


# How US Grassroots Organizations Confront the Global Anti-LGBTQ+ Crisis and Support LGBTQ+ Asylum Seekers

 Chioma Nnaji, MPH, MEd, Al Green, BS, and Nathalie J. Weeks, LMSW, MBA

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chioma Nnaji is with the Multicultural AIDS Coalition, Boston, MA. Al Green is with the LGBT Asylum Task Force, Worcester, MA. Nathalie J. Weeks is with the African Services Committee, New York, NY.

**A**rise in anti-LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and additional sexual and gender expansive individuals) legislation in African and Caribbean countries has compelled many LGBTQ+ individuals to seek refuge in the United States. There is limited data on the exact number. However, from 2012 to 2017, an estimated 4000 out of 30 900 LGBTQ+ asylum applicants cited persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>1</sup> For Black LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, the journey is particularly challenging. They must navigate a complex US immigration system while dealing with dual layers of discrimination—racial inequities and anti-LGBTQ+ stigma.<sup>2,3</sup> This compounded marginalization not only heightens the trauma of their migration but also creates significant barriers to resettlement, restricting access to employment, housing, and social support within both broader society and their own ethnic communities.<sup>4,5</sup>

Grassroots community-based organizations—many founded by immigrants—are essential for Black

LGBTQ+ asylum seekers to find stability. Despite limited resources, they provide crucial services like housing, legal aid, health information, and mental health support. These organizations are often the only trusted source, offering both immediate relief and a sense of community, safety, and belonging.

Two individuals working at the frontlines of this crisis were interviewed. Al Green (A. G.) is the ministry director of the LGBT Asylum Task Force. In 2008, L. C., a young gay man from Jamaica seeking asylum, was referred to Hadwen Park Congregational Church for spiritual and housing support. This led him and the church's pastor to cofound the LGBT Asylum Task Force. Since its inception, the Task Force has supported over 400 LGBTQ+ asylum seekers from more than 30 countries. Nathalie J. Weeks, LMSW, MBA (N. W.) is a mental health counselor and coordinator of behavioral health services at African Services Committee, an organization founded 43 years ago by an Ethiopian refugee. It was initially created to support newly arrived immigrants

needing basic support services. Soon after being established, it expanded to address HIV/AIDS among African and Caribbean immigrants.

## TRUST SYSTEMS AND INDIVIDUAL FEARS

For many Black LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, the process of migration is deeply traumatic because of rejection and violence. This trauma often breaks their trust in both family and society, leading to ongoing psychological distress and fear of exposure. We asked A. G. and N. W., “What migration stories have your clients shared with you?”

A. G.: I've spoken with a woman who endured corrective gang rape. She was told by her family—her parents and brothers—that if she didn't go through with it, she wouldn't be cured of being queer or a lesbian. The belief was that having sex with a man would somehow make her straight. I've also seen people sell everything they own—their farms, cattle, and all their possessions—just to afford a ticket to come to the United States. Some people, for better or worse, form partnerships with older White men in the United States who pay their fare, but then expect sexual favors in return once they arrive. This happens quite frequently. Some have shared stories of traveling through South America, moving through Central America, crossing the Rio Grande, and witnessing people being exploited and drowning beside them. Many have nearly drowned themselves. Once in the United States, they've been treated like cattle—shipped around and used as political pawns, before eventually finding safety and reaching us.

N. W.: One of the things I've seen is the constant pressure on these

individuals—cultural, religious, and legal. From an early age, they face mocking, beatings, and betrayal from their families, teachers, and communities. Their natural systems of trust are destroyed or nonexistent. There is constant fear of being found out, guilt, and anger. Many have endured horrific practices like being thrown out on the streets naked to be beaten by the community or being forced into marriage to produce grandchildren. On top of that, they face the ultimate consequences: arrest, rape, beatings, or, ultimately, even murder.

## LIFETIME TRAUMA

Seeking asylum creates compounding layers of trauma, from persecution in one's home country to systemic barriers in the United States that hinder access to stability and safety. To better understand these challenges, we asked A. G. and N. W. to describe the barriers Black LGBTQ+ immigrants seeking asylum face.

A. G.: Once they arrive in the United States, there's often a lack of understanding about the asylum process. While the US government has a website detailing the process, it's still hard to navigate, even for someone like me who has been doing this work for a long time. For asylum seekers without this experience, it's incredibly challenging to know what documentation they need to provide or what they need to prove. On top of that, finding a lawyer to help them decipher everything and prepare their case is difficult, as legal support is in very short supply.

N. W.: I've been calling what people experienced as ongoing PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. Because PTSD can refer to those earliest childhood experiences of betrayal, to that

time when in fact you were attacked by a mob of five men, because you were kissing or walking on the street with another person of the same sex. . . . And having to flee, and then having the nightmare experience of coming up to the US border through South and Central American . . . to being detained by the US Border Patrol, you have no idea how long you're going to be detained. Then, you get out and are sent to New York City. Then, what have you got? A New York City shelter where you are harassed, threatened, robbed. Then you learn about the stringent rules here. You can't work. You've got to find a lawyer. There are no lawyers . . . how much trauma can you manage in your lifetime?

## WORSENING CONDITIONS

Although anti-LGBTQ+ persecution has long forced individuals to flee, recent legislative crackdowns have exacerbated the crisis, increasing the number of asylum seekers while straining the resources of organizations that support them. We asked A. G. and N. W., "How has the global rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation impacted your organization?" and "How are your clients coping with resettling in the United States?"

### Effect of Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation

A. G.: Recently we've seen an uptick in asylum seekers reaching out to us because conditions in their home countries have worsened. I mean, they've always been bad, but they're getting worse. Just look at the recent laws enacted in Uganda and the shifting situations in places like Swaziland, Nigeria, and Kenya. We've had a

significant increase in people contacting us—about 50% more this year alone. And it's not just online inquiries; people are showing up at our doorstep with nowhere else to go. There are so few alternative resources to redirect people to. No other organization is equipped to handle this, and even if there were, they're not suitable conditions for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. This has put an enormous strain on our already limited resources.

N. W.: I'd say it's impacted us positively because we've been able to welcome LGBTQ persons who otherwise wouldn't have a place in the city. While there are some pockets of support elsewhere, what we offer here is the real deal. We've developed a strong queer presence in the agency, and keep in mind, the vast majority of the staff are from the countries that wanted to kill these people. So what kind of impact do you think we are having over time? The number of queer staff who've been hired gets higher all the time. This visibility has normalized being queer within the agency.

## Dealing With A New Environment

A. G.: Clients cope in a number of ways. Most take advantage of the opportunities presented to them, such as activities the Task Force offers—whether it be trips, social gatherings, or other events. There are some who attend all of these, while others stay isolated and locked up in their rooms as their way of coping. Some turn to substances, and we try our best to help them through that. Unfortunately, there are also those who engage in sex acts as a way to feel some sort of connection or belonging with another human being.

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The presence of community plays a critical role in shaping the resettlement experiences of Black LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Social support networks not only provide immediate resources but also foster a sense of belonging. We asked A. G. and N. W. to discuss how their organizations provide refuge and access to services, and what they view as markers of success in their work.

### Providing Refuge and Access to Services

A. G.: We provide housing and resources for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers during the up to two years that it takes after arriving in the United States before an asylum seeker is able to have their papers processed and get their work permit. . . . As of this month, we're able to guarantee asylum seekers in our housing a free lawyer. We also get them signed up for health insurance, open a bank account, and connect them with educational opportunities and career mentorship.

N. W.: We provide a safe, trusted space. . . . Every Tuesday evening, we offer food, social gatherings, and professionally facilitated support group meetings. We take members on community outings to places like the Botanical Gardens, the aquarium, museums, and parks to show them the city and give them a sense of belonging.

### Impact on Organizations

A. G.: With the Task Force, 100% of our folks have gone on to receive asylum. And that just speaks even more to the fact that having a community behind you, having access to resources, can

significantly increase or influence your outcomes.

N. W.: Members of LGBTQ+ communities who have escaped their countries come to African Services not necessarily knowing that they will be welcomed or served here. But once they're here, they are welcomed. And because now we're known throughout the city by a significant number of organizations, people are referred here specifically for the LGBTQ program.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the interviews highlight the profound challenges African and Caribbean LGBTQ+ asylum seekers face, from the trauma of fleeing persecution to navigating a complex and often discriminatory asylum process. Yet, they also showcase the resilience of these individuals and the vital role that community-driven efforts play in providing not only immediate relief, but also long-term support. As the global anti-LGBTQ+ crisis worsens, the work of organizations like the LGBT Asylum Task Force and African Services Committee becomes even more crucial. We must continue to support and amplify the efforts of grassroots organizations while advocating for the dismantling of current immigration policies that disproportionately harm Black LGBTQ+ immigrants and exacerbate their vulnerability to systemic inequities. *AJPH*

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C. Nnaji conceptualized the editorial, conducted the interviews, and led the writing, including revisions. A. Green and N.J. Weeks contributed to reviewing and editing.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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