

Rainbow community organises for refugees

Rachel Evans, Sydney, March 4, 2016

Issue 1086

Racism and homophobia are on the rise. Millions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) and sex and gender diverse identifying (SGDI) people face life-threatening persecution.

About 2.7 billion people live in the 76 countries that criminalise homosexuality. The death penalty for homosexuality is applied in Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen. In China, several hospitals use electric shock therapy as “anti-gay treatments”.

Queer refugees flee state sanctioned murder, beatings from mobs, laws imported from colonial powers and the imperialist backed, Christian right. David Kato, a Ugandan activist was murdered while campaigning against a US Christian right-developed anti-gay bill in January, 2011. His case reminds us of how dangerous it is for queers in countries where governments polarise opinion to detract from their corporate and social crimes.

In times of economic crisis, rich governments polarise and scapegoat. They use homophobia as they use racism — to break down solidarity, to divide and rule. Despite marriage equality victories sweeping the global North and parts of the global South, homophobia is on the rise in Russia, Iraq, Syria, Africa and Indonesia.

President of the Human Rights Commission Gillian Triggs said at a Uniting Church forum on refugees on February 24: “About 175 million people are vulnerable to persecution for sexual and gender identity. Only 2,500 ever achieve the dream of finding asylum.”

Under the 1951 International Refugee Convention, which Australia signed, an SGDI refugee can legally seek asylum. But, in clear violation of the Convention, Australia's immigration department and Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) imprisons children, families, queers and women fleeing torture and persecution.

Australia jails queer refugees on Manus Island, which penalises homosexuality with 14-years imprisonment. They demean queer refugees in the interview process by foisting a Western “coming out” and LGBTIQ identity framework on applicants to reduce their chance of success.

These are just some of the questions we know immigration have grilled applicants with: “How many partners have you had?”; “Which places have you visited?”; “Can you conduct a secret

relationship in your home town?"; "Do you use lube?"; How many times have you had sex with him/her?". Any hesitancy or slight inconsistencies are seized upon and refugees are declared untrustworthy.

We know of migration agents who have told refugees to stay in the closet because laws are against them. Denis Altman said: "We know of a gay male couple on Nauru who fear they will be bashed if they leave their tent. We know of one woman on Nauru who is being harassed because she is suspected of being a lesbian. We don't know if she is, but we know she is being threatened."

The rainbow community has had a proud tradition of fighting for queer refugee rights. Activists fought alongside and won freedom for courageous queer Pakistani Ali Humayan. We battled alongside and helped win queer refugee status for Motahar, Bipblop, Clary and Walter. There was a mass outcry at the news the immigration department was to deport gay Pakistani Ali Choudhry from his long-term partner Matthew Hynd. We won that campaign too.

But it is hard for SGDI refugees to be public. They have to sign "codes of conduct" and they get bullied by their communities, both rainbow and migrant. We have to be sensitive if they cannot go public. We can walk beside them in any way they are able.

The tide is turning in favour of refugees. The plight of Asha and her family and the 267 refugees the government is trying to deport to Nauru has led to a tremendous outcry. But it is also about the 3500 onshore and the 800 offshore refugees. It is let them all in, let them all stay, free them all.

What can the rainbow community do? We can resurrect the 78ers chant: "Stop police attacks on gays, women and blacks". We can add our sizeable political strength to address the root cause of this crisis.

First World capitalists erect borders against the global south. They organise the free movement of capital. We need to organise for the free movement of people.

There is significant work being done. Our LGBTI elders, the 1978ers, did a "#LetThemLand" photoshoot at a recent QueerThinking forum and the 2016 Mardi Gras Board led a "#LetThemStay" chant and action at Fair Day. The "No Pride in Detention" Mardi Gras float has been inundated with requests to participate.

We can make a difference. Solidarity is strength and together we are strong. The movie *Pride* shows our proud tradition of standing up for oppressed groups. Victory to the poor. We are

numerous and we will win. Free the refugees.

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