

“It’s like being a shadow of yourself”: Closed Camps and Compelled Concealment



Apr 18, 2023 • 5 min read time



Following the Moria fires in September 2020, the temporary reception and identification centre on Lesbos, known as Mavrovouni camp, was established as a short-term solution. Since then, and for the majority of 2022, the residents faced enhanced controls and stringent measures, including a limitation on movement outside permitted hours and a prohibition of certain activities.^[1]

On account of the containment measures and restrictive controls, people seeking asylum on the grounds of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and/or sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are faced with additional and unique difficulties whilst housed there.

Many SOGIESC asylum seekers have fled from countries where same-sex sexual activity or diverse gender identity are criminalised, either expressly or implicitly under widely-interpreted provisions.^[2] The criminalisation and persecution, in combination with societal stigma, has often compelled them to hide or be discreet about their orientation and/or identity, potentially for many years.^[3]

Once applicants have arrived to Lesbos, the people who have already fled their countries due to threats to their safety are likely to feel compelled to have to (re-)conceal. Without the appropriate accommodation, services and protections in place, and on account of the containment policy decisions in the closed camp, the applicant is placed at a greater risk of being outed, along with the threat that

"You just have to hide your real self, it's like being a shadow of yourself."

"It's very hard, you want to be free, you don't want your mind to be in a prison."

"Hiding in my country and hiding here, it's no difference, it's the same."

"It's like you've run from the devil then you come to the devil himself."

Although concealment serves as a mechanism to protect against structural stigma, discrimination and victimisation,[6]it fails to mitigate the negative psychological impact.[7]Compelled concealment contributes significantly to the difference in health outcomes for people with diverse SOGIESC,[8]including an increased risk of anxiety disorders, depression and substance misuse, as well as feelings of alienation, shame and negative perceptions of oneself.[9]

In the context of closed camps, such as in the Mavrovouni camp, the implications for the health of the applicant's mental and physical health are further exacerbated by other SOGIESC-specific considerations. SOGIESC applicants, who are already at a greater risk of having ongoing mental health conditions due to compounded trauma over extended periods of time,[10] are more vulnerable to being subjected to additional trauma whilst in closed camps or facilities, including sexual violence.[11]

Despite the evident impact on the people seeking asylum, the competent authorities are reluctant to take the necessary steps to alleviate these negative experiences, arguing that if they were to have special protections or additional measures, such as adequate accommodation and availability of specialised services, it would discriminate against non-SOGIESC applicants. Such reasoning fails to recognise that further marginalised communities, such as SOGIESC asylum seekers, are already at a greater disadvantage; facing unique and additional obstacles. By providing the necessary protections or measures, it aims to lessen that disparity.

Compounded risks for SOGIESC applicants in CCACs

Following the announcement by the European Commission and Greek Authorities, the camps on five Aegean islands,[12]including Lesbos, will be replaced with more-permanent and restrictive EU-funded centres.[13] Currently, three of the five closed controlled access centers (CCACs) have become operational.[14]Despite claims that the new centers will improve living conditions,[15]the existing CCACs have provided a bleak insight into the realities of such facilities.[16] The CCAC on Samos operates with prison-like security measures; it is surrounded by barbed wire, has rigorous security checks, and a constant presence of police, security personnel and CCTV surveillance.[17] These elements, in combination with the limitations on freedom of movement[18]creates a feeling of imprisonment.[19]

forest, is both remote and secluded.[20]The isolation is further accentuated by the disproportionate restrictions, securitization and surveillance that are expected to be put in place.

The imposed constraints on the resident's freedoms in the operating CCACs has already demonstrated a detrimental impact on their physical and mental health, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts.[21]

For SOGIESC asylum seekers, the combination of an isolated location and restrictive controls places them in a significantly more vulnerable position. The impact of restrictions may be compounded with, and magnified by, the effect of compelled concealment. As a result of the seclusion of the closed center, applicants are likely to be compelled to hide their orientation and/or identity more than they already do in the current camp,[22] and will only serve as an additional strain on their mental health. [23]

Furthermore, in environments where one has to be discreet about their orientation or identity, having safe spaces for SOGIESC applicants as well as access to appropriate services becomes even more crucial. [24] The CCACs, which are located far from any community, services or safe space, offers no respite, and hinders people's ability to obtain the necessary support.

Recommendations

The policy decisions by the Greek Government, and funded by the EU, regarding the increase of controls and restrictions in the CCACs have failed to take a comprehensive, intersectional and inclusive approach, that adequately accommodates further marginalized and potentially vulnerable communities. In doing so, such decisions inadvertently force people to conceal their identity to avoid harm, rather than take into consideration the different particularities, contrary to the applicants' human rights, as recognised by the European Court of Human Rights, EU Court of Justice and the Greek Special Appeals Committee.[25]

To this end, we call on the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum and the European Commission to respond to the following issues:

1. What considerations or measures have been taken to accommodate people who are potentially vulnerable or at risk of being subjected to additional trauma, taking into account the secluded locations and restrictive measures?
2. What measures have been taken to make sure that the staff in the Medical and Psychosocial Unit in the CCAC are fully informed and competent with regards to specialised and intersectional identities, including SOGIESC?
3. What considerations have been taken with regards to SOGIESC applicants housed in a closed facility and what mitigating measures have subsequently been put in place? In particular, with regards to compelled re-concealment?

Migration and Asylum, "K.E.Δ. Λέσβου", available at: <https://migration.gov.gr/ris/perifereiakes-monades/kyt-domes/k-y-t-lesvoy/>.

For more information see: Fenix, 'Five Years of "Unfortunate" Events, or Deliberate Policy Making?', 30 March 2021, available at: <https://www.fenixaid.org/articles/five-years-of-unfortunate-events-or-deliberate-policy-making>; Fenix, 'Waiting to be Heard: Considerations on the impact of Greek asylum policies on the psychosocial wellbeing of asylum seekers on Lesbos', February 2023, available at:

<https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/60bcf98f54ccd12605b18048/63fcd538e056c3986163-Waiting%20to%20be%20Heard%20-%20Fenix%20Humanitarian%20Legal%20Aid.pdf>, p 54 – 57.

[2] 70 UN Member States still criminalise "consensual same-sex sexual acts" in some way. Lucas Ramon Mendos et al, 'State-Sponsored Homophobia 2020: Global Legislation Overview Update', (ILGA, Geneva, December 2020) Available at: https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_World_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_Report_Global_Legislation_Overview_Update_December_2020.pdf, p. 330.

[3] Colin Poitras, 'The 'Global Closet' is Huge—Vast Majority of World's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Population Hide Orientation, YSPH Study Finds' (Yale, 13 June 2019) Available at: <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/the-global-closet-is-huge-vast-majority-of-worlds-lesbian-gay-bisexual-population-hide-orientation-ysph-study-finds/>

[4] Ari Shaw and Namrata Verghese, 'LGBTQI+ Refugees and asylum seekers: A review of research and data needs' (June 2022); Fenix Humanitarian Legal Aid, 'You Have to Hide Your Real Self': LGBTQI+ Asylum Seekers and the Failure of Greek Authorities' (29 August 2022) Available at: <https://www.fenixaid.org/articles/you-have-to-hide-your-real-self-lgbtqi-asylum-seekers-and-the-failure-of-greek-authorities>

[5] These quotes were provided by SOGIESC asylum seekers on Lesbos.

[6] Pachankis, J. E & Bränström, R 'Hidden from happiness: Structural stigma, sexual orientation concealment, and life satisfaction across 28 countries' (Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 86(5), 2018) Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000299>; James Michael

Authenticity and Psychological Well-being' (2021). <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12892&context=etd>

[7] James Michael Brennan, 'Hiding the Authentic Self: Concealment of Gender and Sexual Identity and its Consequences for Authenticity and Psychological Well-being' (2021). <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12892&context=etd>

[8] Pachankis, J. E. 'The psychological implications of concealing a stigma: A cognitive-affective behavioural model' (Psychological Bulletin, 133(2), 2007). Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.2.328>; James Michael Brennan, 'Hiding the Authentic Self: Concealment of Gender and Sexual Identity and its Consequences for Authenticity and Psychological Well-being' (2021) Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12892&context=etd>

[9] James Michael Brennan, 'Hiding the Authentic Self: Concealment of Gender and Sexual Identity and its Consequences for Authenticity and Psychological Well-being' (2021) Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12892&context=etd>;

B and C v Switzerland (Applications nos. 889/19 and 43987/16, ECtHR, 2020) para 33.

[10] Ari Shaw and Namrata Verghese, 'LGBTQI+ Refugees and asylum seekers: A review of research and data needs' (June 2022)

[11] Ari Shaw and Namrata Verghese, 'LGBTQI+ Refugees and asylum seekers: A review of research and data needs' (June 2022)

[12] Samos, Leros, Kos, Lesbos, Chios

[13] Fenix Humanitarian Legal Aid, 'One year since Greece opened new "prison-like" refugee camps, NGOs call for a more humane approach' (20 September 2022) Available at: <https://www.fenixaid.org/articles/one-year-since-greece-opened-new-prison-like-refugee-camps-ngos-call-for-a-more-humane-approach>; European Commission, Memorandum of Understanding: Commission support for the situation on the Greek islands, 2 December 2020, available at:

[14] Samos, Leros and Kos

[15] Lydia Emmanouilidou, "This island is a prison: Migrants say plan for a refugee camp on Lesbos is too isolating" (TheWorld, 6 April 2021) Available at: <https://theworld.org/stories/2021-04-06/island-prison-migrants-say-plan-refugee-camp-lesbos-too-isolating>

[16] InfoMigrants, 'Greece: New hotspots on Lesbos, Chios to open in 2023' (28 September 2022) Available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/43634/greece-new-hotspots-on-lesbos-chios-to-open-in-2023>

[17] InfoMigrants, 'Greece: New hotspots on Lesbos, Chios to open in 2023' (28 September 2022) Available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/43634/greece-new-hotspots-on-lesbos-chios-to-open-in-2023>; Fenix Humanitarian Legal Aid, 'One year since Greece opened new "prison-like" refugee camps, NGOs call for a more humane approach' (20 September 2022) Available at: <https://www.fenixaid.org/articles/one-year-since-greece-opened-new-prison-like-refugee-camps-ngos-call-for-a-more-humane-approach>; IRC et I have Rights, Contribution to the European Ombudsman's strategic inquiry into how the European Commission ensures respect for fundamental rights in EU-funded migration management facilities in Greece, January 2023

[18] Freedom of movement is restricted for residents due to mandatory quarantine until November 2022, in addition to the restriction for those who have not yet received their applicant's asylum card, received a negative decision or who have not yet lodged an appeal or a subsequent application.

[19] IRC et I have Rights, Contribution to the European Ombudsman's strategic inquiry into how the European Commission ensures respect for fundamental rights in EU-funded migration management facilities in Greece, January 2023; Fenix, 'One year since Greece opened new "prison-like" refugee camps, NGOs call for a more humane approach' (20 September 2022).

[20] Lydia Emmanouilidou, "This island is a prison: Migrants say plan for a refugee camp on Lesbos is too

prison-migrants-say-plan-refugee-camp-lesbos-too-isolating; InfoMigrants, 'Greece: New hotspots on Lesbos, Chios to open in 2023' (28 September 2022) Available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/43634/greece-new-hotspots-on-lesbos-chios-to-open-in-2023>

[21] Fenix Humanitarian Legal Aid, 'One year since Greece opened new "prison-like" refugee camps, NGOs call for a more humane approach' (20 September 2022) Available at: <https://www.fenixaid.org/articles/one-year-since-greece-opened-new-prison-like-refugee-camps-ngos-call-for-a-more-humane-approach>

[22] Fenix Humanitarian Legal Aid, "'You Have to Hide Your Real Self': LGBTIQ+ Asylum Seekers and the Failure of Greek Authorities' (29 August 2022) Available at: <https://www.fenixaid.org/articles/you-have-to-hide-your-real-self-lgbtqi-asylum-seekers-and-the-failure-of-greek-authorities>

[23] B and C v Switzerland (Applications nos. 889/19 and 43987/16, ECtHR, 2020) para 33; James Michael Brennan, 'Hiding the Authentic Self: Concealment of Gender and Sexual Identity and its Consequences for Authenticity and Psychological Well-being' (2021) Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=12892&context=etd>

[24] Nina Held, "As queer refugees, we are out of category, we do not belong to one, or the other": LGBTIQ+ refugees' experiences in "ambivalent" queer spaces' (Ethnic and Racial Studies, 10 January 2021); Ari Shaw and Namrata Verghese, 'LGBTIQ+ Refugees and asylum seekers: A review of research and data needs' (June 2022)

[25] 'X, Y, Z v Minister voor Immigratie en Asiel' (2013, CJEU); 'B and C v Switzerland' (Applications nos. 889/19 and 43987/16) (ECtHR, 2020); Greece, Special Appeal Committee (A.G. v. the General Secretary of the former Ministry of Public Order, No. 95/56266) (Special Appeals Committee, 2012).