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about living conditions among
LGBTI persons in Norway**

Helga Eggebø
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Report

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Contents

- Queer Migrants in Norway 2**
 - Discrimination and marginalisation..... 3**
 - Childhood, upbringing and openness 3**
 - Social networks, exclusion and inclusion 4**
 - Health, violence and abuse 4**
 - Migration and integration 5**
- References:..... 6**

Queer Migrants in Norway

This report presents findings from the Queer Migrants in Norway research project. The aim of the research project has been to investigate living conditions and quality of life among lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans and intersex persons (LGBTI persons) with migrant backgrounds living in Norway. It is a collaborative project between Nordland Research Institute, KUN and Henrik Karlstrøm (NTNU), and was commissioned by the Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir). The project combines qualitative and quantitative data and has two parts: Firstly, we conducted an online survey among queer migrations in Norway, which was completed by 251 people. It was based on self-recruitment and as such is not statistically representative. Secondly, we conducted qualitative interviews with 41 queer migrants. The interviews are individual life story interviews, interviews with couples, and focus group interviews. The informants were between 16 and 61 years old. They identified as men, women or somewhere on the trans spectrum, and represent a broad range of sexual orientations. While some were born in Norway from parents who had migrated, the majority had first-hand experience of migration. Around half the respondents in the survey came from countries that fall under the LGBTI-repressive category according to ILGA, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.

This research project is inspired by insights from a flourishing literature on intersectionality. In an influential article from 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw urged researchers and activists to focus on the intersection of sexism and racism in order to understand the needs and problems of black women (Crenshaw 1989). According to Crenshaw, the anti-racist movement has tended to focus on men and ignore the effects of sexism, while the women's movement has focused on white women and neglected the racialised oppression that women of colour are facing. Crenshaw urged researchers and activists to focus on the problems and needs of the most marginalised groups – people subject to several different power structures and forms of discrimination. In this project, we follow in Crenshaw's tradition and investigate the living conditions and quality of life among queer migrants in Norway; that is, a group vulnerable to discrimination on the basis of both homophobia and racism. We agree with Crenshaw that such a project design is a useful strategy for understanding homophobia on the one hand and racism on the other, as well as its intersections (Crenshaw 1989). Moreover, we draw on the Nordic tradition of studying living conditions and quality of life among the general population as well as subgroups. We combine this mostly quantitatively oriented research with the more qualitatively and theoretically oriented international research on queer migration.

The "Queer Migrants in Norway – Research project" Facebook page was the main platform for recruiting participants to this project. We also recruited through personal networks, the snowball method and advertising. Moreover, the voluntary organisation Skeiv Verden (Queer World) helped us by spreading information about the project and directly recruiting participants. Informed consent of the participants was achieved by providing oral and written information about the project, including the voluntary participation and the confidential handling of data provided. The project has been approved by the NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, project number 57432. Quantitative data has been analysed using the software Nvivo, Excel and SPSS. Each researcher coded the qualitative

data and further developed analyses throughout the writing process. The research team organised a workshop in which we discussed preliminary findings from the survey and took part in a joint analysis of the qualitative data.

Discrimination and marginalisation

A main finding from this project is that queer migrants are vulnerable to discrimination and stereotyping based on 1) gender and sexual orientation, 2) migrant background, and 3) the workings of both these grounds for discrimination. In some situations, discrimination due to migrant background – that is, race, phenotype, religion, country of origin, ethnicity and language – is most salient and may not be related to gender and sexual orientation at all. In other situations, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender is most salient. In other situations, these two forms of discrimination are intertwined. Moreover, these dimensions also intersect with other factors, such as health, social status, income, residence status, immigration category and educational background. As regards discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation, the survey data shows that about half of the respondents have been subject to negative comments due to not conforming to norms for gender and sexual orientation, and two thirds have heard such negative comments about others. We also find that all forms of discrimination seem to affect refugees more than other migrants.

An important finding is that queer migrants who come from countries with LGBTI-repressive laws (according to ILGA) experience more homonegativism in the diaspora compared to queer migrants that come from LGBTI-liberal countries. This affects queer migrants' opportunity to live openly. While refugees are generally marginalised in the labour and housing markets, some migrants may have the possibility of drawing on country/ethnically-based networks for help. Queer migrants may be excluded from such networks because of sexual orientation or gender identity. Another important finding with regards to discrimination is that informants experience discrimination on the basis of migrant background in white queer communities, and they report that this happens to a greater extent than discrimination in other arenas, such as at the workplace. Although LGBTI organisations are not necessarily more racist than the population in general, racism may be experienced as more hurtful in the queer community because one expects them to be inclusive to all queers. The combined effect of exclusion from queer communities as well as from ethnic communities may be loneliness and the inability to live openly queer. Stereotypical images of Muslims/Arabs as essentially homophobic also affect queer migrants from these regions. One implication may be that queer migrants are not believed to be queer and therefore, for example, denied access to queer bars. At the same time, respondents also highlighted the queer organisations and networks as a highly important part of their social life and feeling of belonging.

Childhood, upbringing and openness

The feeling of being somehow different in childhood was a recurring theme for many of our respondents. This was related to gender and sexual orientation, but for those who had grown up in Norway, it was also related to being non-Norwegian and non-white. Some felt that this difference was problematic, while others described it as a resource that provided

access to valuable communities and social relations. The majority of our respondents are happy about their gender identity and sexual orientation and would not want to change it. Some, however, struggle with combining gender or sexual identity with a religious identity, and while some managed to combine the two, others broke away from their religious identities. The majority of our respondents are not religious.

Being open about one's sexual orientation and gender identity was important to our respondents. Openness is generally seen as essential to good health and good quality of life, while being closeted is associated with the opposite. However, openness also carries certain risks for many of the participants in this study. While the majority of our respondents are happy about their degree of openness, they also talked about specific negotiations and problems related to openness. For many, openness was not an option as they would lose important relations with friends or family, either in the home country or in Norway. While some experienced this as a problem, others described it as part of an everyday negotiation that did not cause specific problems for them. Openness has a high price for some of our respondents, and we thus question the notion that openness is always for the better.

Social networks, exclusion and inclusion

There are many different mechanisms that contribute either to exclusion and isolation on the one hand, or inclusion and belonging on the other. Inclusion and belonging in one or several arenas of life seems to be a prerequisite for living a good life. Many of our respondents had recently migrated, and often left family, friends and the life they knew behind. The migration process, combined with being an LGBTI person, produced a situation of exclusion and isolation for many of our respondents. Although many are regularly in touch with family and friends, a majority also reported feeling lonely or isolated. For some of our respondents, organisations such as Skeiv Verden (Queer World) were very important in forming the basis of their sense of belonging. Several talked about these kinds of organisations as their only network, as well as the only place they could get practical help and support.

Health, violence and abuse

Most of the respondents in the survey reported that they are in good health and that they are pleased with the health care services they have received. However, a considerable share of the sample report having psychological symptoms that limit their functions in everyday life. Moreover, quite a few report suffering the symptoms of mental illness. More than half of the respondents report suicidal thoughts, and 22 per cent have tried to commit suicide. In the qualitative interview, three health issues appeared particularly prominent. Firstly, the trans persons who expressed a need for gender-confirming treatment expressed disappointment and dissatisfaction with services available to them in Norway. Secondly, informants talked about traumas from childhood, war or flight that had serious negative effects on their psychological health. Thirdly, the informants also explained how legal status also seemed to influence access to health care services.

Twenty-five per cent of the respondents reported having been subject to rape, and 45 per cent had been pressured into sexual acts. Many of the respondents also talked about

experiences of sexual abuse in childhood and adulthood, and of abuse that continued over time. These narratives shed light on some of the problems that may lie behind the high rate of psychological issues reported by the respondents, alongside the general trauma many carried with them from experiences of war and the process of fleeing from war. An important finding is that many talked about the experiences with sexual abuse as an “explanation” for being LGBTI. This model of explanation circulated across cultural contexts. Our informants also prevalently reported that they did not have anyone to talk to about difficult experiences and traumas.

Violence and threats of violence played a part in the lives of many of our informants. Twenty-five per cent reported having been subject to violence or the threat of violence, and many also reported a fear of such crimes. Hate crime was related to sexual orientation, gender identity and migrant background.

Migration and integration

The respondents in our survey have mostly migrated to Norway as adults, and most of them are young. This means that many have not lived in Norway for a very long time. Both family migrants and refugees talked about their experiences with immigration regulation and integration policies. Openness during the interview with the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) was difficult. In some instances, the respondents did not trust the interpreter in the asylum interview, or there were family members or others present with whom they could not be open. Others, unaccompanied minor refugees in particular, were not aware that their sexual orientation and gender identity may be important to their ability to stay in Norway. Some were also not certain whether the authorities were trustworthy, or about what they would do with the information. Furthermore, a new income requirement for permanent residency created uncertainty, insecurity and fear about the future for some of our informants. Some informants talked about family migration as practically unattainable to queer migrants, as many queers face particular problems with meeting the requirements for family migration.

Furthermore, safety at reception and asylum centres, both for adults and unaccompanied minors, was a key issue for those of our informants that had experiences from these institutions. Some reported severe bullying and discrimination, as well experiencing sexual abuse and other abuse from fellow inhabitants while living in an asylum centre. Some informants also experienced severe bullying and discrimination from fellow refugees at the obligatory introductory programme. This will limit their ability to take part of the program and to acquire necessary skills and resources to integrate into Norwegian society.

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