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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Surviving Exile. Queer Displaced People's Lived Experiences of Aid, Risks and Coping in Kakuma

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Abstract

This paper examines the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ displaced individuals in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. Drawing on situated knowledge and relational agency, it delves into how queer people experience the humanitarian-aid system on-site, what risks they encounter, and how they exert agency to cope with the prevalent challenges of day to day life. Findings reveal that, in a country context where same-sex relations are illegalized and queer people criminalized, those displaced face heightened risks. They are confronted with the heteronormative paradigms inherent to the humanitarian-aid system, ones resulting in their neglect and denied access to much-needed assistance and protection. Structural and physical violence such as discrimination, exclusion, harassment and threats of murder exacerbate unrelenting fears and tangible risks in the camp. To navigate these challenges, they employ diverse individual and especially collective coping strategies, creating safe spaces for mutual support, exchange and hope.

Keywords LGBTQ+ displaced people · Lived experiences · Protection · Agency · Coping · Kenya

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Introduction

What does it mean for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and further individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQ+) to seek asylum and protection in Kenya? Do they find safety in settings like Kakuma refugee camp, which are purposefully established to protect and shelter those fleeing places of origin? Established in 1992 in north-western Kenya, Kakuma is the second-largest camp in the country, hosting displaced people[1] mainly from South Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) but also from Burundi, Ethiopia, Sudan and Uganda (UNHCR, 2023). Among them are queer people, and we reflect in the following on how they continue to encounter multiple challenges as the result of deficient protection measures, exclusion and violence in the camp over protracted time. However, these extensive risks do not mean that they give in or give up; instead, they practice agency by individually and collectively coping with the presenting conditions and creating spaces for mutual support, safety, exchange and hope.

Such dangers are not limited to displaced people in Kakuma. Across the world, queer people face persecution on the grounds of their sexual orientation and gender identity, having to seek safety in other countries (Spijkerboer, 2013; Camminga, 2019). Despite a shift towards increased legal and humanitarian protection approaches in working with queer displaced people since the early 2000s (e.g. UNHCR, 2002a, UNHCR, 2002b, 2011), wide-ranging deficits still prevail (Güler et al., 2019; Wessels, 2021). They frequently continue to face gender-related vulnerabilities and structural discrimination in countries of asylum (Nyanzi, 2013; Myrttinen et al., 2017; Koçak, 2020; Camminga & Marnell, 2022b; García Rodríguez, 2023; Ritholtz, 2023). Although scholarship on the adversities of queer displaced people is growing, critical reflection on how heteronormative and patriarchal humanitarian, political and societal structures foster these violent and discriminatory life conditions in exile remains insufficient. Moreover, the focus on vulnerabilities still overshadows the various forms of agency queer displaced people employ to cope with experiences of hardship and danger (for exceptions, see Camminga, 2020b; Şahin, 2022; Ongwech et al., 2024).

In seeking to address these research gaps, we place queer displaced people's lived experiences at the core and explore humanitarian-aid structures, prevalent risks and coping strategies in Kakuma. Resonating with the critique voiced by Ongwech et al. (2024), we do not approach vulnerability and agency as dichotomous and mutually exclusive phenomena but are interested in the entanglements between them. Based on empirical research on-site and by theoretically drawing on situated knowledge and relational agency, we hence analyze the complex interplay between structural constraints and individual coping. More concretely, we discuss how Kenyan law illegalizes same-sex relations and criminalizes queer individuals, rendering those displaced at particular risk. Although the humanitarian-aid system is supposed to provide protection, it follows heteronormative paradigms which not only neglect queer individuals but outright deny them much-needed protection and assistance.

[1] In this paper, we primarily refer to displaced individuals or people instead of refugees as the legalistic approach is critical, and we focus on the lived experiences of displacement and exile.

Homophobic and transphobic sentiments frequently translate into action, and queer displaced people constantly fear and indeed encounter multiple forms of structural and physical violence, including discrimination, exclusion, harassment, assault and even murder. In light of such adversities, those concerned turn to diverse individual and especially collective means of coping. In addition to strategies helping them stay safe, they construct physical and emotional spaces of belonging, trust and support in everyday life in exile.

This analysis is in line with the few studies to date that have addressed LGBTQ+ displaced people in Kenya (Moore, 2019; Camminga, 2020a, b; Pincock, 2021; Carron & O'Keeffe, 2023), while also going beyond them in linking the areas of aid, risks and coping. The paper is structured around these three key areas. After outlining our research approach, we first address the political and humanitarian landscape in Kenya and Kakuma specifically, as giving rise to the structural challenges which queer displaced individuals repeatedly encounter. We subsequently focus on risks of violence and reflect on interlocutors' experiences of precarities in everyday life. Finally, we turn to the ways in which they deal with the complex and multifaceted issues identified, therewith outlining their collective strategies of self-organizing.

Research Design

Expanding beyond feminist studies' perspectives on androcentric norms and structures in politics, law and society (e.g. Enloe, 2014; Charlesworth & Chinkin, 2022), queer scholarship laments how a deeply ingrained heteronormativity marginalizes LGBTQ+ individuals (e.g. Weber, 2014; Sen, 2021). These critiques equally apply to refugee law and politics, as realms in which the heterosexual binary also persists. Queer studies stress that gender diversity, sexual orientations and their intersection with power structures remain insufficiently addressed, which prolongs and amplifies the risks LGBTQ+ displaced people face (e.g. Spijkerboer, 2013; Güler et al., 2019; Camminga & Marnell, 2022b). A prime example is the humanitarian category of vulnerability in refugee protection; it is ascribed to women first and foremost, reinforcing the essentialist dichotomy of 'victim-women' and 'perpetrator-men' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014; Krause, 2021). Heterosexual men, let alone queer individuals, do not seem to fit with humanitarian notions of vulnerability (Turner, 2021; Ruzibiza & Berckmoes, 2022).

Queer research crucially seeks to challenge such essentialist perspectives on gender and sexuality. This necessitates highlighting the complexities, fluidities and lived experiences of the individuals (e.g. Parent et al., 2013; Weber, 2014), while also critically engaging with the inherent power relations and structural underpinnings of heteronormativity given how closely they shape displacement and the multipronged responses to it (Luibhéid, 2004, 2008). And yet the acronym 'LGBTQ+' and depiction of 'queer' are critical and oversimplified, as they ultimately convey the impression of uniformity among those who do not self-identify with the heterosexual and/or binary framework. Such uniformity is, of course, a mirage, and 'queer' itself is already a controversial term, while 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual' and 'transgender' refer to distinct sexual orientations and gender identities (Parent et al., 2013; Murib, 2014;

Camminga & Marnell, 2022a). We draw on such critical reflections and use the terms as interlocutors employed them to explain their orientations and identities. Corresponding with Camminga and Marnell (2022a, pp. 4-7), we tend to refer to queer more frequently as it offers flexibility in capturing diverse non-heteronormative sexualities and various gender identities, while being aware and mindful of the challenges that can arise from such an 'umbrella term'. This is particularly the case for our research with people who fled from diverse African countries and sought asylum in Kenya; academic knowledge production of queerness is strongly shaped by western discourses (Nyanzi, 2014; Reddy et al., 2018; Camminga, 2019) and our positionalities (more below) require to prioritize how interlocutors perceive and address their identities and experiences – not how we interpret them.

To place their lived experiences in exile centerstage, we focus on their situated knowledge and relational agency within the highly precarious humanitarian-aid system. We understand 'experiences' not as a purely reactive concept encompassing mere recollections of the past but rather as a lived and thus active process of continuous engagement with the past, present and future alike, shaping one's perceptions – as situated knowledge – and actions – as agency. Haraway (1988) posits 'situated knowledge' from a feminist perspective to be embodied, in relying on and stemming from positionings while also going beyond the individual in being about communities, too. Collins (2000) also stresses knowledge's social and political embeddedness in her work on black feminist thought, highlighting that it is not static but dynamic because power asymmetries and subsequent experiences can undergo change (Collins, 2000, p. 25). Given the restrictive asylum system encountered in our research context, adopting such an approach enables us to explore the unique individual yet also shared lived experiences of queer displaced people informing their actions.

To examine the latter's endeavor, we broadly understand agency as the capacity to act as well as navigate and negotiate presenting sociopolitical structures. In lieu of an agency/structure duality, we follow Burkitt's relational approach which cites agency not as an 'individual phenomenon' (2016, p. 322) echoing a person's engagement with experiences but focuses instead on the social relatedness of their agency. Hence, individuals' (inter)actions with others and structural conditions onsite are crucial aspects of 'webs or networks of relations and interdependencies, both interpersonal and impersonal' (Burkitt, 2016, p. 323). This approach supports our investigation of the subjective and collective practices of queer people based on their lived experiences, and enables us to explore the manifold ways in which they cope with the tremendous structural constraints and actively shape their situations despite vulnerabilities.

Empirically, we draw on data collected in the course of the research project 'Women, Forced Migration – and Peace' between 2020 and 2022.[2] Due to risks and restrictions encountered in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we initially spoke with displaced people, humanitarian personnel and researchers online in 2020 and 2021, conducting 27 unstructured dialogues and 12 semi-structured interviews with a total of 44 people (17 identifying as women, 27 identifying as men). This paved

[2] The project was funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research and carried out at Osnabrück University from 2019 to 2023.

the way for establishing networks of trust in Kenya and later conducting research on-site. After a pilot phase of three weeks spent in Kakuma in May 2022, the main data-collection round took place between September and November of that year. The research was carried out in a team formed of three people with lived experiences of displacement, whose expertise, language abilities and extensive networks including queer people proved key. We employed a multimethod approach with participant observation, ero-epic dialogues, focus-group discussions and a survey with displaced individuals, as well as semi-structured interviews with aid workers. In this approach, dialogues represent the most crucial form of data collection – being held in the form of unstructured, open conversations (Girtler, 2001, pp. 147-168) during which interlocutors could share their experiences of life in the camp. These accounts are at the heart of this contribution.

While an overall of 78 displaced individuals took part in ero-epic dialogues (53 identifying as women, 25 identifying as men), five of them self-identified as LGBTQ+ and three as activists advocating for the rights of LGBTQ+ displaced people through their respective refugee-led organizations (RLOs). Given the heightened risks, we did not focus on collecting data with more queer individuals but prioritized safety, building relations of trust over time and facilitating in-depth dialogues. In addition to the latter, we draw on insights gained through informal encounters and participant observation in Kakuma, interviews with 23 aid workers in Kenya as well as the online research during the pandemic. This combination of research methods allowed us to gain access to a hard-to-reach population. All those spoken with who self-identified as LGBTQ+ had fled a country of origin in the Great Lakes region. To protect their anonymity, no further details are disclosed here.

Our methodological approach indicates the relevance of ethical considerations in our work. The ethical codes of the University of Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre (2007) and the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (2018) served as guiding frameworks in designing and conducting the research with interlocutors. All information shared was collected in a manner which ensured anonymity and confidentiality. Voluntary and informed participation was pursued not via signatures on standardized consent forms but through the relational approach proposed by Mackenzie et al. (2007). This means consistently engaging in dialogue regarding participation in the research, therewith discussing roles and the use of data in order to ensure interlocutors fully grasp what it is they are agreeing to.

Averting potential harm to those spoken with was key throughout. Many queer people sought to conceal their identities, as disclosure could increase the chances of danger. Conversely, exchange with a white researcher from Germany could produce visibility and attract unwanted attention, requiring us to proceed as sensitively and carefully as possible. To this end, we carried out do no harm analyses before, during and after data collection to (re-)evaluate and adjust the approach (Krause, 2017) and complied fully with the security measures implemented by interlocutors. For example, in the preparation of one of our conversations with two queer people the location of the dialogue was not shared right away. On the planned day of the encounter, we were first directed to one area to meet on the premises of a particular RLO only to be informed that the location of the meeting had been changed to the private compound of an activist, where interlocutors felt it was safer to speak with us. In all interactions,

it was up to the interlocutor to decide where to meet, how long dialogues would last and which topics to discuss. Our primary aim was and continues to be to respect individuals' dignity, rights, agency and own perspectives.

Despite our ethical reflections and strategies to establish rapport and proceed with the utmost sensitivity to our interlocutors' circumstances and needs, we must consider how intersectional power dynamics and structural inequalities persisted. Besides the administrative responsibilities of the team leader and staff, these dynamics are inherent to our intersectional positionalities and the broader social context. We are two white women researchers, trained and employed in western academia, and are deeply aware of the privileges which our education and jobs, skin color, passports and cis gender identity bring – to name just a few critical markers. These inherently shape our situatedness and thus also our interactions with interlocutors. Legal statuses, political constraints and economic limitations impact perspectives – and hence the research. In the team and with interlocutors, we continuously discussed these intersectional power dynamics and structural inequalities and rendered care a central tenet of our work (see also Schulz et al., 2022; Clark-Kazak, 2023). We sought to ensure its upholding through a relational data-collection process, trusted collaboration, maintaining contact and ongoing exchange.

Illegalization in Kenya's Legislation and Heteronormative Paradigms in Kakuma's Aid Apparatus

Not only Kakuma's immediate surroundings but also the overall legal, political and social conditions in Kenya at large affect queer displaced people. One may assume that the latter is a protection space for queer individuals given the increasing number of them seeking asylum there, as nearby countries enact restrictive, discriminatory legislation. Most notable here is Uganda's recent Anti-Homosexuality Bill, first adopted in 2014 before a more punitive version then passed in 2023 (Jjuuko & Mutesi, 2018; HRAPF, 2023).

However, Kenya similarly criminalizes same-sex relations and has laws in place punishing consensual homosexual relations with up to 14 years imprisonment. This colonial-era relic, one inherently embedded in heteronormative principles, contributes to the egregious abuse of queer individuals' human rights in the country and complicates their daily lives tremendously (HRW, 2008; Zomorodi, 2016). Despite widespread protest and activism, the Kenyan High Court ruled in 2019 to uphold this legislation (HRW, 2019). In April 2023, Member of Parliament Peter Kaluma introduced to the floor the Family Protection Bill, which aims to further strengthen heteronormative ideals of family and to criminalize same-sex practices and relations. It seeks to establish more restrictive laws on homosexuality, LGBTQ+ activities and sexual education, containing provisions for the expulsion of refugees and asylum seekers violating them (Kupemba, 2023).

These developments and restrictions endanger all affected persons, but those displaced and seeking asylum are confronted with heightened risks given their precarious legal status and resultant socio-economic circumstances. In spite of that, queer displaced people continue to flee to and remain in Kenya, where they find themselves

in a hostile environment beset by homophobic and transphobic attitudes and stereotypes. This frequently translates into discrimination, exclusion, harassment, physical violence and murder (see also, Moore, 2019; Camminga, 2020a).

The humanitarian system developed by state and aid agencies in Kenya to protect and assist asylum seekers and refugees only provides limited support for queer displaced people. Although international refugee law and humanitarian-protection standards have been complemented in recent years by a more inclusive reading to ensure the safety and well-being of queer asylum seekers and refugees (e.g. UNHCR, 2002b, 2002a, 2011), such global norms and approaches are not necessarily thoroughly considered and pursued in countries of asylum. This is also true of Kenya, where the humanitarian system is largely stuck in heteronormative aid structures and service provision. Yet, some aid measures are realized specifically for queer individuals, creating a parallel legal and humanitarian regime in the country (Nanima, 2017). This paradox is particularly evident in the humanitarian landscape established in camps like Kakuma.

In general, Kenya enforces a strict encampment policy requiring refugees and asylum seekers in the country to live in camps. Of the about 676,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers currently in the country, most are settled in two large camps. Kakuma has a population of about 275,000 people, while Dadaab in eastern Kenya houses about 302,000 others (UNHCR, 2023). Although no official data on the number of queer refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya is available, estimations are that there are around 300 individuals living in Kakuma (NGLHRC & Amnesty International, 2023, p. 17). Despite receiving access to some common services (e.g. food or shelter), the people are confronted with restrictions on their freedom of movement, political participation and economic opportunities while further facing dependency on handouts and prevalent risks of violence over an extended period of time (Abdi, 2005; Brankamp, 2022). Kakuma was, as noted earlier, established in 1992; many of those we were able to speak with have been living there for more than ten years now. While these restrictions and risks are widespread for all displaced people in Kenya, those identifying as queer experience increased levels of danger.

The humanitarian landscape in Kakuma is governed by a number of aid agencies. While Kenya's Department of Refugee Services (DRS)[3] administers the camp together with UNHCR, several NGOs provide services in diverse sectors including vis-à-vis protection, education, livelihood maintenance, health and nutrition. This biopolitical system transfers decision-making power to state and aid agencies while placing refugees in the role of mere beneficiaries – an issue on which camp contexts worldwide have been criticized for many years now (e.g. Harrell-Bond, 2002; Diken, 2004). Concerning Kenya's camp and aid apparatus, Jaji (2012) stresses the social technology of control; Brankamp (2022), meanwhile, deems the system in place 'carceral humanitarianism'. Approaches such as gender mainstreaming as well as age, gender and diversity management are supposed to be cross-cutting and integrated throughout the aid projects provided, but a heteronormative focus on women and men still persists. In practice, gender is frequently equated with women – namely, in the course of providing particular services to protect or empower them (Wirtz, 2017;

[3] Previously the Refugee Affairs Secretariat, it took its current name in 2021.

see also Krause, 2021). This narrow focus is closely intertwined with the vulnerability paradigm mentioned above. How normalized the heteronormative lens is within the aid apparatus becomes evident from humanitarian projects, official reports as well as interviews with aid workers in Kakuma. They primarily address women as vulnerable and men as self-reliant actors (or those who are supposed to be self-reliant), while largely disregarding queer individuals.

Should queer displaced people be mentioned at all, then focus is on their victimhood and need for external protection. Given Kenya's increasingly restrictive legislation, this may seem plausible but it still reveals an underlying bias in overlooking individuals' own agency. Moreover, despite being ascribed a particular form of victimhood, their protection needs are hardly met. A core protection standard in the global asylum system is refugee status determination (RSD), for which the DRS is responsible. Regardless of their sexual orientations and gender identities, however, conversation partners reported huge delays in this process (see also, Pincock, 2021; NGLHRC & Amnesty International, 2023, p. 22). For queer displaced people, these delays and waiting periods were even worse. While all LGBTQ+ individuals engaged with in this research had registered in Kenya and thus received a manifest and a ration card, they were all still awaiting their eligibility interview as part of the RSD process. One emphasized how it was commonplace for two to three years to pass before one's eligibility interview in Kakuma (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). Such a prolonged wait deeply affects the people, causing significant distress. Those spoken with acutely fear rejection, noting how: 'They told us, we don't accept you. Go!' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022). Being subject to hostile reactions was a recollection shared by others, too. The long-term uncertainty about one's legal status exacerbates fears about what the future holds while these delays also complicate additional protection measures, including the possibility of being considered for resettlement. One lesbian woman pointed out her worry that 'if they don't accept us, what will we do?' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022).

To shelter queer people better, UNHCR initially provided them with designated spaces in Kakuma – the so-called 'protection areas' (see also, Buchanan, 2016). Camminga (2020a) expressively labelled this as being 'encamped within a camp', arguing that: 'Paradoxically, although LGBTQ+ refugees became hyper-visible in the camp, in part due to language issues, perceived special treatment, nationality, beliefs held by other refugees regarding their inherent "vice" and the placement of their shelters, they also entered a kind of invisibility' (2020a, p. 46). Our research participants also noted how these areas created the impression that those housed there received special treatment, portraying them as 'different' from 'normal' camp residents.

This Othering put them at particular risk of physical assault, which would transpire when houses were attacked and people were threatened (e.g. dialogue, Kakuma, 5 October 2022; dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). As such, this 'special' protection instead served to produce additional dangers. An LGBTQ+ rights advocate in Kakuma criticized UNHCR for only realizing too late that 'it is useless to keep them in a protection place because they will be a target' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). As a consequence, many chose to rather live in the community, often staying safe by hiding their identity (Zomorodi, 2015, p. 16). UNHCR eventually fostered community integration to reduce the hazards faced but attacks did not stop. Inter-

locutors had to move within the camp time and again, seeking a safer place to live as 'neighbors were continuously assaulting us' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). Thus in Kakuma, which is supposed to be a site of protection, ongoing risks contribute to repeated displacement.

The prevalence of violence is not least related to the outright denial of much-needed assistance. One person described how 'when you go to ask for help, you find out, they separate you because they don't see you as normal people' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022). Another pointed out that some aid agencies 'don't have staff to deal with LGBTI issues. Now you talk to them to tell them what LGBTI people face. But also in their culture we are like cursed. This is a big challenge' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). Many more shared stories of how often they sought support, outright begging for protection but with little to no effect. In stark contrast, one interlocutor recalled how her sister was attacked, had her arm broken but did not receive support because '[t]hey said this is not a case' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022). An activist further complained about humanitarian organizations' inaction: 'We do our work. We write down the challenges people go through but the very people who are supposed to help them finally, they don't take any action' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). Condescending attitudes and discriminatory treatment were also evident in some conversations with aid workers as well as their witnessed interactions with queer individuals. For example, one referred to how increasing numbers of people were seeking asylum 'because of these issues of LGBTQI stuff' (interview, Kakuma, 11 November 2022).

The prolonged wait for an RSD outcome, the 'special' treatment of segregation and structural neglect ultimately reveal the humanitarian-aid system's ingrained homophobic and transphobic tendencies, a state of affairs contributing to the Othering of queer displaced individuals. By labelling them as deviant from the heteronormative standard, those in question are marginalized in or entirely excluded from mainstream humanitarian considerations – while at the same time exposing them to additional risk factors. Thus, queer displaced individuals experience a lack of vital assistance in Kakuma while simultaneously facing the Kenyan state's illegalization of their sexual orientations and gender identities.

Queer Individuals' Lived Experiences of Multiple Risks in Kakuma Refugee Camp

While structural Othering in the humanitarian-aid system and attacks against queer displaced people already reflect the extensive risks they face, the insights shared by queer individuals on their lived experiences reveal how widespread and multifaceted their daily challenges are. Yet, as interlocutors explained about their reason for arrival in Kenya (and Kakuma particularly), fleeing persecution in countries of origin was initially influenced by the hope of a life free from fear and harm. Such desires remained unfulfilled for those we spoke with.

'I told them the place where I would feel safe with my family was in the refugee camp, where I can get protection from police officers and other organizations who support us' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). This is how a gay man described

his expectations concerning seeking refuge in the camp after initially arriving in Nairobi. Having faced exclusion, discrimination, assault, torture and eventually death threats in his country of origin, he and his family were forced to leave and seek protection elsewhere. In the process, they first fled to other countries of the East Africa region but receiving asylum due to persecution on the grounds of sexual orientation proved impossible – also due to his rights activism on behalf of queer people back home. After finally arriving in Kenya and meeting with UNHCR representatives in the capital, his hopes for improvement were high, especially after being transferred to the camp: 'I heard that there are organizations here that help us and also police officers and the military, so I thought there will be no one who could touch me here. I can do everything with my partner […] and we are fine' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). Soon after arrival, however, he realized that Kakuma was also no safe place for them. Instead of protection, he and his family are subject to intimidation and physical harm by other camp residents, as well as experiencing a chronic lack of support from the police and aid workers alike.

Scholarship has shown that gender-specific risks of violence are not limited to situations of conflict in countries of origin, extending to places of exile too (Cockburn, 2004; Ferris, 1990; Alden, 2010; Krause, 2015). However, primarily addressed to date here have been threats to (heterosexual) women and girls, and partly those against men and boys (e.g. Abdi, 2005; Jaji, 2009; Janmyr, 2017; Wachter et al., 2018; Krause, 2018). The prevailing gender-based insecurities of queer displaced people in exile have received some attention as well (García Rodríguez, 2023; see also Nyanzi, 2013; Spijkerboer, 2013; Güler et al., 2019), but remain largely disconnected from the broader research debates. In Kakuma, queer people shared manifold accounts of ill-treatment and attack because of their sexual orientation and gender identity – including verbal harassment, physical abuse and sexual violence. As a result of such widespread risks, all stressed what one lesbian woman surmised: 'There is absolutely no protection' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022).

Attacks occurred on a daily basis, for example when going to collect food rations or on one's way to school or work. Interlocutors shared incidents of stones being thrown at them, of being stopped on the streets, insulted, harassed and their personal belongings stolen. One revealed how: 'They will start throwing stones and attack us heavily' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022). Moreover, lesbian women stressed facing a particular risk of sexual abuse, with one explaining: 'They touch you. They beat you. […] They take all of your things and rape you badly' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). Another woman shared similar dangers of sexual violence perpetrated by people even in highly visible public spaces, repeatedly noting how frequent she both experienced and witnessed violent beatings (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022) – something common to all queer interlocutors.

One gay man recalled being physically assaulted when going to the market; his neighbors attacked him: '[T]hey took me in their midst, pushed me. […] They beat me. I had to scream, so that someone comes to help me' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). The injuries sustained herewith are often severe. Another gay man's very recent assault was testimony to that. While walking to work, he was attacked by six unknown people who hit him with a metal bar on his face, arms and back. He was left covered in blood, while his left eye was still visibly swollen the day we met

and his right hand and back remained injured. He had spent a week in hospital after the attack, and was still suffering from acute pain (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022).

Such widespread violence corresponds with a study by the Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration (ORAM) and Rainbow Railroad (2021, p. 22), according to which 83 per cent of queer people interviewed in Kakuma had experienced physical violence and 26 per cent sexual assault. Our interlocutors noted that such violence is largely perpetrated by other displaced people in the camp and members of the host community, including both known and unknown individuals. It results from widespread homophobic and transphobic hate; one gay man stressed that: '[P]eople are against us. They don't want LGBTI. They attack us. There is no place where we can go […]. If we are in the community, many people treat us very badly' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). This also includes verbal insults, with camp residents partly calling them *shoga* (e.g. dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022; dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022), a derogative Swahili term for a lesbian or gay person – which serves to humiliate them and create public attention, and thus further risks to their well-being. Another man explained how discrimination arises because 'refugees all have their cultural backgrounds and also their religious cultures. They do not accept. As a LGBTI person, if you come across such a person, to them I am like a demon for them or I come as an accosted person. For them, they feel when they assault me, it's like they are serving God' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022).

These prevalent threats induce a constant fear of being attacked. Many said that they sought change by reporting such violence, but neither humanitarian agencies nor security actors like the police stepped in. Their denial of assistance and services discriminates against queer people and contributes to increased risks due to the impunity of perpetrators. One lesbian woman recalled how paradoxical the denial of assistance was: '[A]t the police, for example, they told us that when we see that person, bring him to us. But how will you just hold the person who hurt you and take him to the police?' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022). She went on to criticize the police for refusing to take action on such dubious grounds as 'there is not enough petrol in the car', before lamenting how aid agencies also remain passive: 'There is nothing they have helped me with, not even saying "sorry". They just said, we will write it down' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022) Another person shared similarly of one aid agency: '[I]f you go to [anonymized] to explain to them our problems, they don't help us. So we just stay like this and life is very difficult. And there is no one who helps. There is no one who asks' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022).

Such passivity and, denial of protection essentially reveals structural violence which contributes to acute physical danger. Interlocutors not only addressed discrimination, but some also disclosed instances of police harassment and brutality against queer displaced individuals in Kakuma. These included insults, beatings and physical intimidation, using tear gas and raiding people's homes (see also, Milton, 2019; Zhu, 2020; NGLHRC & Amnesty International, 2023, pp. 28-35).

Coping with Risks and Establishing Support and Belonging

Against the backdrop of queer people's lived experiences of a precarious humanitarian-aid system and multiple risks, their own coping strategies are key tools. These are not merely survival strategies but reveal how they deal with issues individually and collectively by creating social surroundings of trust, support and protection by and for themselves. This way, as conceptualized in the relational agency approach, they actively shape and organize their lives, stand up for themselves and others, and proactively address the daily difficulties they encounter. While the body of research on coping of displaced people in exile is growing (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2016), queer individuals' agentic practices have hardly been examined here (for exceptions, see Camminga, 2020b; Şahin, 2022; Ongwech et al., 2024).

One such strategy immediately visible when in Kakuma and interacting with queer individuals is their living context. In an effort to enhance their safety, some queer displaced people decided to construct one compound where they live together as a group. They pooled resources to build a fence around it to improve their security situation and provide mutual care. 'We constructed houses which have one main gate, so the houses are next to each other. So that there is no path in the middle. So, when my neighbor gets a problem, it becomes easy to rescue them. […] Normally, when you construct a house here, you cannot put it next to another one. There needs to be a distance. But we decided not to do that' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). This gay man herewith explained the protection purpose behind the chosen architecture, while further adding that they live together 'to look for peace ourselves' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022).

According to interlocutors, there are a few compounds in Kakuma where predominantly queer individuals live in such an arrangement. While this may appear to mirror aid agencies' 'protection spaces', the structures which the people develop are self-governed and come with less exposure to the surrounding community. 'We have put ourselves together to live in peace. We try to live in peace within us and then be an example for others showing that it is possible to live in peace here in the camp' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). Moreover, they revealed that these areas sometimes also become safe spaces for other camp residents who, for example, face immediate risks of sexual and gender-based violence at home.

Such collective actions extend to organizing themselves into a group working to support each other socially, economically, politically, legally and psychologically. Be it by exchanging information, starting small-scale businesses together, jointly standing up for their rights, enjoying leisure time together or providing peer counselling – the spectrum of their collective actions is wide-ranging, and must be understood as refugee-led or self-organizing practices (see also, Krause & Schmidt, 2019; Alio et al., 2020; Gonzalez Benson et al., 2022; Kara et al., 2022). Together, they establish ways to cope with presenting challenges and improve their life circumstances. For example, they have developed their own security arrangements for when they need to move around the camp and run errands. These are embedded in their everyday lives, as evident in the information one lesbian woman shared in describing the chosen strategy to reach school safely: '[W]e go early to school. We wake up very early. We

go to school. When we are coming back from school, we walk with a lot of classmates and reach home. We don't walk around. We just stay inside' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022). In addition to ensuring physical safety, protecting their emotional and psychological well-being are also key aspects for which those concerned have created their own psychosocial support system. Hereby, some queer individuals offer counselling and advice to the younger members of the group to help them deal with traumatic experiences. They also seek to create modest income-generating activities for group members, including farming and baking cakes to be sold in a shop they established in their compound.

These physical arrangements and collective practices simultaneously help establish spaces of belonging. Especially due to the omnipresent dangers and neglect of the aid system, self-organizing social surroundings in which queer individuals feel heard, supported and respected are of central importance and indicate additional dimensions to their relational agency. In these spaces, they can be themselves and do not have to hide their sexual orientations or gender identities. Interlocutors particularly emphasized the importance of being together to counter feelings of loneliness and isolation. One lesbian woman pointed out the advantage of living as a group: '[I]n the evening, we like very much to sit outside and we talk. We are laughing' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022). Belonging to a social collective and self-organized forms of support are crucial for sustaining hope and optimism – although challenges persist. Further highlighted was conversation partners' especially valuing the possibility of learning from each other. Thus, they create room for sharing skills, dancing and exercising together to release stress.

Collective practices like these are not limited to queer displaced people, however. On the one hand, they also actively seek to contribute to better understanding and more peaceful relations between respective communities within the camp. One gay man talked about an activity his group fostered to take a conciliatory step towards one nationality they are often attacked and assaulted by in Kakuma. They brought seedlings to that community for them to plant on their compounds, as a means to increase interaction and create acceptance (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). On the other hand, despite widespread homophobic and transphobic attitudes, there are other people who support queer individuals and seek to give them hope. One highlighted how: '[W]e have our activists who are helping us, who are encouraging us, so that our soul does not break' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). This support involves also material aid, with one RLO in the camp regularly handing over clothes and other donated items to a LGBTQ+ RLO. Someone who benefitted from such contributions stressed that 'there is a person who cares' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022), creating belief that social improvement will eventually come.

Collective action and forms of self-organization furthermore pursue political, social and humanitarian aims. Queer people work with allies to raise awareness on the challenges the former face and to condemn homophobic and transphobic sentiments: 'As activists, that is what we keep telling people. Why do you do that? They are people like you' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). Moreover, a RLO which seeks to create peaceful living conditions in Kakuma supports queer people with small grants to start their own businesses and thus become independent of the discriminatory structural environment and its constraints. In addition, there are also

examples of camp residents giving shelter to queer people who face threats in their community, herewith offering some level of protection to them.

Finally, along with collective practices, faith in a better future to come and religious belief are key strategies by which individuals cope with difficult experiences past and present. This corresponds with research debates about the value of religion and spirituality for displaced people's coping and resilience (e.g. Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). All interlocutors pointed out how their faith helps them remain optimistic, noting for example: 'We hope that God will help us' (dialogue, Kakuma, 7 October 2022); 'We live by God's grace alone, because the situation here is very bad. Only God knows our situation. […] It's just God. We just pray to God to help us. Only God alone helps us. We are survivors for God' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). Practicing faith collectively not only provides a social space for spending time together but also support – strengthening hope for and belief in a better future.

Conclusion

While fleeing to Kenya and heading to Kakuma was often fueled by hopes of safety and acceptance, queer displaced individuals found themselves in conditions which one gay man described as akin to continuous 'suffering' (dialogue, Kakuma, 9 November 2022). He had been living in Kakuma for almost three years when our paths crossed, and was a survivor of repeated physical attacks which left him heavily injured in hospital. Such experiences are by no means his alone, being widespread in the camp. Risks of structural, physical and psychological violence prevail due to widespread homophobic and transphobic attitudes in Kenyan society and the heteronormative approach underpinning contemporary refugee protection. Interlocutors' narratives about their lived experiences reveal that there are no humanitarian measures in place to meet the protection needs of queer people in Kakuma. Instead, they are largely neglected by the aid system – denied support even. One gay man stressed: 'It is not safe here and I will not lie that there is security' (dialogue, Kakuma, 28 October 2022). Such dangers only intensify as Kenya's government seeks to further illegalize same-sex relations and criminalize queer people.

It is not only that such adversities require queer people to develop coping strategies individually and collectively. Their coping is, furthermore, future-oriented, paving the way for establishing spaces of belonging, regaining hope and creating an everyday life to enjoy together. In lieu of a linearity to vulnerability counteracting coping, or, contrariwise, their self-organizing automatically leading to better lives and happiness, research shows the importance of contextualizing risks and agency. The widespread dangers are structurally and socially embedded in the homophobic and transphobic context of the camp, their collective practices in the architecture of their jointly constructed living arrangements and their provision of mutual support to one another. The latter may not always prevent or counter the former, but at times runs parallel to it.

The offered insights into deficient protection, prevalent risks and manifold coping strategies demonstrate the relevance of placing queer displaced people's lived experiences and relational agency centerstage. By prioritizing not merely the objec-

tives of the research project but the very people who took their time to speak with us and share their own perspectives, it was possible to gain deeper understanding of the intensity and scope of what they are exposed to on an everyday basis. Focus on their personal experiences, knowledge and agency is key. While bringing to the fore the numerous risks and vulnerabilities queer displaced people face in exile in Kenya, our research reflects the importance of similarly engaging with the diverse coping strategies which the individuals employ. This illuminates how their agency is relational, helping move beyond the vulnerability/agency dichotomy and highlighting that 'agency can sit alongside, and in relation, to persistent vulnerabilities and victimization, which are similarly shaped and conditioned by multiple power formations along intersectional lines' (Ongwech et al., 2024, p. 4). If the focus on agency is not pursued carefully, however, risks can arise. Ethnographic research always requires thorough ethical reflection; in such work, though, continuous assessment of procedures and interactions, taking time to build trusting relationships and ensuring data protection are even more important. These responsibilities emerged once more when writing this paper, in seeking to shed light on prevalent problems while still sufficiently protecting the anonymity of our interlocutors.

Moving forward, more research is needed on queer displaced people. Given the extensive violence they face while stuck in the heteronormative humanitarian-aid system and from entrenched homophobic and transphobic sentiments, studies should particularly address protection needs and approaches. Doing research on and with queer displaced people further requires moving beyond dealing with individuals as a homogenous group, instead paying attention to their diverse experiences. While our research lacks distinct perspectives of non-binary displaced people given the risks and hard to reach population, we are aware that they face unique challenges and patterns of exclusion in binary spaces of humanitarian protection and beyond (e.g. Tschalaer, 2020), which require intensified research attention. Finally, beyond exclusively focusing on presenting challenges and means of protection, scholars should also address the strategies which queer people devise both individually and collectively to navigate the difficult surroundings encountered in exile. Our findings indicate the immense value of RLOs here. Further exploration of forms of self-organization is key if we are to better grasp the mutual-support practices as well as the limitations which can potentially arise.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval This study was approved by the USIU-A Institutional Review Board (number USIU-A/IRB/164–2020). This research was performed in accordance with the ethical standards for research with displaced people as laid down in the University of Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre (2007) and the IASFM International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (2018).

Informed Consent Voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all individual who took part in the research concerning their participation, recording and/or taking notes of data collection, and publishing information they shared. To protect their identities, all information are anonymized to the extent possible.

Submission Declaration With this submission, we confirm that the manuscript has been submitted solely to Gender Issues and neither the whole manuscript nor any part of it is published, in press, or submitted elsewhere in any form. We also confirm that the manuscript is thoroughly adjusted to the journal's guidelines, and that it is suitably anonymized and includes no references to our previous works.

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