

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS: MOMO'S EXPERIENCE OF LGBTQ+ HOMELESSNESS

Feantsa had the opportunity to interview Momo, a user of Le Refuge, a homeless centre focusing on helping LGBTQ+ individuals in Brussels. The interview discusses Momo's experience of homelessness, from the causes of their homelessness, mistreatment they experienced within an asylum centre, and what makes services like Le Refuge safe and effective. We are incredibly thankful to Momo for sharing their story, so we may all identify shortcomings and strengths within homeless services when providing support for LGBTQ+ individuals.



Interview conducted by **Marc Bouteiller**, Director of Refuge Bruxelles, Belgium, on behalf of FEANTSA, with Momo, a resident of Le Refuge, Bruxelles

**FEANTSA:** Can you tell us about yourself and outline some of the causes behind you becoming homeless?

**Momo:** My name is Momo, I'm a 22-year-old Palestinian seeking asylum in Belgium. Upon my arrival, I had to apply for asylum in Belgium for fear of persecution due to my sexual orientation back in my home country (Lebanon). I am gay and gender fluid, and I like to express my fluidity with makeup and feminine clothes. Fortunately, I haven't experienced a long period of homelessness, but I have lived many days on the streets seeking a place to sleep.

**FEANTSA:** What has your experience of homelessness services been like? What additional challenges did you face as an LGBTIQ person, compared to heterosexual or cisgendered people experiencing homelessness?

**Momo:** I was admitted to an asylum centre. As much as it was relieving to be there, it was equally hard due to my sexuality. I had to live with people who had the same mentality as those that caused me to run from my country, and the centre was not very educated about homosexuality and gender fluidity.

I was placed with individuals who constantly harassed, mocked, and insulted me, until I was separated into a room alone where I really felt like I was trapped. Long story short, the experience was bad; it took a toll on my mental health and I went into a severe depression. In the end, I was beaten up by a guy in the centre. Eventually, the centre contacted Le Refuge Brussels to take me in due to the problems that I was experiencing in there. The discrimination I received from the people living at the centre was too much to take. I received too much harassment, and the fact that the majority of staff were not educated enough on the LGBTIQ+ situation didn't help at all, especially when I used to dress up as a girl and the boys would come and touch me in places that were inappropriate.

**FEANTSA:** Have you had positive experiences in homelessness services?

**Momo:** Moving to Le Refuge Brussels changed my life, literally. The amount of love I received is beyond imaginable, and this organisation is like a literal family to me. The assistance they offered, the follow ups, and the accommodation with people who belong to the same community made me feel very safe and I started developing and my mental health has improved. I would also like to highlight that my sister was admitted to Le Refuge Brussels and, because of their support, we are able to seek psychological help and support for the traumatic experiences we have lived through.

**FEANTSA:** Where do you feel safe? What makes a place feel safe?

**Momo:** Feeling safe is so important! Feeling at peace is what every human being seeks, and it is so valuable to have your freedom and act however you feel! Being myself and acting as myself is a freedom! Being able to express what I want is freedom! Not being judged based on my sexuality and preferences is a freedom and, above all, being surrounded by a family who cares about my mental health and about my progress is a freedom; this is what makes a person feel safe and at peace. The feeling of being protected is what makes a person feel safe.

**FEANTSA:** What would help support you to exit homelessness?

**Momo:** What would help any person to exit homelessness is the right information and direction! You can help people move forward in the right direction by informing them about alternatives (jobs, institutions, volunteering, etc.) - anything that could make them feel productive again and help them earn money so they can rebuild their life that has been crushed due to hardship!

**FEANTSA:** *Does your experience of homelessness impact on your relationship with the wider LGBTIQ community?*

**Momo:** My relationship with homelessness has of course made me closer to my community because we can have similar experiences (especially when talking with people who were in the same situation). It has brought us together, taught us to stand by and be there for each other, because, no matter how hard life gets, no one will understand your pain except the people who lived the same experience!

**FEANTSA:** *Beyond exiting homelessness, what are your hopes and dreams for the future?*

**Momo:** My dream is to reach a point in my life where I feel like I'm protected and safe. My main goal now is to try and resolve all the traumatic experiences that I have been through by seeking psychological help. I want to live in peace, and I hope that one day people will understand that we do not choose our sexuality and that it is not wrong to love whoever you want! Homophobia, transphobia, and any kind of phobia towards our community should be stopped for good!

**FEANTSA:** *This magazine is addressed to people who work in the homeless sector, either in delivering services or making policies, what message do you have for them? What would you like to them to take away?*

**Momo:** I would like to thank everyone for their support and assistance in helping homeless people! You are so precious, and we are forever grateful for your help and support. Please, whether dealing with people from the LGBTQ community or otherwise, keep in mind that these

people did not choose to be homeless or left in the street, and that their mental health is already devastated. Please start from their position, through talking to them and letting them open to you! Be their brothers and sisters and assure them that it is only a matter of time and that everything will be okay!

Also please take the chance to attend some awareness campaigns about the LGBTQ+ community if you don't have much knowledge about it. It would help you a lot to understand everyone's situation and will make the other person more comfortable talking to you if they can consider you an ally.

One example: being gender fluid I sometimes feel like I'm a girl, but in the asylum centre they put me with men. I felt like shit dressing up like a girl while being put in a room with guys. It made me feel so low - to the point where I had a mental breakdown because no one had any idea about my situation or what gender fluid meant, in a time where I really needed someone to understand what I was going through.

