

## Sade Richardson

Thank you for this opportunity to share light on the difficulties encountered by transgender people seeking asylum in France via French Guiana.

My name is Sade Richardson, and I was born in Guyana, South America. In my country, it is illegal to be LGBTI. After years of seeing my transgender sisters being abused and murdered without any justice, leaving was the only way I would survive.

I entered France through Saint-Laurent-Du-Maroni (French Guiana). This is an overseas department of France in South America. It is small but dangerous for Transgender persons seeking asylum. It is easy to access since no visa is needed to enter, but it can be deadly for those who stay long. As a French territory, the same laws and rights should apply, including same-sex marriage, but from my personal experience, Saint-Laurent-Du-Maroni and the whole of French Guiana is a lawless zone.

According to French law, once an individual has entered French territory to seek asylum, they must be registered as an asylum seeker by the French authority responsible for the right of residence, namely the Prefecture. Then, they can lodge an asylum application with OFPRA, the only administration competent to examine asylum applications.

The Prefecture in Saint-Laurent refused to give the papers to start anyone's asylum process, saying that applications should be made through the Prefecture in Cayenna. However, a French visa is required to enter the capital of French Guiana, Cayenne. This leads to transgender people seeking other means to enter the capital. Those means are very dangerous, either by paying someone to take you illegally and in return working on the streets to repay them with interest. In some cases, people are willing to get STI/STDs or HIV to obtain a doctor's certificate to get an appointment to see a specialist in the capital. Some doctors charge between 500-1500€ to make a paper for an appointment in Cayenne to show at the border to enter Cayenne for medical help.

When I arrived in Cayenne, I contacted the Samu Social explaining that I was seeking asylum and had no place to stay. They provided me with an apartment that I shared with a couple from the Caribbean. They were also seeking asylum, but they were NOT friendly towards a transgender woman. Every day they would pray loudly, asking their god to kill as they said, "the devil a man in a dress." I was allowed to stay for 2 months or until I had an approved interview date with OFPRA.

The next day I went into the Prefecture to ask for asylum. I was told to return in one week with passport photos and government stamps. They give no information about rights or about the asylum procedure. Everyone at the Prefecture was very rude and showed no remorse. Without an income to pay for the stamps and passport photos. I walked day and night asking for a job without any success. I met a transgender woman who told me the only choice was to work on the streets as a prostitute.

I had never worked as a sex worker before and always told myself my body is the only thing I genuinely own. Making this decision was one of the hardest yet in my life. I worked one night on the streets to gain money to pay for the documents needed for my asylum.

One week after giving the photos and stamps to the Prefecture, I received a paper ID with my photo valid for three months, proving that I was in Cayenne seeking asylum. Then I started opening a bank account to receive assistance, and with help from an organization, I started my asylum applications.

That was when I was told that I had to leave Samu Social and find housing and food on my own.

With only about 200€ assistance per month to get a place and food and no chance of gaining mainstream employment, there is not much choice for transgender women. I ended up back on the streets working. I met many other transgender women who had applied for asylum, and they were all refused and waiting for an appeal. But most still had to work on the streets to repay the people that bought them to Cayenne.

After about ten months of waiting, I finally got my interview at OFPRA and was successful. I was so happy, but after walking out, I felt depressed again, knowing I had to work on the streets the same night to have food and pay my rent.

About nine months later, I received my French ID valid for ten years.

My asylum process in Cayenne was challenging, but it is impossible for many other transgender women. Most workers at the Prefecture don't speak English, and they NEVER provide a translator for anyone. Some lawyers charge a lot of money to transgender women, promising that they will do the application procedure for French papers for them, but none had ever been successful. All they do is take transgender women's money. No information is given about your rights while seeking asylum, so you have to research them on your own.

The wait for receiving your first three months' ID from the Prefecture in Cayenne can sometimes take weeks, and you must stay indoors at all times during this period. If you venture outside, you risk random controls by police officers asking for a valid ID, and if you say you are waiting for your asylum ID from the Prefecture, they deport you, taking you to Saint-Laurent-Du-Maroni. Then, you must find a way to return to Cayenne and restart the whole process again.

This is what happened to a young, talented transgender woman I meet while working on the streets. Her name was Diamond.

She was very popular with clients. Some of her clients were police officers, gendarmerie, and also some men working at the Prefecture. She thought knowing these people would make it easier for her to get her papers, but it was the opposite. She was deported countless times while waiting to receive ID, sometimes by her clients. She lost hope in the system and returned to Guyana, her home country, where she was murdered within days.

From my research, over 85 percent of transgender women seeking asylum in Cayenne see their case refused by OFPRA or don't even get a chance to apply for asylum papers from the Prefecture. Every day, they encounter horrible discrimination from both government workers and from the public. This means that they just flee to another country or, more commonly, contract HIV while working on the streets in Cayenne. In some cases, they try to get HIV in order to receive medical papers to stay in France.

Transgender women flee their country to come to France, hoping for a better life and a safer place but most never get the chance to see it because of the prohibitively discriminatory system in Cayenne.

For example, Teoisha is a young transgender woman currently living in Cayenne, French Guiana, seeking asylum. Within the first week of being in Cayenne, she was raped brutally at gunpoint. Her aggressor told her that he knew she was new there and he needed to teach her how things work there.

He said that if she caused any problems, he would find her and kill her.

On 28/09/2019, Teoisha was arrested and taken to Camp Rochambeau Destination Center located in the southwest of Cayenne, French Guiana, for deportation. When she got there, two male officers asked if she was a male or a female. She replied she is a transgender woman. They asked, "if she has a dick?" she said yes. They then told her to take her clothes off to show what she had. She refused and said that before she got there, a female officer checked her, and she was not comfortable doing this in front of them. They said she didn't have a choice. Teoisha lifted her dress up and pulled her underwear down to show them. Full of hurt and shame, Teoisha stood there in tears as the officers laughed at her. One of the officers used a ruler to show other officers the size of her dick as they all laughed at her. This place took the little I had left! I was raped, beaten, police laughed at my naked body, and I don't even know if I will get my asylum. I have nothing left! Teoisha said in tears.

Words can not begin to express the horror I faced while applying for my asylum papers. I was lucky to get my papers and leave Cayenne, but the price I paid was unforgettable. Selling my body for my freedom took away some things from me that I could never get back. I still have nightmares because of it.

Most transgender women I met while in Cayenne are still there, waiting and hoping for their freedom and working on the streets.

I want to thank you again for this opportunity for allowing me to share my personal story and those of my transgender sisters. I hope this will make a difference, and it would not be just another way for me to reliving my horror in front of an audience.