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This couple is applying for asylum in France (Credit: InfoMigrants)

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LGBT asylum seekers in France face difficulties

Latest update : 2018/05/07

By Charlotte Boitiaux (<http://www.infomigrants.net/en/author/charlotte%20boitiaux/>)

There has been an increase in the number of LGBT people applying for asylum in France over the past few years. Several French associations, founded to help LGBT people in France, have had to adapt their services to help this particularly vulnerable group, many of whom are victims of discrimination and physical violence.

The founders of Le Refuge (<https://www.le-refuge.org/>) never thought that they'd be helping so many migrants. When this organization began, it was meant to be a refuge for LGBT people in France who felt isolated and alone. But about four years ago, Le Refuge started getting pleas for help from LGBT refugees

who had fled persecution in their home countries.

"In 2014, our association was confronted for the first time by the migrant crisis," says Frederic Gal, the director of Le Refuge. "Young foreigners were knocking at our door, looking for help. They said they were in grave danger because of their sexual orientation."

Most of the young people who came looking for help were from Africa, from countries like Algeria, Morocco, Cameroon and the Ivory Coast. However, there were also young people from Albania and Eastern Europe.

"They were coming, so we had to do something," said Gal. "The stories that these asylum seekers told were sometimes much more violent than those we were used to hearing. These people hadn't just been rejected by their families for their sexuality, many experienced violence through the legal system."

Homosexuality is still illegal in many different countries in Africa, including the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Morocco, Algeria and Guinea. In some countries, like Sudan and Nigeria, people found to be gay are sometimes given the death penalty.

'We've requested funds to help open up space for LGBT asylum seekers'

In the past few years, we've been getting more and more requests for help from foreigners. In 2015, only 10 percent of young people housed by the association were foreign nationals. In 2016, they represented 14 percent. By 2017, the number had risen to 28 percent (about 70 of the 280 young gay people helped by the organization are migrants).

Even though foreign nationals being helped by the organisation are in the minority, the increasing numbers show the new visibility of LGBT migrants in French society.

"We reached out to the Ministry of the Interior about this issue," said Nicolas Noguier, the president of Le Refuge. "We requested funds to open up spaces reserved for LGBT asylum seekers."

The French government body responsible for granting asylum or refugee status, OFPRA (the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons), has also noticed an increase in the number of people claiming asylum because of their sexual orientation.

"We don't have numbers, because, in France, it is illegal to gather this kind of statistic," said Pascal Brice, the director of OFPRA. "However, I can say that the number of asylum claims made over sexual orientation has been increasing since 2013. Most of these asylum seekers are African and we have staff specially trained to help them."

Raising awareness amongst officials working with migrant populations is important, otherwise, they might resort to relying on stereotypes when working with LGBT asylum seekers, says ACAT, a French Christian NGO that opposes torture and the death penalty.

"For example, if immigration judges and officials believe in the stereotype that homosexuality equals hypersexuality, they might be skeptical of an asylum seeker who says he has only loved one partner in his or her life [...] They have the unfortunate tendency to want to apply [the stereotypes that we have in France] to the experience of asylum seekers in their home countries," says an article published on the ACAT website. (<https://www.acatfrance.fr/actualite/demandeurs-d-asile-lgbt-la-double-peine>)

'There's still quite a bit of homophobia in our society'

BAAM, a Paris-based association that helps migrants, is also worried about interactions between LGBT asylum seekers and immigration officials.

"There's still quite a bit of homophobia in our society, even amongst social workers and within both organisations that help migrants and government agencies," said Julian, a member of BAAM LGBT, a specialized branch that opened in 2017.

"We opened up an LGBT branch due to an increase in requests for help from gay and transgender migrants," said Julian. "Often, these people are extremely fragile and have gone through a difficult journey. We have a safe space to meet with them, so that they can tell their stories without the presence of people from their community or country."

Last year, BAAM LGBT helped about fifty people, most of them from Africa, especially Kenya, Eritrea, Nigeria and Niger.

Another difficulty that some LGBT asylum seekers face is defending their cases when they come from a country considered "safe" by OFPRA. According to OFPRA, these are countries that are thought to respect personal freedoms, democracy and human rights. However, this list includes countries that criminalise homosexuality, like Ghana and Senegal. Applications from asylum seekers who come from these countries are automatically put on an accelerated track, which offers less protection. However, there is one piece of good news: if the National Assembly adopts new reforms to the immigration system which are currently under discussion, then countries that criminalize homosexuality will be removed from the list of safe countries.

*Albania, Armenia, Benin, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cape Verde, Georgia, Ghana, India, Kosovo, Macedonia, Mauritius, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Senegal and Serbia.

*** PRACTICAL INFORMATION ***

BAAM LGBT

Office hours, every Tuesday from 6 to 8pm

74 avenue Denfert-Rochereau (Bâtiment Colombani)

75014 Paris

Baam.lgbt@gmail.com (<mailto:Baam.lgbt@gmail.com>)

ARDHIS, an association that helps LGBT migrants

Office hours, the second Tuesday of each month, starting at 10:30am

63 rue Beaubourg

75003 PARIS

contact@ardhis.org

To contact Le Refuge, click here (<https://www.le-refuge.org/nous-contacter/liste-delegations/form-contact-signallement.html>)

- > Meet the refugee photographer whose photos were shown at the French Culture Ministry (<http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/10131/meet-the-refugee-photographer-whose-photos-were-shown-at-the-french-culture-ministry>)
- > Asylum seekers in Paris must now book first appointment through a call center (<http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/8991/asylum-seekers-in-paris-must-now-book-first-appointment-through-a-call-center>)
- > 'Had I stayed in Afghanistan, I would have been killed' (<http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/7714/had-i-stayed-in-afghanistan-i-would-have-been-killed>)
- > Seventeen unaccompanied minors are being detained in Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport (<http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/10874/seventeen-unaccompanied-minors-are-being-detained-in-paris-charles-de-gaulle-airport>)

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