



June 2025

# NEWSLETTER



## The Story Behind Rainbow Haven

*Courtesy of the Anglican Journal*

"My own experience as an asylum seeker showed me [for the] first time how vulnerable LGBTQ+ people, refugees, are," Emel says. "Many of us flee one dangerous situation only to find ourselves in another, struggling with homelessness, exploitation and lack of resources. I knew that if I survived, it was because of people who stepped in to help me, like Duane ... So I wanted to do the same for others."

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## Status Update: New Safe House announcement for Kenya

Kenya is one of the few African countries that accepts refugees who flee persecution due to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Currently hosting over half a million refugees who have fled violent conflicts in the Horn of Africa, Kenya remains a safer alternative for LGBTQI+ persons fleeing persecution in various countries in the region, such as Uganda. Nonetheless there are still significant challenges for LGBTQI+ persons to overcome experiences of stigma and violence in the refugee camps.

A 2021 study by the Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration (ORAM) of LGBTQI+ persons in Kenya's largest refugee camp illustrates societal stigma and discrimination, as well as self-

## Victoria Pride Festival 2025

Rainbow Haven (RH) organizers were not entirely sure what to expect from their decision to participate in the Victoria Pride Festival in the Park 2024 with an information booth.

The post-parade event in James Bay's McDonald Park is typically part entertainment, part community picnic, and

stigma and physical violence among LGBTQI+ persons in the camp. Nearly all LGBTQI+ persons surveyed in the camp reported having been verbally insulted and being denied services in shops or markets and police assistance due to their sexual identity.

Most refugees in the camp were from cultural and religious backgrounds that are non-accepting of LGBTQI+ persons. The community leaders, especially block leaders who are tasked with some security responsibilities, including conflict resolution and filing complaints with the police, reported trying to provide protection services but were overwhelmed by the negative attitudes among most of the refugees towards LGBTQI+ persons.

Physical violence was reported by over 80 per cent of the respondents, with 26 per cent reporting sexual assault. The physical assaults were attributed mainly to fellow refugees in the camp. Members of the host community and family members of LGBTQI+ persons were responsible for seven per cent and six per cent of the violence reported respectively. The same trend was noted in the sexual assaults. The sexual violence reported included mainly rape perpetrated by fellow refugees with a stated goal of attempting to change the victim's sexual orientation.

Due to reduced donor funding, obstacles created by COVID-19 and other challenges there is a need to shift the service delivery model from emergency and relief to a development-focused model allowing members to live outside of the camp as the best approach towards ensuring asylum seekers live a dignified life. Rainbow Haven's safe house, located outside of the refugee camp in an urban setting, will help LGBTQI+ refugees create self-reliance opportunities to live with dignity and create a safe future for themselves and their families. The stability and safety provided by a residence outside of the refugee camps will increase the residents' ability to seek employment or identify income-generating activities to sustain themselves while waiting for permanent settlement.

Christ Church Cathedral in Victoria, BC, has partnered with Upper Rift Minorities (URM) to open a Rainbow Haven safe house in Kenya. URM focuses on human rights and development, providing support through economic empowerment programs and advocacy efforts for refugees.

Anthony Danda, coordinator of the Rainbow Haven safe house in Kenya, sees this work as an extension of Christ Church Cathedral's focus on human dignity and decades of experience in refugee relief: "As an LGBTQI+ affirming community Christ Church Cathedral welcomes the opportunity to partner with Rainbow Haven and URM to deliver on our commitment to the unhoused in our local community and internationally through assistance to refugees."

part call to action by social activists.

RH volunteer Brian Seymour and the group's chair Duane Lecky along with many others spent weeks spearheading the group's participation: registering with the Victoria Pride Society, running a volunteer roster, and honing the message volunteers would give.

On the day of the festival, Brian was front and centre. He was behind the tables and under the tent kindly loaned to RH by St John the Divine Anglican Church.

Brian and the other RH volunteers spent the day explaining to numerous festival attendees why Rainbow Haven's mission is so important.

He says many attendees were surprised to learn the problems RH addresses even exist.

"Many were unaware that LGBTQI+ folks often resort to flight from their homeland due to persecution" says Brian. "Virtually everyone was surprised and shocked to learn that once an asylum-seeker has fled their country, they still face financial and life-safety insecurity as well as a very long wait for their refugee claims to be vetted and processed by the UNHCR."

Many of those visitors to the booth then in turn surprised RH volunteers by offering impromptu donations once

If you would like to contribute directly to the Kenya safe house, please click on through the link below.

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## Interview: The Story of "Mams"

"Mams" is a charming and lively 32 year old man originally from The Gambia in West Africa. He now lives and works in a northern European nation where he is a permanent resident. Multilingual, he speaks five languages fluently: Fula, Wolof and Mandinka plus English and an additional European language. Some day he would like to build a career in criminal law, a field in which he has already had some training. But a few years ago his professional hopes and indeed his own life were put in jeopardy by discrimination.

### Growing Up Gay

Mams was raised in his father's house in a Gambian village. He said that growing up "there was no one else like him" in his community. He noted that in Africa, as a gay person, "you live in hell" and that "you cannot express your feelings". When he was a child schoolmates and neighbours sometimes "made a mockery" of him because they considered some of his manners to be effeminate. He completed secondary school and then studied law at college intending to take those studies further. However, his father died and it was not financially possible to move on to university. So, while still living in the family home he became a police officer and subsequently worked for an organization

they learned of the need. Organizers did not expect that.

Several people also offered their time; asking how they can volunteer, again, to the surprise of the RH organizers.

Brian notes that the Pride Festival participation reinvigorated Rainbow Haven's organizers and even led to two new people joining the organization.

Plans are underway to participate in this year's Victoria Pride Festival and keep the momentum going.

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## Thank you to our Donors

From all of us at Rainbow Haven, thank you to our donors for helping give LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers a safe and brighter future, while they await refugee approval in a safer country. If you are a one-time donor, please consider making a monthly donation!

Did you know?

- Any donation is accepted, but monthly donations help us better budget and plan for recurring expenses.
- Rainbow Haven provides the first point of refuge when LGBTQI+ asylum-seekers are most vulnerable, before other organizations become

teaching health education and basic legal rights to the public. He eventually came to understand that he was not alone as a gay person. He developed friendships within the hidden queer community and even found a boyfriend.

### Discovery and Exposure

Now, a neighbour in his village had long suspected Mams of being gay. One day this neighbour invaded Mams' privacy right inside the family home by spying on him while he was with his boyfriend. The neighbour, without their knowledge, was recording them electronically. This man immediately gave this stolen "evidence" to Mams' brother. Then the neighbour reported Mams to the village at large. Mams' brother suddenly appeared and beat him "like he was an animal". At that point their mother arrived and tried to protect Mams by intervening. For that she, too, was badly beaten by his brother.

### Flight From Danger

Right after this incident Mams fled his home village and indeed The Gambia itself. He said there was "nothing else he could do" to protect himself. Staying in his native country and facing the hostility of his family and the now-alerted community was simply too dangerous. He crossed the River Gambia in a small boat into Sénégal. He managed to do this legally and in the open as opposed to clandestinely.

He had very little money with him as he had to depart so quickly. Once in Sénégal he stayed in a small village. Then he travelled by motorbike and bus to Dakar, the capital, a city of 3.5 million.

### Asylum and Survival

He did not know anyone in Sénégal. So, for the first 3 months in Dakar he lived mostly on the street. To get money to eat he took whatever work he could find. He laboured in warehouses carrying 50 kg. sacks of sugar and sometimes washed clothes by hand for other people. He got by with whatever work he could do with his hands and the strength of his back.

Fortunately he had gay friends from West Africa who had previously gotten to Canada. It was they who informed him of the existence of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR) office in Dakar. These offices are situated in 130 countries worldwide and can offer hope to asylum seekers.

### The Refugee Process Starts

The first step was a visit to the local Police Office. Asylum-seekers are required to report to the police for interviews to establish their status and to request a document allowing them to proceed to the UNCHR office. He received police approval and could then proceed to UNCHR.

involved.

- Donations can be made directly through our website, not just via CanadaHelps.
- Donations greater than \$18 are CRA tax-deductible.
- All Rainbow Haven staff are volunteers. There are no paid staff, so your contribution goes where it is needed most.

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## The Latest from Senegal

*Courtesy of Africa News*

Every time Abdou's mother hears of a homophobic attack in the streets of Senegal's capital Dakar, she locks him in her bedroom.

Abdou -- who, like other LGBTQ people AFP interviewed, asked not to be identified by his real name -- is used to hiding. He has been concealing his sexuality most of his life.

But lately the 20-year-old has felt even more in danger.

"The situation is becoming more and more serious," said the soft-spoken unemployed tailor.

"Before they would say you were gay, but they didn't hit you. Today you are beaten and it's posted on social media."

Within one week of reporting to UNCHR he had his first formal meeting to start his refugee process. Three months later he had his second meeting with UNCHR Protection Officers. And so it went, month by month for three long years.

### The Waiting Game

There is a 30-day wait after the first UNCHR meeting before a successful refugee applicant can receive any assistance toward living expenses. While greatly appreciated, the money supplied was not enough to support him. Sometimes there were funds for both food and a small place to live, sometimes not. At other times he had to sleep in the street and sometimes he just didn't eat. So he needed to keep seeking work. He got sick at one point but without money for medicine he simply had to tough it out.

And the persecution continued. People were suspicious of strangers in their community and foreign nationals like him were especially targeted. And if they suspected the stranger was LGBTQ+ the harassment intensified. Sometimes persecutors entrap gay people by befriending them on gay social media apps. Once a meeting is set up the LGBTQ+ person is then assaulted, robbed or both. Cell phones are often the goal in these crimes and their theft can cause a host of difficulties for the victim.

### A Final Interview

During those years of waiting Mams met many times with UNCHR Protection Officers. They verified his account of what happened to him in The Gambia and assembled data and documents to confirm his status and personal history. Finally the day came for a formal Resettlement Interview. It was successful and his case was forwarded to the embassy of a northern European nation. Five months after the fateful Resettlement Interview Mams flew from Dakar to Europe to resettle as a Permanent Resident. He says he was warmly welcomed and his new government provided all the documentation and job-training he needed in order to settle in quickly. In Mams' words:

*"...today I have got my own job, my own apartment and I'm paying all my bills without the help of the government! My life has really changed and I'm free here living my life how I wanted without any fear".*

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## Interview:

### Bab's Story

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## Refugees coming to Canada

**Courtesy of *Halifax City News***

MOMBASA — Astraeus O'Levin is tired of strangers telling her they want to kill her.

In 2015, as a transgender woman, she left the scrutiny of her family in western Kenya, seeking peace and new opportunities in the tourism sector in the eastern coastal city of Mombasa.

Instead she was greeted by children pelting rocks and religious leaders using loudspeakers to blame gay people for everything from bad weather to soccer losses. Men would insult and beat her in the street, only to message her later, looking for sex.

Nine years later, Kenyan members of Parliament are debating a bill that would impose a decade-long criminal sentence for actions seeking "to advance, advocate, promote or fund homosexuality." Protests calling for the expulsion and even death of LGBTQ+ people in Kenya happen every few months.

"They think we are promoting pedophilia or recruiting



The young man wishes to be known as Bab for this article. It's a nickname that's short for "Bad and Boogie," the title of a hit hip-hop song about having bourgeois tastes yet being down to earth or "real."

Bab steps inside to a warm meeting room, escaping an early December blast of frigid cold and snow in central Canada.

He's come to talk about a much more difficult and harrowing escape as a young gay asylum-seeker from a country in Africa where his very existence is considered a crime. A place where he feared violent crimes committed against him would go unpunished.

"You will see boys from around the neighbourhood just invading your house and just attack you," says Bab. "The saddest part of all is they attack you for no reason, but the community would not see that they are ones at fault because of you being gay, you are the one who is at fault without doing anything. So they would just be like, oh, they are gay so clearly they are the ones who should not be here. Right."

Bab left his homeland of the Gambia in 2016, heading to Dakar in Senegal, the location of the nearest United Nations High Commission for Refugees office, but also a place with its own anti-LGBTQ + laws.

Like many young LGBTQ + asylum-seekers in Eastern Africa, Bab's months-long journey to safety included a difficult wait in Dakar.

"The journey comes with stigma, discriminations. It comes with hard pain, sleepless nights, hunger. It comes being broke. It comes with problems of nothing to eat, where to sleep, where to have clean water."

Bab says aside from a couple of small stipends from the UNHCR, he and other LGBTQ+ refugees were on their own in a hostile country where they were not allowed to work. Leading some to take drastic measures to survive.

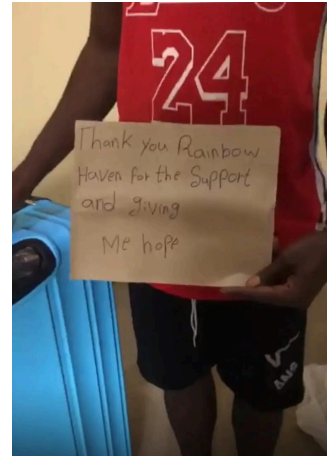
"For example, you have to sleep with men to get money to feed yourself. Yeah, you have to sleep with men to get to feed your own self. You have to borrow money. You have to get any kind of possible way for you to get money."

In spite of all that, Bab counts himself lucky that his journey lasted only one year before Canada accepted him as a refugee. He has friends in Dakar now who have been waiting much longer.

"Now that I see a couple of my friends there for two years, three years, four years, you know, going through everything life could possibly throw in their face for three or four years," he says. "I see

people," O'Levin said. "We just want to feel safe."

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## The Lawyer Risking Everything

Courtesy of *The BBC*

Despite being vilified, threatened and humiliated in public, veteran Cameroonian lawyer Alice Nkom is determined to uphold the rights of homosexual people in her country.

A human rights NGO that she runs, Redhac, was recently suspended by the government and she is due to appear before investigators to answer accusations of money laundering and funding terror groups – which she denies.

The 80-year-old says the authorities are obstructing her work and believes she is

those ones eh struggling. I just feel sick to my stomach, because for us, it was a little bit easier."

Bab says that's why Rainbow Haven's work is so important. The group raises money to pay for food and a couple of apartments in Dakar as shelter for LGBTQ + people while they wait out their asylum claims.

"It's important to help them because I know that being gay in Africa is hard, that being African or being like us. So, when they get any kind of help, it might be food, it might be clean water, it might be uh shelter, it might be money to for the transportation. It will all help.

Bab says to take it from him donors to this cause are saving lives.

being targeted because of her legal advocacy with the LGBT community.

"I will always defend homosexuals because they risk their freedom every day, and they are thrown into prison like dogs," she tells the BBC in a firm tone, speaking in her office in the city of Douala.

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### **Rainbow Haven**

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