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Migration Mobilities Bristol

New thinking on people and movement

LGBTQI+ Muslims

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seeking asylum are

more successful if they

speak, dress and act in accordance with Western notions of homosexuality. My work recently published in the Journal Ethnic and Racial Studies, has found that LGBTQI+ asylum applicants reported they were often expected to be “flamboyant” and “outspoken” in their asylum interview, and that overall, asylum seekers were more successful if they could prove their ‘gayness’ by being involved in gay/queer activism in their country of origin, visiting gay bars, being members of lesbian and gay groups and attending gay pride marches.

I interviewed 15 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) refugees and asylum seekers from Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, Iran and Pakistan, as well as asylum lawyers and judges from Berlin and Cologne, and representatives of LGBTQI+ refugee counselling centers in Cologne, Munich, Heidelberg and Mannheim – [project website](#).

The majority of successful applicants were from middle to upper-class backgrounds, were assigned male at birth and had been actively involved in gay/queer activism in their country of origin. Along with class and educational background, membership of LGBTQI+ organisations and access to local queer and gay refugee organisations in Germany were the most important factors in securing a successful asylum claim. In order to gain asylum, asylum seekers must convince officials of their permanent identity as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, trans’, ‘bi’, and/or ‘intersex’, and they also need to demonstrate that their sexual and gender identity has led to them being persecuted in their home country.

The most successful applicants were very well informed about what is expected from them at the asylum interview – which was for their asylum story to align with Western notions of queer/gay lifestyles, i.e frequent visits to gay discos and parties, public display of love and affection, wearing rainbow-coded clothing etc.

In addition, and despite efforts to render the asylum process safer for LGBTQI+ individuals, it was reported there were still incidences where asylum seekers were expected to answer questions about their sex life during their asylum interview – despite this being against EU law – and some interviewees stated they felt judged on their clothing, or how they acted in the interview.

People who were more open about their sexuality and gender identity in their country of origin as well as the country of arrival were much more likely to be granted asylum, in part because they were more likely to seek out LGBTQI+ refugee organisations in

Germany and receive support for the preparation of their asylum interview. However, people who were not 'out' at the time of their interview, or who found it difficult to speak about their sexuality due to fear of persecution, stigma or shame felt marginalised.

"LGBTQI+ asylum seekers who felt forced to hide their sexuality and/or gender identity, and who felt uncomfortable talking about it were usually rejected, as were those who were married or had children in their countries of origin. This was either because they were not recognised or believed as being LGBTQI+, or because they were told to hide in their country of origin since they had not come out yet.

Quite a few of my interviewees also mentioned that they felt that their translator held a homo-/transphobic attitude or did not translate properly due to their lack of knowledge of gay/queer/trans issues. For example, one Somalian man said that his fear and shame of coming out as gay – coupled with his translator's known negative attitudes toward homosexuals – stopped him from being able to talk openly about his sexuality, leading to the rejection of his asylum claim.

Asylum applicants who portrayed Germany as a liberal, tolerant country free of discrimination, while portraying their Muslim countries of origin as homophobic and morally 'backwards' were more likely to receive refugee protection. While Germany, and Europe more generally are traditionally seen as a safe havens for LGBTQI+ refugees compared to many majority Muslim countries – where homosexuality is illegal – there is a concern that the narratives and stereotypes perpetuated by the German asylum system may serve right-wing discourses on immigration in Germany.

More needs to be done to ensure that all Muslim LGBTQI individuals enjoy the same right to asylum. We need to train decision makers, judges and translators around the topic of LGBTQI+ so that they are more knowledgeable about LGBTQI+ identities and sexualities, and so as not to reproduce Islamophobic tendencies in the current immigration practices and debates in Germany. Access to legal resources and support for LGBTQI+ also needs to be streamlined, as LGBTQI+ asylum seekers who had access to information on the asylum process in Germany were much more successful.

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The content for this blog was previously posted by Taylor and Francis as a [press release](#).

The ERS article can be found here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2019.1640378>

All news reporting in relation to the study can be found [here](#).

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28th January 2020, 17.00-19.00

in motion new film group

in motion is a new Migration Mobilities Bristol film group bringing together students and researchers interested in the subject of migration in film and cinema. It will comprise of monthly screenings (on the final Tuesday of the month) followed by informal conversations about the issues raised by the films. Everyone is welcome!

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