

Forced migration and sexual and gender-based violence in queer communities: UK findings from the SEREDA project

SEREDA Policy Briefing

Background

Over the past six years, the [SEREDA project](#) has been examining the experiences and incidents of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) across the forced migration journey. Initial findings from SEREDA suggested that LGBTQI+ people who seek asylum face incidents of and vulnerability to SGBV that are distinct from heterosexual and cisgender populations, including within the UK asylum system. Our research found that LGBTQI+ populations experience a continuum of violence on arrival in the UK including SGBV in the asylum system and incidents of homophobia within the Home Office. Overall, our research suggests the UK asylum system is currently unsafe for LGBTQI+ people. This briefing outlines the most urgent policy changes needed to ensure the asylum system is safe for everyone.

Urgent Policy Recommendations

Offer LGBTQI+ housing based on self-identified need

The dangers faced by LGBTQI+ people in mainstream asylum accommodation has been

evidenced in multiple recent reports across the four nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). This research confirms those dangers and highlights the urgent need for the provision of specific LGBTQI+ asylum housing for those who need it. The solution already exists and is being offered in parts of England and Wales by Micro Rainbow, but further provision must be expedited across the UK to ensure that all LGBTQI+ forced migrants can be safely accommodated.

Establish a specially trained team to deal with SOGIESC¹ claims

Our research uncovered ignorance about the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ people forced to migrate, punctuated by active incidents of homophobia and transphobia from Home Office staff, interpreters and contractors. We urge the Home Office to establish specially trained, trauma-informed teams (including carefully vetted interpreters) to deal with all SOGIESC asylum claims.

End the policy of immigration detention of LGBTQI+ people

Immigration detention has increased since the Illegal Migration Act was implemented. Immigration detention is extremely harmful for anyone, but LGBTQI+ people in particular face harassment and

¹ sexual orientation, gender identities gender expression, and sex characteristics.



abuse in immigration detention from both staff and other residents. We request that the government immediately end the practice of detaining LGBTQI+ people and [explore community-based alternatives as a matter of urgency](#).

Increase access to legal aid

Recent cuts in legal aid have [made it increasingly hard for asylum seekers to get access to good representation](#). This is having a disproportionate impact on those making SOGIESC claims due to the complexities of claiming asylum based on sexual orientation or gender identity and the difficulty in finding experienced solicitors willing to take on these cases.

Grant all asylum seekers the right to work

There is a clear financial and social case for [allowing all people seeking asylum the right to work within six months of arriving in the UK](#). Our research found that inability to work increases the risk of SGBV to LGBTQI+ people who face high levels of social isolation and vulnerability to exploitation and abusive relationships. The right to work provides a means of independence that may be vital to keep people safe.

A full list of our recommendations are available here: [Forced migration and sexual and gender-based violence in queer communities \(birmingham.ac.uk\)](#)

Findings

Queer Mobilities

While many queer people seeking asylum still travel over land, many take advantage of historical colonial links to the UK, arriving from ex-Commonwealth countries on student, work or visitor visas and claiming asylum once in the UK. Reasons for leaving range from escalating incidents of SGBV, exposure of sexual or gender diversity, pressure to marry or a dawning realisation that continuing to live in their home country is unsafe.

Queer Experiences of SGBV

Survivors and the service providers who support them reported varied incidents of SGBV across the forced migration journey, motivated by homophobic or transphobic hate. Experiences of violence

in countries of origin spanned all genders and orientations and were perpetrated across familial, community, statutory and governmental settings. Cisgendered women and trans people were largely reported to be more at risk from sexual violence while cisgendered men were more at risk of physical violence although many respondents experienced both. Protection from violence was undermined by anti-LGBTQI+ laws and a culture of hostility to queer people in respondents' countries of origin.

Sexual and gender diversity (especially when combined with intersections of race) created additional risk for queer people in flight. Reported incidents of SGBV included rape, exploitation and transactional sex in return for food or shelter. Those in camps or at the mercy of traffickers suffered most and conditions in Greece were reported to be particularly dangerous. Experiences of SGBV did not end when participants reached the UK. Queer forced migrants reported multiple and repeated incidents of homophobic abuse including verbal abuse, threats of violence, actual violence, sexual assault, sexual exploitation and intimate partner violence (IPV).

Queer Experiences of the UK asylum system

Despite the freedoms enjoyed by the LGBTQI+ community in the UK, our research found that queer people seeking sanctuary are not safe in the UK asylum system. Our findings portray a heterosexist, homophobic asylum system that violently abandons queer people most in need of protection. Forced into housing with the very communities they are fleeing from, queer people seeking asylum commonly faced daily experiences of abuse, harassment and sexual assault from other residents and staff. Homophobic abuse was also experienced in official settings, from interpreters in asylum interviews and in court. Homophobic slurs were also reported in official translated documents. Despite evidence of specific safeguarding risks faced by queer people seeking asylum, no special safeguarding provision was required in any asylum support settings. Home Office staff and contractors were reported to hold Eurocentric stereotypes of queerness and how this is performed (including in evidence required to 'prove' sexual or gender diversity) which was considered inappropriate to the lived experiences of those who have been conditioned to keep their queerness hidden and

who fear that they or their families will be subject to violence if exposed.

Vulnerability to SGBV

Queer people seeking asylum were found to face a unique set of vulnerabilities compared to heterosexual and cisgendered asylum seeking populations. While both trans and cisgendered queer women were seen to be most at risk of SGBV, factors such as isolation, shame, inexperience and difficulty accessing specialist services combined to create a perfect storm of vulnerability to SGBV across the spectrum of queer identities. The paradox of needing to be simultaneously invisible, to keep yourself safe and visible to 'prove' your queerness to case workers was a distinct challenge for respondents. The dangers of being visible included exposure to hostile co-ethnic communities in the UK as well as in countries of origin. Respondents feared retribution against their families and for their own safety if their asylum claim was refused and they were removed to their country of origin. Marginalisation from co-ethnic communities and mainstream LGBTQI+ and refugee support services were found to increase vulnerability to SGBV. Queer people seeking asylum were also uniquely vulnerable to abuse in relationships due to enforced poverty on asylum support, inexperience in queer relationships, shame and the pressure to be in a relationship as a source of evidence to support asylum claims.

Strength and Belonging

Dehumanisation in the asylum system and marginalisation in wider society was reported to be a barrier to integration in the longer term, shaping an impression of the UK as a place that is not safe or welcoming. Such dehumanisation was reported to be not only unnecessarily cruel but also a false economy. The harms of the UK asylum system were mitigated by the concept of *chosen family*.

Respondents described the importance of finding others with shared experiences of both being queer and being in the asylum system. Specialist support services in safe places were reported to be a lifeline, addressing isolation, providing resources and reassurance and giving queer people a space where they can safely start being their authentic selves. Others found strength in faith, drag, and keeping busy through volunteering or social activities.

Methods

Delivered with assistance from Rainbow Migration, data was collected from 15 people seeking asylum and 14 specialist service providers drawn from across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Interviews explored experiences across the journey of forced migration, access to services and support, experiences of the UK asylum system, factors creating risk and resilience, what is needed and how experiences have impacted the ability of LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum to build a life in the UK. Service providers were asked about the services they offered and the experiences of those receiving them, about Home Office procedures and what creates vulnerability and resilience. Both groups were asked to suggest recommendations for change.

Full report available at: [Forced migration and sexual and gender-based violence in queer communities \(birmingham.ac.uk\)](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk)

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