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'What Do They Want Me To Do To Prove I'm A Lesbian?' - Investigating The Plight of LGBTQ+ Asylum Seekers In The UK

"Can you describe how you have lesbian sex' Was just one of the questions Thalmah, 24, was asked during her six-hour Home Office interview last year. As Pride comes to London, Sophie Wilkinson explains why we need to do more to support LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in the UK



BY SOPHIE WILKINSON | POSTED ON 09 07 2018
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'How did you realise you are a lesbian? How did your relationship begin? Can you describe how you have lesbian sex? If you're religious and your family won't approve, why do you do it? Why can't you go home and hide your sexuality?' These are just some of the questions that Thalmah, 24, was asked by a Home Office worker during a six-hour interview last year, she says. All because she's an asylum seeker fleeing homophobia in her home country, Uganda, to live in a country which, apparently, is proud of its LGBTQ+ citizens.

This weekend, for example, Pride In London will see thousands of people gather in the centre of the capital to not only celebrate how far LGBTQ+ rights have come but to also take a look at what comes next. High on any woke millennial's list should be the plight of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, represented in the parade by members of Say It Loud, the UK's only dedicated support group for LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers. Because the homophobia that the UK once exported across its empire is now coming home to roost.

Half a millennia ago, when Britain started invading Africa, Asia and the Americas, toppling local leaders to set up the British Empire, these bold pioneers exported regressive laws. One was Henry VIII's 1533 act banning sex between two men. Though lesbians weren't always criminalised in the same way, arguably because women weren't seen to have enough autonomy to sleep with each other, the culture of homophobia against all same-sex couples was the logical end. Especially when religious missionaries, convinced of women's role as baby-makers, turned up. As veteran human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell once put it: 'Prior to western colonisation, there are no records of any African laws against homosexuality.'

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Though Britain's Empire has all but disappeared, its toxic legacy thrives: 37 of 53 Commonwealth countries (70%) have laws criminalising homosexuality, and of the 44 countries across the world banning lesbian relationships, 66% are ex-British colonies. Earlier this year, [Theresa May expressed to a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting](https://qz.com/1261482/theresa-may-sorry-for-colonial-anti-gay-laws-in-commonwealth-africa-but-it-wont-help-) (<https://qz.com/1261482/theresa-may-sorry-for-colonial-anti-gay-laws-in-commonwealth-africa-but-it-wont-help->

[lgbt-community/](#)) that: 'I am all too aware that these laws were often put in place by my own country. They were wrong then and they are wrong now.'

Strong words, but in action, lesbians like Thalmah are facing such a long and tough journey to acceptance, both as asylum seekers and as LGBTQ+ people.

Such as Valerie Fanguem, 29, who moved to the UK from Cameroon as a student: 'I come from a country that was colonised by the British and French, so it's difficult - didn't say to anyone I was attracted to girls, even though I was excited with my feelings, I had to show my family and friends that I was normal.'

She remained in the closet in London, partly because she didn't have the English to reach LGBT groups, and applied for asylum in October 2014. 'I was so lonely and crying and worrying,' but through a mentor, she discovered the Say It Loud club, of which she is now an ambassador: 'I started being really open with myself. And after learning more English, I could meet plenty of friends from the LGBT+ scene.'

'Engaging with the LGBT community is the best thing I've done since being here,' she adds, 'I've stopped fighting myself.'

The issue is, though, Valerie's asylum application was rejected two and a half years after she submitted it, on the basis that she only seemed to join the LGBT community after her application and is therefore not a genuine lesbian. Valerie is understandably upset: 'The system is messed up, I'd come from a country where to talk about sexuality, let alone homosexuality, is difficult, and I found it hard to open up. What do they want me to do for them to prove I'm a lesbian?'

She is determined, though, as she readies to submit a fresh claim for refugee status, because 'I can't go back to Cameroon. I know I'm attracted to girls and I want to live an open life.'

Doris Funotong, 34, is also from Cameroon, and explains the consequences of being an out lesbian in the country: 'I didn't live openly because it would have made me persecuted. The authorities just need to suspect and you can be arrested and put in prison.'

The sentence for 'homosexualité' reports the [Human Dignity Trust \(http://www.humandignitytrust.org\)](http://www.humandignitytrust.org), is 5 years' imprisonment and a fine of \$35-\$350. Doris explains that the authorities are allowed to act viciously: 'The country is run by the military and with the backing of the law, they know as long as it's legal their backs are covered.'

After falling for her best friend at secondary school, she 'couldn't put my finger on what I was feeling because of the society I came from. We had no role models, no social group, nobody could talk about it.' So she stayed in the closet, never considering leaving because 'I loved my mum so much that running away didn't cross my mind.' Luckily for Doris, her mother offered to sponsor her studies in London, so she moved here as a student aged 26, excited that 'it was a great opportunity to live somewhere that was gay-friendly.' Even still, she couldn't come out right away: 'I was so used to my Cameroonian community in London, and so lived in fear of coming out.'

When she did, 'it was the most difficult thing I've ever been through, I was scared of upsetting my mum and being rejected by my own family.'

But Say It Loud provided her the confidence to be out: 'It changed my life completely, I could speak proudly about who I am.' This, in turn, made her refugee application interview as comfortable as it could be.

Also an ambassador for Say It Loud, Doris is now hesitant to blame homophobia in Cameroon on colonial rule alone, pointing out that the country has long been independent: 'The law could have changed a long time ago, but it's not been. We've only had one president since I was born and nothing will change as long as he's president.' Indeed, the concern now is that while 1 in 4 countries ban lesbian relationships, countries such as Nigeria consider homosexuality as a toxic western export, and are banning it only now.

In Uganda, the penalty for 'unnatural offences' and 'indecent practices' is life imprisonment, which is why Thalmah, 24, and unwilling to give her surname for fear of being further ostracised by family members still living in the country, cannot return.

She arrived in the UK with her family as a teenager, and realised in her late teens she was 'different...but I had nowhere to talk about it, there was a lack of trust and confidence and a stigma in my family. Religion - we're Catholic - and tradition

told me that you're meant to marry a man and if you do different you're cursed. Even that is shameful for the family, so I closed myself off for a very long time.'

Eventually, aged 21, Thalmah tried online dating: 'I used a different name to be careful but I met someone who was going through the same thing, it assured me that I wasn't alone. We went out on meet-ups and I got to know LGBT communities, and even other people like myself from Uganda. It was so uplifting to realise I wasn't the only one going through that.'

Though she passed the six-hour interview, she found it unnecessarily insensitive: 'I had to explain how I realised, how I came out, who I told, why I told them, why it took so long to tell them.' She also provided evidence in her petition: 'messages between me and my girlfriend, pictures of us together, she had to write a written statement and provide her passport...it was so much.'

Aloysius Sali, who was forced to leave Uganda after founding Say It Loud as a student in 1994, was on hand to help, building Thalmah's confidence to the point she was finally granted asylum.

The struggle, now, is getting a job. Because not only does Thalmah have to come out as a card-carrying refugee, but as a lesbian: 'They don't always have an idea of what a refugee card means and then having to explain that I sought asylum because of my sexuality all the time is hard.'

Though she's got more than enough on her plate, Thalmah wants to give back, and advocate for LGBTQ+ refugee rights as an ambassador for Say It Loud. 'I feel empowered that i can tell people from my experience, 'This is what you think, but this is what it is.'

'I hope to bring more awareness, more choices and voices to the table. Look how far the UK has come since Section 28 [a law banning local authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality] was repealed 15 years ago. The future is bright for the Commonwealth, soon they will be enlightened and educated and the stigma to LGBT people can disappear.'

To help the Say it Loud club and other charities supporting LGBTQ+ Refugees and asylum seekers from around the world, you can buy an organic rainbow-themed Choose Love x Pride In London T-shirt, designed by Katharine Hamnett and priced at £20, from ASOS. (http://www.asos.com/asos/help-refugees-choose-love-organic-cotton-rainbow-print-t-shirt/prd/10278442?affid=14173&channelref=product+search&mk=abc¤cyid=1&ppcadref=761030383%7C39786841643%7Caud-458847217612;pla-461761477876&browsecountry=GB&_clid=v3_5d4db09e-2419-5b4f-beb3-7299fae9a6bc&gclid=Cj0KCQjwpvzZBRcBARIsACe8vyJzSf1BroYxNzZacQ9xI3j3uOrh7lKn33btQ5jsg5Bksc3NRltkPmYaAmwsEALw_wcB)

The limited edition T-shirts are also available or from the Rainbow Choose Love pop-up store in St Martin's Courtyard and Mercer Walk, Covent Garden, London, WC2, open from 10-7pm on Saturday 7th July. There will be complimentary make-overs from [Smashbox](http://smashbox.com) and cocktails provided by Bill's. For more information, visit [Help Refugees on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/HelpRefugeesUK/)

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