

FINAL CONFERENCE RAINBOW WELCOME : THE RECEPTION OF LGBTIQ+ ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES IN EUROPE

MINUTES

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In various parts of the world, the rights of people in the LGBTQIA+ community are severely violated and infringed upon. Often, in order to survive, these individuals are forced to seek asylum in countries considered "safe". However, even in these locations, vulnerabilities and violence are still present. Discrimination continues upon these asylum seekers' arrival into their host countries, typically in many forms. Thus, the Rainbow Welcome Project was born out of a desire to improve the conditions faced by asylum seekers and refugees by fighting against the discrimination they face. The project was led by five European organizations from four different countries; it lasted two years, from 2020 to 2022.

The final conference took place in the European Parliament with the support of the LGBTI intergroup. This event was an opportunity to look back on the work accomplished and to discuss the position of Europe and Belgium on the issue of the experiences of LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers. The objectives of Rainbow Welcome's project were to identify the protocols already present in partner countries, in the European Union, and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these protocols. The project was, in part, aiming to create training courses for professionals in direct contact with LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers and refugees, a people with particular needs in terms of being welcomed into shelters and in their application for refugee status. The diversity of the speakers' profiles enriched the debate and shined light on the difficulties that this issue raises, as well as the urgency of the situation through the testimonies of LGBTQIA+ refugees.

INTERVENANT·E·S

- **Pierre Karleskind**, MEP (France, Renew Europe), Vice-President of the LGBTI intergroup
- **Marie Schuller**, Former Project Manager, POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ (Belgique)
- **Betsy Vivegnis**, Project manager, POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ (Belgique)
- **Xavier Compte**, Volunteer, ACATHI (Espagne)
- **Thibault Anselmi**, Assistant Director of Development Projects, Le Refuge Foundation (France)
- **Mahamed Robleh Bourale**, Coordinator, CADAL, the Brussels reception centre for LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers (Belgique)
- **Mohamad, Rajae, Talal et Arsène**, Refugees (Belgique)
- **Oliviero Aseglio**, Spokesperson for Sarah Schlitz – Belgian Secretary of State for Gender Equality,

- Equal Opportunities and Diversity and former Spokesperson of Rainbow House Brussels (Belgique)
- **Emmanuel Smaïl**, Social worker, DENH, a specific facility for refugees and asylum seekers of the Fondation Le Refuge (France)
 - **Malin Björk**, MEP (Sweden, The Left), Vice-President of the LGBTI intergroup
 - **Birgit Sippel**, MEP (Germany, S&D), Rapporteur on the Screening Regulation, LIBE Member, LGBTI Intergroup Member
 - **Abir Al-Sahlani**, MEP (Sweden, Renew Europe), LIBE Member, LGBTI Intergroup Member
 - **Dimitri Verdonck**, Director, Le Refuge Brussels (Belgique)

WELCOMING SPEECH

Pierre Karleskind, a member of the European Parliament and Vice-President of the LGBTI Intergroup in the European Parliament, opened the conference. He called for an open discussion between legislators of the European Union (EU) Asylum and Immigration Pact. The MEP then highlighted the inertia of migration policies. The organization of this conference is an important and necessary moment of discussion and debate about this issue. Pierre Karleskind reaffirmed that freedom is at the heart of European values, and the EU is proud to be a land of welcoming and shelter for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers and refugees, though more broadly immigrants.

INTRODUCTION OF RAINBOW WELCOME PROJECT

- **Marie Schuller**

Marie Schuller, former Project Manager at POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ, said the Rainbow Welcome project was born in 2017 in order to link two notions that were separate at the time: asylum seekers and the inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in Europe. She adds that these asylum seekers were at the center of many vulnerabilities and violence. The Rainbow Welcome project was therefore created with this in mind, linking European countries who are field actors to make Europe more social, sustainable, and inclusive.

- **Betsy Vivegnis**

Betsy Vivegnis is a Project Manager at PLS and the coordinator of the Rainbow Welcome project, financially supported by the European Commission's Rights, Equality and Citizenship program (2014-2020). She stated the objectives of this two-year work:

- To identify the legal procedures already existing in the countries of the European Union (EU) for the reception of refugees.
- To highlight their strengths and weaknesses.
- To equip the structures that welcome LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers in the best possible way.
- To raise awareness about the experiences of these refugees.

Betsy Vivegnis concluded by reaffirming the need to make the project visible, in particular through the training provided in the partner countries and an awareness campaign.

- **Xavier Compte**

Xavier Compte, a member of the Barcelona-based association ACATHI (Spanish partner of the project), presented the methodology of the project. The partners chose to work in different geographical areas of Europe. They used different sources of information through the implementation of a survey that obtained more than eighty responses

and interviews with field actors (NGOs or shelters). These two working methods allowed the partners to characterize the main obstacles and the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers. Xavier gave two examples:

- For refugees, the main issue is to focus on facilitating access to information and better social, psychological, legal and economic care.
 - For associations, the obstacles are the lack of resources (funds, staff, and time) and the lack of training on the specific welcoming of LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers.
- **Thibault Anselmi**

Thibault Anselmi, a member of the Refuge France Fondation, was the french partner of the project. He explained that the guide, produced at the end of the project, identifies the difficulties of the reception of asylum seekers on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity and provides some answers. Indeed, this collaborative work has allowed Europe to obtain a new vision on the welcome of LGBTQIA+ people. The guide proposed to deconstruct prejudices about this community and included advice on how to support and organize shelters.

WELCOMING LGBTQ+ REFUGEES IN EUROPE

- **Mahamed Robleh Bourale**

Mahamed Robleh Bourale is the coordinator of the Welcome Center for LGBTQIA+ Asylum Seekers (CADAL). Founded on December the 10th of 2021, the CADAL responds to the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers who did not have a shelter adapted to their particular situation; 20-30% of the public in Brussels shelters are part of this community. The coordinator then pointed out the difficulties of welcoming them in Belgium. For example, the number of spaces in the shelters are very limited, but they receive one request everyday. Moreover, the access procedure for the refugee status is slow and unsure, which puts the refugee in very precarious situations. These problems have been experienced by many asylum seekers, some of whom were able to testify at the conference.

- Mohamad is a Palestinian refugee who did not receive adequate psychological help in the center where he was staying.
 - Tala is a Lebanese refugee who was rejected from her country because of her trans-identity. She shares a different point of view since a Belgian shelter helped her to find an apartment.
 - Arsène was excluded from a refuge for asylum seekers in Belgium because his partner is transgender. During the conference, he explains that he makes a live painting, and he prefers to express himself by drawing.
- **Oliviero Aseglio**

Oliviero Aseglio is the Belgian Secretary of State for Gender Equality, Equal Opportunities and Diversity as well as the former spokesperson for the Rainbow House in Brussels. He explains that a first welcome network was created in 2014 for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers, but it was not sufficient and left many asylum seekers in precariousness. For Oliviero Aseglio, the most important issue about the creation of Rainbow House was to create a safe space run by members of the LGBTQIA+ community to prevent the violence perpetrated against asylum seekers.

- **Emmanuel Smaïl**

Emmanuel Smaïl is a social worker with the DENH at the Le Refuge Foundation in France, a project that currently welcomes 30 young statutory refugees aged 18 to 30. He notes several difficulties in the shelters:

- Difficulty for traditional accommodation structures to guarantee safe accommodation for people.

- The mental health of asylum seekers is not taken into account; many suffer from isolation, traumatic psychological disorders and are not listened to.
- Transgender people are particularly affected by discrimination and the non-respect of their rights in traditional shelters.
- Requests for accommodation for LGBT+ exiles cannot be met due to lack of funding for specific facilities.
- The staff of these facilities need to be trained to deal with these issues.

WHAT RESPONSE AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL?

- **Malin Björk, MEP**

Malin Björk is a Member of the European Parliament and vice-president of the LGBTI Intergroup of the European Parliament. Having travelled to different European countries (Greece, Italy, Balkans, etc.) to observe the reality on the ground, he stresses the importance of the Union's responsibility in the reception of refugees. Finally, she expressed her interest in improving the conditions of housing-and support for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers.

- **Birgit Sippel, MEP**

Birgit Sippel is a Member of the European Parliament and the LGBTI Intergroup. Recalling the lack of qualifications of the staff welcoming LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers in Europe, she asserts that legislation is the first step towards better care of this community. Birgit Sippel presented a new mechanism proposed by the Commission regarding the adoption of the "New Pack on Migration and Asylum" of 2024. This procedure would make it possible to identify the specific needs of asylum seekers interviewed from the first five days of their application, thus making the procedure and the care of the asylum seeker more efficient. Finally, the elected representative underlines that asylum is a right and that no one should be forced to leave their country in order to fully assert their gender identity or embrace their sexual orientation.

- **Abir Al-Sahlini, MEP**

As a member of the European Parliament as well, Abir Al-Sahlini began her speech by presenting her status as an Iraqi refugee. She describes her own experience, which was traumatic on many levels. For the MEP, the principles of human dignity and fundamental rights should not be taken for granted by asylum seekers. To conclude, Abir Al-Sahlini asserted that it is imperative that, from the reception staff to the judges deciding on the granting of refugee status, training on psychological trauma and on the political situation of the countries from which the applicants are departing must be provided.

Q&A WITH THE PARTICIPANTS

This conference raised many questions for the participants, including refugees, asylum seekers, and field workers.

Ilaria Todde, from EL*C (EuroCentralAsian Lesbian* Community), recalled that Europe was able to welcome a large number of refugees from Ukraine in March 2022, a political victory. Ilaria shared the work done at the Ukrainian borders by her association to take care of female refugees and relocate them within a community that helps them with the first stages of integration and underlines the importance of safe houses. Malin Björk is pleased with the assistance given to Ukrainians and stresses that Europe has lessons to learn from this so that we can welcome more refugees.

A refugee shared her story and asked how the pre-application interview mechanism could identify the special needs of an LGBTQIA+ asylum seeker. Member of the European Parliament Birgit Sippel echoed this participant's concerns, pointing out that the uniformity could frighten or prevent exiles from detailing the reasons of their refugee claim. However, the parliamentarian clarified that the mechanism could be appealed if the particular needs of the applicant were not understood well.

Yasminé is an expert on EU migration policies and decided to share her views on the theme of the conference. She argues that LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers are not respected, especially in her country, Sweden. They are treated differently, depending on their professional skills, and ultimately face greater difficulties than other asylum seekers in finding housing or work. This mistreatment creates further trauma for these exiles. The participant takes the example of transsexuals who are unable to assert themselves until they receive an official decision on the acceptance of their asylum application.

A trainee in one of the European institutions asked the speakers about the place of these reception problems in the work of the permanent representatives of the countries to the European Union. Malin Björk, a member of the European Parliament, explained that the Intergroup does not have access to permanent representation, so coordination between the different European countries, especially on the allocation of funds for field actors in non-European countries, is very complicated.

CONCLUSION

Dimitri Verdonck is the director of the reception structure Le Refuge Brussels. To conclude the conference, he chose to quote the 381 asylum seekers accompanied after four years of existence for the refuge and one year for CADAL. He also called for the implementation of more flexible aid mechanisms for associations defending the rights of LGBTQIA+ community, particularly on the African continent, and to raise the profile of these field actors. Finally, he reminds attendees of the need for financial support for shelters to welcome LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers in the best possible conditions. Dimitri Verdonck also insists on the training carried out within the framework of the Rainbow Welcome project, which will start soon. He advises contacting the partners if interested in this development. He concludes by encouraging the parliamentarians to invite the associations to share their work, especially in committee.