LESTER FELLOWSHIP REPORT

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Last year, I was fortunate enough to be chosen as one of two recipients of the Lester Fellowship. I completed my Fellowship at the Streha Centre, an LGBT+ shelter and support centre in Tirana, the capital city of Albania. In this report, I detail my experience on the Fellowship, my work with Streha, what I learned from my time working at the Centre, and how this experience has changed me and how I understand my human rights work.

Why I applied to work at Streha

I work as a human rights barrister in Ireland and, from 2022 to 2025, I also co-ran a weekly free legal advice clinic for the LGBT+ community. My practice is predominantly in childcare, discrimination, housing, and asylum law. In my asylum work, I regularly represent LGBT+ people who have fled their home country for Ireland because of rejection, stigma, and threats to their health, and often their life, due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. I have represented a significant number of Albanian nationals, including LGBT+ Albanians, who have applied for asylum because they are not safe in their home country. Drawing on this, I applied for the Lester Fellowship so that I could put my expertise to good use, by providing prospective asylum applicants who are still in their home country with advice on what to expect and how to best prepare for the process ahead.

Streha, meaning '*shelter*' in Albanian, primarily operates as a home for LGBT+ people from Albania and the surrounding region who are homeless due to domestic violence, eviction, and family or community rejection due to their LGBT+ status.[1] Streha is the only shelter of its kind in Southeastern Europe. In ten years of operation, it has

[1] Streha Center https://www.strehacenter.org/

provided a home to over 300 people who had nowhere else to go – a stark and remarkable achievement for a shelter with only eight beds.

Beneficiaries of Streha can stay there for a maximum of one year and Streha also provides financial support towards rent for the first months after beneficiaries exit the shelter. Streha provides additional social supports to the LGBT+ community in Tirana, in Albania, and in surrounding Albanian-speaking regions; including care packages for those living out in the community, psychosocial and psychological help, medical support, employment support and, vitally, family mediation services to try and mend relations between beneficiaries of the shelter and their families. In addition to this wide range of services, Streha provides legal consultations to members of the LGBT+ community. I contacted Streha to ask whether I could assist, by using my expertise to advise people considering seeking asylum in the European Union on what to expect and how to prepare *before* they began the process.[2] Streha advised they would be very happy to have me and together we formulated a plan for how I could work with them. With the support of the Lester Fellowship, in July of last year I travelled to Albania to begin my work with the shelter.

My work at Streha

I worked at Streha from the middle of July to the end of October 2025. Before I began my Fellowship, I had presumed my work would only involve giving advice to Albanian nationals who were using their services. However, I learned on arrival that LGBT+ people from other countries in Southeastern Europe and North Africa were also relying upon Streha's services, and in turn I provided guidance on the EU asylum system to a much wider cohort than I had initially anticipated.

A big difficulty that people face in their asylum applications in countries like Ireland is where immigration authorities do not consider their account to be 'credible.' Immigration authorities in the EU rely upon an applicant's 'documentary evidence'

[2] The European Union has rules on asylum that apply across all Member States. As Ireland is in the EU, I was able to advise on the process as it applies across 25 countries.

where available when making a decision on an applicant's credibility. Examples of such evidence includes photographs, messages, or reports from authorities in their home country corroborating their account. This especially poses problems for LGBT+ asylum applicants, given that the basis on which they are being persecuted is often to do with how they feel inside, rather than due to their identification through their visible membership of a particular religious, national, or ethnic group which is persecuted in their home country.

Demonstrating the truth of a person's sexual orientation or gender identity is all the more difficult when they come from a repressive and unaccepting society, which has caused them to fastidiously hide any traces of how they truly feel about themselves or who they love. In the absence of such '*evidence*,' the testimony of LGBT+ asylum applicants is frequently rejected as being '*unsupported*' or '*unproven*,' and their asylum claims rejected on this basis following an invasive, and often ill-informed cross examination process that, in my experience, can be unnecessarily cruel, blind to cultural nuance, and even traumatising for the applicant.[3]

The burden of proving LGBT+ status is compounded in the case of Albanian asylum applicants by the fact that almost all EU countries deem Albania to be a '*safe country of origin*.'[4] This designation means that applicants are assumed to be able to return home without risk of persecution or serious harm. This assumption is often mistaken, and many applications for asylum by LGBT+ Albanians at genuine risk at home are unsuccessful because of reliance on this misapprehension.

On paper the rights of LGBT+ Albanians have improved over the last ten years, including recently by the passage of an anti-discrimination legislation. However, this is not reflected in accounts from LGBT+ Albanians. In 2024, Aleanca, the Alliance against Discrimination of LGBTI people, noted that, '*Public awareness of the* [anti-

[3] Johannes Lukas Gartner, '(In)credibly Queer: Sexuality-based asylum in the European Union' https://humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/incredibly-queer-sexuality-based-asylum-in-the-european-union/

[4] European Union Agency for Asylum, 'Overview of the implementation of safe country concepts' (July 2025)https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2025-07/2025_safe_country_concept_EN.pdf

discrimination law] *remains low, and incidents of violence and discrimination against LGBTI individuals frequently go unreported due to a lack of trust in institutions.*'[5] Their study further found that that 40% of LGBT+ individuals polled had experienced violence or discrimination in the preceding two years, and that of that 40%, three quarters of the incidents were unreported.[6] Almost two thirds of all polled were unaware that there even *was* a Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination to whom they could report. This illustrates the chasm between protections that exist on paper, and in reality; and the continuing need for access to the asylum process for those who cannot find safety at home in Albania.

Having won and lost cases representing LGBT+ asylum applicants, I was able to advise beneficiaries at Streha of ways in which a prospective application for asylum in an EU country could be strengthened by them bringing along evidence, such as it may exist, of them attending LGBT+ events, or messaging other LGBT+ people, and also what evidence immigration officers *cannot* expect an applicant to provide, such as evidence of sexual activity. I was also able to articulate EU attitude and assumptions about the relative safety of Albania for LGBT+ people so that they are aware of the challenges which they would face mounting an asylum application.

I had not anticipated before I arrived in Tirana how often I would be advising on how to apply for EU work visas. Due to the unpredictability of applying for asylum it often proves safer and more reliable for a person who could have a good asylum claim to instead focus on getting a work visa. Whilst it may not provide as long or stable a right to remain as asylum, it does provide a way to legally move to an EU country where, hopefully, they can find safety. My work in this regard involved cross-referring the skills and qualifications of beneficiaries with advertised skill shortages raised by Member States, and outlining to the beneficiary how to apply for jobs as well as work permissions and visas in order to move safely and legally to an EU country.

[5]https://upr-info.org/sites/default/files/country-document/2024-08/AllianceAgainstDiscriminationofLGBTI_presentation.pdf
[6] Ibid.

One client from North Africa was in Albania on a work visa, having fled his home country after his family, neighbours, and subsequently the police, discovered his sexual orientation. (Homosexuality is a criminal offence in his country of origin. Notwithstanding this, it is designated a '*safe country*' by many EU countries including Ireland). This work visa was itself precarious, as he was being exploited by his employer who refused to sign the document required to extend his visa. The client was understandably terrified of being deported to his home country, and also wanted to travel to an EU country, as he did not feel sufficiently safe in Albania. Streha had to first arrange a new job in Albania with an employer who formally enable him to extend his residency. Then, we liaised with other LGBT+ asylum rights organisations on his behalf, and advise him on how to both apply for jobs, and for residency permission in these other countries, based on his skills and qualifications.

Another outcome of my Fellowship was an information guide which I compiled for Streha, laying out in simple language the complex process by which EU countries decide on whether to grant a person asylum and what information is sought from asylum applicants. This guide also advised on how long the process can take, where asylum applicants are expected to live during the asylum process, and what might happen after a decision is made, whether to grant or refuse asylum. As well, I conducted research for Streha on the risk of human trafficking of members of the LGBT+ community, and what warning signs to look out for that someone may be trafficked or at risk of being trafficked. Trafficking is a significant problem in Albania.[7] There is a paucity of research on how the problem affects LGBT+ people globally, and no available information specific to Albania. However given the particular vulnerabilities of LGBT+ people, such as higher rates of homelessness, rejection, and the false promise of being taken to safety in another country, the likelihood of targeting by traffickers is notably high within the LGBT+ population. My research fed into presentations and workshops which Streha has run with community organisations across Albania.

[7] US Department of State, '2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Albania'
https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-trafficking-in-persons-report/albania/

I was also proud to contribute practically to the day-to-day operations of the Centre while in Tirana. I collected supplies which were distributed to beneficiaries staying at the shelter, as well as beneficiaries in the community. I also filled in for staff during shifts monitoring the entrance to centre – a security measure that is undertaken 24/7. Whilst this work was not directly related to my legal skills, it proved personally to be an incredibly rewarding part of my experience working at the shelter. I was grateful for the opportunity to directly assist and bear witness to the operation and protection of a small, vital, place of safety and hope within a city and country that does not reliably or effectively guarantee its LGBT+ population these bare minimum conditions.

What I learned at Streha

It has been six months since I completed my Fellowship. Reflecting on the experience, there are three main takeaways I have from my time at Streha which inform how I now understand my work as a human rights barrister.

1) The limits of asylum law

The experience has caused me to reframe how I understand my practise as an asylum lawyer. Before my work at Streha I perhaps naively believed that, despite the many flaws of the EU asylum system, it presented the way to best guarantee a pathway for vulnerable people to access safety and protection in an EU country. I thought the best use of my expertise would be to advise on how to make a strong case and demonstrate credibility in a way that increases the likelihood of being granted asylum.

It has therefore been confronting for me as a barrister, to now suspect that the more impactful intervention I made in my consultations at Streha might have been advising beneficiaries to apply for work visas instead, as a more reliable and safer way to flee. This is not a heartening takeaway. I do not believe an ability to code, or proficiency in English or French should make it more likely that a vulnerable person who needs to flee their home country is legally able to do so. Laws regulating economic migration

should not have to be relied upon in lieu of refugee law. However, as government attitudes towards asylum applicants further harden across Europe, including in Ireland, I increasingly, if unenthusiastically, am of the view that training vulnerable people facing persecution marketable skills may provide a more reliable pathway to safety in a European country than the existing international refugee system which was designed for that purpose.

2) The effectiveness of prioritising action over theory

Second, my Fellowship experience expanded my understanding of what can be done with enough ambition by a very small group, with relatively little money and scarce public support. From its initial purpose as a shelter, Streha has expanded to provide community supports beyond the shelter, and even beyond the borders of Albania. The practical and hugely impactful ambition that I observed every day in the incredible staff at Streha made me think of Maxine Wolfe's reflections on the successes of ACT UP New York during the AIDS Crisis. To be effective, Wolfe argued, '*you go action first, not theory first*' as then eventually, '*theory emerges from action.*' Sarah Schulman, following up on this, argued:

> *If you put action first, then you have to make decisions about how to do your action. And that's where your values come to surface. But if you're debating theory before you act, you'll end up in very polarized positions, and you won't have anything on the table.*[8]

My time working with Streha on their trafficking capacity-building project illustrated to me this approach. The staff at the Centre did not let the fact that they had not previously focused on supports for people who are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, human trafficking dissuade them from taking on work to help this group. Whereas, in Ireland, a specific advocacy group may focus on access to medical

[8] Sal Tamarkin, Sarah Schulman on ACT UP, Direct Action, and the Movement to Free Palestine (15 December 2023) https://www.them.us/story/sarah-schulman-palestine-interview. See also Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York 1987 – 1993* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021)

care for LGBT+ people, and another on providing therapeutic supports and mutual aid, and a third (such as my clinic) on providing legal advice; Streha provides all these functions to a high standard, in addition to its primary purpose of running a shelter. It may be that the small number of LGBT+ interest groups in Albania necessitates Streha having a broad remit. However, I believe it is more than this. Working there, I came to understand that the breadth of Streha's functions it is not solely nor mainly due to a lack of other supports, but because of the ambition and inventiveness of its staff, their clear-sighted understanding of the needs in their society, and their unwillingness to box themselves into a narrow understanding of their purpose. Provided it does not compromise the shelter itself (for instance by offering shelter to more people than can safely live in their property), Streha are an extraordinary and inspiring example of what can be accomplished by an organisation that measures what it *should* do by what it *can* do.

3) Community, not law, is the greatest guarantor of LGBT+ safety

My experience in Streha showed me first-hand how laws by themselves cannot make LGBT+ people safe, and how, where the law does not effectively guarantee safety, community can do so. Streha is the creation of a small group of community-minded LGBT+ people who refused to allow other people to feel discarded or unwelcome in Albania because of who they are. Kristi Penderi and Xheni Karaj, two founders of Streha, have described the shelter as:

> *a reminder that a life does not end at the moment of rejection. Over the years, Streha has helped more than 300 young people rebuild their stories, connect with education, work, and community, and imagine futures that once felt impossible. It stands today not just as a service, but as a collective memory of care – built by those who lived there, worked there, and held one another up through the hardest nights.*[9]

[9] Alba Ahmetaj, 'Albania's first LGBTQ+ shelter rejects false allegations amid political tensions following gender equality law' (11 November 2025) https://www.historiaime.al/identitet/albanias-first-lgbtq-shelter-rejects-false-allegations-amid-political-tensions-following-gender-equality-law/

While Streha provides a central locus for activism, support, and mutual aid, this community spirit exists beyond their work. Through my work, I was fortunate enough to make contact with a transfeminist sea swimming group (called, fittingly, Splash the Patriarchy) with whom I spent many of my weekends. This group meet to swim together but also to provide supports, not just to their members but to the wider community: including support for one member who was suddenly evicted when their landlord discovered their LGBT+ status, arranging babysitting for another whose gender-non-conforming child had lost their space at daycare; and indeed, providing legal advice for an overseas friend facing deportation back to Albania. I witnessed this group voluntarily, alongside their own jobs and life commitments, provide supports that their members could not otherwise access. Despite discrimination, rejection, and ineffective legal protection, I witnessed a vibrant, empowering, and tremendously welcoming community of LGBT+ people insist on making Albania safer for people like them and, in so doing, for everyone else too.

Conclusion

My time at Streha and within the wider LGBT+ community in Tirana has made me certain that, in terms of LGBT+ safety, good laws will never be a substitute for community; and that community promises safety, with or without good laws. This affirmation of the importance of community above and beyond law in no way diminishes the importance of human rights work, or indeed, the necessity of parliaments passing laws that protect people's rights. If anything, it has made me more inspired in my job since returning to Ireland, as it has clarified for me how glad I am that I get to use my skills to work for a community of which I am tremendously lucky to be a part. Experiencing first-hand the work, and the drive, and the joy, of the team at Streha, all operating within a much more hostile environment I was used to coming from Ireland, has provided me with renewed conviction for, and pride in, my work. I am very grateful to the Lester Fellowship for providing me with this transformative opportunity.