship, therefore we don't believe you. You understand? But even the straight people – there are so many people you ask and say "I don't have a girlfriend," but they are straight people. Yes. So, to the gay person, it seems as if they must have... Most of the time when you have casual relationship what happens that you don't keep track of those people because they – it's just like one date, one night stand. You go, you have a good time. You might not keep that person's records for – so even when you need some evidence, it might be, you might not be in a position to trace him, to confirm that you have had a good time with him.'

This quote has been included at length because it makes a series of points. Interacting with actual statistics about the proportions of LGBT people and straight people who engage in non-monogamous relationships and encounters would be beyond the remit of this report; but whether or not such disparities exist, it is not the case that all LGBT people primarily express their sexuality in monogamous contexts. Yet the two participants discussed here interpreted questions about their relationship statuses as a requirement. Further, with many LGBT people expressing their sexuality in non-monogamous ways, it would indeed be difficult to gather evidence of this.

Other Catch 22's

A few other situations that might qualify as catch 22's were mentioned by one participant each, so will not be included in great detail. Two of these

were housing issues. One participant mentioned that in looking for housing, potential landlords would not accept him until he had provided a bank account, but banks would not open an account without a permanent address. Another participant said that they were one of many asylum seekers who have to ask to use other people's addresses as a permanent address for Home Office correspondence; but that person eventually refused to give them their post, wrongly believing it to be illegal to let an asylum seeker use your address for post.

Lastly, another participant felt as though they were in a trap when they explained in an interview that, being African and mostly having African friends, they were not open about their sexuality (i.e. not out of the closet). They said that the Home Office accused them of lying because they had not told people they are LGBT. The person then did tell people they are LGBT, but was consequently told by the Home Office that it still was not good enough, because people only know that this individual is LGBT after having been told. So the participant says they were accused of lying for not having been open about being LGBT, and then accused of lying for having been open about being LGBT. This participant also said that they feel the reason this has happened is because they are not currently in a relationship, making this the third person to say that being in a relationship is a requirement for a successful asylum claim.

Conclusion

Relevance of the Findings

Despite the relatively small sample size of this study, the conclusions it has drawn should probably be regarded as revelatory of the difficulties and support needs of the wider community of LGBT African asylum seekers. This is for several reasons:

1. The approach, using certain aspects of grounded theory and open-ended questions, means that the trends that emerged have done so ‘naturally,’ with every attempt having been made to bracket out the biases and preconceptions of the researcher and volunteers. Consequently, when some issues did emerge time and time again in the interviews, this is significant despite the small sample size.
2. Many of the issues reported here did in fact emerge in large quantities, with near unanimous mention of the effects of destitution caused by the prohibition on working, and nearly four in five mentioning some sort of psychological or emotional issues.
3. Some of the issues discussed above, especially the so-called ‘catch 22’s,’ should give cause for concern even if they happen in relatively few instances, because they potentially involve asylum seekers facing removal to countries where they face persecution, for reasons they had no way to avoid. Other issues occurring infrequently but with wide implications are the information barriers to accessing NHS services, and the desire for dedicated caseworkers within the Home Office.
4. Other issues discussed above occurred more widely (but not unanimously) in the sample, and are concerning if true. Among these are the allegations of some sort of discrimination against Africans within the asylum application process; experiences of

homophobia in religious or African social contexts here (and the implications this can have for the asylum application) and those who waited to claim asylum due to a lack of information, and had that fact held against them.

Though based on a small sample of participants, this report will hopefully be helpful to charities devising systems of support for LGBT African asylum seekers (and other groups facing similar issues). It could be used by Home Office officials or legislators who want to understand the issues faced by asylum seekers. Further, as one of the few studies about the interaction between faith and the issues facing LGBT asylum seekers, this report could be of great benefit to religious organisations seeking to help asylum seekers, or other bodies that simply want to understand better the role that faith has to play in the life of the many LGBT asylum seekers.²⁴

Though there are not a great deal of other studies of the issues specifically facing LGBT African asylum seekers to the UK, the faith dimension of this study is the main way in which it is unique. We have found not only that faith remains important to many LGBT asylum seekers from Africa, and to their emotional and psychological wellbeing, but also that it interacts with the asylum application itself in various ways. It can be used against asylum seekers in Home Office interviews and decisions. It can cause them to experience homophobia in the UK, potentially even in the home where they are staying, when their accommodation is linked to their religious environment. Homophobia in the home can affect the asylum application by restricting their ability to be open about their sexuality. Religion was a major factor in the traumatic experiences many African LGBT asylum seekers had in their countries of origin, so is intertwined with other factors in their present psychological and emotional condition.

Nonetheless, the approach of this study was not to focus in on specific issues but to see what emerged while discussing any and every issue faced by LGBT African asylum seekers. The findings and the recommendations are thus appropriately wide-reaching. The exact figures and elaborations are given in the previous chapters, so what follows here is a summary of the main issues faced, and then the recommendations for other charity and government bodies.

²⁴ Another report that briefly discusses the intersection between religion and LGBTQI+ asylum claims is *Still Falling Short*, by UKLGIG (see bibliography). It was not read by the author of the present report until after the research was completed, but corroborates some of the findings, such as in the statement that ‘interviewers almost always asked the claimants in some form how they reconciled their sexual orientation with their religion’ on p. 27.

Summary of the Main Issues Faced by LGBT African Asylum Seekers in the UK

Nearly all participants in the study mentioned financial destitution and/or difficulties finding housing. This can lead to dependency on potentially homophobic groups, which can negatively impact the asylum application. This can also lead to a limited quality of life, in the ways detailed in this report.

Asylum seekers face psychological and emotional difficulties, including fear, anxiety, depression and the long-term effects of trauma. These difficulties can affect various parts of the asylum application, by making it difficult to face signing in (which some are required to do by the Home Office), making it difficult to continue figuring out what is required of them by the application process, and causing anxiety during screening and substantive interviews. Being disbelieved and/or accused of lying in Home Office interviews also contributes to psychological and emotional issues. When attempting to deal with these issues, asylum seekers experience difficulties in accessing NHS services, chiefly in the form of information barriers.

There are continued experiences of discrimination after coming to the UK. They can still experience discrimination from family members, both communicating from Africa and residing in the UK. African asylum seekers also still experience homophobia from others of a similar cultural background in the UK. Black Africans reported experiencing racism from the general UK population. In addition to this, there is stigma against asylum seekers and refugees. They also alleged discrimination against Africans within the asylum application process.

Four possible traps were reported, which asylum seekers experienced as conflicting requirements or aspects of the asylum application process. Lack of information about asylum upon entry to the UK was the most frequent cause of a delayed asylum claim, and affected asylum applications later on; yet that lack of information was in every case caused by one or another aspect of being an asylum seeker, in many cases particularly an asylum seeker of African origin. Another trap was dependency upon homophobic benefactors resulting from the prohibition on working, but then preventing one from being open about one's sexuality, which can be used against asylum seekers in interviews. Depression and fear that asylum seekers attributed to the effects of the asylum application process can make navigating the asylum application process difficult. Finally, restrictions applied to asylum seekers make finding a partner difficult, but finding a partner was understood by research participants to be essential to the success of their asylum applications.

One-Page Summary of Findings

Issues faced by LGBT African asylum seekers during the asylum application process:

- Financial and work restriction (97%)
- Psychological and emotional difficulties (79%)
- Limited quality of life (55%)
- Being disbelieved (42%)
- Lack of a Home Office caseworker (18%)
- Other issues (found at the end of Question One and Question Five)

Ways that being African affects being an LGBT asylum seeker:

- Restricted social life or discrimination from other Africans and/or Black-British people in the UK (47%)
- Negatively affected by members of the family in Africa (41%)
- Alleged discrimination within asylum application process (34%)
- Discrimination within wider UK population (16%)

Ways that faith interacts with being an LGBT African asylum seeker:

- Positive effects of LGBT-affirming faith-based support (94%)
- Having been told and/or believing that they were cursed or were a curse (55%)
- Lasting effects of religiously-based homophobia in Africa (47%)
- Homophobia in faith settings here (31%)
- Faith used against them in Home Office interviews (13%)

‘Catch 22’s’ in which LGBT African asylum seekers found themselves:

- Penalised for a delay in claiming asylum, which was due to a lack of information about the application process (30%)
- Having to depend upon homophobic people for support, making living openly as LGBT difficult (12%)
- Struggling to navigate one’s way through the process due to psychological/emotional effects of the process (15%)
- Told that having a partner would help the asylum claim, but dependency and psychological situation make this difficult (6%)
- Other catch 22’s mentioned by only one person each

Support LGBT African asylum seekers mentioned wanting:

Financial	Emotional/ Psychological	Information	Transport	Housing	Legal	Medical	Food	Education	Interview Practice	Support Letter
73%	48%	45%	45%	39%	36%	21%	21%	12%	12%	9%

Notes for Supporting Organisations

By reading the whole report, or using the above summary as a reference and then examining certain issues in more depth, there are undoubtedly some points that members of any organisation supporting asylum seekers might find helpful. Nonetheless, here are a few things that stand out as particularly vital notes arising from this study for organisations supporting LGBT African asylum seekers or other related groups of people:

- Information provision is essential. This includes information about the asylum application process itself; about forms of support available; about legal aid/available solicitors and about how to access NHS services.
- When considering signposting to other organisations, faith-based support could have a unique role to play. It provides an alternative to homophobic faith communities. It can help one to reconcile faith and sexuality, if they had been experienced as in conflict. It helps to counteract effects of religious homophobia in the person's past. Also, prayer, music and LGBT-affirming community can have positive emotional effects. Secular and religious organisations should strive to work together when supporting LGBT asylum seekers.
- Emotional/psychological support is highly sought after, but many still find it difficult to access.
- Finding appropriate housing can have knock-on effects upon the success of the asylum application as well as the individual's psychological wellbeing.
- Participants in this study did not seem to be aware of food banks, so perhaps this is an area where information provision could improve.
- Since the Home Office does not now provide dedicated caseworkers for each asylum seeker, designating a single person to act as an information contact could be very helpful.

Recommendations for the Home Office

Likewise, although the intent of this report is not to be critical of the Home Office, a number of issues discussed in this report might reveal ways that the Home Office could nonetheless improve its practice. The following recommendations arise from the difficulties mentioned by the asylum seekers and refugees who took part in this study:

- Ensure all asylum seekers have clear information about how their applications for asylum will be processed.
- Ensure all asylum seekers have clear information about how to access NHS services and which NHS services they are permitted to access.

- Review the reasons why applications for financial assistance are being rejected, or provide financial support for all asylum seekers, and/or permit asylum seekers to work.
- Provide training for interviewers on African cultures and the issues faced by LGBT people in Africa.
- Provide training for interviewers on what it means to be LGBT, in order to eliminate the use of stereotypes, especially when these stereotypes are even less applicable to African LGBT people (such as stereotypes regarding sexual openness, LGBT cultural references and the use of dating apps).
- Provide training for interviewers on faith and sexuality, in order to avoid the presumption that all LGBT people of faith will demonstrate the effects of a struggle to reconcile their sexuality with their faith and scriptures.
- Ensure that all asylum seekers are informed that they are entitled to use an interpreter during interviews. Also ensure that they are informed this is the case even if they speak some English as a second language.



Florence Kobutetsi (volunteer interviewer, centre) with two of the other asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

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Although little reference to secondary sources was made in this report, research was conducted before the interviews began, to get a general sense of the issues found by other reports, the way the asylum application process works and the support being offered by charity and religious organisations. Many of the reports below do indeed contain findings similar to those in this report. Textbooks on qualitative research and data analysis were also employed in order to plan the methodology of the research, as well as conversations with academics with more experience in social research.

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Afterword: MCC North London and Faith-Based Support

Personal Comment

As the purpose of this report was not to be an advertisement for the church in which the bulk of the research was conducted, not much has yet been said about that church, and all references to it in the quotes given above were changed. A brief background to the events that led to this research was given in the introduction above, in the words of the supervisor of this project and former senior pastor of the church. I thought that an afterword about the church would be an appropriate place for a more personal tone, about the Metropolitan Community Church of North London, of which I (the lead researcher) have been a member since 2011.

Now, in 2019, asylum seekers and refugees make up the majority of the congregation on any given Sunday, as well as the majority of the Board of Directors. Other members of the congregation provide accommodation, meals, support letters, and go with asylum seekers to their court hearings. Though we are a small congregation and can only offer limited support, we are doing what we can, and looking for ways to continue and expand the support we are providing. As stated in the introduction above, a large part of the reason this research took place was towards that goal.

Although we were not looking for the asylum seekers and refugees who took part in this project to express their gratitude, they often did; especially when they were asked the question about the relationship between faith and being an LGBT African asylum seeker (Question Three). Many of these quotes were not used in the report above; again, because this was not the purpose of the report (it was only mentioned

briefly in the chapter on Question Three that many of the asylum seekers talked about the benefits of religious support).

Since one of the findings of this report is that there is a unique place for faith organisations in providing support to LGBT African asylum seekers, it seems right to add a final section about how asylum seekers themselves said they benefited from that support. And since there is such a wealth of quotes on this subject, it is only right to allow them to speak for themselves. So here, unaltered except to ensure anonymity, are some of the many things that asylum seekers and refugees said about the support they have received at MCC North London.

For members and representatives of religious organisations reading this report, I hope this can serve as a treasure-trove of reasons why providing faith-based support for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers, and including them equally as parts of faith communities, can be a profound blessing both to them and others sharing in community with them. This is cliché to say, but it is certainly true: the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London have enriched my own life, and the life of our community, in a far greater portion than any help we might have provided for them. It is truly a blessing and a privilege to be surrounded with such great and admirable people.



Jordan Dyck (lead researcher, centre), with Florence Kobutetsi (volunteer interviewer, left) and one of the asylum seekers and refugees at MCC North London.

Quotes From Asylum Seekers and Refugees About Faith and MCC North London

'Having found this church is my greatest thing that I have ever found since I have been in this country. Because when I come here I socialise, I talk to people, I find it relieving. I find myself happier, the happiest day of my week when I'm here. And the last time I went to [an LGBT charity], after the meeting we went to the pub, to the gay pub, and there was music, and people were dancing away. Oh my God that was very nice. I enjoyed that bit so much. Yes, I did. I went to the pub, and I went dancing, it was beautiful. Gosh, it was; I felt like my head was going "Oh

my God, I'm living a life again!" That's why when I come here I like going to the choir. There's something it gives me. And I want to come here early and help preparations, and talk to people. I feel I'm a useful member of the community. Rather than sitting home and feeling sorry for myself.'

'I am proud to be an African lesbian who is a Christian as well. I am proud to know that there is God, because to me, as much as my family does not like me at the moment – but it's where I grew up – they taught me that it is important to have God in your life. And I am happy that I found MCC, where I am more open to express my feelings to my God, to know that actually it's not something that is not supposed [to happen].'

'I think for me it has been my backbone, yeah, to be a Christian. Because I still believe, and I believe already that God created me who I am, and nothing can change me, and no one can change me. And I used to say to people that if I happen to be deported back to [my home country], maybe... I will live as who I am, and if I'm going to last for one day, then glory be to God. Because I cannot change. And the mental and emotional journey that I've been through, years back, I don't want to live in a secret life, doing things that you don't want to do. I mean, that will, one way or the other, make me a mad man. So I will live open, and if I happen to be killed, that will be it.'

'Being a Christian, you always believe that everything happens for a reason. God made you the way you are and for a reason. Like, it is not a curse, it is not a crime. So being a Christian you always get to know that God loves you the way you are... And you can always believe that as much as you might not be liked in your country, by your family, somewhere some other people can like you, [you] are welcome. So when you are a Christian you have that hope and belief and faith that God is there and he loves you.'

'When I come to come to MCC church I feel welcome, I feel like I'm home, people are very friendly. So I really enjoy coming here every Sunday, and if I miss because maybe I'm sick I just to want come back, because I feel sick of not being here.'

'For me in this period is the time when I have come to go in depth in my Christianity, because I actually found out about MCC, so being at MCC and being a lesbian and being an asylum seeker has made the whole process easier for me, in the sense that at the church I have found a family, and I have found people who I'm able to speak to, air my mind out to get peace, to get some sense of welcoming and wellbeing, and for me that's what's made it easier. The fact that I have a church, MCC, and as a lesbian they love me for what I am, and you know they make the process bit easier for me.'

'I take it like my family because whenever I come, every Sunday, I have less stress. I meet different people who are like me, we laugh and that's why I always come every Sunday, than keeping myself home. Whenever I stay home I feel distressed.'

'It's really hard to come out all of a sudden and say "Now I'm free," walking as a gay man, yeah? It's going to take more time. But at least deep inside you feel there's a community that's appreciating me. There's a community where I can come and sing out loud. I've never sang in my life, trust me, but I go up there and sing... I couldn't be able to talk to you, in the past few months. Trust me, I wouldn't say a word. I would sit down, and keep quiet. Because I don't, I wouldn't think anybody knows what is running in my mind. Yeah. But because of this church I'm able to open up and speak to people, and I think I'm now coming back to my normal senses. And I think I'm able to express myself, like I'm doing now.'

'When you pray, when you sing, things like that help you psychologically. It helps you to overcome. It helps you when you pray. It's like you have a gold, when you're praying, it's like you're asking something, it's like you are blessing. So it's a feeling that you are having something back, from the church. So I think this experience is great because most of asylum seekers, I think their lack of spirituality, especially those who are not Christian, their lack of – because when you are in God you feel like some sort of support, some sort of support. You feel like when you're singing you feel like you're having something that's coming in.'

'They don't see me as a gay person or as an asylum seeker. They see me as a human being.'

'I've listened to many pastors preach, they say it's because of the act of homosexuality, that's why God destroyed the city of Sodom. Meanwhile to me, after coming to – the moment I came to MCC, and I went through the doctrine and everything, the way they preached about the Bible, that's when I realized that, to be quite honest, what these pastors have been preaching, it's not really true. Because I need to be in the right environment to know the truth. Because when like, because I didn't see anything written about homosexuality in the Bible. They just make us look bad. They just make us look like we are evil. When it's not... God created us because he loves us. And we preach that there is no shame in love, so I don't see why there should be a boundary between anything like relationship. So, that's how I see, so I feel really blessed to be a member of MCC, because I feel that you actually enlighten my knowledge of the Bible. And being a Christian, that's helped me build my spiritual life as well. Because I believe I now know more about the Bible.'

'It has given me hope, and it has given me confidence to realise that the way I am was what God made for my life. So through what they tell me, I feel a bit of comfort, there's a lot of comfort. Because it has enabled me to

meet other people, who are of the same situation like me. Whereby in our road together, and we believe that we are all the same, whether you are gay or not, all human beings, created by God. And everybody is created with a purpose.'

'I found a very good LGBT community and this is one of them. Well, they help you, you get someone to talk to, you get someone to encourage you, you get to meet other people, potential partners and somehow you get happy, yes. But it doesn't last long until the depression comes back and then it's if you feel like coming every week well that's good... I'm a believer. It has helped me to keep me strong and encourage me that one day everything will be fine and that God loves me.'

'The support I would say I am getting is not support financially, but psychological, feeling at home. I get feeling at home, a psychological support, at MCC. I wish I will be coming to MCC every day, just to have this feeling of brotherhood. Have this feeling that I have somebody that will listen to me.'

'I built confidence. I became very very confident when I came to MCC north London, because they are loving. They welcome everyone. Because in my life I can't say that I have ever went somewhere like singing in church, but here they give you platform.'

'Being here and then going to church, coming to MCC, preaching, and seeing people of the same calibre as you, as I am, it makes you understand that – I mean when they say that God loves everybody, God really loves everyone, it doesn't matter exactly who you are or what you are because he sees us as his children; not as in being straight, being transgender or whatever.'

'Well, my faith has kept me stronger because it preaches love, you know. It preaches togetherness. It teaches, it invites everybody. So my faith hasn't withered, it is my faith within me is strong. So I always take up the love towards another person because that's what my faith teaches me. So I don't hate anybody that doesn't like LGBTI people.'