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# Introduction: LGBTIQ+ Refugees Virtual Issue

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Over the years, there has been a significant expansion in the refugee studies literature on LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, and others) people in situations of forced displacement. While this expansion has encouraged inclusion, there is still much more to learn. Accordingly, the *Journal of Refugee Studies* has announced a new, open [Call for Papers](#) for a special issue on this subject.

This Virtual Thematic Issue aims to refocus attention on a seminal set of previous JRS articles that have explored the experiences of, and the challenges faced by, LGBTIQ+ refugees. Bringing together a variety of disciplines, including law, anthropology, sociology, and social work, the five pieces curated in this issue speak to a range of key questions about how LGBTIQ+ refugees are incorporated in, or excluded from, the global refugee regime. Together, these articles reflect how academic inquiry on LGBTIQ+ refugees has developed in the past few decades. Of note is the longstanding focus on understanding the numerous and intersecting harms caused by refugee status determination (RSD) processes as well as more recent attention to the agency and organizing efforts of LGBTIQ+ refugees.

Speaking to early debates about whether LGBTIQ+ claimants could reasonably be expected to conceal their identity or make a legitimate asylum claim on this basis, [McGhee \(2001\)](#) shows how many courts relied on an interpretation of ‘social group’ that was informed by conceptions of ‘traditional’ minority groups. He goes on to show that gay applicants were able to overcome this binary by forging links between international human rights law and refugee law. This piece provides a view into the early intersection between LGBTIQ+ applicants and a legal convention that was not written with them in mind, but that has over the years been interpreted in increasingly expansive ways, in an ad hoc effort of inclusion.

Building on this theme, [Lauri Berg and Jenni Millbank’s \(2009\) article](#) has remained pivotal as one of the earliest examinations of the rigid expectations that underlie court decisions in sexual identity narratives in Canada, Australia, the UK and New Zealand. These authors show how the contextual, pluralistic, and cultural identities of queer refugees clashed with heteronormative assumptions in asylum proceedings. Parsing these tensions out, they illustrate how the commonly used ‘staged model’, which typologizes LGBTIQ+ identities as passing through a series of phases, relies on essentialized and Eurocentric conceptions of queer identities. Their conclusions opened the door for a generation of scholarship to critically examine the biases at play in asylum proceedings. Overall, refugee studies scholarship problematizing the assumptions at the heart of

RSD processes has levied a significant challenge to legal definitions and perceptions of refugees and their chances of succeeding in court proceedings that have historically excluded them.

Following this development, many scholars have focused on less obvious ways in which LGBTIQ+ forced migrants are negatively impacted by RSD. Of note is [Hedlund and Wimark's \(2019\)](#) article which explores the experiences of unaccompanied children who sought to make asylum claims based on sexual orientation or gender identity in Sweden. Similar to Berg and Millbank's findings on the performative expectations of queer identity, they conclude that children are also expected to provide narratives that would match (heteronormative) expectations for adults, such as having a long-term relationship. This article demonstrates the enduring power of heteronormative biases in asylum proceedings to define queer children's 'truths', and the utility of intersectional approaches to refugee studies.

Meeting the burden of these heteronormative expectations through uncomfortable performances of Western imagined sexuality and gender identity has troubling consequences, even for those who receive asylum status. [Kahn and Alessi \(2018\)](#) show that RSD processes harm LGBTQ+ claimants in Canada due to the expectations of revealing their identities, narratives, and memories through a framework of trauma and precarity. Further fleshing out criticisms of the 'staged model', these authors show that asylum seekers were forced to recount painful or nonexistent memories of rejection or violence from their childhood to prove their sexual orientation. Further, applicants were often pushed by service providers to publicly come 'out' and to reveal extremely personal details about their past and intimate lives in a way that had deleterious effects on their wellbeing. Thus, these pieces show that while modest gains have been made in including LGBTQ+ refugees in asylum proceedings overall, RSD processes continue to injure by fervently policing gender identities and sexual orientations through a Western normative lens.

While such scholarship has made important strides particularly in terms of critiquing RSD processes in the global North, there is still a long way to go in overcoming the exclusions of LGBTIQ+ refugees from processes of knowledge creation and in centring the agency of LGBTIQ+ individuals and communities across diverse contexts in the global South. Thus, an important limitation in this conversation is the persistent focus on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers in the global North, in spite of the fact that the majority of the world's refugees reside in the global South. Important exceptions include [Reda and Proudfoot's \(2021\) piece](#) on LGBTQ+ activist-humanitarians in Beirut and Athens, which provides a comparison of grassroots organizing and international solidarity networks, showing how LGBTQ+ refugees negotiate and reinterpret their own well-being through their organizing efforts.

Together, these pieces provide insight into the evolution of RSD processes and the cultural ideologies that they embody on the one hand, and the much-needed rethinking of protection

institutions on the other. Greater care is required in engaging with queer displacement outside of the global North, to aid in overcoming the binarization of ‘genuine/fake’, ‘queer/straight’, and ‘West and the rest’. Further research is also necessary on trans lives, as well as intersex people, in situations of forced displacement. Additionally, ample opportunities remain to examine how LGBTIQ+ displaced populations actually rearticulate core concepts associated with displacement, as opposed to simply applying established concepts—such as notions of ‘family’ and ‘persecution—to the lives of LGBTIQ+ people.

Revisiting these articles provide a basis from which to expand research agendas on LGBTIQ+ experiences of displacement. As editors of this Virtual Thematic Issue, we recognize that there have been significant advancements in knowledge related to LGBTIQ+ people in situations of forced displacement that have occurred outside the pages of this journal, particularly from researchers in the fields of gender, sexuality and queer studies.<sup>1</sup> For the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, representing and engaging with the experiences of refugees in all of their diversity remains a key commitment. In furthering this conversation and signaling the journal’s renewed effort to support knowledge mobilization on this topic, we have issued our first ever [open call for papers on LGBTIQ+ refugees](#). We welcome your submissions and prolonged engagement in taking this conversation forward.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see special issues on queer migration, asylum, and displacement in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2008) and *Sexualities* (2014).