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



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with support from Rainbow Migration

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SEREDA: Sexual & Gender Based Violence against Refugees from Displacement to Arrival



RAINBOW
MIGRATION

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Forewords

The SEREDA project was developed following concerns raised by international NGOs that sexual and gender-based violence against forced migrants was neither recorded nor addressed during the so-called refugee emergency of 2015-2016. The SEREDA project identified multiple forms of SGBV occurring over time and place and at the hands of multiple perpetrators. Our findings indicated that women, girls and LGBTQI+ persons were most vulnerable and that SGBV sometimes constituted the reason for flight but also continued once individuals were in imagined refuge. SEREDA interviewed a small number of LGBTQI+ respondents. Analysis of the data collected indicated that LGBTQI+ respondents' experiences of violence differed from those of other respondents. The SEREDA team was delighted when Pip McKnight and Dawn River joined us and proposed extending the original work to a focused project looking at the experiences of LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum across the four nations of the UK. Supported by Rainbow Migration, this report sets out the findings of that project and makes for very difficult reading. It is clear from the report that the UK asylum system inflicts enormous harms on LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum that are entirely preventable. I hope that shedding light on these practices will provoke the UK Government to begin to properly protect LGBTQI+ communities seeking sanctuary.

**Professor Jenny Phillimore,
SEREDA Chief Investigator**

From the threat of immigration detention, where queerphobic bullying is rife, to an unfair standard of proof being used to deny people seeking sanctuary, and legislation to send people to countries where they could face violence, the UK's asylum system is failing to protect hundreds of LGBTQI+ people. This report shines a light on the harms that LGBTQI+ people experience within the asylum system. People who have escaped persecution and come to the UK to rebuild their lives in safety should be met with compassion, instead government policies are exposing them to harm. This is entirely fixable, and this report lays out the urgency for doing so.

**Leila Zadeh, Executive Director,
Rainbow Migration**

Executive summary

Introduction

Over the past six years, the SEREDA (Sexual and gender-based violence in the refugee crisis: from displacement to arrival) 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 in countries of sanctuary seemingly accepting of sexual and gender diversity. This project aimed to build on the initial findings of SEREDA to gain a more complete understanding of the current situation in the UK. Against an international backdrop of increasingly draconian anti-LGBTQI+ laws fuelled by fundamentalist religious and right-wing groups, this research sought to examine the experiences of queer people seeking asylum in the UK.

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+ asylum seekers 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.

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. Those who travelled overland to reach England commonly spent time in camps in Greece, Italy or France although this represents a minority of respondents.

Queer experiences of SGBV

Survivors and service providers 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 communities 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. Sexual and gender diversity (especially when combined with intersections of race) created additional stratifications of 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 faced daily experiences of abuse, harassment and sexual assault perpetrated by 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.

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 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 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.

Recommendations

Create a system that is safe for queer asylum seekers

- Lower the standard of proof required in asylum claims to pre-Nationality and Borders Act level- from 'a balance of probabilities' back to 'a reasonable degree of likelihood'
- Establish a specially trained team (including interpreters) to deal with SOGIESC claims in a way that is trauma-informed and responsive to the lived experiences of people outside the western LGBTQI+ paradigm
- Give people seeking asylum the option of disclosing sexual or gender diversity in needs and risk assessments in a way that does not create risks for them and improve record keeping of SGBV and hate crimes against queer people in

the asylum system

- Create specific safeguarding protocols (inclusive of protections under the Equalities Act) for queer asylum seekers and implement training for all Home Office staff and contractors involved in the assessment of SOGIESC claims or the support of queer people seeking asylum
- Accommodate all queer people seeking asylum based on self-identified need, ensuring they have a choice of both location and type of accommodation, i.e. individual accommodation or LGBTQI+ housing if that is what they need to keep themselves safe
- End the policy of forced bedroom sharing in asylum accommodation
- Proactively address problems of heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia across all Home Office systems and implement safeguards and training to prevent heterosexism and homophobic and transphobic abuse
- Grant asylum seekers the right to work and access to integration measures (such as language classes) at the very start of the asylum process, in line with recommendations from the Commission for the Integration of Refugees¹
- Mandate signposting by the Home Office to specialist services and information on legal protections for LGBTQI+ people including Hate Crime protections
- Restore the right to asylum irrespective of how individuals arrive in the UK and establish safe routes for SOGIESC claimants including a LGBTQI+ Community Sponsorship Programme
- End the detention of SOGIESC claimants
- Put in place safeguards to prevent the forced relocation of any queer people seeking asylum and recognise the rights of people from any country to seek asylum

- Increase legal aid so that the reduction in availability of legal aid lawyers is reversed and everyone seeking asylum who needs a legal aid lawyer can access one

Service provision

- Mainstream knowledge of queer asylum issues across the LGBTQI+ and refugee sectors and statutory and public sector services. Support specialist services (with the involvement of people with lived-experience) to work with these sectors to become safe spaces for queer asylum seekers including how to be visibly welcoming and genuinely safe
- Improve access to LGBTQI+ therapeutic services to support the recovery from SGBV and the journey to self-acceptance
- Invest in specialist support provision

Policy and strategy

- Include specific provision for queer asylum needs in devolved strategies (such as LGBTQI+ inclusion strategy and New Scots Integration Strategy)
- Include queer people who have sought asylum in policy and practice development
- Take steps to improve the safety and security of queer people internationally, acting in line with the knowledge and guidance of those affected by anti-LGBTQI+ laws abroad

¹ [CIR_Report.pdf \(refugeeintegrationuk.com\)](#)

Introduction

Over the past six years, the SEREDA project (Sexual and gender-based violence in the refugee crisis: from displacement to arrival) has been examining experiences and incidents of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) across journeys of forced migration². Of the many varied, challenging and distressing incidents reported by participants, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/ Questioning and Intersex populations (hereafter referred to as 'queer' or LGBTQI+) represent some of the most at risk of SGBV. Forced migration, now estimated to affect 110 million people worldwide³ is diverse in terms of gender (around half of forced migrants are women), but data on the numbers of queer forced migrants is not known. This is despite sexual orientation, gender identities, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) being recognised as a qualification for protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention⁴.

Systems of protection for queer forced migrants are crucial. To date, there are 64 countries worldwide which criminalise private, consensual, same-sex activity, 12 of which can or do impose the death penalty⁵. Many of these laws are the legacy of colonial-era penal codes which imposed European religious or social preferences on indigenous populations which did not previously view sexual or gender diversity as taboo. More recently, anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment has been fuelled by evangelical Christian and Catholic groups based in the US, stoking fear of a 'gay agenda' which has contributed to the imposition of more draconian laws in countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda⁶. The advent of such laws has led to an increase in queer forced migrants seeking sanctuary in Europe and the US⁷, with Rainbow Railroad reporting an 81% rise in requests for help⁸ from queer Ugandans following the imposition of The Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2023, one of the most extreme of the recent anti-LGBTQI+ laws adopted in Africa.

Not all queer people forced to migrate do so because of their sexual orientation or gender identity but being queer creates additional vulnerability to SGBV across the journey to safety, including in the country of sanctuary. Recent publications on queer experiences of seeking sanctuary in the UK suggest those in the asylum system are experiencing particular risk of harm^{9,10,11,12}. Delivered with assistance from Rainbow Migration, the purpose of this report is to examine the evidence provided by queer asylum seekers and the specialist services that support them in order to identify risks and make recommendations for change. We start by describing our research methods and key findings. We proceed to outline the distinct challenges of seeking asylum as a queer person in the UK, including how queer people experience SGBV, homophobia and heterosexism within the asylum system, and the obstacles to accessing services. Finally, we consider what builds resilience and offer recommendations for policy and practice.

² [Sexual and gender based violence in the refugee crisis: from displacement to arrival \(SEREDA\) - University of Birmingham](https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwjLGyBhCYARIsAPqTz1-sIE-nwPFVrm7j-Gtqhecht7cn4bFARWYpuY3SI_JJsogblzlyEQwaAuFEEALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds)

³ [unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwjLGyBhCYARIsAPqTz1-sIE-nwPFVrm7j-Gtqhecht7cn4bFARWYpuY3SI_JJsogblzlyEQwaAuFEEALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds](https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwjLGyBhCYARIsAPqTz1-sIE-nwPFVrm7j-Gtqhecht7cn4bFARWYpuY3SI_JJsogblzlyEQwaAuFEEALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds)

⁴ [Guidelines on International Protection No. 9: Claims to Refugee Status based on Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity within the context of Article 1A\(2\) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees | Refworld](https://www.refworld.org/docid/4a6d1d1d.html)

⁵ [Human Dignity Trust](https://www.humanrights.org/en/issues/human-dignity)

⁶ [US religious right at center of anti-LGBTQ+ message pushed around the world | LGBTQ+ rights | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/11/us-religious-right-at-center-of-anti-lgbtq-message-pushed-around-the-world)

⁷ [As countries tighten anti-gay laws, more LGBTQ+ migrants seek asylum in Europe - ABC News \(go.com\)](https://www.abcnews.com/news/2023/09/28/anti-gay-laws-more-lgbtq-migrants-look-for-asylum-in-europe/)

⁸ [Ugandan Constitutional Court Upholds Draconian Anti-LGBTQ+ Law - Rainbow Railroad](https://rainbowmigration.org/news/ugandan-constitutional-court-upholds-draconian-anti-lgbtq-law/)

⁹ [Rainbow Migration's briefing on the risks to LGBTQ+ people in initial and contingency accommodation - Rainbow Migration](https://rainbowmigration.org/news/rainbow-migration-briefing-on-the-risks-to-lgbtq-people-in-initial-and-contingency-accommodation/)

¹⁰ [LGBTQ-Asylum-Seeker-Housing-Needs-Report.pdf \(dpia.org.uk\)](https://www.dpia.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/LGBTQ-Asylum-Seeker-Housing-Needs-Report.pdf)

¹¹ [LGBT Health and wellbeing housing report.pdf](https://www.lgbt.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-07/LGBT%20Health%20and%20wellbeing%20report.pdf)

¹² Fletcher, C. (2024). Heteronormative accommodations: strategies of in/visibility for LGBTQ+ people in asylum accommodation. *Journal of Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Law*, 38(1), 32-49.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken between August 2023 and May 2024 with 10 queer forced migrant survivors of SGBV who have experience of seeking asylum in the UK and 14 service providers with expertise in queer asylum issues. Five further interviews with queer forced migrants from the initial SEREDA study (respondents interviewed in England) were included in the analysis. Participating service providers were drawn from across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and participating services users represented lesbians, gay men, trans and non-binary individuals from 10 different countries of origin, now residing in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (see Table 1). The service providers contributing to this research comprised of grassroots, voluntary and lived-experience-led organisation, NGOs involved in national advocacy and policy work, specialist health and housing providers, specialist legal services and representatives from the public sector.

Table 1 People seeking asylum sample characteristics

Category		Number interviewed (n=15)
Sexual orientation or Gender identity	Lesbian	7
	Gay	6
	Trans man	1
	Trans woman	1
	Non -binary	3 (all 3 also identified as gay)
Country of origin	Cameroon	2
	Eritrea	1
	Iran	1
	Kenya	1
	Kuwait	1
	Namibia	2
	Nigeria	3
	Syria	1
	Uganda	2
	Venezuela	1
Country of residence (UK)	England	8
	Scotland	5
	Northern Ireland	2

Most interviews were carried out in English apart from one which employed a queer Farsi interpreter and two which were carried out in Arabic by an Arabic-speaking researcher. Introductions were largely made between researchers and stakeholders via Rainbow Migration, and stakeholders identified service users who they felt would be safe and willing to take part in interviews. The forced migrants interviewed self-identified as being survivors of SGBV. We use the UNHCR definition of SGBV which encompasses any form of violence inflicted on the basis of socially ascribed gender roles including homophobia and transphobia. Interviews explored experiences across the journey to safety, access to services and support, experiences of the UK asylum system, factors creating risk and resilience, what is needed and how experiences have impacted their ability 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, what creates vulnerability and what creates resilience. Both groups were asked to suggest recommendations for what could bring about positive change.

Ethical approval for the SEREDA project was received from the University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee. All interviews were undertaken with informed consent and interviewees were assured of anonymity in reports, discussions and publications. Given that the population of queer people seeking asylum is small in some areas of the UK, identities have been obscured and geographic details have not been revealed in order to prevent exposure. Participants are referred to by their self-reported gender identities and sexual orientations. While initial interviews undertaken in the first SEREDA study were carried out by researchers without specialist knowledge of queer issues, it was felt this knowledge was important in returning to the topic. Thus, the most recent interviews were carried out by two researchers who identify as queer. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Care was taken to ensure interviews were carried out without harm to interviewees and referral pathways/psychological support was in place via Rainbow Migration if required.

Findings

Queer mobilities

The ways that queer populations cross into the UK are quite distinct from general mobilities of forced migrants with 10 of the 15 respondents arriving initially on student or visitor visas and claiming asylum once the visa has expired. Service providers suggested this route is often taken from ex-Commonwealth countries, 29 out of 56 of which criminalise same-sex intimacy¹³, yet provides better opportunities for study or work due to historical colonial connections. A service provider in England suggested there isn't usually one incident that causes queer people to flee their country of origin but a series of escalating incidents or a dawning knowledge that they must leave for their own safety. Many report arriving on study visas to avoid getting married or as a safe way of putting distance between themselves and families as questions begin to be asked about their sexual orientation or gender identity or pressure builds to settle down and start families. One respondent describes returning to the UK for his graduation after a period of being back home in Nigeria following his undergraduate degree;

“ **But you know it wasn't until I got here, that I started to realise I couldn't do it again, I couldn't go back there. So, I talked to some friends, you know, and got some advice and then I decided I was going to apply for asylum** ”

The decision not to return was also reported to be as the result of an incident at home or an increased threat. One participant took the decision not to return to Kenya upon hearing their partner had died as the result of a homophobic attack.

Other respondents reported arriving on visas for the Commonwealth Games or to attend a work conference, sparing them dangerous journeys overland. People living in Northern Ireland told of

arriving in Dublin and travelling north across the open border due to perceptions that the UK is a more welcoming place to LGBTQI+ people or as a result of the conditions in the Direct Provision system in the Republic of Ireland. The minority of respondents who travelled overland to reach England reportedly spent time in camps in Greece, Italy or France.

Queer experiences of SGBV

In country of origin

Queer people seeking asylum and service providers reported multiple experiences SGBV in countries of origin, motivated by homophobic or transphobic hate. In contrast to previous SEREDA studies which found women were more at risk of SGBV than men, queer experiences of violence spanned all genders and sexual orientations and were perpetrated across familial, community, statutory and governmental settings. Women however were largely reported to be more at risk from sexual violence while men were more at risk of physical violence, although many respondents experienced both. Trans women were reported by service providers to be particularly at risk of all forms of SGBV in their country of origin. A lack of legal protection for those seen to deviate from heteronormative expressions of gender was a common denominator, allowing unconstrained abuse to continue.

Experiences of familial SGBV ranged from Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) to punishment for deviating from gender norms or following exposure as queer. One participant reported being abused by his mother for being too 'femme' and another was threatened with electroshock therapy in an attempt to 'cure' her of her transgender identity. In these instances, both reported being protected by the intervention of other family members. Families were often reported to be the drivers of abuse

¹³ [Good-Practice-in-Human-Rights-Compliant-Sexual-Offences-Laws-in-the-Commonwealth_Final.pdf](#) (humandignitytrust.org)

following the exposure of sexual orientation or gender identity, including acts of 'corrective' rape, forced marriage, imprisonment and inviting the interventions of religious exorcisms or conversions. A lesbian from Namibia recounted experiences of corrective rape at the hands of her uncle:

“ When I was caught with a girl, so, he told me that, okay, he's going to sleep with me and my cousin is going to sleep with me, because they have to show me what a lady does

Another respondent, a gay man from Nigeria described being taken to a pastor for conversion and being subject to exorcism practices which included starvation and ritual abuse culminating in uncomfortable sexual advances from the pastor. A lesbian from Nigeria recounted:

“ So they take me to the priest and be like, just pray for this girl. She is possessed because why would you be interested in a girl like you... what kind of mentality is that?

Lesbian participants reported getting married to men and having children because they had no choice, including as a way of deflecting attention and questions about their sexuality or following blackmail. One respondent was blackmailed into an abusive marriage by a policeman who threatened to expose her sexuality. When she eventually said she wanted a divorce he tried to kill her by driving her off the road.

Exploitation and abuse by police was a common theme with respondents reporting incidents of rape in police cells following the exposure of their sexual orientation. One woman recounted being arrested after being caught with her girlfriend who later died from injuries sustained in police custody. She was then sexually exploited by a female police commissioner who, fearing exposure herself, arranged for the respondent to be brought to the UK by traffickers.

“ They call me a shame. They call me a curse
Lesbian from Uganda

Community punishment was a common theme reported by forced migrants, ranging from ostracisation, mob abuse in schools and universities, to the practice of *necklacing* (setting

alight a tyre around a victim's neck). Community militias were reported to act as political enforcers of anti-LGBTQI+ laws in Kenya, running protection rackets and carrying out punishment beatings. A participant from Nigeria described the practice of *keito*- honey-trapping gay men for extortion. Without legal or societal protections, queer respondents reported being extremely isolated and more at risk of violence, extortion, and exploitation.

“ So, they arrested us while we were wearing feminine clothes. I don't know how to describe it to you; when I got off the police car, there were like a 100 police officers in front of me, while I was wearing those clothes. We were ten people partying, but 100 police officers showed up. Is partying worth all of that? It was merely a party
Trans woman from Kuwait

State violence and violent abandonment was also experienced through the forced gender reassignment policies of Iran which refuses to accept the existence of same-sex attracted people, seeking instead to 'correct' LGB individuals through surgery. One trans man participant described the subsequent damage to his body and feeling "like a mouse in a laboratory... the doctors would just do so many experiments on me".

In flight

Although many queer forced migrants arrive in the UK through official routes, those that travelled overland reported vulnerabilities to SGBV due to their queerness. These risks were exacerbated by race with homophobic and transphobic abuse reported as being worse if you are a person of colour. In the chaos of camps and at the mercy of traffickers, rape and other forms of SGBV were reported as common, particularly in Greece. Exploitation and transactional sex in return for shelter or food were described as common by both service providers and service users, especially among gay men and trans women. One service provider in England explained:

“ The currency you have when you don't have the money to go from Turkey to Greece or Greece to Bulgaria or ending up in France is your body

A trans man from Iran reported being detained with cisgendered men because the authorities couldn't decide where to put him;

“ It was a terrible experience. I did everything to just get out of there. I was sick, I was crying, I was shaking

In the UK

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). Abuse was common from co-ethnic communities and other residents in Home Office asylum accommodation (see section on Accommodation pg 13). A trans woman reported of her neighbours:

“ When I go to the market to buy stuff, I hear them whispering, “Astagfirullah, Astagfirullah¹⁴

Queer forced migrants described feeling their status was exploited in abusive or controlling relationships and transactional sexual encounters. One participant suggested this was common in conversations on dating apps when he would disclose that he was seeking asylum:

“ I remember guys telling me like, oh, okay, well if you need something just let me know and I can maybe I can give you some money and that kind of stuff but you need to give something in exchange

A service provider in England gave an example of a service user made homeless from asylum accommodation using the Grindr dating app to find a place to sleep. Another was made street homeless by the woman she was staying with when she was exposed as a lesbian. One participant describes the vulnerability of being moved away from support networks:

There are times as well when I put myself in compromising situations. Definitely did things I didn't want to do, just so I would have somewhere to sleep, and unfortunately it's the reality

Two respondents reported receiving racialised homophobic abuse while in the UK and one described transphobia experienced from the LGBTQI+ community.

Overall, service providers reported that the majority of queer asylum seekers in the UK experienced a continuum of violence in multiple incidents of SGBV across the forced migration journey with cisgender women, trans women and those who are visibly gender-nonconforming most at risk of sexual violence. Experiences of homophobic abuse and heterosexism in Home Office systems is explored in more detail in the following section.

Queer experiences of the UK asylum system

“ The entire asylum system is one of those systems that creates that oppression that means that sexual violence, you know gender-based violence, can thrive in this society. Because people are made powerless
Gay man from Nigeria

“ The suffering that a person endures through the process can feel very traumatic, can have long lasting effects on a person (and) can really damage someone's mental health. So, to me, that's a form of violence
Service provider, England

Both survivors and service providers gave multiple accounts of how life in the UK asylum system is unsafe for queer people, compounding underlying trauma and increasing the risk of experiencing SGBV in the UK. At the heart of this issue is an institutional heterosexism in the UK Home Office, which sees heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation

¹⁴ Interviewers note: The phrase 'I seek forgiveness from Allah' or 'Astaghfirullah' is sometimes used to show despire or disagreement of someone's apparent sins which is the case in this context.

and fails to recognise or address the inherent vulnerabilities of being queer in the asylum system. The impact of heterosexism is felt across all areas of the UK asylum system including in accommodation, safeguarding, and asylum claim assessments.

Accommodation

Home Office-provided accommodation in multiple-occupancy housing with heterosexual and cisgendered populations was reported to create multiple risks of SGBV for queer asylum seekers. Experiences range from discomfort and fear of 'outing' to homophobic or transphobic hate crimes, harassment and sexual assault. In the past year, four specialist support organisations^{15,16,17,18} have published reports on housing issues facing queer asylum seekers. A further report on LGBTQI+ asylum housing in Wales was published in 2021¹⁹. All five publications provide evidence that mainstream accommodation with non-LGBTQI+ asylum seekers is generally unsafe for their service users. Accommodation is provided on a no-choice basis, usually in hostel-style Initial Accommodation (IA), houses of multiple occupancy, hotel accommodation, or more rarely, individual flats. Micro Rainbow is contracted to provide LGBTQI+-specific housing in parts of England, (London and West Midlands). Respondents in Micro Rainbow accommodation or individual flats were reported to feel generally safe. One service user in England described the feeling of moving into LGBTQI+-specific accommodation:

“ Then I moved to my Micro Rainbow house. When I got into that one, I took a deep breath. It was home

Respondents in Scotland were largely housed in their own flats or small shared houses by Mears (an asylum housing provider) and had good experiences of individual housing officers who responded

positively to requests for individual housing due to incidents relating to sexual orientation or gender identity or medical need. Housing managers were reported to be polite and responsive, usually following difficult experiences in hotel or hostel accommodation. The majority of service providers, including those in Scotland, described general multiple occupancy asylum accommodation as dangerous to queer people seeking asylum. Forced to be housed with the very populations they are trying to escape from, queer people experience daily harassment, threats, outing, physical and sexual assaults:

“ They're put into a house with people from their culture that originally persecuted them. So, in all honesty, I think that's the reason why a lot of people aren't open about their identity. Their history means people don't know if they are going to be safe if they are open about that
Service provider, Wales

The physical conditions of the accommodation exacerbate these threats. A lack of locks on doors in some housing made it impossible to shelter from assailants. One respondent slept with a knife under his pillow because he was unable to lock his door despite asking for the lock to be fixed. A service provider in Wales reported that a trans service user was threatened with a knife by another resident in his accommodation and had to hide in his room. When he tried to call the police there was no signal, so he went downstairs, was accosted again and had his phone smashed. The housing provider, Clearsprings, wrote the incident off as a 'household spat' and took no action to safeguard the victim. In another incident, a Pride flag was torn down from outside a hotel accommodating people seeking asylum in Belfast, stamped on and spat at. A video of the incident was circulated on social media.

¹⁵ asylum seekers work file (lgbthealth.org.uk)

¹⁶ Rainbow Migration's briefing on the risks to LGBTQI+ people in initial and contingency accommodation - Rainbow Migration

¹⁷ Resource Library | Law Centre Northern Ireland (lawcentreni.org)

¹⁸ ARF-Accommodation-Report-2023.pdf (africanrainbowfamily.org)

¹⁹ LGBTQ-Asylum-Seeker-Housing-Needs-Report.pdf (dpia.org.uk)

There was a common perception that reporting abuse in asylum accommodation did not improve the situation or that it risked making the situation worse by escalating the issue through further exposure of an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. The asylum housing provider Mears was reported to require a police crime number before any action would be taken, an impossibility for many with traumatising experiences at the hands of police. One respondent reported:

“ It was also in the first place that I lived that I was placed, I was being sexually harassed by one of the others who lived there, by one of the other asylum seekers. And it was really difficult because for the longest time I didn't feel that I could say anything about it. I was scared in case the other people in the house would turn on me as they spoke the same language as this person. I was scared that it might affect my asylum case negatively. I was scared that it was somehow my fault and I caused this, and so for the longest time I couldn't talk to anyone. And when I did, you know when I finally spoke to the G4S housing officer about it, they weren't very helpful to be honest

Queer identities were reportedly not considered a specific safeguarding risk in asylum accommodation. This meant sexual and gender diversity was not included in risk assessments and there were no policies or procedures for dealing with homophobic or transphobic hate crimes. Service providers reported that when a safeguarding issue or hate crime was escalated to Home Office housing contractors, there was a lack of time frame to resolve issues. Contingency use of hotels sits between Section 98 and Section 95²⁰, creating a 'no man's land of accommodation' where the use of hotels to house asylum seekers was introduced and then expanded largely without clear policies for addressing violence and hate crimes. *Operation Maximise*, brought in in 2023 to cut the cost of hotel

use, compelled people in asylum accommodation to share rooms with other residents which was reported to be particularly unsafe for queer people seeking asylum. One service provider in England reported:

“ Since Operation Maximise started the levels of violence they're seeing in hotels.... it's gone through the roof. Because just think about like four traumatised alpha males in one room

Respondents who were perceived to be queer or those outed in accommodation were reported to be especially at risk of abuse. Even if they would like to do so, it is especially hard for trans individuals or those who do not conform to stereotypical gender norms to try to hide their queerness. A service provider in England described a 'femme' presenting gay man having to sleep with a chair against his door due to unwanted advances from other (heterosexual) residents and a trans woman being propositioned by the security guard and the receptionist at the hotel, who then obtained her number from the hotel records. Another described the issues faced by trans women in asylum accommodation:

“ I would say I think trans women are particularly seen as I want to say fair game it seems like the men in asylum accommodation seem to feel that they can do whatever they want with impunity.... She gets followed to her bedroom, men trying to force their way into her bedroom. They follow her into the lift and touch her inappropriately in the lift. She gets daily harassment and that is not a bad one

The government's move to a full dispersal model outside of urban centres to all parts of the UK with cheap, available housing compounded problems for queer people seeking asylum. More rural or suburban areas of the UK are less likely to offer the specialist service provision queer

²⁰ Section 28 covers basic subsistence (housing and rudimentary benefits set at about 50% of mainstream benefits) All individuals who are unable to support themselves while a claim for asylum is being assessed are entitled to apply for Section 98 support. Section 95 support is the emergency destitution support granted while a claim for Section 98 is being assessed and covers housing and basic meals, usually in hostel-style accommodation.

asylum seekers rely on, increasing isolation and thereby further increasing vulnerability to SGVB in asylum accommodation. A service provider in England described one gay couple, housed in hotel accommodation in a remote part of England, being harassed daily to the point that one of them twice attempted suicide. The impact of isolation is explored further on page 22.

One organisation providing safe housing to queer asylum seekers, shed light on the positive impact of LGBTQI+ housing provision. Not only does it protect queer people from direct harm perpetrated by other residents and staff, it also builds community which is a protective factor and gives residents the opportunity to live authentically in a safe space. They gave an example of a trans service user who kept her high heels and make up in a locked suitcase while in mainstream asylum accommodation, terrified of it being discovered by other residents. The experience of hanging up her dresses and putting out her shoes was transformative, both for her wellbeing and her ability to engage more effectively with the asylum process: *“You know, she was getting confidence to be who she is and that is so important when claiming asylum because you also have to be convincing. If you haven't had a chance to experience who you really are, how can you be convincing about it?”*

Interviews and asylum decision-making processes

Across the study, queer asylum seekers and service providers reported a double disadvantage when it comes to making SOGIESC claims, of assumed heterosexuality and a culture of disbelief in the Home Office. The Nationality and Borders Act²¹ increased the standard of proof in 2022, a change which unfairly burdens SOGIESC claimants who are unlikely to be able to meet the higher threshold now required by both the Home Office and the courts, especially as many have to rely on narrative accounts to convince case assessors²². Service providers described the complexity of proving your

sexual diversity when you are not yet comfortable in your own skin, a process that requires care and sensitivity which is little understood by the Home Office and Courts:

“As if someone has a knowledge of a point or a point in time and then if they don't answer those in a certain format, then they're said to have their credibility damaged.....and that damages their case and it's just a really bad measurement of the reality of a human who is coming to terms with their sexuality that they may not even fully have realised and in circumstances where they come from a background where it's not legal, or encouraged or celebrated
Service provider, Northern Ireland

Underlying trauma or fear of being unsafely exposed were also reported as factors making it difficult to provide evidence in a timely way, another consequence of the Nationality and Borders Act which does not give equal weight to evidence submitted later in an asylum claim without good reason. Participating service providers described situations where queer people seeking asylum found it initially too difficult to talk about adverse experiences at home, particularly with a stranger or where they were unsure that disclosures would not somehow expose them as queer to their co-ethnic communities. Unsafe living conditions and a lack of access to specialist services (including therapeutic support) were reported to further compound their difficulties in making disclosures. Queer asylum seekers are expected to provide believable narratives of self-realisation and persecution when many are only just beginning to address the trauma they have experienced, as described by a service provider in England:

“I wish I never had to speak and think about this ever again. But yeah, I have to like, not only tell it I have to probably tell it several times. I then have to read my own witness statement back. I've had some female

²¹ Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (legislation.gov.uk)

²² Sexual diversity and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 | Electronic Immigration Network (ein.org.uk)

service users that have taken weeks to reread their witness statements because of the amount of sexual violence they face they have to then reread that in black and white and they find that so distressing

Not having a common language or understanding of terms describing sexual diversity was also reported to be a barrier. A service provider in England recounted the experiences of a service user who described herself as bisexual to the Home Office because she thought that meant having had relationships with both men and women, and she had been compelled to marry a man for protection. She believed she had been honest but later found out that the terminology that best described her sexual orientation was lesbian. Changing her self-description to lesbian damaged the credibility of her claim. Another suggested the fact that no positive word describing queerness exists in some languages made disclosure difficult for those trying to recount their experiences.

Experiences in interviews were mixed. Some respondents reported interviews being conducted with care, respect and sensitivity while others reported long, traumatising interviews requiring intense personal and physical detail carried out by hostile interviewers and interpreters. One asylum seeker, a lesbian from Nigeria, was given the impression by her interviewer from the beginning that nothing she would say would make him believe her. A gay asylum seeker from Nigeria recounted the dehumanisation he experienced in his interview:

“ I was sat talking to somebody behind a computer screen who I had never seen before and I would never see again, and I was rehashing the most difficult memories that I had, the most difficult details about my life, and they were just sat there typing, do you know on their keyboard. It was the weirdest thing, it felt so unreal, inhuman.... with none of them was there ever any sympathy, any empathy, any human feeling. They felt like cold, hard, emotionless monsters. It was horrid, truly horrid

One service provider described a sense of anxiety among service users about which type of interview you will get. Some interviewers asked for very

specific, intimate details of relationships to 'prove' their sexuality, despite this being against Home Office guidance. An asylum seeker in England described her discomfort:

“ They were things I'm not allowed to talk about in public. So, I thought they were a bit intimate and I couldn't start answering questions like that, like what do you do? 'What do you do with your girlfriend when you're together'? I didn't know how to tackle that one

A service provider confirmed:

“ It's not relevant. Like.... all of the guidance says that this should not be a part of the Home Office interview, but it absolutely still happens
Service provider, England

The detail required by some interviewers was reported to be traumatising, stoking fear of exposure to co-ethnic communities both at home and in the UK. With no guarantee that they will not be sent home, queer asylum seekers fear retribution if forced to return. They worried about the impact of the exposure of their identity or sexuality on their families back home, including the risk of honour killings, if following their asylum case in the UK, news that they were queer reached their home communities. This was especially problematic where co-ethnic interpreters were used.

Service providers and asylum seekers alike reported a basic lack of understanding displayed by interviewers of the lived experiences of being queer under persecution alongside the centring of Eurocentric stereotypes of queer culture in decision-making. Asylum seekers were expected to display a particular version of queerness that involves looking queer, acting queer and having queer relationships when they had, for the majority of their lives, been conditioned to hide or act 'straight' and were often excluded from mainstream UK LGBTQI+ spaces and services:

“ But I've heard stories of people being told things like you don't look gay or needing to be able to recognise the LGBT flag. Actually, that's just a very western concept of what it means to be queer and doesn't necessarily

apply to other contexts

Service provider, Wales

“ How do you prove to somebody, you know do you dress up in pink shorts and a T shirt? And what does it mean to be LGBT? And also, what does it mean in your own culture? And how would you translate that? And how would you talk about it when all your life you’ve not been talking about it”

Service provider, England

This basic lack of understanding in the decision-making process of SOGIESC claims was experienced in court settings too, as described by a lesbian seeking asylum in England:

“ So when it went to court, the judge was asking me did you have any warrant of arrest? I told him I didn’t travel with any evidence from back home. So, he asked me if your girlfriend passed away do you have a copy of her death certificate? And my barrister told him this is not allowed. We are not married, I’m not legally married by law since these relationships are not allowed, so how am I supposed to have that death certificate?”

Specialist services participating in this research took steps to try to address the difficulties asylum seekers face in proving their queerness against Home Office standards in a way that feels safe to them. For example, volunteers in Northern Ireland carefully document their service users’ participation in social events to include in support letters.

Interpreters and translated materials

While people seeking asylum can request an interpreter of a particular gender, interpreters are otherwise provided on a no-choice basis by the Home Office. People seeking asylum are not allowed to provide their own interpreters though they may bring someone to check the quality of interpreting. The use of co-ethnic interpreters was reported to be a source of extreme anxiety for respondents who feared they could expose them to their communities both in the UK and in their countries of origin. A recent report by specialist organisations in Northern

Ireland²³ found that 78% of respondents feared exposure from interpreters and 58% withheld information about their sexuality as a result. While some respondents reported good experiences with interpreters, their fear of interpreters was merited with multiple accounts provided of homophobia and transphobia from Home Office interpreters. Incidents included refusing to translate the words “gay” or “bisexual”, not understanding basic concepts of sexual diversity, and perpetrating homophobic or transphobic abuse in interviews and court settings:

“ ...So many of our community members have had actively homophobic translators when they’ve been in a meeting with the Home Office....and the person feels like they can’t engage in the interview properly because they’re experiencing this homophobia towards them. We’ve had instances like that or another one where that was the situation, but it was in court and the translator that turned up was being LGBT-hostile in the situation and no one else spoke the same language, just the community member and the translator. No one else knew what was going on

Service provider, Scotland

“ The witness, didn’t perform as well as they might because English is a third language or their interpreter, which is another huge issue, isn’t interpreting exactly what they want, or they have their own issues..... they’re misgendering the person constantly or they’re misgendering their partner or misgendering their sex, or whatever the discussion is, or are uncomfortable talking about sex that’s maybe being asked about

Service provider, Northern Ireland

Issues were also reported in the quality of Home Office translated information. One document, a welcome guide provided by Migrant Help and translated into Arabic, contained an offensive homophobic term for lesbian (للمثليات) in a section that was providing signposting to LGBTQI+ support organisations.

²³ We Are Getting Hurt (2024) <https://www.rainbowrefugeesni.com/safe-accommodation-report>

Heterosexism and homophobia in Home Office systems

The centring of heterosexuality as default and the violent abandonment of queer people in the asylum system suggest a process which is heterosexist at best and institutionally homophobic and transphobic at worst. Participants argued that the Home Office expect queer asylum seekers will experience SGBV and homophobic or transphobic hate crimes within the system and act as if this is normal and do not take it seriously or treat it as safeguarding risk:

“ When it comes to individual disclosures, like <yeah, obviously> but then not taking seriously because it >s considered kind of normal and then to a certain extent, acceptable
Service provider, England

In the latest version of the Home Office guidance on accommodation allocation²⁴, no specific provision is discussed to enable the appropriate safeguarding of queer asylum seekers. Indeed, information on sexual or gender diversity is not even requested for risk assessments:

“ ...the ASF1 form [for asylum support] doesn >t have a question that explicitly asks people about their gender or sexuality. I mean, I think there >s gender but it's just a two-box gender question with no question on transness and, and that >s a big problem.
Service provider, Wales

Examples of heterosexism and homophobia in Home Office Systems are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 Incidents of homophobia & heterosexism in Home Office systems

Being asked for photographic evidence or intimate details of past relationships
Asked to provide death certificate of dead partner from country that does not recognise relationship
Homophobic abuse from interpreters in substantive interviews
Homophobic abuse from interpreters in court
Homophobic slurs in translated Home Office information documents
Homophobic hate crimes in Home Office accommodation
Homophobic/transphobic abuse in Home Office accommodation
Requirement to provide an unreasonable amount of evidence to 'prove' sexual orientation or gender identity
Stereotyped, Eurocentric ideas of how queerness is performed
AS1 Form- doesn't account for sexual or gender diversity
Homophobic attitudes of Home Office staff and contractors
Failure to recognise safeguarding risks to queer people

²⁴ Allocation of Asylum Accommodation Policy (2024), Home Office

Vulnerability to SGBV

Our research found that queer people seeking asylum face a unique set of risk factors when compared to heterosexual asylum-seeking populations in a number of different ways. Cisgender women and trans people were reported by service providers to be most at risk of SGBV but factors such as isolation, shame, inexperience and difficulty accessing specialist services combined to create a perfect storm of risk to SGBV across the spectrum of queer identities.

Vulnerability in relationships

Many queer asylum seekers were reported to arrive in the UK with relationship histories shaped by the violence of the state and cultural taboos. Authentic relationships were carried out in secret, under the threat of physical attack, prison or even death. Lack of social power or state protection was reported to create conditions which fostered coercive, exploitative and abusive relationships. Others experienced forced marriage or married to deflect questions about their sexual diversity. Some avoided relationships altogether for shame or in fear of their safety. These experiences were said to shape feelings of self-worth or expectations of the sorts of relationships queer people seeking asylum think they deserve on arrival in the UK.

Once in the UK, forced poverty on asylum support without the right to work created further risk of exploitation as reported by a gay man and a lesbian seeking asylum in England:

“ Just imagine if it’s someone telling you I give you £100 just for that and you’re receiving £35 from the Home Office. Do you say like, oh my god, I mean, and I really need the money

“ A lady friend of mine, she called me and said ‘if you need money, I can you know, I can connect you with a man, he will be giving you.....so, when she said that to me, that was the end of the relationship I had with her. I thought she was a good girl, an ok girl, but then she was trying to sell me into doing that, like pimping

For people seeking asylum who are marginalised from co-ethnic communities and unsafe in asylum accommodation, relationships can provide much needed social capital and comparatively safe housing. One service provider explained that service users seek out relationships as a form of protection. Another as a form of stability:

“ We’ve got members who have got into relationships and they’re desperate to be in a relationship...but they just wanted to take whatever it is just to have a home, to have some kind of love in their life and ... it gives them that stability

Service provider, Northern Ireland

Relationships in the UK can also be a rare source of evidence to support asylum claims. A service provider in England told us some solicitors told their clients to say they are in a relationship to support their claims, advice they suggested was wrong. Another asylum seeker reported how the end of her relationship meant she was refused asylum because she couldn’t provide the proof the Home Office required. Both service providers and asylum seekers felt the power imbalance created by poverty, lack of status and need for safety make queer people seeking asylum uniquely vulnerable to exploitation, IPV and immigration abuse within relationships.

In/visibility

“ It’s like, you choose where you feel safe to be out, you know, like, I’m not out everywhere

Service provider, England

Queer people make calculations on the extent to which they can safely express their gender identity or sexual orientation in all situations, regardless of immigration status. For queer asylum seekers, the decision to be ‘out’ in the UK is a particularly complex one. Respondents spoke of the difficulty of balancing the need to be invisible for your safety with the need to be visible for your claim. Visibility was reported to be dangerous for queer asylum seekers on a number of different fronts.

Even in urban areas, co-ethnic communities were reported to be small and well connected by social media, both in the UK and in home countries. Word

spreads quickly and respondents recounted the impact of being exposed. A non-binary asylum seeker described the experience of being shunned by the local East African community after being outed in hotel accommodation. Exposure created fear for their safety when inside and outside the hotel. They were too fearful to shop alongside people of the same ethnicity as themselves and thus could not access culturally appropriate food and services, compounding their marginalisation and mental health struggles.

Respondents reported needing to remain invisible while within the asylum system for fear of repercussions if their case was refused and they were removed. Exposure could also lead to the need to claim asylum. A lesbian participant in Scotland had her student sponsorship withdrawn by her uncle when he saw her linked to an LGBTQI+ post on Facebook, forcing her to claim asylum. Another asylum seeker in England explained:

“ I couldn't trust anybody, based on my background when you've, when I've almost told anybody who I am, what I receive was never the best, so I prefer to keep to myself

Fear of exposure led to individuals having to move around to remain safe. A Syrian participant left multiple countries in Europe because he did not feel safe in places with large Syrian populations. Other respondents described wanting to leave small British cities as soon as possible to go to London or Birmingham where they felt they would be less visible and as a result, safer.

“ Maybe it's maybe some of the stuff is hidden because people are hidden. And there's a couple of women I'm working with at the moment who have been in the country for 10 years plus and have been hidden
Service provider, England

Participants described how vulnerability was heightened by intersections of race and performance of gender identity. Both cisgender and transgender women experienced additional risk due to gender inequalities but expectations of gender performance and the combination of being sexually diverse or genderqueer and a person of colour was also reported to increase risk of SGBV as described

by a non-binary person seeking asylum in Northern Ireland:

“ You know, it's not the same for white queer person and black queer person. White queer person got the privilege and black queer person got no privilege for sure. Like anywhere people sees you with- look my nails now when they see me a black person with a nail painted..... people get mad, even angry. Why?

The expectation of the Home Office for SOGIESC claimants to provide evidence of engagement with queer culture creates a tension between needing to be visible to be safe and needing to be invisible to be safe. Service providers described how they navigate this paradox, attempting to provide safe conditions for individuals in which they could explore queerness and gather the evidence required for their claims. A volunteer-run service in Northern Ireland described how they had the prospect for their members to lead Belfast Pride in 2022 (see cover image). This presented an exciting opportunity for members to celebrate their identities. Yet those without the security of refugee status felt the need to cover their faces to participate, a need that was skilfully adapted to be part of the celebration:

“ That first year we had everyone wanted to wear masks and we'd had mask workshops.....And we had banners and placards, there was political stuff. There was social stuff about housing, about education, about safe spaces, and all that stuff, but there was also just colour and vibrancy, these masks were done as if you were in a Mardi Gras kind of thing, absolutely fantastic.
Service provider, Northern Ireland

Access to services

Across the research project, addressing isolation and marginalisation was reported to be essential to keeping queer asylum seekers safe from SGBV. Both sets of participants described a service gap in mainstream refugee and mainstream LGBTQI+ support with neither adequately meeting the needs of queer people seeking asylum. Respondents

described a wariness of engaging with mainstream refugee and asylum support services unless they explicitly advertised that they are queer friendly. A service provider in Wales described an asylum seeker attending a refugee support group because it displayed a Pride flag on the noticeboard. While he was there a volunteer tore the flag down and threw it in the bin. When he raised this with another volunteer, the incident was dismissed. He did not return. We were told that queer asylum seekers needed time to build trust in any service and LGBTQI+ services were also approached with caution for fear of having their sexual or gender identity exposed by other members of the group or through being seen attending, as described by a transgender woman seeking asylum in England:

“ I was walking past the LGBT centre in the city centre, the colours, what place is this? It looks beautiful, when I look up and saw LGBT, I thought what is this, I had to look up on my phone on google, what is this? I was a bit scared. If I go inside are they white? Would they accept me, a black? That sort of thing, so I went back, I slept over it. The following day I came back, I knocked, I entered, the first person who received me, she was like wow welcome, she said feel free relax, relax, but still I feel tense, but gradually I came out of it

Mainstream LGBTQI+ spaces and services were reported to not always be a welcoming place for queer people seeking asylum. Participants recounted being racially abused and fetishised in queer spaces or felt that revealing their immigration status led to predatory, unwanted advances or hostility from others. Spaces were not always easy to access for those who didn't drink alcohol or have money to spend. A service provider in England described an experience of taking a group to Birmingham Pride festival:

“ We go to Pride and for many of the people in the group, it's amazing.... God, we can walk the streets and we're not being stoned or whatever but sometimes we've got wristbands for people to go into the paid areas.... and then its quite a lonely place, it's very much about alcohol and loud music...

people sometimes have gone in for 10 minutes, half an hour, and it's like, well, I was hungry, but I couldn't really buy anything

Several specialist services provide training to both the mainstream refugee and LGBTQI+ sectors to support them to be more responsive to queer asylum seekers' needs. A service provider in Northern Ireland described the tendency in mainstream services to train a specific individual rather than embedding that service in the organisation's wider offer. When the trained individual leaves, the expertise is lost.

Dispersal beyond urban centres was also reported to be a barrier to accessing specialist services which are largely city-based. Digital poverty, including lack of access to smart phones or Wi-Fi in asylum accommodation, further impeded access. A lack of trust in the police, largely due to adverse experiences at home, or a lack of awareness of legal protections around hate crimes led to attacks going unreported.

Health/mental Health

Poor health and difficulties accessing healthcare were reported to create greater risk for queer people seeking asylum by most participants. Experiences of underlying and ongoing trauma were singled out as a particular problem. Mental health concerns included stress, anxiety, PTSD, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts. Data shared by a service provider in Scotland reported that 98% of its service users self-harmed and/or experienced suicidal ideation. Reports from participating queer asylum seekers suggest traumatic experiences in countries of origin were compounded by lack of access to therapeutic services and unsafe conditions in the asylum system. Respondents described being afraid of the dark, being afraid of being alone and needing to keep busy to prevent intrusive thoughts.

“ If you're used to moving forward and you're stagnant, it affects you mentally
Non-binary/gay man from Kenya

“ There is no coping when you are still surrounded by water filled with sharks
Lesbian from Nigeria

A service provider described situations where members in crisis were further harmed by the hostile attitudes of support staff. One asylum seeker attended A&E in crisis and was told they should be grateful to be in this country. Another expressed frustration at the Home Office's dismissal of physical evidence that their service user was self-harming.

“ **She's self-harming. She's had, you know, you can actually physically see this the impact of what's happened on her body like it's not just like she has pieces missing out of her body because of what has happened to her. And she's been called not credible and one of the reasons was that she was forced to get married**

Conditions in the asylum system were reported to impede access to care. One service user struggled to access talking therapy because the bus ticket would cost a whole day's budget of £5. Another feared taking his HIV medication in front of the person he was forced to share a room with. Home Office policy is clear that asylum seekers with HIV should not share rooms. Accessing Gender Affirming care was also reported to be an issue for trans asylum seekers, affecting them both mentally and physically. Specialist services aimed at recovery from SGBV were reported to be effective but difficult to access with only the most severe cases given priority.

“ **'I've had one rape' - join the queue"**
Service provider, England

Lack of access to specialist services was reported to directly hinder an individual's ability to engage with Home Office processes and to provide evidence required in making a claim.

Strength and belonging

The hostility of the asylum system was reported to be a barrier to integration and belonging on the other side of the asylum process, shaping an impression of the UK as a place that is not safe or welcoming.

“ **It's hard when your experience of the external world has been hostile. It's hard to then go out and treat it like it's not going to be the same thing**

Exclusion from co-ethnic communities cuts off a vital resource of community and belonging often available to heterosexual and cisgendered asylum seeking populations. The extreme marginalisation experienced by queer people seeking asylum was said to have a lasting impact on their ability to find belonging in the UK:

“ **You know, migrant communities help other migrants. There is that social capital there that doesn't often exist for queer people, and that makes their life a lot more difficult**
Service provider, Scotland

Participants felt that the UK asylum system is purposefully brutal. One service provider described members' reaction to the Rwanda policy as one of disbelief, that a country of sanctuary would treat vulnerable people so cruelly. Another service provider in Northern Ireland explained:

“ **I just feel like the process of claiming asylum in this country destroys people. I think that whatever resilience people have left can often be completely decimated by the actual process. And I think that that's intentional**

The cruelty of the UK asylum system was suggested by one service provider in England to be not only dehumanising on an individual level but also a false economy:

“ **From start to end, it is really designed to dehumanise people, to discourage people which is really a false economy. Because we know that you know, a number of people will stay in the UK, we may as well give him, give them the best chances in life so that they can hit the ground running and start contributing or having a life and that will save local authorities money, will save the government so much money you know.**

We asked all participants what gave them strength or resilience. Keeping busy was a common theme. Participants described getting out of accommodation as much as possible, going for walks and volunteering. Volunteering opportunities

in Scotland with SQUIFF (queer film festival) and LEAP Scotland (queer sports charity) were reported to be especially positive.

Although complicated by adverse experiences in religious settings back home, faith remained a source of strength for many respondents. Many reported engaging with inclusive churches or finding their own ways to practice their faith privately including through daily prayer.

“ I believe that Allah has created me this way
Gay man from Syria

One respondent described escape through drag as a source of strength, making themselves up and taking pictures in their hotel room, in defiance of the homophobic abuse they experience when they step outside their room.

The concept of *chosen family* came up repeatedly, 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 described as a lifeline, addressing isolation, providing resources and reassurance, and giving queer people seeking asylum a space where they can safely start being their authentic selves:

“ I found my people, I found people who would understand me
Gay man from Kenya

“ They are proud. They can even say I'm a lesbian without fear. That gave me confidence
Lesbian from Uganda

Several participants described the role of just one friend in helping to keep them safe in the UK. One told us about the intervention of his friend in getting him out of a potentially dangerous situation when he was new to the country and vulnerable to exploitation. Another described the difference it made to have a friend in their hotel and the trauma of having him move away after he himself was assaulted in a homophobic attack. They explained:

“ Friendship is... just being with someone you feel like a friend is boosts your confidence. And you know, there's nothing going on. No one's gonna do anything even they're

not gonna say to you something. Especially being alone, it exposes you always and people attacks you when you're lonely. Take advantage of that part. So having a friend around- because I saw that part. So it's very important

Devolved contexts

Asylum policy and the justice system in the UK is a reserved issue, set by Westminster and overseen by the Home Office, yet under devolved powers, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland offer unique policy approaches to migration and human rights. Some of these policies have been specifically implemented to mitigate against the harms of the Westminster approach to asylum, while others (as in the case of Northern Ireland's Windsor Framework) have unintended consequences. Service providers were asked to comment on the unique contexts of asylum provision, policies, and services in the devolved nations.

Northern Ireland

At the time data was collected, Northern Ireland was without a government following the suspension of the power sharing executive due to political disputes, however power sharing at Stormont has now been restored. Under the Windsor Framework, all residents of Northern Ireland are guaranteed human rights protections in line with the European Convention of Human Rights, a provision that was recently ruled to include asylum seekers²⁵. This ruling is likely to have consequences for the implementation of the Illegal Migration Act in Northern Ireland, making Northern Ireland strategically important in the future direction of UK asylum policy.

Northern Ireland was widely described by service providers as religiously and socially conservative with sectarian issues spilling over into anti-immigration and racist sentiment. Groups with suspected links to Loyalist paramilitaries were reported to be targeting hotels housing asylum seekers outside of urban centres with hostile protests. Racism and conservatism around LGBTQI+ issues was reported to be a problem in

Northern Ireland, driven by sectarian cultures which view people from outside of the community with suspicion and the influence of religious groups in preventing teaching on LGBTQI+ issues in schools. Mainstream refugee and asylum support services such as language classes were largely provided by churches which were not considered a safe place for queer asylum seekers by most respondents. Specialist service provision for queer asylum seekers was only available in Belfast however access to services for those living outside the capital was reported to be accessible through a temporary pilot with the Department for Infrastructure providing free travel for all asylum seekers across Northern Ireland. Currently, there is no LGBTQI+ specific housing provision for asylum seekers.

Scotland

Scotland has implemented devolved legislation and strategies concerning forced migration and SGBV in relation to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and human trafficking and in the New Scots Integration Strategy²⁶ which attempts to mitigate against harms in the asylum system by starting the integration process as soon as someone arrives in Scotland. The most recent version of New Scots, published in March 2024, stops short of recognising the risks facing queer asylum seekers on arrival in the UK and how to prevent further harm. Participants reported Scotland to be a welcoming place to queer asylum seekers, with good provision of specialist support services, solidarity networks and opportunities for getting involved in sports, education, and the arts. LGBTQI+ -specific accommodation is not currently available in Scotland and although the participants we spoke to largely had good experiences of single person accommodation or small houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs), this was reported not to be representative of the experiences of those in larger HMO or hotel accommodation. It was also suggested that because Scotland was less diverse than other parts of the UK, people seeking

asylum were more likely to experience racism. As in Northern Ireland, free travel for those in the asylum system is due to be implemented soon.

Wales

In 2019 it was announced that Wales would become the world's first Nation of Sanctuary, in keeping with the Welsh tradition of 'croeso' (welcome), which sees people seeking asylum generally embraced in all areas of the country. This ambition, which includes granting those in the asylum system the right to work was, like Scotland, reported to be at odds with Westminster asylum policy. It was suggested Wales is politically more radical but socially more conservative than the rest of the UK. Welsh legislation on violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) is more inclusive of transgender identities (the main women's refuge provider takes an identity rather than sex-based approach). Service providers reported a missed opportunity in not including considerations of sanctuary in its LGBTQI+ action plan. There is currently no LGBTQI+ asylum housing provision available in Wales although talks were reportedly underway to bring in this provision.

England

Asylum policies in England follow the national reserved policies set by Westminster however England is currently the only country in the UK with specific asylum housing provision for queer people. LGBTQI+ housing is subcontracted by Clearsprings and Serco in London, the West Midlands, and the North of England with plans to expand into Bristol and Wales underway. Safe housing is provided alongside a programme of social inclusion, legal signposting, and a moving on programme to prevent homelessness once refugee status is granted and asylum support withdrawn. Of those moved into LGBTQI+ housing, 100% reported an increase in safety (in housing) and 60% reported an increase in confidence and self-esteem. However, it was reported there was insufficient capacity to meet the scale of need.

²⁵ [Illegal Migration Act: Parts should not apply in NI, judge rules - BBC News](#)

²⁶ [New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

The way forward

This report is unique in bringing together the experiences of 14 specialist queer forced migrant support services across the UK with the lived experiences of those in the system to understand the specific risks of SGBV that queer asylum seekers face across the continuum of violence from their country of origin to arrival in the place of imagined refuge. The results expose an asylum system that is not only dehumanising, but actively dangerous for queer people seeking sanctuary. Without the safety net of regularised immigration status, safe living conditions and social capital, queer people in the asylum system continue to face the same threats they are escaping from at home. To keep themselves safe they require time and the ability to stay hidden as long as they need. Yet they are simultaneously required to provide evidence of a version of queerness based on Eurocentric stereotypes which are inappropriate to experiences of being sexually diverse in countries that do not tolerate sexual diversity. The pressure to look queer, act queer and have queer relationships to prove one's sexual orientation or gender identity increases the risk of SGBV from co-ethnic communities, others in asylum accommodation and within relationships.

To create a safer system of sanctuary for queer people, the way forward must include a dismantling of heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia within Home Office systems. At the core of the UK asylum system is an assumed heterosexuality and identification with sex assigned at birth which fails to recognise the safeguarding risks to queer people and expects SOGIESC claimants to meet an unfair standard of proof. Awareness of these risks and clear safeguarding policies and protocols need to be mainstreamed across Home Office systems with mandatory training and proactive vetting of staff and interpreters to prevent further homophobic or transphobic incidents. The availability of safe housing for queer asylum seekers is essential and the provision of LGBTQI+ asylum accommodation should be rolled out across all devolved nations, centring on urban centres with better ease of access to specialist services. The solution to providing LGBTQI+ housing is already available in the services provided by Micro Rainbow but only in certain parts of England. Mainstream LGBTQI+ and refugee services should also be supported to become safe spaces for queer asylum seekers, utilising the expertise of the specialist services who have so generously given their time to this research.

Recommendations

Create a system that is safe for queer asylum seekers

- Lower the standard of proof required in asylum claims to pre-Nationality and Borders Act level- from *'a balance of probabilities'* back to *'a reasonable degree of likelihood'*
- Establish a specially trained team (including interpreters) to deal with SOGIESC claims in a way that is trauma-informed and responsive to the lived experiences of people outside the western LGBTQI+ paradigm
- Give people seeking asylum the option of disclosing sexual or gender diversity in needs and risk assessments in a way that does not create risks for them and improve record keeping of SGBV and hate crimes against queer people in the asylum system
- Create specific safeguarding protocols (inclusive of protections under the Equalities Act) for queer asylum seekers and implement training for all Home Office staff and contractors involved in the assessment of SOGIESC claims or the support of queer people seeking asylum.
- Accommodate all queer people seeking asylum based on self-identified need, ensuring they have a choice of both location and type of accommodation, i.e. individual accommodation or LGBTQI+ housing if that is what they need to keep themselves safe
- End the policy of forced bedroom sharing in asylum accommodation
- Proactively address problems of heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia across all Home Office systems and implement safeguards and training to prevent heterosexism and homophobic and transphobic abuse
- Grant asylum seekers the right to work and access to integration measures (such as language classes) at the very start of the asylum process, in line with recommendations from the Commission for the Integration of Refugees²⁷
- Mandate signposting by the Home Office to specialist services and information on legal protections for LGBTQI+ people including Hate Crime protections

²⁷ [CIR_Report.pdf \(refugeeintegrationuk.com\)](#)

- Restore the right to asylum irrespective of how individuals arrive in the UK and establish safe routes for SOGIESC claimants including a LGBTQI+ Community Sponsorship Programme
- End the detention of SOGIESC claimants
- Put in place safeguards to prevent the forced relocation of any queer people seeking asylum and recognise the rights of people from any country to seek asylum
- Increase legal aid so that the reduction in availability of legal aid lawyers is reversed and everyone seeking asylum who needs a legal aid lawyer can access one

Service provision

- Mainstream knowledge of queer asylum issues across the LGBTQI+ and refugee sectors and statutory and public sector services. Support specialist services (with the involvement of people with lived-experience) to work with these sectors to become safe spaces for queer asylum seekers including how to be visibly welcoming and genuinely safe
- Improve access to LGBTQI+ therapeutic services to support the recovery from SGBV and the journey to self-acceptance self-actualisation and a sense of self-worth
- Invest in specialist support provision

Policy and strategy

- Include specific provision for queer asylum needs in devolved strategies (such as LGBTQI+ inclusion strategy and New Scots Integration Strategy)
- Include queer people who have sought asylum in policy and practice development
- Take steps to improve the safety and security of queer people internationally, acting in line with the knowledge and guidance of those affected by anti-LGBTQI+ laws abroad

"If you are gay or trans in an Arab community,



...you have to keep quiet about it."

FORCED MIGRANTS FACE VIOLENCE/MULTIPLE RISKS OVER TIME & PLACE

Ethnic communities continue to exclude & harass us here with Online abuse, hate crimes, death threats.

Some of us have depression. Some take their own lives.

Trans people can feel alone in LGBTQI+ asylum groups.



We feel isolated, no job, no money, relying on foodbanks.

We need work, not just be expected to work in nightclubs.

We shouldn't be left without support, not knowing what will happen to us.



The camps had no LGBTQI+ safe spaces.

There was a lot of homophobia.

We arrived at night, they made us sleep in the cold, even the children.

GERMANY / AUSTRIA



They made us walk like a herd of sheep, and put us in trains.



We woke to find tanks and journalists all around us.



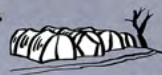
It was freezing without tents.

CROATIA & SLOVENIA



The army treated us very badly, some were beaten.

The camps were a problem, especially the sleeping arrangements. The officers mistreated us, said we wouldn't make it out alive.



TURKEY

We lived in Ankara bus station for 3 months. The U.N. gave us "temporary protection" paper.

Traffickers packed us in to cars like a herd of sheep.

We couldn't smoke in the forest in case we were seen. Someone used the GPS to get us to the right place.

There were more than 70 people on our boat to Greece.

We thought Turkish Coastal Guards would shoot our inflatable boat.

When the Greek coastal guards found us I cried, we all cried.



SERBIA ← GREECE



We knew the road ahead was long, but at least we wouldn't die.

IRAQ
For us the violence is at home, on the streets, at school, work, everywhere. People stare at you, attack you.

Parents reject you, beat you imprison you.



ISIS raids your home if they find out you are gay.

They force you to marry the opposite gender.

There are no freedoms, no protections.

ACTIONS WITHIN COUNTRIES OF REFUGE & GENDER INSENSITIVE ASYLUM SYSTEMS CAN PERPETUATE, REINFORCE & EVEN INTRODUCE NEW HARMS

The SEREDA Project

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM IRIS

HOW CAN HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES & GOVERNMENTS MAKE PEOPLE SAFER & OFFER CARE WHEN THEY ARE MOBILE?