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"Were in this together" - NGO advocacy and LGBTQ+ asylum claimants: Intimate/care citizenship as co-presence and imagined equality

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Abstract

This paper explores the work of regional NGO organisations in the UK that explicitly support LGBTQ + asylum claimants, framing the testimonials of both service providers and service users, in considering issues of co-presence, and imagined equality, that may be experienced between the parties. While framing the cultural and political environment at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and critiquing citizenship as a purely hegemonic nationalistic concept by drawing from theories of "intimate citizenship" and "Care-tizenship", this paper considers the dynamics of collective advocacy. Offering an intersectional approach that frames issues of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, religion and regionality, the authors consider the significance of co-presence related to citizenship, that affords an optimistic sense of equality when LGBTQ + service providers support LGBTQ + asylum claimants.

Keywords

Advocacy, LGBTQ+, asylum claimants, citizenship, co-presence

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Introduction

'Saeed' an LGBTQ + asylum seeker research respondent tells us:

> "Only [LGBTQ + individuals] understand the pain of LGBT people. They will understand my problems. They will understand my pain. They will understand my situation".

Referencing the longstanding support that he had experienced from his non-binary NGO caseworker (NGO2 – discussed further below), Saeed's reflections were emblematic of many responses from our British Academy funded research project which took place between 2020 and 2021.[1] Many evoked the concept that 'we are in this together', suggesting an alliance between LGBTQ + service providers and LGBTQ + service users. Appreciation of this concept was also evident within the LGBTQ + asylum seeker community, where a tribute was paid to Philip Jones of the First Wednesday LGBT Asylum Support Group in Manchester, working there from the time it was founded in 2013 till his death in 2021. *Manchester World* reported that:

> "Philip was just able to be there for everybody. … He allowed each … person in the LGBTQ + asylum seeking community to feel hope [and was] completely irreplaceable" (Battle cited in Nowell, 2023).

Support workers such as Saeed's caseworker (NGO2) and Philip are often not only highly valued, but they also demonstrate "citizen advocacy" on behalf of their service users, forming a productive "one-to-one relationship between a volunteer spokesperson and their disadvantaged partner" (Atkinson cited in Wilks, 2012: 3).

We argue that these relationships, which are not exclusively connected to LGBTQ + identifying support workers, but rather are framed with the involvement of an empathetic caseworker who understands the struggles of LGBTQ + asylum claimants (see Hébert, 2011), exhibit the potential of "intimate citizenship" (Plummer, 1995) and co-presence, where NGO advocates are framing new models of citizenship, based on "Care-tizenship" (Casas-Cortes, 2019). Such a process demonstrates "possibilities for alternatives to the received conception of citizenship as legalistic membership [of] the state" (De Capitani, 2023: 234), highlighting humanity and the imagination of equality.

LGBTQ + asylum seeker advocates often appear as committed individuals nurturing empathetic relationships with asylum seekers, offering transparency and co-presence, which Laing defines is "to be with another person in a completely open hearted, unguarded way, where one is not on one's own part somehow or other cancelling, or altering or modifying who that other person is to suit one's own book" (cited in Nutall, 2019: 227). Within this therapeutic approach, many framed their own identities as LGBTQ + citizens, with some revealing that they are survivors of mental health issues, and others foregrounding a relationship to organised religion (Greatrick, 2023). Such an intersectional, intimate narrative and care-based model frames the potential of alliance between the service provider and the service user in "telling sexual stories" (Plummer, 1995), offering

reflective discourse that "flows through social acts of domination, hierarchy, marginalisation and equality" (30).

We argue that the co-present relationship between the NGO service provider and the service user appears to be mutually beneficial. While inevitably the service user is perceived as gaining assistance, the service provider potentially develops a sense of personal fulfilment. This is particularly evident with those who worked as sole managers or leaders, where many were embarking on new careers later in life, where personal goals of motivation in 'giving back to community' were apparent, as LGBTQ + citizens aiding others.

The relationship between service provider and service user nevertheless relies on the maintenance of professional boundaries (Kapelj, 2022), involving mutual respect between the parties. For example, "the social worker [like the NGO supporter], has the full responsibility to set clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries" (NASW cited in Kapelj, 2022: 451). Despite this, in some instances a "white saviour culture" might be perceived, such as the "white gaze saving brown queers" (Sharif, 2015). Also, western NGO service providers potentially evoke "homonationalism" (Puar, 2007), which emerged as an "intersection between [an] Orientalist misrecognition of Islam and Middle Eastern/North African migration, on one hand, and the acknowledgment of Western queerness as an allegedly positive civilizational drive, on the other" (Insausti and Ben, 2023: 7). Central within this is the bias towards "homonormative" subjectivities (Duggan, 2002) and the concept of the "good gay citizen" (Bell and Binnie, 2000).

Similarly, NGO support spaces may be ambivalent (Held, 2023), where inequality and abuse may be apparent (Datta, 2023). Equally we must be aware of the notion of the 'selfless hero' in supporting others, as this places a focus on the NGO service provider as solely beneficent, and determining, eroding a sense of equality between the parties. Hence in estimating the co-present relationship between regional NGO service providers and asylum claimant service users, complex intersectional nuances of care, identity, cultural space, respect, and psychological belonging must be understood and navigated. Central within this may be the inevitable power imbalance between the NGO service provider and the service user, where this is not an alliance among equals. Rather the LGBTQ + NGO service provider interprets the storytelling, in offering an empathetic vision to the LGBTQ + asylum seeker, who whilst might not share the same access to power, potentially engages in this relationship with optimism and imagined equality.

Imagined equality and methodology

LGBTQ + identity has been used in this research as an all-encompassing social identity term representing citizens of sexual diversity (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and others), noting that there is no political or cultural homogeneity within the diverse elements of its constitution, and that using "LGBTQ+" is limited as it connotes "Western stereotypes and a particular gay lifestyle" (Dustin and Held, 2018: 80). Furthermore, the notion of the LGBTQ + asylum claimant equally lacks homogeneity, as diverse elements of nationality, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender may be included within this. Hence while LGBTQ + identity appears as a term that binds people, linking western with

non-western and the diasporic, evoking the notion of a collective alliance where there is egalitarianism, it offers an imagined equality that fails to address polarising levels of abjection/suffering and/or access to privilege/cultural capital, among the individuals who may identify with this term. Hence when an NGO service provider engages with a service user, it is likely that their bonding as equals under the community of LGBTQ+ is related to wish fulfilment and respect for each other, rather than reflecting their diverse lived experiences and life chances from where they originate.

The design of the research was approved by Bournemouth University ethics procedures.[2] The NGOs that were approached were explicitly identified as supporters of LGBTQ + asylum claimants. Data was gathered from 12 hours of semi structured online interviews with eight members of staff who largely identified as LGBTQ+.[3] NGO interview participants were based in Belfast, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Brighton, Cardiff, Glasgow, and London.

The research team also held three semi structured online interviews (of 1 hour each) with LGBTQ + asylum claimants that respectively came from Bangladesh, Cameroon, and Pakistan, that were linked to the regional NGO organisations in Brighton and Birmingham.

Two hours of data was gained from a subsequent online workshop, including attendance from regional NGOs in Belfast, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Brighton, Cardiff, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester & Wakefield, plus representatives from national NGOs, and a representative from the UK parliament Women and Equalities Select Committee (Parliament, UK 2023a). The names of the research participants have been anonymised.[4] The key NGO participants include: NGO1- (Birmingham), NGO2 – (Brighton), NGO3 - (Cardiff), NGO4 - (Liverpool), NGO5 - (Glasgow), NGO6 - (Bournemouth) and NGO7 – (Belfast). The key asylum claimants include 'Pascal' - (Cameroon), 'Saeed' (Bangladesh) and 'Ibrahim' (Pakistan).

Overall, within the interview stage and within the workshop, there were 13 NGO participants. 10 represented regional NGOs, and three represented national NGOs. Eight were male, four were female, and one was non-binary. Five were older workers (over 55 years old) and eight were younger workers (aged between 25 and 40). Four (all older males) also could be considered as sole managers or leaders of regional NGOs, while the remainder (nine) could be considered as leaders of subdivisions within their organisations (as a mixture of regional and national NGOs). Contact with the asylum claimant interview subjects was enabled through the regional NGOs, who asked their asylum claimant communities for volunteers to participate in our project. Four individuals expressed interest, leading to three interviews with gay males aged between 25 and 30 years old, and one potential female lesbian interview subject that ultimately was unable to participate.

All interviews were conducted by the primary investigator of the project who identifies as an older white gay male, using online technology (Zoom). For both the NGO service providers and the asylum claimants a semi structured interview format was employed, largely asking the respondents to discuss their experience in either providing service to asylum claimants, or alternately in receiving service (as asylum claimants). Central within this was the desire to hear their personal life stories, as to how they became service providers or service users, evoking the notion of the 'autobiographical self' as a

performative activist potential (see Pullen, 2016), to discover the key issues, concerns and political action.

In using online technology, the team were aware that not being physically co-present, means that neither participant receives a full sense of the moment-to-moment interaction, or have full experience of the physical space of the interview. Stress of being overheard could also be evident if participants were transmitting from semi-public environments, such as from asylum housing, NGO offices or coffee shops. Likewise technological delays in the transmission of audio/visual connections, not only syncopates the natural flow of conversation, but also fractures the psychological connection. Hence the team were aware that:

> "It [was] critical that the interviewer pay close attention to the strain that can occur during [online] interviews and offer support. This [could] include providing quiet silence, offering comforting words, allowing them the time they need to process the emotions" (Lobe et al., 2022: 5).

Hence when Saeed in interview recalled a distressing historical event (discussed below), appropriate time was given for him to consider his ability to carry on the conversation or take a break.

All asylum claimant respondents used their personal phones to communicate in the interview process, and we provided them each with £15 vouchers to credit their phone costs. After the interviews, two of the asylum claimants also asked for letters of support from the research team to confirm their participation in the project (which were promptly supplied), as it was understood that participating in the project would offer evidence within their substantive interview to claim asylum.

It became clear within the interview process, that the NGO service providers were wary of participating in the project, as some had contributed to earlier academic projects and considered that no real impact was made in their community. Hence during the project, a prototype online network (with monthly meetings) was established by the primary investigator to regularly connect the regional NGOs over the duration of the project, offering the ability to share stories of best practice.[5] Although not a formal part of the research project, such a process encouraged participation, including NGO1, NGO3, and NGO4, who all stimulated progressive and innovative conversations, about the meaning of best practice within the NGO service industry to asylum claimants.

However, because of the dominant discourse of NGOs in this project (where in this paper we frame the key interviews of 8 NGO participants alongside three asylum claimants), it's possible to argue that this research may not be fully representative of the asylum claimant narrative. Furthermore, the narratives of the asylum claimants would inevitably have been influenced by the contingent relationship that they have with the NGO, who elicited the research team's connection with the asylum claimant. Hence the data in this project inevitably is influenced by the NGO's perspective. Despite this, the research team took care in assessing the responses from the asylum claimants, to focus on autobiographical and intimate narratives of personal experience, critically framing

emotional responses, rather than measuring value judgements on service, whilst being aware of the optimistic framing of NGO experiences.

At the same time the NGO research respondents were all reflexively aware of the inevitable power imbalances evident in their relationships with asylum claimants and understood that their role was purely to support them in working on their asylum applications or gaining access to services. Furthermore, it's important to note that the NGOs in this research project, did not openly conceive that they took part in an intimate citizenship-oriented alliance with their service users, but this was an observation theorised by the research team, in considering the productive and empathetic manner of their relationships.

Research strategies

Research on LGBTQ + asylum seekers, including their interactions with NGOs has taken various forms, including as special issue of *Sexualities* journal (Lewis and Naples, 2014) framing case studies in the United States and Europe, and the landmark publication *Queering Asylum in Europe* (Danisi et al., 2021) which largely framed examples in the UK, Germany, and Italy. The significance of neoliberalism and the migration industry has been explored (McGuirk and Pine, 2020) framing the problematic nature of LGBTQ + asylum seekers' participation and performance within western pride events (McGuirk, 2020). Pullen and Franklin (2020) have explored the attempts of undocumented LGBTQ + youth in the United States to gain legal citizenship, framing the activism and media performativity of the 'Undocuqueer' movement. Legal and social experiences of LGBTQ + asylum seekers have been interrogated (Dansi 2021), while discussions of intersectionality have been framed considering queer theory (Dustin and Held 2018), and religion and faith (Greatrick, 2023). While there is little work on advocacy and LGBTQ + asylum seekers, notably discussions of group therapy (Reading and Rubin, 2011) based on case studies in the United States, have offered insight into the provision of "space for processing the shared realities of insidious traumatisation" (90), while the significance of storytelling in relating activism and prospects of social justice have been explored (Forbear, 2015). Most significantly though, the ambivalence of support spaces has been critically explored indicating that LGBTQ+ "refugees can feel "out of place" in [LGBTQ+] support spaces when they do not represent the "somatic norm" (Held, 2023: 1908). Furthermore, McGuirk (2018) advises that "LGBT asylum seekers experience suspicion, and pressure to conform to NGO workers' expectations of credible candidates" (4), which may be subjective.

Early outcomes of this research project informed policy brief evidence provided to the Women and Equalities Select Committee within the UK Government (Pullen and Tschalaer, 2021), commenting on the lack of bespoke/safe housing for LGBTQ + asylum claimants, the need for better training of asylum application administration staff, and the insufficiency of policy supporting LGBTQ + asylum claimants. Also, our data offered insight into LGBTQ + asylum claimant isolation during the UK COVID-19 lockdown (Tschalaer, 2022).

This paper offers insight into a gap in the literature produced so far, by focussing on regional NGO service providers that explicitly support LGBTQ + asylum claimants as service users. Through focussing on models of citizenship, framing the significance of intimacy, care and co-presence, a hybrid dynamic is revealed, that whilst might appear to be positivist, nevertheless frames the collective potential for advocacy.

Context

Asylum claimants face a variety of daunting challenges after entering the UK which includes "indefinite detention" which effectively imprisons asylum seekers and denudes them of their rights with the view to subsequent deportation. Those who are not subject to detention can nevertheless still be ineligible for support from the Home Office and are allocated government-provided temporary accommodation. This accommodation can be insecure or inappropriate, underlined where in 2023, 76 child asylum seekers went missing from a Brighton hotel managed by the Home Office (Guardian, 2023d). Even when it is safe and suitable, asylum housing usually means sharing with other refugees, some of whom may hold homophobic or transphobic views. This can lead to discrimination, harassment, or violence, which determines that the victims either shut themselves away in their room or opt to leave the accommodation entirely. As Ibrahim reported, before gaining housing from a national NGO (that offer LGBTQ + asylum housing), he shared a four-bedroom house with 19 other male tenants, many of whom exhibited threatening attitudes and behaviour. During the large part of the Lockdown, Ibrahim simply recalled crying all day in his room. Many asylum seekers become homeless for this reason. If the asylum seeker ultimately receives a positive asylum decision, they have only a 20-day period to find housing, which is problematic as they don't have a credit background. Asylum claimants and refugees have no recourse to public funds, which increases the likelihood they will be faced with financial destitution and homelessness. Destitute asylum seekers and people refused asylum (at the time of writing) are allotted by the Home Office a standard weekly allowance of £40.85 for each supported person, which is inadequate to cover essentials such as travel costs, food, clothing, nappies, and sanitary products. Furthermore, largely people seeking asylum are banned from working while waiting on outcomes of asylum claims, meaning that they have no means to supplement this meagre income (Refugee Council, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis have exacerbated the precarity of LGBTQ + asylum claimants regard to food security, mental and physical health, isolation, accommodation, digital poverty, as well as access to social and legal support services.

There is no set pathway and no typical story of how LGBTQ + asylum claimants seek support from advocacy organizations, largely due to the bifurcated nature of asylum or integration "pathways" – as NGO1 articulated: "you can either go the LGBTQ + route or the refugee route"; - and there are few organizations that manage and give sufficient recognition to both "sides" of a claimant's identity, in terms of sexuality *and* citizenship.

A "culture of disbelief" characterises the Home Office's attitudes to asylum claims, which creates a great deal of work for refugee advocacy groups in terms of helping their clients prepare for interviews, in support of their asylum claims, and generally trying to

bolster the social and cultural capital that they need to navigate the legal framework. As NGO7 reported "the burden of proof on LGBTQ + people is intense", revealing that one of her service users was questioned by the Home Office for 10 hours within his initial interview. Added to this NGO1 stated that "something is wrong with the [asylum] system. [For example] how do asylum claimants prove that they are gay?", adding that exhibiting consistency and "emotional authenticity" is most important, when presenting evidence to the Home Office.

Significantly, the Home Office apparently fail to understand bisexuality, trans and non-binary identity. For example, although the term bisexual is recorded in the guidelines for sexuality, there are no instances where MSM (men who have sex with men) is explained, who appear as bisexual, but do not identify as bisexual or gay. Also assessing transgender people is subjective:

> "If a transgender individual chooses to live discreetly because s/he wants to avoid embarrassment or distress to his or her family and friends s/he will not be deemed to have a well founded fear of persecution and will not qualify for asylum. This is because s/he has adopted a lifestyle to cope with social pressures and not because s/he fears persecution due to his or her gender identity" (Gov UK, 2023a).

This shows no understanding of the predicament of a transgender individual seeking refuge from a country that persecutes gay people. Furthermore, as NGO4 stated, the Home Office do not comprehend the nuances of a non-binary gender experience. NGO4 reported that in supporting a service user within a substantive interview, the interviewer could not understand why an applicant would not want to be identified as neither male or female, and a sense of coercion was apparent where the assessor summed up what gender they should be identified as. NGO4 noted that the asylum claimant was traumatised by this encounter.

NGO3 reported that "believability" or credibility is an important factor when assessing how LGBTQ + asylum claimants might effectively engage with the Home Office. Advocates frequently stated, however, that judgements appeared to have no consistency, and that the undercurrent of the "hostile environment" (see below) stimulates a culture of disbelief, that is sanctioned by the authorities. As NGO6 noted, at many levels of public service, the UK is "making people unwelcome in this country, who are entitled to be here … and is dehumanising [them] mentally". NGO5 described the difficulty that an asylum claimant from Nigeria faced when communicating with Home Office officials, explaining that in his country respect is conveyed by not looking directly into someone's eyes, as you are in the presence of an authority. Because of this he found it difficult to engage his eyes with those of his interviewer, as this would be deemed disrespectful, in his home country. However, Western norms of comportment dictate that this equates to potential duplicity or a psychological barrier, preventing one from appearing as authentic.

Such a culture permeates other sectors including public services. For example, asylum seekers are entitled to access primary healthcare, after registering with a GP practice - but this is not generally acknowledged. After presenting their documentation, asylum seekers receive an Application Registration Card. But if a GP sees this and decides that it is not

valid or offer sufficient evidence, they can refuse to register them. Support agencies and NGOs such as Doctors of the World and Praxis are therefore fundamental in helping asylum seekers to register with a GP practice.

LGBTQ + asylum claimants suffer because of the exclusionary and punitive nature of immigration legislation in the UK (De Capitani, 2023: 231), exacerbated since 2012 when policies were altered to create a "hostile environment", conceived by the then Home Secretary Theresa May (who later became Prime Minister in 2016):

> "The hostile environment is a sprawling web of immigration controls embedded in the heart of [UK] public services and communities. The Government requires employers, landlords, private sector workers, NHS staff and other public servants to check a person's immigration status before they can offer them a job, housing, healthcare or other support. Landlords and employers can face fines and even criminal sanctions if they fail to do so" (Liberty Human Rights, 2023).

Moreover, the UK has pursued isolationist policies on migration since leaving the EU after the Brexit referendum (BBC, 2023), and no longer needs to uphold the Common European Union Asylum System (CEAS). Although this has not been entirely supportive to asylum claimants, as there is a "lack of compliance with fundamental EU values by the CEAS in its current form [which causes] prevailing deficiencies in the system" (Rizcallah, 2019: 249), it offers a holistic ideology. Significantly when the UK government adopted the "Nationalities and Borders Act" in 2022, isolationism progressed, including at that time a policy to send illegal immigrants to Rwanda to process their applications (Parliament UK, 2023b).

Historically, right-wing newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* have consistently highlighted the increase of immigrants arriving illegally as a cultural threat to the UK, evident in front page headlines such as "Migrant Chaos All Summer", "Migrants Rob Young Britons of Jobs" and "Asylum Seekers Ferried Around in Stretch Limo" (Guardian, 2023b). The tabloid presses often disavow, distort, deride, or even trivialise the plight of LGBTQ + refugees. For example, in 2010 a *Daily Mail* headline stated that "Supreme Court Judge says homosexual asylum seekers should be allowed to stay because "gays must be free to enjoy Kylie concerts and cocktails" (Daily Mail, 2023), framing a diminutive stereotypical viewpoint about gay men in the west.

UK politicians have also continued to perpetuate negative discourse about the arrival of refugees. Notably in 2016 Prime Minister David Cameron described refugees as "a swarm" (Guardian, 2023a), while in 2023 Home Secretary Suella Braverman considered them as "an invasion" (Guardian, 2023c). Such discourse embodies the populist politics of Brexit, which included in the campaign of the pro leave side a widely published poster that erroneously used Syrian refugees as representing the threat to UK security as a "Breaking Point" (Independent, 2023). This was an abject misrepresentation that demonised genuine asylum seekers, as the critique of EU freedom of movement within the Brexit campaign, applied only to EU citizens. Hence within the tabloid press and within the UK parliament, refugees continue to be scapegoats.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, little attention was afforded to the context of the refugee, as limitations in travel prohibited movement locally and nationally, with the press and the government focussed on regulations and legislation designed to combat the spread of COVID-19. However, at this point asylum claimants were highly vulnerable and seemed voiceless, unable to move freely in society and easily contact support organisations. They were under extreme stress, isolated from physical community space and advocacy support. Not able to leave detention centres, home office housing or general accommodation, as reported initially in our project (Tschalaer, 2022), they were increasingly at risk, and the relationship they had with NGO advocates became more vital.

Relationship between advocate and service user

NGO2 provided a broad definition of advocacy within the workshop:

> "[We] help people find out what their rights are. Help with accessing services [and] making complaints, [also involving] writing letters of support for their asylum cases and appeals."

Wilks (2012) proclaims that the "advocate's role is enabling a service user's voice to be heard" (7), as much as providing a specific professional service. At the same time, it frames the impact of the NGO service provider as interpreting or authenticating the voice of the service user, who cannot possess a powerful voice on their own accord.

This was particularly resonant for Saeed, who had been homeless in the UK for many years, before seeking support from his local NGO, who over time emboldened his sense of self-worth, through the bespoke and nuanced personal service offered to him (see Introduction to this paper). However, as Prakesh and Gugerty (2010) advise:

> "The term "advocacy" suggests systematic efforts (as opposed to sporadic outbursts) by actors that seek to further specific policy goals. Advocacy is integral to politics and not restricted to any particular policy domain" (1).

Hence the political significance of the advocate is expressed not so much in the type of work that they do, but through their interaction with other refugee and LGBTQ + support groups, and formal healthcare providers, solicitors, the judiciary, local politicians, churches, and trade unions.

The advocates that we interviewed and that participated in our workshop can be regarded as constitutive of an informal cultural movement, in working towards change, highlighting Prakesh's and Guggerty's ideas that "advocacy needs to be recognised as a collective endeavour and NGOs viewed as collective actors" (2). Through their efforts in supporting LGBTQ + service users with applications for asylum, and generally caring for their wellbeing, the advocates engaged with wider social, cultural, and legislative networks, contributing to discourses that surround asylum claimants. As Clear et al. (2017) note, NGOs, because of their intimate connections to (other) community non-profit organisations, "are better positioned [than institutional services] to interact with people and provide networks and bridges to form and establish the relationships and trust that

support the community" (858). Whilst they have "no representational legitimacy they may nevertheless influence governments" (ibid.). Hence in supporting individuals in writing letters of support for asylum applications, engaging with solicitors and the judiciary, and in representing their work to government committees, advocates can impact policy over time, through their influence within civil society. However, in doing so they also reflect the power imbalance between the service provider and service user, where the former is deemed as the authentic source in mediating the narrative of the asylum claimant.

In the UK, the emergence of the Patient Advocacy and Liaison Services (PALS, 2023), implemented in 2002 as a reform within the NHS to better serve needs in mental health and disability, signalled the growing value of advocacy. However, the notion of the advocate covers both those paid to act as advocates, and those who might work as volunteers to support vulnerable individuals. As Henderson and Pochin (2001) note:

> "[There are] substantial differences between, say a citizen advocacy scheme that develops advocacy through long-term voluntary partnerships and a scheme that offers short episodes of representation by a trained, paid worker [leading to people wondering] whether "advocacy" is really a single concept at all, or simply a name which happens to have been given to a series of [relatively] separate activities" (vi).

Because of their often-precarious financial situation, and their "proximity to institutionalized centres of power" (Gill et al., 2014: 379), migrant support groups do not explicitly challenge the asylum apparatus, although they may contest specific governmental policies and practices. In the case of LGBTQ + asylum seeker advocacy groups there may also be a tendency to focus on issues of recognition (e.g. identity politics) rather than the systemic critique of the asylum system (including, e.g., border controls). As Gill et al. have argued, this raises the possibility of support groups being effectively "co-opted" because "providing welfare to destitute migrants arguably enables governments to diminish welfare support" (ibid.). In endeavouring to perform "service delivery" the available time and space for protest is diminished, and "protest" itself is just a means of negotiating the terms of an accommodation with the existing framework. It is very hard to find ways to both challenge the colonial and neoliberal structures of the asylum apparatus and to envision ways to provide relief to refugees in distress, many of whom seem powerless without possessing a unique or authentic voice, that relies on mediation by advocates, such as NGOs.

Hence in meeting this challenge, the organisations that we engaged with were very different from each other. Some were longstanding organisations with a history of providing service within a particular region with higher levels of management that directed the services, while others were managed by a key individual, who also seemed like the sole resource of all the efforts.

The advocates that we interviewed appeared deeply committed to LGBTQ + asylum seekers, often offering support that was beyond the remit of their role. Participants reported giving financial support out of their own pockets, and simply just being there as a companion to service users. For example, NGO1 reported that he simply sat in silence

(and offered prayers) with an asylum claimant on the anniversary of the loss of a partner who in his home country had been murdered by a mob. NGO3 recalled the suicide of an asylum seeker group member, and the devastation that it had caused to the other members of the community, over lockdown. This participant took this all in his stride, despite the psychological pressure on himself to care for his community, and admission that this took a toll. At the same time, it reveals the complex intersectional relationship between the service provider and service user, where the physical affective presence of the NGO service provider appears as a mediating presence, in representing or responding to asylum claimant vulnerabilities, and abject experiences.

Moreover, during the COVID-19 lockdown, when it was not possible to meet face to face indoors, the inability to hold the regular community meetings made a significant psychological and cultural impact on asylum claimants and their service providers. Because of this, service providers had to improvise, such as arranging outdoor picnics, where some sort of social contact could be made with the LGBTQ + asylum seeker community. The focus was on improving the mental wellbeing of those seemingly abandoned at times of need. As NGO1 told us:

> "[Usually] in small groups, we talk about fears of coming out. What it's like to live in the UK. What it's like to prepare for the [substantive] interview".

Hence these support efforts continued during lockdown, addressing the key issues for LGBTQ + asylum claimants, with the managers attempting to obviate the restrictions on face-to-face contact in indoor settings. During this period there was a heightened need for psychological support – as issues of isolation compounded pre-existing problems. As Reading and Rubin (2011) report:

> "Refugees and asylum seekers often face multiple traumas, along with loneliness and isolation due to loss of home and ties to family and community, [with LGBTQ + asylum seekers] often experience[ing] long-term feelings of guilt, shame, mistrust, and helplessness that may exacerbate the negative impact of trauma and loss on mental health and psychological functioning" (87).

As part of this impact within the UK lockdown, many LGBTQ + individuals experienced an exacerbated "insidious traumatisation" (Root cited in Reading and Rubin, 2011), through their isolation and intensified vulnerability. The opportunity to connect with their advocate and potentially be in the company of other LGBTQ + asylum claimants, offered profound and vital support at this difficult time.

Care and intimate citizenship

Hence the psychological and social world of the asylum seeker became even more precarious, at a time when the NGO help providers were also under stress in attempting to deliver services, often relying on their own personal resources to do this. As Casas-Cortes (2019) advises, for the migrant there is "an emerging geography of precarious mobilities"

(23), that can inform the theoretical context of citizenship, in relation to the services that may be offered. The relationship between the asylum claimant and the service provider can inevitably be framed in terms of the support given by the citizen in relation to the need of the non-citizen. Although some service providers may not have achieved full citizenship, in their role as an advocate, inevitably their voice is likely to possess cultural and social capital, grounded in their ability to have access to resources. The NGO help provider potentially understands the precarious subjectivity of the asylum seeker, engaging with Casas-Cortes" (2019) notion of "Care-tizenship", telling us:

> "In the neologism of "CARE-tizenship", there is an erasure of the "city", the original spatial delimitation of the polity which later on was linked to a broader territorial entity, the nation-state. This erasure speaks to the rejection of an arbitrary territorialization of rights, whether at the urban or national scale [calling] for flexible understandings of territory. [This redefines] citizenship as a political community able to provide a sense of membership and collective entitlements in the context of intense international mobility and global reconfigurations" (24).

Border asylum and migration enforcement systems continue to enact forms of violence that are: a) legitimated by the state; and b) spatial, as they lay claim to a place, for example "the United Kingdom", whose borders are operated by identifying individuals who are conceived as "out of place" (Cresswell, 1996). In Casas-Cortes' terms, we suggest that "commitizen" may be a more attractive neologism, indicating the need to therefore theorise differing forms of citizenship, that are no longer linked to the geopolitics of the nation-state, and instead are based on an ethic of voluntarism and care.

When an asylum seeker is assessed by legal bodies, the notion of national citizenship nevertheless forms the basis of the outcome, which frames the dynamic of the NGO supporter in mediating the narrative of the asylum claimant. The Home Office will assess what vulnerability the individual would experience in their homeland. For example, if you consider citizens from Pakistan who might apply for asylum as an LGBTQ + person, there are directives and reports that indicate what risk there is in that country, such as that "a person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm" (Gov UK, 2023b). Equaldex (2023) offers insight into elements of risk, referencing research conducted by Pew that 87% of participant interviews in Pakistan considered that society should not accept homosexuality, while only 2% advised that there should be acceptance.

However, references to citizenship within asylum claims, might blur the distinction of national citizenship and reference postmodern concepts, such as the "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) and the "imagined gay community" (Pullen, 2006: 51), where identification, fluidity and mobility are central, dislocating national identity and citizenship from a fixed physical place. As Benhabib (2007) advises:

> "We are moving away from citizenship as national membership. Increasingly towards a citizenship of residency, which strengthens the multiple ties to locality, to the region, and to transnational institutions" (22).

Hence the relationship between the asylum claimant and the service user might not only demonstrate the notion of transnational citizenship and "sexual citizenship" (Bell and Binnie, 2000), where national identity is less significant and a sense of equality pervades, but also elements of "commitizenship" may be apparent where the precarity of the individual is considered, as political and cultural factors in defining that relationship. Indeed, this is essential, given that the neoliberal state has diminished its role in welfare provision and social services, leading to the persistent - and deepening - inequalities which characterise advanced capitalist societies.

As part of this, we argue that Plumber's notion of "intimate citizenship" (1995), might also be useful in defining this relationship.

> "Intimate Citizenship does not imply one model, one pattern [and] one way. On the contrary, it is a loose term which comes to designate a field of stories, an array of tellings, out of which new lives, new communities and new politics may emerge" (151).

Rather than citizenship based on national identity, citizenship is based upon the ability to share stories, relative to the human experience. As Plummer (2003) reports "intimate citizenship refers to all those areas of life that appear to be personal but that are in effect connected, structured by or regulated through the public sphere" (70). Whilst the narrative potential of the asylum claimant appears as private disclosure, to NGO supporters, other asylum claimants, those within the care system, legal bodies, and the judiciary, a potential erosion between the private and public spheres may take place, where the narrative of the asylum claimant and the NGO advocate are closely linked. Hence when the advocate speaks on behalf of the asylum seeker, a quasi-political union is formed that frames both parties. While this union is unequal, in that the advocate's voice is impacting, in interpreting the needs of the disempowered, it nevertheless is enabling, in developing relationships, and potential connections.

This is particularly resonant to "AIDS citizenship" (Brown, 1997) where advocates (both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual) within the buddy programme supported those living with HIV/AIDS, and there was a close relationship between the service user and the service provider. Such an alliance may generate "hybrid spaces" that draw on a "poststructuralist decentring" (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 17) of subjectivity, framing not simply the voice of a buddy in service, or the voice of the Person With AIDS in appreciation, but a hybrid dynamic offering "an interplay of intimacy and citizenship, emphasising new forms of kinship" (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 18), demonstrating an imagination of equality.

Such a relationship exhibits the public facing narrative potential of intimacy and emotion, within the hybrid space of the relationship, seeming like a union. As Giddens (1992) tells us:

> "Emotion becomes a life political issue in numerous ways with the latter-day development of modernity. In the realm of sexuality, emotion as a means of communication, as a commitment and cooperation with others, is especially important" (202).

In contemporary society the expression of emotion (and intimacy) is a recognisable framework of narrative engagement which encourages interactions with others. This might demonstrate that a good relationship is:

> " …. of equals, in which each party has equal rights and obligations … in which each person has respect for, and wants the best for, the other. [It is] based on open communication and dialogue between partners, … in which trust [must] be worked at and cannot be taken for granted, [and] that is free of an arbitrary imbalance of power, coercion, or violence" (Giddens cited in Plumber, 2003: 26).

Specifically for LGBTQ + people of western and non-western extraction who share stories of identity, personality and struggle, elements of intimate citizenship play a key role in understanding shared narratives and concerns, framing a sense of imagined equality. The sharing of stories potentially forms a central part of the relationship between the service user and the service provider. As De Capitani (2023: 233) has observed, there is a stark contrast between "the act of listening to other people's stories as an exercise in empathy, trust, and political solidarity, and, on the other hand, the unsympathetic, inquisitorial listening required of immigration officers to bring about the hostile environment". As NGO9 affirmed, there is a general lack of awareness within the service sector, the judiciary, and the police force, of what it's like to be a non-western LGBTQ + asylum claimant. Although some asylum claimants may disclose their sexual identity to immigration authorities as to the reason why they may be claiming asylum, many are likely to conceal their sexual identity from other asylum seekers. Historically, many may have been coerced by their family and community into heterosexual relationships and some have experienced abuse from members of their family and/or community. Hence, many have been unable to form frank and authentic relationships.

For example, Pascal left his home country after being rejected by his family, and worked as an engineer in the Far East believing that he would be accepted in his new workplace. There he developed a long-term same sex relationship with an American work colleague, but could not live openly with him, and was abandoned when his partner returned home. He was advised by his employer (who knew about the relationship) to return to his home country, where he contacted his child, who he had fathered under pressure from his family, before coming to the UK. The Home Office and the judiciary may not understand or appreciate the motives and nuances of desire or commitment that underpin this ostensibly disordered narrative, as they largely only understand western cultural stereotypes of LGBTQ + people, who generally possess some degree of security and privilege in society, where leading multiple, or compartmented lives is less problematic.

While inevitably the NGO supporter is likely to possess a privileged and enfranchised citizenship identity (in comparison to the asylum claimant), many of the LGBTQ + asylum claimants considered that the best support could only be offered by NGO supporters who identified as LGBTQ+. For example, NGO5 believed that the only way that services from the Home Office could improve would be to hire LGBTQ + staff, as, even if they were of western extraction, they would better understand the life story of the

LGBTQ + asylum seeker. Saeed similarly stated that only LGBTQ + individuals understand the "pain of LGBT people" (see Introduction to this paper). The focus on pain is significant here, as Saeed had been homeless for several years before getting support from his service provider just 3 years ago and managing to register for a doctor. Significantly he had experienced psychosocial problems, manifest not only in depression, but also in a sleep deprivation condition that he had endured for over 2 years. When he joined the online interview for this project, he was late in logging on, and at 11a.m. in the morning, he had only slept for about an hour in the preceding night, before his alarm woke him to log on to the meeting. He apologised for being late, and NGO2 summed up the struggles that Saeed had experienced, and that their relationship goes back many years, and how gradually he was gaining confidence. Their relationship appeared meaningful and authentic, despite the inevitable power imbalances evident in a service provider/user relationship. Notably, Saeed clearly identified with NGO2 as they were a non-binary member of the LGBTQ + community and were of non-white heritage, who spoke frankly about their own challenges in life and understood the "pain" that LGBTQ + people experience.

LGBTQ + asylum claimants have varied experiences of attempting to come to terms with their sexual identity. Many have histories of depression and suicidal thoughts. Pascal, Saeed and Ibrahim all reported struggles with mental health. Saeed recollected his own harrowing suicide attempt after his sexual identity was discovered by his family at home, involving him recalling the moment he hanged a rope from a ceiling fan, to take his life. Although he was now safe, no longer in his home country where he was threatened, and no longer homeless in the UK, it was clear that he was still struggling with psychological issues. Despite this his co-present relationship with NGO2 apparently allowed him to speak for himself, becoming more confident, and gaining access to services.

When advocates support LGBTQ + asylum claimants in developing a voice, often this involves "non instructed advocacy" where the advocate "seeks to uphold the person's rights; ensure fair and equal treatment and access to services" (IAPK, 2023). Wilks (2012: 49) suggests that this involves varying methodological approaches, such as a "rights-based approach" and "person-centred approach".

For example, when Ibrahim recalled his experience with Home Office officials, he was confounded that his initial case was denied, when he had provided what he considered was very strong evidence of his queer sexuality. This had involved letters of support from responsible individuals that he had a relationship with. He also discussed visiting gay saunas and recalling contracting a sexually transmitted disease. From a rights-based approach, any advocate would identify that his case should be robust as he had been living in a country that has oppressive laws against homosexuality. Despite this Ibrahim admitted that before his hearing he had a troubling time with the Home Office officials, when he argued with the case manager that he did not need a translator. Added to this, Ibrahim admitted that he may appear as inconsistent, as he was twice married. He initially was married under an arranged marriage, with a suitor selected from his family; when this did not work out, he got divorced, but then married another female, believing that she would better understand him.

Ibrahim through his connection to cultural capital both in terms of his familial standing and financial status, appeared to offer an empowered vision. In comparison, Saeed appeared as disempowered, evident where he had experienced homelessness, recalled traumatic events, framing his abject situation. Despite these contrasting visions, of empowered and disempowered asylum claimants, nuances of perception are complex, where the NGO advocate potentially frames the narratives of these individuals, in some senses mediating their identities, in relation to western citizenship ideals.

Hence it is important that an advocate does not impose their ideas, such as suggesting the ideal way to be perceived, but mainly supports them in working towards their goals. Advocacy involves a sense of partnership between the service provider and the service user, binding individuals who ultimately possess differential access to power. The voice of the asylum claimant is inevitably enabled by the agency and cultural profile of the NGO service provider. However, it is significant that whilst this appears as an alliance or a union between these parties, senses of equality within that relationship are potentially idealistic, deferring to the dominance of western oriented notions of LGBTQ + liberty and identity.

Conclusion

Within regionally based NGOs that offer service to LGBTQ + asylum claimants, the relationship between service provider and service user generates the potential for personal and collective advocacy. This was evident in our research project not only in considering the complex and nuanced relationship between these parties that frame aspects of commitment, vulnerability, and engagement, but also it is evident in the tangible community and public facing events, where advocacy may be exhibited, such as within:

- The online workshop that brought regional and national NGOs together.
- The presentation of formal evidence to the Women and Equalities select committee based on the interaction of NGOs and service users.
- The development of an informal prototype NGO regional network framing incidences of best practice, that lasted for the duration of our project.

Within these instances the apparent alliance between the NGO service provider and the LGBTQ + asylum claimant, appeared as a union of co-presence, potentially demonstrating new pathways as modes of support.

Despite this, inevitably there are power imbalances within this relationship, and the spectre of "homonationalism" (Puar, 2007) is inevitably apparent in posing a model for the western "good gay citizen", as evident where the advocate provides the voice for the asylum claimant, and subliminally underscores their own identity.

We should however place a focus on co-presence as the active mode of engagement, rather than deliberate on the contested signification of identity politics or historical subjectivities. As Nuttall (2019) affirms:

> "[C]o-presence has, as it were, a palpable quality to it: one can sense the attuned effect of it in action. This can allow for the safe expression of feeling, sometimes very raw feeling, and thus can lead to a powerful sense of emotional intimacy between people" (228).

Through NGO service providers and service users sharing their co-present personal stories, as part of "intimate citizenship" (Plumber, 1995) and "care-tizenship" (Casas-Cortes, 2019), not only are new models of citizenship potentially enabling, that challenges the hierarchical norm of national identity, but also an emboldening sense of self-respect is apparent in this model of citizen advocacy, for its ability to generate an empathetic emotion-based communion or connection. This relationship is one that offers benefits to both the service provider as much as the user, in framing a sense of communion and personal value, offering a hybrid sense of citizenship, where national subjectivity is decentred, if not deconstructed.

While inevitably power imbalances clearly dominate the narrative potential of asylum claimants who are seeking a voice, and senses of equality are hypothetically imagined, opportunities for mobility and exchange are evident. As NGO5 stated in affirming the co-present potential, not only was his life transformed when as an asylum seeker he attended a Church that accepted him as a gay man, but also later he would become an NGO advocate himself, as if traversing both sides of the divide, building bridges. We should however consider less about the building blocks of the bridge, their provenance, their origin, their connection to preferred geological/elemental sources of manufacture, but rather we should pay attention to the tensile strength that builds the bridge, in binding the materials as natural minerals, synthetic sources, and forming agents, as diverse as they need to be.

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Notes

1. This British Academy project (SRG1920\100567) had a working title of "Understanding LGBTQ Refugees' and Asylum Seekers' Support Needs through Listening to Autobiographical Storytelling". Christopher Pullen was the Primary investigator, Ieuan Franklin was the Co-Investigator, and Mengia Tschalaer was the research assistant.

2. The ethics ID is 32744 approved on 24/06/2020. The authors confirm that there are no competing interests to declare, and there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.
3. Disclosure of sexual or gender identity was voluntary. NGO participants included six male, one female and one nonbinary. Seven of these identified as LGBTQ+, while the female participant did not state if they personally identified as LGBTQ+.
4. Although some of the participants agreed that their identity could be used within the publication, for consistency anonymisation has been employed, using an alpha-numeric system for the NGOs, and pseudonyms for the asylum claimants.
5. The prototype network involved a structure where diverse regional NGOs would take turns in leading a discussion on issues that they were concerned with, also connecting with national NGOs. All 13 NGOs were invited to these sessions.

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