

# Caught between borders

*Closed borders and closed minds are trapping African LGBTI asylum seekers in hostile countries.*



Illustration by *Eric Chow*

*Malia Politzer | Annie Hylton | Longreads | June 2019 | 25 minutes (6,991 words)*

The first time his father tried to kill him, Ismail\* was 15 years old. By the time he turned 19, he had escaped four attempts on his life: Once, he was outside an asylum center in South Africa, where he'd hoped to find safety; other times he was in Somalia, the country from which he fled. His father was intent on killing him to protect the family's "honor." No matter where he went, it seemed, his father had enlisted Somali immigrants to mete out his execution. Ismail's crime? He is gay.

Slender and tall, Ismail dresses sharply, favoring bright colors and tight cuts. He wears a signature mixture of ladies' perfumes, and carries a silver-chain necklace and anklet in his backpack that he longs to wear but is too afraid to put on. From a young age, Ismail displayed traits that he said were "woman things" — his walk, the way he spoke, how he moved his hands — mannerisms that were not "normal" and provoked his father's ire. His father forbade him from school and kept him under house arrest.

One day, Ismail's mother was out when his father discovered him coloring his nails black with a marker. As punishment, he scalded Ismail with boiling water, leaving a maze of angry blisters across his torso and neck. Ismail fled to a neighbor's house to avoid being beaten, and he hid there until his mother returned.

*"The first time his father tried to kill him, Ismail\* was 15 years old...Ismail's crime? He is gay."*

His father attacked him twice more before his mother convinced Ismail to flee somewhere — anywhere — he might be safe. "She said that she couldn't save me anymore," he said, "because my father and the community wanted to kill me."

With little more than the clothes he was wearing and some money his mother had managed to scrape together, Ismail said goodbye to Mogadishu. Wearing a coat and a red baseball cap tilted over his eyes to disguise his face, he got on a bus destined for Kenya — and, he hoped, to a friendlier place.



REPORT THIS AD

Before he made it out of the city, the bus stopped, and five men — their faces concealed by scarves — got on. One of them grabbed the back of Ismail's coat and dragged him off the bus. The others blindfolded him, bound his arms behind his back with black wire, and shoved him into a car. They drove him to an abandoned farmhouse on the outskirts of Mogadishu, where they took turns beating him for the next three days.

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"They were wearing boots, and they were kicking me against the ground," he said. Deprived of food and water, cold and wet from sleeping under the rain, and aching from the relentless beatings, Ismail began to grow weaker. He realized that if he stayed, he would die.

Ismail began to think of how he might escape. He asked one of the men to untie him, convincing him that he was far too weak to be a threat. "Please," he told the man. "Even if I am going to die, can you help?"

That night, while one of the men was praying, and the others were sleeping, he unbound his legs, which had grown numb from the restricted blood, and slowly crept away from his captors. "At first I couldn't walk," he said. "I had to crawl; I was so dizzy ... and then I ran."

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It's illegal to be gay in **35 countries in Africa, four of which employ the death penalty** as punishment. That's why people like Ismail are fleeing their countries in search of safety — many to South Africa, the only African country that, on paper at least, offers constitutional protection on the basis of sex, gender, and sexual orientation (but not gender identity). Others languish in refugee camps, hoping to be resettled, while the few lucky enough to have contacts and financial resources fly to Europe or the United States to pursue asylum. But a yearlong investigation into the plight of African LGBTI asylum seekers — for which we interviewed dozens of African LGBTI-identified asylum seekers, lawyers, and human rights activists on three different continents — revealed that systemic gaps in the asylum process mean that members of this particularly vulnerable population often fall

through the cracks. If you're African and LGBTI, true safety is often unachievable.

*“‘At first I couldn’t walk,’ he said. ‘I had to crawl; I was so dizzy ... and then I ran.’”*

Our investigation found that African LGBTI asylum seekers face danger and rejection multiple times over: First, by deceitful translators and immigrant communities — who often take it upon themselves to enforce the strict anti-gay laws that exist in their countries of origin by attacking or killing those they suspect are LGBTI — and, second, by the state. Those who venture to Europe or the United States become swept up in anti-immigrant policy changes: Political backlash to the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, as well as President Trump’s various travel ban iterations and his historically low resettlement numbers leave many to live a life of unending limbo in places that are hostile and dangerous to people identifying as LGBTI.

For Ismail, and many like him, the first acute challenge is to escape immediate danger.

After fleeing his captors, Ismail stumbled through the darkness until he reached a nearby farmhouse. He pounded on the door and begged for help. The home belonged to a couple with two small children — and though the husband tried to shoo him away, the wife took pity on him. She discreetly slipped him money, gave him food and a niqab to conceal his identity, and convinced her husband to drop him off at a bus stop a few hours away.

Under the protection of the niqab, Ismail didn’t dare speak, lest he give himself away. He took the bus to the Kenyan border, where he managed to bribe a truck driver to smuggle him into the country. (His mother had wired him money.)

Nairobi, the largest city in Kenya, is a sprawling, vibrant, diverse metropolis of skyscrapers and incessant traffic jams. Upon arriving in the capital, Ismail began to relax, feeling a sense of security in melting into the anonymity of the bustling city. He got odd jobs where he could, and even made a friend: another Somali named Adil, who, after

some time, revealed that he, too, was gay.

After a few short months, however, Somali immigrants found and beat Ismail; he learned that his father had circulated a photograph of him. “The community is very small,” he explained. “I even had a sister in Nairobi, but I didn’t dare to see her — I didn’t want anyone to know I was there.” After the incident, Adil tried to convince Ismail to apply for asylum with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). “He told me that I don’t have to be afraid, that we can go to UNHCR and tell them our stories, and that they would protect us,” he said.

Ismail refused, so his friend went alone. Two days later, Ismail read in a newspaper that Adil was dead. Though he has no proof, Ismail believes that the UNHCR interpreter had passed on his story to members of the Somali community in Nairobi, who stabbed him to death. Bereft, Ismail called his mother to tell her the news. After doing some research, she convinced him to flee to South Africa.

*“After a few short months, however, Somali immigrants found and beat Ismail; he learned that his father had circulated a photograph of him.”*

(While a UNHCR spokesperson said they don’t have enough information to comment on Adil’s case, they take such allegations very seriously and intend to open an investigation into it. At the end of 2018, UNHCR readvertised translator positions in Kenya due to “dissatisfaction with the quality of translation” and will be providing translators with sensitization trainings on LGBTI issues.)

Ismail left for Johannesburg the next day.

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The Johannesburg headquarters of Jesuit Refugee Services — a partner organization to UNHCR — is a small building gated off from the street by an impenetrable metal wall in a rundown neighborhood on the

outskirts of the city.

Johan Viljoen, the Jesuit priest who formerly ran the center, says he hears stories like Ismail's often: LGBTI people flee countries across the continent to escape "corrective rape," attempted murder, witch doctors, and violent ceremonial practices (often paid for by their families) to "cure" them.

In theory, LGBTI people fleeing persecution should easily qualify for refugee status in countries signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which defines a refugee as a person who crosses an international border and is unable to return to their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Most LGBTI asylum seekers qualify as "members of a particular social group," which is broadly defined as a group that shares a common, immutable characteristic that they cannot — or should not — be compelled to forsake.

Many LGBTI asylum seekers look to South Africa — the first country in the world to outlaw discrimination of sexual orientation in its post-apartheid constitution and the fifth to legalize same-sex marriage — as a potential safe haven. And while its domestic legal framework includes protections for LGBTI asylum seekers on paper, in practice, very few individuals receive asylum on the basis of sexual orientation, causing many to live underground or to be deported. (According to Sharon Ekambaram, the head of the refugee and migrant rights program at the Johannesburg-based NGO Lawyers For Human Rights, only 4 percent of all asylum claims result in refugee status. Guillain Koko, the former project coordinator for LGBTI refugees with the refugee services NGO People Against Suffering Oppression and Poverty (PASSOP) told us he saw only five successful resettlements of LGBTI asylum seekers in his three years of running the organization's LGBTI support group.)

This is, in part, endemic to larger institutional problems riddling South Africa's asylum process that affect all refugees. Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has struggled with deep-seated xenophobia — politicians frequently blame immigrants for crime and economic woes, and violent riots targeting immigrants are a semi-regular occurrence.

Xenophobia has also infected the asylum system, leading to long delays in processing applications. Claiming that economic migrants

were pretending to be asylum seekers and were bribing corrupt officials to stay in the country legally, then-minister of Home Affairs (the department responsible for managing asylum services in South Africa), Malusi Gigaba, began to close refugee reception offices across the country in 2011. For many years, only three reception offices accepted new asylum applications in all of South Africa, forcing asylum seekers living in other parts of the country to travel long distances to renew their application, leading to further delays.

The problem became so acute that Scalabrini, a refugee NGO based out of Cape Town, successfully sued Home Affairs, leading to a 2017 ruling that the office had to reopen a refugee center in Cape Town by March 31, 2018. Despite the ruling, a 2017 white paper released by Home Affairs articulated its hope to maintain closure of the centers to process all asylum seekers in “Asylum Seeker Processing Centers,” which, according to Corey Johnson, an attorney and advocacy program manager at Scalabrini, can only be interpreted as detention facilities. This marks a shift in South Africa’s asylum policy from integration to detention.

In addition to these overarching challenges facing all asylum seekers, those who identify as LGBTI face a double burden in getting their claims recognized and must contend with discrimination in the last place they’d expect it: in the asylum centers, many of which do not guarantee confidential interviews. Asylum seekers are at risk of being overheard by heteronormative asylum seekers hostile to people who are LGBTI; translators and asylum officers have, in certain cases, been prejudiced and lacked adequate training, so they ask intrusive questions or force alternative narratives; and the system operates on corruption, where bribes may be the only option to advance in the asylum process. According to Viljoen, these barriers can prevent people from asking for asylum, for fear of the persecution following them.

When a person lodges an asylum claim, they must explain the nature of their persecution, Viljoen explained: “But the centers are often packed with people. If you come from Nigeria, for example, you know that if you came out publicly as gay you’d be lynched and killed in the streets. And there you are in a crowd of Nigerians. You’re not going to disclose your real reason for applying for asylum.”

Ismail learned this lesson the hard way. It took him nine days to reach South Africa: He passed through vast areas of wilderness, rugged



terrain, and farmland; and he crossed four international borders by foot, by car, by truck, by bus. When he entered South Africa from Mozambique, his mother had arranged to have someone pick him up, and he was taken to a Somali community in Johannesburg, where he lived for a few months. “I don’t know English; I don’t know anything,” he recalled, so he had no choice but to stay with the people whom he most feared. He did his best not to be noticed; he spoke to no one, and, except to eat meals with the group, he remained unseen.

One Friday, in 2015, he was standing in the Home Affairs queue, when he was attacked. The police were standing just a few feet away from him while he was being beaten, but they did nothing. “I said help me,” but “nobody tried to help,” he said. He managed to get away from his assailants and ran back to the place he was staying, where he cut his hair, changed into traditional Muslim clothes, then called his mother. She told him to go to Cape Town. Terrified, he never stepped foot inside the Johannesburg asylum center again.

Those who do find the courage to tell their stories may experience homophobia from the people staffing the centers. South Africa’s Legal Resource Centre, a nonprofit law clinic, **published cases** of people who fled troubling circumstances because of their sexual orientation. In five different rejection letters, an officer quoted describes the claimant as “a gay.” The Centre concluded, “The use of the article and of ‘gay’ as a noun rather than as an adjective is discriminatory and offensive.” In other cases, claimants have been rejected on the basis that they should go back to their home countries and obey the law by keeping their sexual orientation a secret.

Translators may also feel “scandalized,” according to Viljoen, by the fact that members of their community are LGBTI. They deliberately craft another version of the person’s story to the asylum interviewer. “The asylum seeker later gets a notification that their application was rejected, because the story on their initial statement didn’t match with the story the translator told,” he said.

Because of South Africa’s indelible xenophobia, many LGBTI asylum seekers are often forced to rely on members of their home communities to help them integrate. However, these communities are also often “pathologically homophobic,” according to Viljoen. If you’re LGBTI, “you can’t go and rely on the support of that community,” he said. “They would probably kill you.”



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In one such case, two Somali lesbians had fled to South Africa to escape a fatwa ruling that they be buried in the sand and stoned to death. News soon spread that they were in South Africa, and the fatwa followed them: One morning, they woke up to three male intruders who had been instructed to kill them with axes. One of the women survived to tell the story, while the other has since gone missing.

Ismail hoped to have better odds when he boarded a bus from Johannesburg to Cape Town with less than 650 rand (about 50 USD) in his pocket and no contacts to help him. (His mother, having urgently researched on the Internet, had read that Cape Town was supposed to be friendly to LGBTI people.)

In Cape Town, Ismail wandered the streets until he found a mosque where he was able to wash his face. He went to the same mosque for the next three days to cleanse his skin, and, in between, he paced up and down the streets, hoping for some kind of miracle. Eventually, he decided to take a chance: he found a man who dressed “gay” and asked if he knew of a place he could shower. To communicate, the man used his smartphone to translate from English to Somali. He took Ismail to a sauna for gay men, and they soon became lovers.

Over the next year, the man gave Ismail a home and broke down the emotional walls Ismail had built to survive. Still, when he ventured outside, Ismail couldn’t avoid the perfidious: Three Somali men hid behind his boyfriend’s building, and as soon as Ismail stepped out of his temporary oasis, the men beat him with a stick and pounded the back of his head. The next morning, Ismail’s boyfriend took him to the police station. They never do much, however, he said of the police.

When we met Ismail in December 2017, he was aesthetically striking:

He wore coiffed hair, a black cotton shirt, and African-printed pants; his bright eyes, contoured by long eyelashes, dripped when he spoke of his mother. His boyfriend had since left him, and he'd been recovering from the latest in a series of attacks: Another group of Somalis had mercilessly pummeled his genitals. He needed surgery to repair damage to his testicles that, for months, had been postponed.

While Cape Town has been called Africa's "gay capital," that openness doesn't necessarily extend to LGBTI-identified people who also happen to be black. A 2017 study by the Centre for Risk Analysis at the South African Institute of Race Relations found that four out of 10 LGBTI South Africans know of someone who has been murdered "for being or suspected of being" LGBTI — with black members of the community twice as likely as white respondents to know someone who was murdered on account of their sexuality.

Ismail struggles to support himself financially and is frequently beaten. He periodically sends us WhatsApp messages with his face bloodied and swollen; he receives phone calls threatening him: "You will die soon," the voice tells him. In May 2018, he was still waiting for asylum when authorities asked for a bank statement and proof of address, neither of which he has; he has since become undocumented. "Still," he said, "I'm fighting." In September he finally received his operation. He sent pictures of himself in a hospital cap and gown. "Everything's OK now," he said. "You don't have to worry."

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Melanie Nathan, a white South African woman who occupies a small apartment in California's Marin County, rarely sleeps through the night. Her phone constantly buzzes with desperate calls: One woman from Rwanda, who was forced to flee to Uganda (where a friend offered to help her) after being exposed as a lesbian via social media, was subsequently kicked out of her friend's house and forced to live on the streets; another, who had just survived a brutal beating, was turned away from a hospital. Some of her callers are so traumatized that they tell her they want to commit suicide, and Nathan is often their last hope.

Nathan's small organization, the African Human Rights Coalition, is technically dedicated to advocating for LGBTI rights in Africa, but, in reality, most of her time goes to fielding calls from terrified LGBTI Africans seeking safety. Nathan does her best to provide "ad hoc" exile

strategies, humanitarian assistance, and general resources and advice — even if she knows that the scant information she can share is woefully inadequate.

For many LGBTI asylum seekers, the only available option is to apply for refugee status with UNHCR directly in a neighboring country.

Sometimes people call Nathan seeking help to escape their countries. “It’s extremely frustrating, because I don’t have a pretty picture to offer someone who is suffering so badly,” Nathan said. While she can tell them where to go, they must make the perilous journey — which is sometimes life-threatening, expensive, and can involve crossing multiple borders — alone. “It’s often extremely dangerous, and then once they arrive they’ll have to be in what is essentially a prison camp for the next three to four years, on the off chance that they’ll be resettled.”

Until recently, many of her callers would end up in Kakuma refugee camp, in northwestern Kenya, bordering Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia.

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That’s how Faith\*, a trans woman who was forced to flee Uganda after narrowly escaping death at the hands of her father, found herself in Kakuma camp. (In Uganda, being homosexual is illegal, **with a penalty of life in prison. Human rights activists report that many inmates suffer torture and neglect while in police custody.**) Faith’s first impression of Kakuma was that it was a desperate place. The camp consists of rows of simple buildings with corrugated-steel roofs surrounded by baked red earth in Turkana County, one of the poorest regions of northwestern Kenya. **Originally established in 1991** to care for Sudan’s “lost boys,” it’s since ballooned into Kenya’s second-largest

refugee camp, and, as of December 2018, it hosts more than 187,349 refugees from across Africa.

Faith immediately sought the LGBTI community, who, with the aid of UNHCR, established residence in a separate part of the camp — a deliberate segregation intended to keep them safe from other refugees, local Indigenous populations, and the police.

At first, Faith felt hopeful about her decision to travel to Kakuma. She met other transgender women for the first time, many of whom wore dresses and makeup. “I thought it is a safe place where I can make myself to be me,” she said. She, too, began to dress in a way that felt more authentic, wearing women’s clothing and makeup. “I was happy — it was the first time I really felt comfortable.”

But that impression quickly soured. Life in a refugee camp isn’t easy for anyone — Kakuma is crowded with people from many different countries, with differences in culture, all compounded by hunger due to food rationing. Frustrations over delays with asylum claims mean that conflicts are common.

Faith soon discovered that refugee camps are not as safe for LGBTI asylum seekers, who often encounter from fellow refugees the same homophobia, discrimination, and even violence that they sought to escape.

For Faith, the harassment started with cruel words from other refugees, but soon escalated to violent attacks. Faith said that other refugees would sometimes stalk her and other transgender women, and she soon felt afraid of leaving her tent. When she went to UNHCR to complain, she said they suggested that she try not to draw so much attention to herself by not wearing women’s clothes. “We reported every harassment, but they did nothing,” she said.

Faith and her friends began to feel unsafe inside their compounds, too. “We would sleep in shifts,” she said. “We were so frightened. So long as someone was awake, nothing would happen. But then one day I found everything was cut — my mattress was removed, my clothing was cut. They had just destroyed everything.”

That moment marked a tipping point for her. It was Easter, Faith said, and it was raining heavily that day when she and several other transgender women decided to protest outside of UNHCR. The small group stood near the office, shouting slogans, when they were

approached by a group of men — members of the local Indigenous Turkana people.

“They had weapons — a panga, which is like a big knife, and big sticks with them,” she said. “There were many in number, probably more than thirty. I couldn’t count all of them.”

The group attacked them, beating them so badly that one of Faith’s friends ended up in a coma. While the local police broke up the fight, Faith said that they didn’t arrest any of the attackers, instead delivering the injured protestors to the UNHCR staff, who drove them to the hospital.

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“After that, I didn’t want to go back to Kakuma,” she said. “It’s dangerous in Nairobi — you need to make your own way, and they can put you in jail — but at least it’s anonymous.”

Faith headed to Nairobi that same month, where, like in Uganda, she has suffered multiple beatings and risks imprisonment.

At long last, however, Faith recently received the hopeful news that her asylum application is under review at the Canadian embassy. Her interview took place at the end of January 2019. Her application was accepted, and she is supposed to be relocated in the next few months. “I am praying that it will go well,” she said. “Here there is no future for me.”

In December, following another attack targeting LGBTI asylum seekers

in Kakuma, UNHCR relocated those registered as LGBTI to a safe house in Nairobi.

“It became very clear to us after the incident that it is really risky and dangerous for LGBTI-identified asylum seekers to stay in Kakuma, which is why we took them out,” said Cécile Pouilly, a global spokesperson for UNHCR. “Our colleagues in Kenya are working very hard to make sure this group is safe, and to find a long-term solution, and to provide them with accommodation and assistance.”

(That aid only extends to asylum seekers who are registered LGBTI. According to Daemon\*, the informal spokesperson and leader of a group of 41 LGBTI asylum seekers who remain in Kakuma, many are too scared — or are unaware that they have the option — to file their asylum claims based on their LGBTI status. According to Daemon, a group of them were recently attacked — this time by Somali asylum seekers living in the camp.)

Ultimately, Nathan believes that the current asylum system is broken for LGBTI asylum seekers and cannot offer them adequate protection. It is “virtually impossible to guarantee safety to someone who is LGBTI and on African soil,” she said. “To be safe, they need to be resettled in a third country — a country that is known to be friendly to LGBTI people,” like the United States, Canada, or one in Europe.

For many, however, that safety is out of reach. Resettlement through UNHCR is a long and arduous process: According to the agency, only 4 percent of refugees in Africa considered to be in need will be resettled in third countries this year, after waiting between one to five years. Because of the persecution LGBTI asylum seekers face in refugee camps, UNHCR tries to prioritize their resettlement — even so, it can take years before the process is complete.

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Jimmy\*, a gay man, fled Uganda where he escaped being butchered, a family who disowned him, destruction of his property, and endless nights in police cells. In 2015, he ended up in Kakuma, where, like Faith, he faced daily threats of violence and illness. “This place is horrible; it’s like another hell,” he said over a voice note in February 2018.

In 2016, Jimmy was approved for resettlement in the United States and was scheduled to leave in January 2017, the month President Trump

came into office and issued his infamous travel ban. But the call for Jimmy to board his flight to the United States never came. Months went by until finally the International Organization for Migration (IOM) informed Jimmy that he'd be on a flight in July 2017. He sold off all of his belongings, gave up his job, saved up the "little pennies" he had and borrowed money from friends. "I became very happy ... I will finally leave this place," he remembered thinking.

Two days before his departure date, the IOM told him that the Supreme Court had upheld parts of Trump's executive order and that he would be unable to resettle in the United States at that time. "I'm waiting for my flight, but there is no flight for me," Jimmy said. "I feel like hanging myself." A few months ago, Jimmy contracted malaria. "It was the end of the road for me; I had to start from zero," he said.

Finally, in November 2018, Jimmy was resettled to Chicago — but he is one of a small minority. According to UNHCR statistics, only 1 percent of refugee applicants globally are submitted for resettlement. And of those submitted for resettlement from Africa this year, there are only sufficient spaces allocated for 4 percent of applicants. That means that very few African LGBTI asylum seekers make it to a third country. Some become disillusioned with the long asylum-seeking process and disappear. Others don't survive the wait.

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Nathan believes that the only way to address the unique vulnerabilities of LGBTI asylum seekers is to circumvent the traditional asylum process altogether by creating a special visa for people who are LGBTI and fleeing persecution.



“My question is: How can you protect somebody who has the right to protection, when you are putting them in the same conditions that they ran from?” Nathan asked. “It’s a big flaw in the system. I think you shouldn’t be putting them in the UNHCR system at all.”

Nathan’s proposal isn’t without precedent: During the Cold War, the United States passed the Lautenberg Amendment, which created a more lenient standard for refugee status to Jews, Evangelical Christians, and Ukrainian Catholics coming from the former Soviet Union and Southeast Asia, where communist governments were imprisoning and killing minority religious groups with impunity. To qualify, applicants merely needed to prove category membership, rather than having to prove individual persecution, facilitating more rapid resettlement than is possible through the current asylum system

“When people are denied one of the most fundamental aspects of their lives, then international communities who recognize that fundamental right have a duty to look for solutions,” Nathan said. “That’s what happened with the Soviet Jewish émigrés — a fundamental right, the right to practice their religion, was taken away from them, and the United States found a way to support them. Now they should do the same with LGBTI.”

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The Netherlands is about as far from Uganda as you can get — both geographically and culturally. At least, that was Janet Kawuma’s thought when she first arrived, nearly nine years ago. Originally from Kampala, where the pace of life is much slower, it seemed to her that Dutch people didn’t walk, they ran like they were “chasing something.”

When she first arrived, Kawuma said she wondered how she would ever fit in. Nearly a decade later, her asylum claim is still in limbo.

Although no one has data on the rate at which the applications of LGBTI asylum seekers are accepted or rejected (the UNHCR doesn’t keep these sorts of statistics), NGOs throughout Europe complain that the reasons LGBTI claims are often rejected has little to do with their validity: In some European countries, LGBTI people have been rejected for not adhering to the interviewer’s stereotypes about how an LGBTI person should act. In others, interviewers refuse applications based on what they see to be “inconsistencies,” but may in reality be due to

cultural differences. Kawuma has struggled with both of these challenges.

A petite 28-year-old, Kawuma has a round, serious face, close-cropped curly black hair, and a purposeful, don't-mess-with-me gait. She occupies a tiny room that is filled with her shoe collection, plush heart-shaped pillows, and photos of the son she was forced to leave behind in Uganda when he was only 2, who she supports by cleaning houses under-the-table. Since arriving in the Netherlands, she's lived in six refugee camps in different parts of the country. It hasn't been easy. She said that being forced to watch other asylum seekers receive protection again and again, while her own application languished, has been extremely painful.

Originally from Uganda, Kawuma fled her home in the capital city of Kampala when the father of her son — a man with whom she'd formed a transactional relationship (sex for shelter and, at times, financial support) after running away as a teen — discovered her in bed with another woman. He immediately began screaming that the police should arrest them. His accusations drew a crowd. Kawuma hastily grabbed her clothes and ducked out the back window barefoot. She'd read accounts of lesbian and gay people who were beaten to death in similar circumstances, and wanted to disappear before her neighbors had a chance to lay hands on her.

"Women are raped often, saying we have to teach you how to sleep with a man," she said. "They can throw stones at you, beat you to death, injure you — they don't mind."

Her lover, a white woman from the Netherlands, was able to walk out the front door, unmolested, protected by the color of her skin and her European passport.

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Somehow — to this day, she doesn't know how — her lover managed to secure Kawuma a forged passport and a ticket to accompany her to Amsterdam. Within three days, they were on a plane to Europe. Kawuma remembers sitting on the airplane in a state of numbed shock. Her friend had been watching her 2-year-old son the day she fled. "I didn't get to say goodbye," she recalled, her voice flat. "I didn't know if I would ever see him again. But then, it was about saving my life."

Upon reaching Amsterdam, her lover dropped her off with a cheerful, middle-aged woman she identified only as "a friend," then left, with a vague promise of returning "soon." The woman settled Kawuma in a small room toward the back of the house containing little more than a bed. At first, Kawuma felt relief: She was safe, separated from the other Ugandans who might harm her by a continent and an ocean. Then her lover's "friend" brought the first man to her room.

He was a white man, Kawuma recalled, in his late 30s or early 40s and not particularly attractive. Kawuma was sleeping when they entered her room. The woman woke her up, telling her "I have somebody for you. You be with him. He will tell you what he wants." Then she left them, closing the door behind her. The man crossed the room to Kawuma's bed and raped her. After he left, the woman asked her if she had liked it.

*"At first, Kawuma felt relief: She was safe, separated from the other Ugandans who might harm her by a continent and an ocean. Then her lover's 'friend' brought the first man to her room. "*

Many more men visited her room after that night. Kawuma did what was expected of her, too scared to run away.

"I had no option at that point. I had no telephone number," she said. "I couldn't even go to the police, and I was afraid of them because I thought that maybe they were working with the police in Uganda."

Kawuma began to close off from the outside world, folding into herself. Her depression manifested in physical ways: She had panic attacks and lost weight. Some days she had trouble breathing. One day the woman came to her room and told her that she was going to take her to a place to get help. She told Kawuma to get in the back of her car and dropped her off a block away from the office of an NGO that worked with trafficked women. “I think she was afraid I would die in that house,” Kawuma said.

The office was closed, but an elderly lady living nearby was able to direct her to a police station, which brought her to another organization that works with refugees, which helped her begin the process of applying for asylum.

According to Thomas Van Der Sande, a law student who volunteers at an NGO called COC — originally Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum (Center for Culture and Leisure) — one of the oldest LGBT organizations in the world, Kawuma’s story is typical in a number of ways. “I haven’t met one woman who was not being trafficked — whether they’re [from] Uganda, Nigeria, or Sierra Leone, ” he said. “They were basically all trafficked.”

In theory, the fact that Kawuma was trafficked, compounded by the fact that she identifies as a lesbian and is from a country where being LGBTI is illegal, should have made it simple to get asylum. But her claims were complicated by a combination of incompetence on the part of her first lawyer, the police’s inability to locate her trafficker, and her own incapacity to advocate for herself. In this, she is far from alone.

In the Netherlands, before survivors can receive protection for a trafficking claim they must first denounce their trafficker, and the trafficker needs to be arrested (or provide evidence proving they were trafficked). But Kawuma was in a daze when her trafficker dropped her by the NGO — and she couldn’t remember where the house was.

*“Many more men visited her room after that night. Kawuma did what was expected of her, too scared to run away.”*

When her claim for protection failed, she applied for asylum, this time based on her LGBTI status. The first time her claim was rejected, the reason cited was due to “inconsistencies in her story.” She says that they’d asked her questions she couldn’t answer — like the exact day she left Uganda, how long it took her to get to the Netherlands, the name of her captor, and her lover’s last name. When she couldn’t answer, she got flustered, and gave the best answer she could.

I. Petkovski, a lawyer with a reputation for taking on “hopeless cases,” became Kawuma’s lawyer five years ago, after her initial asylum claim was rejected. He believes that she never should have been rejected, but also wasn’t surprised that she was: He sees LGBTI cases rejected on similar grounds all the time.

“A lot of these ‘contradictions’ were actually about cultural differences,” he said. For example, many of Kawuma’s answers to the questions about her lover weren’t satisfactory to her interviewers, leading them to believe that she may have made it up. However, according to Petkovski, in African countries, it can be considered rude to ask people a lot of the personal questions that would be considered “normal, getting-to-know-you questions,” in Holland — for example, a lover’s last name or relationship history. In some cases, African asylum seekers who are LGBTI might not necessarily identify with the words “gay” or “lesbian,” particularly if they come from places where the local language has no word for “gay.” This can cause complications in an asylum interview, leading interviewers to reject asylum seekers’ version of events, or at times, even think they are lying.

Trauma can also cause people to give contradictory answers, according to Van Der Sande. “Sometimes parts have been lost in their memory, or they have been abused severely, or brutally beaten, and that has an affect on how you remember certain events, and how you are able to tell about them,” he said. A lot of asylum seekers also suffer from PTSD, according to Van Der Sande, which means that while they might be able to remember parts of what happened to them, their memories are often flashbacks, and they can’t narrate it chronologically into one story, he explained.

During Kawuma’s first interview, she said she didn’t have a lawyer, and as an intensely private person, she struggled with the interview process. The interview lasted hours; she was so nervous that she was unable to give the long narrative answers they seemed to expect. When her first rejection letter arrived, her stomach tied in knots, and she felt

like she couldn't breathe. "The government said they don't believe me that I'm a lesbian," she said. "If they say they don't believe me, how am I going to convince them?"

Danielle Cohen is a lawyer in the United Kingdom who takes on many LGBTI asylum cases. She says asylum hearings often become about whether or not someone can prove they are gay — and can rely on stereotypes of LGBTI behaviors to do so. If a person doesn't fit those stereotypes, they are deported.

"They ask do you have a boyfriend? If you don't have a boyfriend, or aren't sexually active, or don't go to gay clubs, then they decide that you aren't gay," she said. But having a boyfriend (for a gay man) doesn't necessarily guarantee protection, either. "I recently had a case where we went to court twice and presented my client's ex-boyfriend, and the judge still didn't believe he was gay."

Evelyne Paradis, the executive director of the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA), said that until very recently, some countries even subjected asylum seekers to anal testing to see if they'd had a relationship, according to Paradis. "Formally, this has been banned," she said, "though I'm not so naive to think it might not still happen from time to time."

Europe's increasingly restrictive environment toward refugees also means there's less nuance in how claims are treated, leading to a drop in successful LGBTI asylum applications, according to Paradis. "The asylum process is overloaded and overwhelmed, and politicians are under a lot of pressure to reduce the numbers of refugees, so there's a lot less willingness to pay attention to the specific needs of vulnerable populations," she said. "It's a real issue."

For Kawuma, time is running out. Although she has a copy of a warrant from her arrest issued by the police in Kampala due to her sexuality, her claim continues to be rejected. Her last rejection notification was accompanied by a deportation order, which her lawyer managed to delay. She has one more shot to prove her claim: She recently discovered that the Ugandan police had put out a warrant for her arrest, on the basis of her sexuality. Her lawyer is using the document—which is currently in the process of being authenticated—as a basis to appeal the deportation order : If it doesn't work, she fears authorities will return her to Uganda.

“If they want to deport me, I don’t know what I’ll do,” she said. “I have been waiting for nine years. Sometimes it seems that all I do is wait. I want my life to begin.”

*\*Some names have been changed for the safety of the asylum seekers.*

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