



# COMING TO AMERICA

## LGBT ASYLUM SEEKERS FACE YEARS OF ADDITIONAL HURDLES

Beatings by a family member. Rape. Police harassment. Arrests. Imprisonment. Death.

Every year, scores of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people make their way to the United States, seeking to escape horrific anti-LGBT persecution in their countries. It is estimated that 4,000 LGBT people apply annually for asylum in the U.S.

For years, Temitope Oke faced incessant blackmail and extortion in Nigeria. Oke, who worked in LGBT health promotion, finally left his homeland for the U.S. after Nigerian lawmakers passed, and the president signed, a law criminalizing LGBT people and LGBT-related groups and allies, and levying prison terms of up to 14 years.

But like so many other asylum seekers, Oke faced a harsh reality upon arrival in America. It is illegal for new asylum seekers to get a job for the first six months after they apply for asylum. Even after those first six months, they are ineligible for government assistance, including healthcare, until they are granted asylum.

Finding housing is also a major problem, Oke told *Equality*. "Many asylum seekers come with a single suitcase, at the most, and with no clothing for winter."

LGBT asylum seekers like Oke face additional hurdles that their straight counterparts do not. All too often, they cannot find refuge with family members, friends or others who have resettled in this country; anti-LGBT attitudes abound in many of those communities. Churches that usually open their arms to help new arrivals might turn their backs on their LGBT brothers and sisters.

*continued on p. 21*

### ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE UNITED STATES...



May be held in immigration detention or under "supervised release."

Can move within the U.S. but must notify U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services of change of address, and consultation with legal counsel is recommended.

Must apply for special permission to leave the U.S.



Permitted to apply for work authorization 150 days after filing asylum application as long as

they have not caused any delays in the processing of their application.

Then they are eligible to receive work authorization after waiting an additional 30-90 days. Authorization must be renewed annually.



Receive no financial support from the federal government.

From: *Stronger Together: A Guide to Supporting LGBT Asylum Seekers in the United States* [LGBT-FAN]

Asylum *cont'd* from p. 19

Further, some of the largest U.S. financial supporters of asylum seekers, which include faith-based groups as well as clinics, shelters and others, reject or ignore LGBT asylum seekers. Even many LGBT community centers and major foundations in this country do not lend a helping hand; some may know little or nothing about how to help out.

HRC has started to take action. In an effort that could become a model for other U.S. cities, HRC has joined forces with Center Global, a program at the local LGBT community center in Washington, D.C., to lobby the city government for housing and food assistance for LGBT asylum seekers.

The HRC Foundation is also trying to increase awareness about the issue. It has teamed up with the LGBT Freedom & Asylum Network (LGBT-FAN) and other groups to produce a new handbook, *Stronger Together: A Guide to Supporting LGBT Asylum Seekers in the United States*. It's a comprehensive, best-practices guide about a range of issues, including housing, employment counseling, health and legal services and staff training. Over a hundred people contributed to the report, including LGBT asylum seekers and asylees, service providers, lawyers, researchers and activists. Oke, now an asylee living in the Washington, D.C., area, is one of the authors.

"This guide sends an important message: The experience of LGBT asylum seekers in America matters," said Ty Cobb, director of HRC Global. "It is not enough to simply open our doors, we must do so with respect, compassion and a desire to honor their experience."

The situation for LGBT people around the world varies widely. In up to 10 countries worldwide, same-sex activity is punishable by death, and 75 countries criminalize same-sex relationships. In addition, hundreds of transgender individuals have been brutally murdered in the last year. Further, in a growing number of countries, governments have sought to silence equality advocates and organizations with so-called "anti-propaganda" laws and legislation. 🇺🇸



## "I DO NOT REGRET SPEAKING OUT."

— **Alagie Jammeh**, nephew of Gambian President Yahya Jammeh who infamously threatened last spring to personally "slit the throats" of gay men in his country.

While on scholarship in California, Alagie Jammeh posted on Facebook, "No one should be denied their fundamental basic human rights because of their sexuality." Immediately, his scholarship was revoked. He was told to return home to "apologize" to his president. Gambian officials threatened his life. He also faced possible imprisonment.

"Human rights belong to us by nature of being born," Jammeh said at a Human Rights Day event sponsored by HRC and Human Rights First at the Newseum in Washington, D.C. "We have a right to demand them from our leaders, and to speak out when we see others being denied these rights."

Speaking out, Jammeh said, "has made me realize the importance of gathering together and committing as a community to the preservation of human rights for all." Jammeh has applied for asylum in the United States.

Photo: Phil Hummicky



Photo: Howard Wise

## WHY MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

**"I tell everyone, 'Love yourself and celebrate whatever makes you different.' Unfortunately, we all still face discrimination in everyday life. Thankfully, HRC is there to change that."**

— **Ross Mathews**, TV personality and 2016 HRC member

See [www.hrc.org/hrc-story/our-victories](http://www.hrc.org/hrc-story/our-victories) for more.



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