

SUPPORTING LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

To celebrate Refugee Week (16th-22nd June) and Pride month this June, we wanted to shine a light on the intersectional experiences of people in the LGBTQI+ community seeking asylum. Milly McKinnell who leads on the VCSE Sanctuary Seekers Network for Macc, spoke to African Rainbow Family - a charity in Manchester supporting these communities.

AN INTERVIEW WITH AFRICAN RAINBOW FAMILY



Can you please share with us the story behind the establishment of the African Rainbow Family? What specific needs did it aim to address in Manchester?

African Rainbow Family (ARF) was established in 2014 in the wake of some of the Commonwealth countries in Africa's severe and discriminatory laws towards LGBTQI+ people, alongside the oppressive environment which sought to criminalise LGBTQI+ people on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. ARF was established by Aderonke Apata, a lesbian who fled Nigeria in 2004 after receiving the death penalty. Aderonke set up ARF during her ongoing, thirteen-year battle of seeking asylum in the UK. The aim of African Rainbow Family is to support other LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum, our Siblings, to achieve their grant of refugee status and life of freedom. The idea was to support this marginalised community by developing a network that would improve the mental health and wellbeing and promote integration into British society amongst offering many other services.



In what ways does African Rainbow Family support the intersectional needs of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees, and how has this support evolved over time?

African Rainbow Family is the Leading UK Based Expert by Experience Grassroots Charity Campaigning and Advocating for Racial Justice & Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Refugees and People Seeking Asylum of African Heritage & the Global Majority. There are currently over 1,500 people being supported across England and Wales. ARF offers psychotherapeutic peer support, counselling, advocacy, advice and information. We campaign for global LGBTQI+ equality and stand against hate crimes. Over the last ten years, our support has grown and expanded in line with the need. Since inception in Manchester, African Rainbow Family has been able to reach other areas of the UK by opening four more centres in Birmingham, Leeds, London, Cardiff and Swansea. We provide move-on and integration support, which allows people to continue their journey with African Rainbow Family after being granted their status. Newly granted Siblings are invited to become members, and

can be offered support and guidance in regard to housing, education, employment etc.

How crucial is it that the support and services provided by African Rainbow Family are led by individuals with lived experience of the issues faced by your community members?

We are proud to be an expert by experience grassroots charity and champion the contributions of our lived experience experts. It is vital that the support and services provided by African Rainbow Family are led by individuals with lived experience. Our staff, trustees and volunteer teams offer a wealth of experience and knowledge that allows us to provide a more in-depth service, and a better understanding of people's needs. With many people not having the right to work, and 90% of our volunteer team being our Siblings themselves, we aim to provide a space where people can gain leadership and organisational skills that will support them later on.



Could you describe the role African Rainbow Family has played in advocacy efforts, such as contributing to legal cases like the M.I v Switzerland judgment, and why such work is significant?

Every day, the African Rainbow Family team advocates on behalf of LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum and refugees in the UK. On a small scale this could look like providing an identification letter for someone to take to the bank and open an account, thus becoming financially independent. We also write letters in support of people's asylum claims that are used as evidence to help strengthen their claim.



In the case of M.I v Switzerland, the European Court of Human Rights published its judgement that a gay man from Iran cannot be deported from Switzerland or asked to live discreetly in Iran on 12th November 2024. Aderonke Apata, the Founder & CEO of African Rainbow Family acted as a European Court of Human Rights' court-granted intervener in this case which overturned the ruling of the Swiss authorities. The recognition that requiring a gay man to live in his country of origin discreetly would be psychologically damaging was a huge milestone and turning point in the cases of LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum. This outcome means that it is now law for all 46 Council of Europe member countries to end the use of discretion and concealment tests around asylum cases surrounding sexual orientation.

This work by African Rainbow Family, Stonewall, the legal team at 33 Bedford Row, and Leigh Day in contributing to this decision by the European Court of Human Rights reaffirms the commitment to protecting the rights and mental wellbeing of individuals who are facing persecution based on their sexual orientation.

What impact has African Rainbow Family had on the wellbeing and integration of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers and refugees in Manchester, and what are your hopes for the future of this work?

Supporting the wellbeing and integration of the LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum and refugees is at the heart of what African Rainbow Family does. We host meetings every month. There are three online meetings: Family Social Hour, which holds a light-hearted discussion and allows people from all of the African Rainbow Family centres to meet and interact; the Asylum Process Presentation Series, which offers general support and information on asylum claims; and the Integration Series, in which we cover topics such as volunteering, CV and cover-letter writing, workplace etiquette etc. We hold an in-person meeting once a month and this is an opportunity for people to meet, learn from one another, and ask the staff any questions. We provide a hot meal and arrange collaborations with other organisations to come in and give presentations or workshops. Most recently in Manchester, BHA for Equality provided information on the importance of sexual health and offered free STI testing. As our service continues to grow, we hope to be able to maintain the quality of the support that we provide.



For more from African Rainbow Family, follow their socials:

Facebook: African Rainbow Family

X/Twitter: africanrainbow1

Instagram: africanrainbowfamily

Threads: africanrainbowfamily

Bluesky: africanrainbowfam.bsky.social

TikTok: africanrainbowfam



Have you got a message for the community you work with and support?

The African Rainbow Family is proud to work with you, our Siblings, and support you throughout your asylum journey and beyond! We hope that in African Rainbow Family you find a safe space, where you can learn to express yourself freely, and without fear of judgement. We are committed to continuing to stand in solidarity with you, working with you to improving our service, and share the love and joy that we all deserve. We hope to see each and every one of you receive your grant of refugee status and secure a life of freedom and security.

Images kindly provided by African Rainbow Family