

Op Ed: A Call to Authenticity; The Plight of Transgender Refugees

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Picture this: You are looking out upon a scorched desert, humming the song your mother used to sing you to at night when you couldn't sleep. As you hum this tune you realize there are many more sleepless nights ahead. You remember last night, like so many others. The memories flood back as you dab at the swollen eye you received from the men who beat and raped you, again. This is what you were running from; where you come from, people who are different, people like you, are better off being dead in most cases. Because you break down the barriers between man and woman, like your mother's song, firm and unbreakable, yet soft and sweet. Because you are this other, Transgender, you were told to kill yourself or risk being killed by those you thought you could trust. Continuing on your journey you travel by foot across an endless desert to a neighboring country. The country of endless possibility, prosperity and most of all, safety. But sadly, this is only the beginning of your journey.

Transgender men and women already face impossible odds. They must steel themselves against wave after wave of hate, physical and emotional abuse, neglect, poverty, sickness, harassment and discrimination. They face a world that has no love for them, yet they cling to authenticity like a prayer. Transgender individuals in several countries across the globe are faced with the threat of death simply because they are living as their authentic and true selves. These individuals are unwelcomed within their home countries and in some vehemently criminalized, simply for trying to live as they are; as men and women. By increasing our knowledge about the issues transgender refugees face and trying to adjust the broken systems and laws that do this harm, we can play an active role in saving the lives of thousands of people coming into our country.

Transgender asylum seekers, immigrants, and refugees all share a common and pronounced threat to their wellbeing, mental, and physical health. Not only are they subjected to inhumane treatment when being processed into the country, once allowed in they are subjected to horrors such as forced sterilization. Transgender refugees are detained for months and sometimes years at a time, as stated by the International Detention Coalition. Harassment,

rape, and physical violence run rampant in the detention centers whilst they await processing into the country. They are often housed with those of their birth gender meaning for example, trans-women are housed with men, leading to sexual harassment and often physical abuse. There is often abuse from officers that are supposed to protect refugees into the country as well. One account from a woman named Tania Cordova from Michoacacan, Mexico stated:

“They didn’t have no place to house me, and they decided that if I wanted to be in general population, I was going to be housed with males,” she said. “I remember one day I went back to detention, and there was a female officer there who was supposed to search us, but not see us without clothes. She wanted to see what a transgender looks like.”

The way the system is as of now, the government is more willing to repatriate or relocate individuals back to their home countries than to allow them entrance into the country. Senior Director for Programs at the Women’s Refugee Commission Dale Buscher explains that many LGBT persons are relocated instead of gaining the asylum though there are “76 United Nations (UN) Member States criminalize same-sex acts among consenting adults and seven of those states (Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and parts of Somalia and Nigeria) maintain the death penalty for consensual homosexual acts.” In short this means there are potentially thousands of lives that have been lost due to repatriation, and relocation because authorities are not taking the possibility they are LGBT into consideration.

LGBT individuals that could potentially seek asylum are usually too frightened to reveal their identity due to fear of being turned away or discriminated against by officials. If asylum seekers are interviewed in a group setting, and it seems this is common, they may hide their identities due to this mixture of shame and fear. As Buscher states; “LGBT refugees risk having their claim denied if they are not able to speak openly about their sexual identity, how they were treated in their home countries based on that identity, and how it led to their flight.”. The fear that is a constant in the lives of these individuals doesn’t go away with leaving their hometown or village. Transgender people especially tend to be noticeably LGBT and yet are still turned away or repatriated back to their home countries. There seems to be a shift in blame towards the

asylum seekers because of them hiding their identity, however this is an issue that needs to be addressed by those with the power to help instead of victim blaming.

These populations are overlooked and not taken care of in a proper way that shows them any human decency or respect. Until we change the way or immigration systems are set up and operated, more lives are going to be lost and shattered. We need to put legislators into office that don't overlook or demean Refugees and asylum seekers coming into the United States. They are fleeing their oppressive countries to try live safely in the arms of this great nation and we are turning a blind eye to a people in need. They are being murdered, prosecuted, beaten, and raped because they are a little different from the norm. They are autonomous, emotional, human beings, simply because they look differently, sound differently, dress differently does not negate the fact they deserve basic human rights to life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Evander Jennings is an Anthropology and International Studies double major with a focus in global diversity. Upon graduation he hopes to either work internationally, or on the home front to provide safety, aid, and support for those within minority groups.