

The Rainbow Group in Mae La camp

Moses

Discrimination, verbal abuse and physical and sexual violence follow Burmese LGBTI people who cross into Thailand to seek shelter in camps.

Growing up gay in Burma I did not really understand what being 'gay' meant but I believed that my feelings must be wrong. I think most LGBTI people who left Burma for refugee camps in Thailand were similarly confused about their sexual identity or had suffered mental or physical abuse by their families and/or community. This is the reality of life for LGBTI individuals in Burma. Traditional cultural and religious beliefs prevent most of us from living openly as respected members of our communities.

Most of the LGBTI people in Mae La refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border decided to leave Burma because of the discrimination they experienced there. We fled to Thailand with the hope of finding freedom. In reality, things were not going to be as we expected. We arrived in Thailand with no legal documentation and therefore had to live in one of the refugee camps established along the border. The camps are large and well established but there are no organisations or groups offering support specifically for the LGBTI community.

Living in the camps is a big challenge for LGBTI individuals. The camps are crowded and gossip spreads quickly. Taunts and abuse against LGBTI people are looked on with amusement by bystanders, and attempts to find protection from the established camp leaders results in advice to “change our appearance” or in even further abuse. After finding the refugee camp to be no better than the situation I had left behind, I began thinking about why we were being treated so badly, what was wrong with us and what we could do to live peacefully with the community. Then I came up with some ideas for how I believed we could change perceptions. By participating in community work perhaps we could create understanding between the community and LGBTI people.

At first, we had no idea how we could start. A friend who worked for an NGO operating in the camp gave us advice on organising a group. We met twice a month with the aim of providing a safe place for LGBTI individuals to meet, talk about our experiences and hopefully improve our situation in the camp. We faced many challenges, even in just having the confidence to meet together. Within the camp there is a great deal of fear in identifying oneself as LGBTI and we had ten members at most. We would meet in someone’s house, inviting people whom we felt might identify as LGBTI. We were asked by UNHCR to consider establishing a more formal community-based organisation (CBO) but resisted as we did not believe we could offer our members sufficient protection if we were to become more visible through becoming a CBO.

There are certainly many more people living closeted lives within the camps, too frightened to live open lives or make contact with other LGBTI people. In creating a more positive perception of being LGBTI by contributing to the community we hoped to make it increasingly acceptable for people to identify as LGBTI in the camp and to challenge intolerant attitudes. The group’s motto was very clear: “we love to live peacefully with the community”.

We set up our Rainbow Group with seven members, with all of us taking different responsibilities. The Group worked in the belief

that we had different abilities that could help the wider camp community. We decided that we could raise the profile of LGBTI in the camp by becoming involved in social work and so the Rainbow Group began decorating weddings, assisting at funerals, running dance classes and facilitating funfairs or special events. Due to our reluctance to become a formal CBO we never received funding, although we were able to attend community meetings.

Despite our involvement in community activities, however, I did not feel a great change in attitudes. Tolerance, perhaps, but not acceptance. We had believed that perceptions within the camp could change but there are huge obstacles. The leadership positions in the refugee camps are often held by religious leaders and the majority of the camp community is uneducated and holds conservative beliefs regarding sexuality. We avoided becoming a formally recognised CBO because of fears of what having a higher profile might bring – but that meant we had no protection provided by any authority in the camp.

For most LGBTI refugees in Mae La and the other refugee camps, the choice is between leaving the camp to work illegally in nearby Thai communities or living closeted lives in the camps until they can relocate to a third country. I left Mae La to study near Mae Sot. Most of the former members of the group now also live outside the camps and our Rainbow Group has now ceased to exist. I am still in contact with friends in the camp and understand that the intolerance and the abuse continue.

The Thai interior minister recently announced that, given current reforms in Burma, all refugees could be repatriated within two years. We do not believe, however, that LGBTI individuals will be able to live openly and safely in Burma as LGBTI. But as we are not in the camps we are not in a position to seek resettlement elsewhere.

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