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How Does Necropower Shape the Everyday Experience of LGBTQ+ People Seeking Asylum in England and Wales? Perspectives From Providers and Directly Affected People

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ABSTRACT

Individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or with other diverse sexual orientations or gender identities (LGBTQ+) face unique challenges when seeking asylum, many of which are intensified by the state's cisheteronormative structures. These effects can vary depending on the social identities and locations of LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum. We used Mbembé's (2003) concept of necropolitics to examine the daily experiences of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in England and Wales. Necropower, a manifestation of necropolitics, reinforces notions that specific groups are disposable and less deserving of support. This not only furthers stigmatization but also shapes policies that criminalize and vilify them. We conducted 26 qualitative interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum in England and Wales, as well as with legal, social, and mental health providers who have experience assisting this group. We used constructivist grounded theory to identify four themes from the data: (1) Being trapped at the mercy of the state; (2) Perpetuating dehumanization through restricted agency; (3) Relying on informal supports (if they can be found); and (4) "I was always my hero:" Drawing on one's strength to resist and persist. We also identified a process through which necropower contributed to hostile immigration policies; these detrimental policies fostered migration stigma, which then affected the lives of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Despite the difficult conditions that LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum face, the findings underscore their agency, which enabled them to resist the impacts of widespread stigma and structural harm.

1 | Introduction

Migration is one of the defining features of the 21st century, with over 281 million international migrants worldwide in 2020 (International Organization on Migration 2024). The reasons for migration are complex and many (Czaika et al. 2021); for people fleeing persecution, finding safety and protection in a new country is urgent and often lifesaving (Ormsby 2017; UNHCR 2024). The United Kingdom (UK) is one such destination country, ranking 17th in the total number of asylum applications out of the 27 countries comprising the UK and the European Union (Sturge 2024). According to the Home Office (2024a), the main administrative body tasked with accepting and processing asylum applications in the UK, there were 80,452 asylum applications in the year ending March 2023.

One group facing persecution in their countries of origin and seeking protection in the UK are people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or with other diverse gender or sexual identities (LGBTQ+). Experimental statistics showed that sexual identity formed the basis of an asylum claim in 2% of all cases in the UK in 2023, or 1377 claims (Home Office 2024b).[1] These statistics, however, should be interpreted with caution because they do not account for LGBTQ+ individuals who apply for asylum on other grounds or those who intend to submit a claim (Alessi et al. 2025). Additionally, there are situations where the Home Office may mistakenly omit the designation that classifies an asylum case as having a sexual orientation basis (Home Office 2024c), which consequently may underestimate the number of LGBTQ+ people applying for asylum.

LGBTQ+ people experience unique challenges when applying for asylum, many of which are exacerbated by the state's structure, which is entrenched in cisheteronormativity (Ferreira 2022; Rodríguez and Giametta 2024). Cisheteronormativity has been defined as: "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality [and cisgenderism] seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality [and gender]—but also privileged" (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548). The experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, exacerbated by hostile immigration and asylum policies, can be analyzed through Mbembé's (2003) concept of necropolitics. This framework examines the socio-political conditions under which the "right to kill or allow to live" is enacted as a means of state sovereignty. Accordingly, this study explored how necropower shaped the experiences of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in England and Wales. The findings from this research can enhance theory, deepen understanding of their experiences, and inform policies and practices to better protect them.

1.1 | LGBTQ+ People Seeking Asylum

Like the broader population of people seeking asylum (e.g., limited access to work opportunities, hostile immigration policies, and anti-immigrant rhetoric), LGBTQ+ individuals face numerous difficulties once in the host country; however, their multiply marginalized identities and social positions magnify these difficulties (Chossière 2021; Held 2023; Wieland and Alessi 2021). They experience intersecting forms of oppression, including racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and classism, from state officials, other people seeking asylum, and both diaspora and host communities (Lasowski et al. 2023; Raj 2024). Challenges in the host country build on existing experiences of victimization in their countries of origin and throughout the migration process, where LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum encounter violence and abuse from their families, communities, and state authorities (Alessi et al. 2021; Yarwood et al. 2022). Consequently, LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum often experience posttraumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues due to the cumulative impact of trauma and minority stress (Alessi et al. 2018; Golembe et al. 2021). While LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum desire mental health care or seek to grow their social support networks, many are unable to find resources, increasing barriers to integration and exacerbating mental health challenges (Fox et al. 2020).

LGBTQ+ individuals also face the complexities of proving their sexual orientation or gender identity as part of the asylum process. This typically involves providing deeply personal and intrusive documentation, such as photographs or testimonies that demonstrate they are indeed LGBTQ+ (Dawson and Gerber 2017; Dhoest 2019; Tschalaer 2020). These requirements often rely on notions that are white/Western/colonialist and reductive regarding what it means to identify as an LGBTQ+ person or to be in a same-sex relationship (Alessi 2016; Akin 2019; Giametta 2020; UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group [UKLGIG] 2018). As a result, LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum must confront assumptions of cisnormativity from state actors who may undermine narratives that do not conform to conventional "coming-out" stories (Akbari and Vogler 2021; Gordon-Orr 2021; Luibhéid 2014). Additionally, while LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum may share a common desire to live free from persecution based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, their pre-migration experiences vary based on their race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, among other identities (Dhoest 2019; Wieland and Alessi 2021). This diversity complicates the implementation of refugee law, as it often relies on discrete categories rather than a nuanced understanding of identity (Berg and Millbank 2009; Wieland and Alessi 2021). For people seeking asylum who are racialized, the process may depend on a logic that portrays Western countries as progressive and free, in contrast to countries in the Global South that are seen as inherently repressive (Chossière 2022; Marnell 2022; Shakhsari 2014). This "migration-as-liberation" narrative thus erases the ongoing challenges that migrants face, including racism, while also constituting the LGBTQ+ person seeking asylum as a racialized other (Chossière 2022). The asylum claims process is further complicated by the Home Office's entrenched "culture of disbelief," which casts suspicion on LGBTQ+ asylum claims and demands that applicants meet an unfair burden of proof regarding both their identity and persecution in their country of origin (Alessi et al. 2025; Ferreira 2022). Legal support is crucial for navigating this process; however, access to legal aid in the UK is increasingly restricted due to systemic disinvestment in such services, which may impact asylum outcomes (Alessi et al. 2025; Jean-Pierre et al. 2023; Wilding 2021).

Furthermore, the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA 2022) has raised the standard of proof for people seeking asylum, requiring them to provide evidence that satisfies the "balance of probabilities"—that it is "more likely than not" that an individual has the "characteristic" that puts them at risk of persecution. LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum must already meet high thresholds when proving their sexual orientation or gender identity to the Home Office (Mermaids and Micro Rainbow 2021). Thus, these new standards can result in disproportionate impacts for this group, further complicating the asylum process (Hasan 2025; Mermaids and Micro Rainbow 2021). This may result in more appeals, but these appeals will also be subjected to a higher burden of proof, thus increasing the chances of an asylum claim being denied.

In addition to NABA, the Illegal Migration Act (2023) can impose harm on asylum seekers. The Act disqualifies individuals from applying for asylum when they arrive in the UK "illegally;" only individuals entering "legally" (e.g., through a valid visa or other authorized permission) can apply for asylum. However, it has been well established that, due to various socio-structural and psychological factors, including the need to keep themselves safe, LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum pass through or live temporarily in one or more countries before entering the country in which they seek asylum (Alessi et al. 2021). Moreover, the fear of being removed or detained may deter LGBTQ+ people from applying for asylum, resulting in them living as undocumented people.

1.2 | Necropolitics

Building on Foucault's (1978) concept of biopower—which examines how nation-states rely on their power to regulate, govern, and maximize life through governmental institutions, medical establishments, and technological innovations—Mbembé (2003) argues that who lives or who dies is dependent on who the state deems disposable based on assimilability and neoliberal interests (Kirk 2024). For those considered disposable, states create living conditions that generate systems of dehumanization and deprivation, leading to "death worlds." Death in this case refers not only to physical death but also to the death of one's social, political, and civic life due to prolonged exposure to state-sponsored neglect, deprivation, and violence (Lamble 2014). Necropower ultimately aims to promote a neoliberal agenda, perpetuating social inequities and reifying the notion that some populations are less worthy of assistance than others (Kirk 2024). This was considered the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Sandset (2021), which magnified the neoliberal forces that had always existed but became more apparent during that time. While this may be presented by government actors as a "state of exception" during a "public emergency," in actuality, this is a state of acceptance that is reinforced even in times when no such crisis exists (Sandset 2021). He drew upon Mbembé's work, as well as concepts like the state of exception (Agamben 2005), slow violence (Nixon 2011), and precarious life (Butler 2006) to demonstrate how global health inequities in neoliberal societies like the UK and United States are perpetuated by environments that are conducive to life for some and slow deaths for others, especially those who are racialized and marginalized.

Migration is one of several areas where nation-states exercise necropower, often appearing as a "state of exception; " however, it is this state of acceptance that creates death worlds (Grace et al. 2025). Mbembé (2019) asserts, "borders are no longer sites to be crossed but lines that separate," with efforts to demarcate borders as a method for not only vilifying and criminalizing migrants but also driving policies to keep and push people out (p. 3). Others have also used necropolitics to analyze the specific experiences of people seeking asylum. For instance, Mayblin et al.'s (2020) qualitative study of people seeking asylum in the UK demonstrated how receiving unequal treatment shaped their everyday experiences, making it extremely difficult to meet basic needs, including shopping, eating, clothing, grooming, using public transport, and finding work. (p. 120). These challenges resulted in what Mayblin and colleagues referred to as the "post-colonial everyday," leading to slow violence motivated by "hierarchical conceptions of worth" (p. 120), where migrants exist in a constant state of precarity, equipped only with the necessities for basic survival —although there were instances where this might even be considered debatable. Thus, while the nation-state may fulfill its obligation to protect people seeking asylum from physical death by doing the absolute minimum, it leaves them gradually and perpetually wounded.

For LGBTQ+ migrants, nation-state borders are seen as sites of gendered violence (Chávez 2013; Luibhéid et al. 2005). To illustrate the impacts of necropower on LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in the UK, Tschalaer (2022) explored their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the UK (and other countries) instructed individuals to stay home to protect against the spread of COVID-19, this left LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in accommodation exposed to isolation, cramped conditions, economic insecurity, and severe physical and psychological harm from other asylum seekers who were homophobic or transphobic. Like Sandset (2021), Tschalaer viewed this as a necropolitical strategy, which failed to consider that not all individuals experience a pandemic in the same way. In this case, LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum were subjected to different forms of protections because they lacked citizenship or protected status, leading to death worlds that compromised their health, well-being, and overall safety. Queer necropolitics examines the "everyday" death worlds of LGBTQ+ people, highlighting how some are granted the right to live while others are subjected to death at the hands of the state (Haritaworn et al. 2014). Relegation to the death world is not solely due to their sexual orientation or gender identity but also results from their other intersecting marginalized identities (including migration status, race, or social class), which are seen as antithetical to the perpetuation of a neoliberal agenda (Haritaworn et al. 2014; Saleh and Tschalaer 2023).

1.3 | Resilience and Agency Among LGBTQ+ People Seeking Asylum

As a result of the abuse and neglect LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum face throughout their migration journey, along with the cascading effects of necropower and the immigration policies resulting from it, scholars have become increasingly interested in the internal and external factors that strengthen their resilience (Alessi 2016; Gottvall et al. 2023). Several studies have reframed resilience within this population as the coping strategies that emerge from individuals trying to navigate their daily lives (Attia et al. 2023; Lasowski et al. 2023). Others, like Alessi (2016), have shown through qualitative studies that trauma and resilience co-exist rather than being mutually exclusive among refugees and asylees who identify as LGBTQ+. More specifically, they can engage in everyday tasks (e.g., attempting to find various ways to meet basic needs) while also struggling with mental health symptoms.

Additionally, typical discussions about resilience among LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum may frame them either as

powerless victims or as active agents (Kreft and Schulz 2022), especially as nation-states try to assert their sovereignty under the guise of protecting their borders. Therefore, there is a need to emphasize the resilience and agency of LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum to disrupt the narratives focusing exclusively on abuse and victimization (Marnell 2022; Ongwech et al. 2024). Aligned with conceptualizations from feminist and postcolonial studies, agency should be understood as primarily a relational phenomenon where individuals actively respond to the structural conditions and other people in their lives (Burkitt 2016). This has been referred to as "agency-as-resilience," which includes acts of resistance and the choice not to act as a symbol of patience and determination (Renkens et al. 2022).

This study builds on existing literature on necropolitics, migration, and asylum to explore how necropolitics shapes the experiences of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in the UK. It examines processes that perpetuate necropower and contribute to harmful policies and asylum procedures that reinforce cisheteronormativity and promote a culture of exclusion for individuals in need of assistance. Additionally, this study aims to examine how LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum manifest strength, agency, and resistance, despite the adverse sociostructural conditions they encounter. Two research questions guided this study: How does necropower shape the policies and processes that impact the daily experiences of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in England and Wales? How do LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in England and Wales express or manifest resilience and agency even in the face of necropolitical conditions?

2 | Materials and Methods

The current study was part of a larger project conducted between January and April 2023 in collaboration with Rainbow Migration. This community organization provides practical support and legal services to LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in the UK. The previous project explored the impacts of legal aid cuts on LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in England and Wales (Alessi et al. 2025). In this study, the authors extended the findings by applying the lens of necropolitics to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum.

The first author used purposive sampling to recruit participants. Rainbow Migration emailed study announcements to their networks to inform legal providers about the study. Additionally, the first author contacted community organizations (via study announcements or brief meetings) that provide legal, mental health, and social care services to asylum seekers or LGBTQ+ people to inform them about the study. Individuals also had the opportunity to refer others for participation. The final sample included 17 legal, mental health, or social care providers working in England (Birmingham, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Nottingham) or Wales (Cardiff) and nine LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum (hereafter, directly affected people). The demographics of the participants are in Table 1.

Before being interviewed, the first author screened participants for inclusion and obtained their informed consent. For providers, the criteria were: (a) working as a solicitor, another type of legal provider (such as a caseworker), or social care or mental health professional, and (b) providing legal or support services to LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in the UK for at least 6 months. One solicitor did not provide legal aid services but offered private services to LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum, so they were included to offer alternative perspectives. Another solicitor had only 5.5 months of experience providing legal aid services to this population. They were included because they could discuss their work with several LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum.

TABLE 1 | Demographic characteristics of participants ($N = 26$).

	n	(%)
Providers (mean age = 35.71)	17	(65.4)
Directly affected people (mean age = 28.33)	9	(34.6)
Race/Ethnicity of directly affected people		
Arab	3	(11.5)
White	2	(7.7)
Asian White	1	(3.8)
Black African	1	(3.8)
Persian	1	(3.8)
Mixed	1	(3.8)
Occupation of providers		
Solicitors	9	(34.6)
Trainee solicitors	2	(7.7)
Caseworkers (provide legal guidance and wraparound services)	4	(15.4)
Social care or mental health professional	2	(7.7)
Gender identity of directly affected people		
Cisgender woman	2	(7.7)
Cisgender man	5	(19.2)
Transgender woman	1	(3.8)
Do not know	1	(3.8)
Gender identity of providers		
Cisgender woman	9	(34.6)
Cisgender man	6	(23.1)
Queer	1	(3.8)
Non-binary	1	(3.8)
Sexual orientation of directly affected people		
Gay	5	(19.2)
Lesbian	2	(7.7)
Bisexual	1	(3.8)
Not sure	1	(3.8)
Sexual orientation of providers		
Straight/heterosexual	8	(30.8)
Mostly straight	1	(3.8)
Gay	3	(11.5)
Gay/queer	1	(3.8)
Bisexual	1	(3.8)
Queer	3	(11.5)

For LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum, inclusion criteria were: (a) be at least 18 years of age or older, (b) currently living in the UK, (c) having a current asylum application or being granted asylum within the past 5 years based on sexual orientation or gender identity, (d) having or previously having legal aid representation in the UK, and (e) being comfortable communicating in English. One directly affected person who did not have a legal aid provider was included because they wanted to speak about their experiences trying to obtain one.

The institutional review board of Rutgers University approved the study protocols.

2.1 | Data Collection

All participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire before beginning the interview. The first author also asked directly affected people about the type of situation they were currently living in and whether they were taking medication or receiving counseling for a mental health concern. He asked providers whether their work was paid or unpaid, how long they had worked with LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum, and the approximate number of individuals from this group they had served. After completing the questionnaire, he conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom video software, using either video ($n = 24$) or audio-only ($n = 2$) formats.

Interview questions for providers focused on the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in England and Wales, their legal needs and particular service gaps, the types of support and services that can help ease their integration, and how policies and attitudes about migration in England and Wales impact experiences of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum. Interview questions for directly affected individuals centered on their motivation for coming to the UK and their experiences as people seeking asylum there.

The first author conducted all interviews. They ranged from 32 to 74 min for directly affected people ($M = 46.33$, SD = 13.19) and from 27 to 57 min for providers ($M = 44.12$, SD = 8.86). To accommodate the scheduling needs of providers, the first author interviewed two providers from one organization and three from another organization together. Following participation, directly affected people and providers received an Amazon gift card, £25 and £20, respectively.

2.2 | Data Analysis

The authors used constructivist grounded theory to analyze the data. Constructivist grounded theory utilizes similar methods to traditional grounded theory (e.g., constant comparison, initial or open coding, and theoretical coding). However, unlike conventional approaches, constructive grounded theory allows for more flexibility because the researcher takes an active role in all phases of the research process (Chun Tie et al. 2019). Knowledge and reality are seen as socially constructed, and therefore, the collection and analysis of data are shaped by the interactions between researchers and participants (Charmaz 2014).

To begin the present analysis, the third and fourth authors conducted initial coding of five transcripts using hand coding. They then met with the first and second authors to review this initial list of codes. Because the first and second authors analyzed the data for the prior study, they examined the codes to identify similarities and differences between the two studies. The codes distinct to this study formed the initial codebook. The second, third, and fourth authors then used this codebook to code the remaining transcripts, incorporating the sensitizing concepts of necropower (Mbembé 2003) and gradual wounding (Mayblin et al. 2020). The authors coded all remaining transcripts using hand-coding or NVivo software (Version 14). The first, second, third, and fourth authors met weekly to review and refine codes, organize them into categories, and discuss the development of preliminary themes. The authors relied on the constant comparison method, which involves moving back and forth between the data, codes, and categories, to explore what has been identified in the analysis and what still might be missing or left out (Corbin and Strauss 1998). To finalize the themes, the four authors had to agree on them.

Engaging in ongoing reflexivity enhanced the study's methodological rigor. The first author identified as a cisgender gay man. He has conducted multiple studies to understand social-structural inequities among LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum and the impacts on their health and well-being. He primarily employs qualitative and interpretive methods but also values quantitative and mixed-method approaches. He acknowledged his assumptions, based on previous research, throughout the data collection process: that legal and service providers, as well as directly affected individuals, would describe how structural barriers led to adverse conditions for LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum. At the same time, he worked to remain open to information that might challenge these assumptions or generate new meaning-making. He also reflected on his position as a researcher from the United States who could travel freely to conduct research in the UK. While conducting interviews, he recognized this privilege, ensuring that he acknowledged the agency of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum. This approach mirrored how many legal and service providers reflected on their experiences with this group and how directly affected participants discussed their situations.

The first author also consulted with the second, third, and fourth authors to bring new perspectives to the analysis since they did not participate in the study design or data collection. The second, third, and fourth authors also attempted to mitigate their biases by challenging one another as they identified various codes, themes, and categories. The authors kept an audit trail of all analytic procedures to enhance rigor. They also triangulated data from directly affected people with providers, which helped capture a more nuanced understanding of the lived realities of applying for asylum as a person who identifies as LGBTQ+. Staff members from the community organization also reviewed the themes to ensure they resonated with their work.

3 | Results

We identified four themes from the analysis. They are presented below. All participants were asked to choose pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

3.1 | Theme 1: Being Trapped at the Mercy of the State

The power that the state has over LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum permeates all aspects of their lives and has ripple effects on their day-to-day experiences, including interactions with state actors (e.g., Home Office personnel), documentation issues, housing concerns, and social relations, according to legal and service providers. This dynamic affects LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum generally, but the way legal and service providers expressed it and how directly affected participants experienced it demonstrate how homophobia and transphobia interacted with other structural forces (i.e., sexism, xenophobia, racism) to leave them trapped at the mercy of the state.

For instance, misogynistic and patriarchal understandings of womanhood reinforce the barriers faced by lesbian and bisexual women seeking asylum. Cultural expectations in the countries of origin frequently force lesbian and bisexual women to conform to stay safe, including getting married to men and having children. However, this could be used against them by the Home Office, which might interpret it as indicating that the person can live without persecution in their country of origin. Sally, a legal provider, described how this was the case for several women she worked with:

> ...The thing that you might find more with the lesbian cases that can sometimes be a difficulty with the Home Office, is that ...quite often, they've had to ...adopt a heterosexual lifestyle in their country to not draw adverse inferences ...and then, the Home Office may... have an issue accepting whether ...they're lesbian.

The reification of cissexism also impacted transgender and gender nonconforming people, who are frequently left at the mercy of state actors to navigate documentation issues, leaving them in a position where they must either risk disclosing their gender identity outside of the legal system or not receive adequate care. Josh, a legal provider, mentioned what can emerge for transgender people seeking asylum who have incorrect gender markers on their identification:

> If the Home Office [has] given them an ID that doesn't reflect the name that they use or the gender identity that they live by, and they present in a way... [that] would increase the risk of someone ... making an assumption based on what a person looks like ...and seeing a gender marker ...that challenges that assumption then I think that can pose harm.

Similarly, those needing access to hormone medications to continue their medical transition encountered barriers that left them without proper medical care. Mina, an asylum seeker identifying as a transgender woman, explained how the lack of access to hormone medication during the migration process lowered her hormone levels before arriving in the UK. Because of this, medical professionals wanted documented proof that she had been medically transitioning before restarting care. However, she stated: "I [don't have] any kind of document with me."

In addition to the implicit and explicit effects of state structures perpetuated by *cis*- and heteronormativity, legal and service providers spoke about the impact of anti-immigrant legislation and how it framed and validated the fears of the public, especially, the 2022 Nationality and Borders Bill. Stanmilian, a legal provider, discussed how the legislation fomented people's fear of asylum seekers to divert attention away from the problems of the Home Office and the UK asylum system in general:

> ...We know what the real problems are, and migrants, gay people, transgender people, the whole lot of other people I could name aren't the problem. And if that 'othering', that trying to divert people's attention ...it's ... a dangerous game.

Anti-immigrant sentiments also impacted how other LGBTQ+ people from the UK viewed people seeking asylum. This was expressed by one directly affected participant who experienced rejection by potential romantic partners on dating apps. David, a cisgender gay man, stated: "... You start speaking, but when people realize you're an asylum seeker, some of them ... unmatch right away... and it's hard to build a relationship because you want to be at least on the same level."

LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum, especially those who do not speak English, also anticipate experiencing stigma and discrimination when interacting with interpreters who may share a linguistic or cultural similarity but might be homophobic or transphobic. Thus, some LGBTQ+ asylum seekers may refuse interpreters altogether because they do not feel confident that interpreters will adequately communicate their needs to legal providers and the Home Office or even treat them with basic respect. Simona, a legal provider, highlighted this power dynamic by describing the concerns of an LGBTQ+ asylum seeker they served in their practice:

> We had a [British, Arabic] interpreter ...who I know, and I trust him very well, and he's a very liberal person ... I know he's quite okay, you know, fine and accepting of people ...but I could tell the client felt quite uncomfortable in talking to me about his sexuality with ... interpreter who he knew was from the region.

Moreover, legal and service providers discussed how the intersection of xenophobia and racism intensified the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum. Audrey, a social care provider, expressed that these intersecting stigmas precipitated additional layers of traumatization:

> Lots of the people we see have faced racial trauma, as well, in the UK and other countries that they've been

> through ... and racial abuse ... and so, there's all this... vulnerability that comes from identities that ... are clashing, as well.

These struggles, in turn, make it even harder for LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum to navigate their situation without many resources, perpetuating a vicious cycle that continuously reinforces their dehumanization.

3.2 | Theme 2: Perpetuating Dehumanization Through Restricted Agency

While many people seeking asylum experience dehumanization to some extent (e.g., through an arduous claims process, a culture of disbelief, inability to work, and constant surveillance), this may be compounded for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. They may hesitate to rely on diaspora and host communities for basic needs due to stigma and discrimination, often leading them to struggle on their own, which narrows their options and opportunities. As a result, dehumanization is perpetuated by the restricted agency they experience. For instance, Mike, who identified as a cisgender gay man, described how, after arriving in the UK with a few items, he had to hand them over to the authorities. These were even basic items needed for survival, resulting in excessive levels of control that felt punitive, even though he genuinely needed assistance as a person seeking asylum:

> ... They took my stuff ... they took my money, my cellphone, my medicines, and everything I had, and they didn't give [them] back again... and for more than one month, I couldn't take my medicine, and I couldn't have a connection ... with anybody.

Lack of financial resources, combined with the lack of social support, also severely limits the ability of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum to have even the slightest control over their situation, especially regarding accommodation. Maria, a mental health provider, explained how asylum seekers in UK hotels face harsh conditions:

> It's very difficult ...to leave ... [the accommodation] in London, which is [where] all our clients are based...it's likely to be somewhere that you can walk about outside and do something else but ... you've got no money and so ... how on earth are you supposed to try and exercise any kind of autonomy?

Van, a directly affected participant person identifying as a cisgender gay man, further illustrated this restricted agency: "You're not allowed to work ...you need just lay down in a hotel, lay down in house like 2 years, 3 years, and then, after that, if you got your passport or not, you need [to be] awaiting more."

Furthermore, while living in shared accommodation, LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum may have their safety needs overlooked, placing them at risk for homophobia and transphobia and once again subjecting them to the same type of persecution that forced them to flee their country or origin. This can make it challenging to feel they have control over their surroundings. For instance, Kunstlerkopf, a directly affected participant who identified as a cisgender gay man, not only experienced discrimination in his accommodation by individuals from his diaspora community but did not receive any assistance when attempting to remedy the problem: "...If I'm complaining about the religious problems that happen ... I am not heard ... I was just the outsider that cannot complain about the malicious effects ... so that was the thing where I felt really disrespected."

Directly affected participants, like Kunstlerkopf, frequently expressed feeling disrespected, and legal and service providers echoed this sentiment. Having little to no agency can diminish their sense of hope and feelings of worth over time, making it challenging to build a life even after being granted asylum. Emmy, a caseworker, described her work with a transgender woman who, during the asylum process, lost her sense of agency after being placed in an accommodation where she experienced violence:

> [The client said to me]: 'I've left the place because, you know, I was in danger there, and I thought that I was coming to a safe place, but I faced additional trauma and abuse here.' And it's all kind of a façade.

While this lack of agency was in and of itself enough to cause distress (i.e., shame, sadness, hopelessness, suicidal ideation), legal and service providers emphasized that LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum have already experienced trauma in their countries of origin and through the migration process, which ends up magnifying existing trauma, underscoring the importance of seeking mental health services to deal with such consequences. However, lack of access prevented LGBTQ+ asylum seekers from seeking such services. Eric, a caseworker, described the following situation that occurred:

> The system is designed in a way that every time you need to seek help or additional assistance ... because of your mental health, then you're asked to prove it. So then, it becomes, like, this vicious cycle where people can't actually access the help that they need, but then, to access it, they need to be able to produce, kind of, medical supporting letters ...and documents to show why they need it. So then, effectively, no one gets it...

3.3 | Theme 3: Relying on Informal Supports (If They Can Be Found)

Informal support offered a safety net for LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum because of the challenges of accessing formal support (e.g., medical, mental health, social care, or legal services). Informal support (i.e., relying on friends and individuals they met in the community) offered directly affected participants the material and social support they could not get through formal means. This protected them against feelings of

dehumanization caused by the persecution they encountered in their countries of origin and the stigma they faced from being a migrant in the UK. For instance, Van, a directly affected person who identified as a cisgender gay man, shared the relief he experienced upon revealing his identity to a woman he met after moving from London to Scotland: "... I thought [she'd] punch me ... and she'd [say], 'Stay away from me.' But no, she's hugging me. She said, 'Oh, that's good. You are gorgeous.' For the moment, I felt like the world is mine."

In addition to protecting against the harmful effects of stigma and discrimination, directly affected participants described that one primary way they secured essential resources, such as legal aid services or safe housing accommodations, was through informal support. Leen, a directly affected participant who identified as a cisgender lesbian woman, reported that after spending six months calling at least 50 legal providers from a list she received through a community organization, she finally found a solicitor through an informal support network:

> We [called] everyone, and they told us the same thing, 'We [stopped]' or just 'we don't do that.' And we call, we call. And our legal aid, we found it from someone [who] knows someone, [who] knows someone, [who] knows someone to get this one ...

Van also mentioned a situation where his friend helped him secure a place to stay where he could feel safe. He described the relief, as well as the opportunities that came about, because of this person's assistance:

> ...Meeting with my friend ... he said, 'Let's get out the hotel and be [free] ... Cause the hotel is really horrible ... not for all, just LGBTQ people ... [Until] now, I [was] hiding myself. I [couldn't host] anyone. I [couldn't go] out with anyone. I [couldn't speak] with anyone, I [couldn't] go to the club ... pub, nothing in my life [until] now.

However, both legal and service providers and directly affected participants mentioned how informal support, along with the sense of safety and belonging that accompanies it, was constrained for LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum. Patricia, a trainee solicitor, expressed: "What if someone doesn't have a support, even? ...There [are] a lot of people here, we meet them, and they just came alone, and they don't have someone to support them."

Furthermore, if an LGBTQ+ person seeking asylum requests to be moved after experiencing violence or abuse in the accommodation for asylum seekers, they might be relocated to an area that leaves them further disconnected from the informal support networks they have developed. Jane, a housing solicitor, expressed:

> ... They then have to make a decision between do they [move] anyway and start all over again and maybe be safe? Or do they want to stay where they are and continue being persecuted but at least have the support around them?

Although local LGBTQ+ organizations may offer formal support services for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers, not everyone feels welcome, especially those who are racialized, indicating how vital informal support can be for some. As John, a solicitor, stated: "A lot of LGBT support groups actually ... are quite hostile to non-white members..."

3.4 | Theme 4: "I Was Always my Hero:" Drawing on One's Strength to Resist and Persist

Experiencing intersecting stigmas compromised directly affected participants' access to formal support services and ability to maintain informal relationships, leaving few avenues for securing the material and social support that they needed for safety and survival. Despite these circumstances, they reported finding strength within themselves, enabling them to resist and persist. Jaz, a legal caseworker, commented on what keeps LGBTQ+ people seeking to be able to do so. She explained that fleeing one's country of origin may help one be less afraid of the migration process and the general unknown: ... The other day, I was talking about the [Illegal Migration] bill with someone, and I was like, 'You underestimate how horrible it will be,' and he was like, 'No, you underestimate how much I'm willing to survive.' The narratives of directly affected participants illustrated Jaz's comment, speaking about their ability to resist and persist even before arriving in the UK. For instance, Mina, a directly affected participant who identified as a transgender woman, described how the trauma and isolation she experienced, including growing up alone, helped build her sense of tenacity:

> ... I was always my hero in my life because I haven't [had] any kind of support ... like [a parent's] support, or emotional support or anything like that. And it caused me [to] become, not really strong, [but] become a good warrior.

Similarly, Kunstlerkopf, a directly affected participant who identified as a cisgender gay man, resisted the internalizing effects of the severe and prolonged violence and abuse he encountered: "I never stigmatized myself. I knew that ... [it was] not my fault to be born in that country or ... to [experience] discrimination." Realizing this helped him: "...get out of death, psychological death." Although he encountered severe stress in the UK, his goal was to persist: "I know that the core of who I am is good and is well-intended."

Resisting and persisting took work, and it was more of a dynamic process than a static one. For instance, Van, a directly affected participant who identified as a cisgender gay man, shared that he attempted to stay strong, which included being able to resist and persist, but this did not come without feeling he still needed to demonstrate his worth to his detractors:

> If I'm not staying strong, the people eat me. The people attacking me. I need to show myself, for the people, I

> am strong ... In ... people's mind, they are thinking, LGBTQ people, they are weak ... you know? So, I need to show myself [for] the people, 'No, I'm not like this. Just give me a chance to prove myself.'

Leen, a directly affected participant who identified as a cisgender lesbian woman, worked hard to resist and persist but also found it challenging. She engaged in multiple suicide attempts and shared that her strength to keep going came from her connection with her partner:

> The first thing [that stops me from killing myself is] my girlfriend, I don't want to ... leave her alone. So, I ... have a feeling I'm responsible for someone. I can't just [act] ... without making sure there's no one ... hurt from ... what I'm doing."

Several directly affected participants also shared that their resistance and persistence came from their desire to help others who experienced persecution. Mina added: "I want to ...say something to the LGBT community. Never lose your hope. You're born for a reason ... so try to play your role as best as you can because you are always a hero."

4 | Discussion

The study, which explores how necropower shapes the lives of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in England and Wales and the providers supporting them, deepens our understanding of how state power and intersecting forms of oppression affect hypermarginalized groups, leaving them at the mercy of the state. Our findings are consistent with previous research revealing the adverse structural conditions LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum face during the asylum process (e.g., Golembe et al. 2021; Rodríguez and Giametta 2024). Additionally, the findings align with studies indicating that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers experience compounded discrimination due to their marginalized identities (e.g., Lasowski et al. 2023; Raj 2024). Taken together, these results show how the combination of cisheteronormativity and neoliberal ideology shapes the asylum process, perpetuating dehumanization and restricting the agency of LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum.

This study builds upon the work of Tschalaer (2022) and offers new insights into the experiences of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum. It frames their experiences within the lens of necropolitics (Mbembé 2003) to demonstrate how state policies create "death worlds" that systematically strip LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum of their dignity and autonomy and subject them to what Mayblin et al. (2020) refer to as "gradual wounding." Findings from the current study illustrate how these death worlds are constructed and maintained through forces that scholars have described as both biopolitical and necropolitical (see Haskaj 2018; Kirk 2024). Biopower operates through state legislation that imposes restrictions on the mobility and housing accommodations of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum, while at the same time regulating their expression of sexuality and gender, so it conforms to the expectations of state actors who may rely on white/Western narratives of what it means to identify as LGBTQ+. For instance, service providers explained how lesbian and bisexual women often face additional questioning from Home Office officials who doubt their sexual orientation because they may have children or have been married in their country of origin, even though they might not have had a choice to marry due to cultural expectations. This is essentially how biopower functions: to regulate and control behavior, ultimately reinforcing a hierarchy of acceptance and inclusion (Kirk 2024; Mayblin et al. 2020), where only specific presentations of identity are deemed trustworthy or credible. Those deemed less credible face longer waits as they attempt to gain asylum: living in state-designated accommodations where they are exposed to transphobic and homophobic discrimination without protection, being unable to gain employment, having little funds, and lacking access to proper legal representation. Moreover, they may be detained or removed from the UK to face continued persecution in their country of origin (UKLGIG 2018). Thus, this provides further evidence of how control over LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum goes beyond biopower into the creation of death worlds, which consist of precarity and bare-life conditions (Butler 2006; Mayblin et al. 2020).

It was in the everyday life of all directly affected participants that these death worlds became apparent: they spoke about their belongings being taken away and their access to safe housing being restricted, leaving them in a constant state of helplessness, which aligns with previous studies (e.g., Alessi et al. 2018). Providers and directly affected individuals also discussed barriers to mental health and medical care, including accessing gender-affirming care for transgender individuals (which may then be held against them in their asylum case) or having to "prove" mental health conditions to receive care. These barriers, which can be exacerbated for LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum who are racialized, not only degrade the physical and psychological well-being of individuals but also severely hinder their access to means of protection or safety.

Although informal support networks (friends or people they met in the community) could help protect against the impacts of dehumanization and structural violence, accessing them was challenging, thus magnifying the effects of necropower and the stigma resulting from it. The experiences of directly affected participants reveal that the creation of these death worlds by the state is not necessarily about physical death, but instead what scholars refer to as the establishment of neglectful and violent conditions in which LGBTQ+ people face stigmatization and marginalization, ultimately leading to a social, political, and civic death (Lamble 2014; Mbembé 2019).

Indeed, we identified a preliminary process where hostile migration policies propagate migration stigma, permeating the lives of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum. Recent scholarship has coined the concept of "migration stigma" to understand connections between the literature on stigma and migration, the relationship between migration stigma and discriminatory actions by the state, and the subsequent health and social inequities migrants face (Gurrola and Ayón 2018; Yang et al. 2024). The perpetuation of migration stigma reinforces necropolitical systems of control that push LGBTQ+ asylum seekers into death worlds, often going unnoticed but becoming

visible in their everyday experiences. Our findings show how migration stigma occurs at multiple levels through the execution of unjust policies, lack of social support and safe spaces, prejudice in personal interactions, and the internalization of negative stereotypes. These results extend the work of Mayblin et al. (2020) by showing how intersecting forms of stigma contribute to the development and maintenance of these death worlds. For LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum, migration stigma is compounded by experiences of rejection, harassment, and violence from both diaspora and host communities, further excluding them from various resources and sources of support.

Still, this study highlights the strength and agency of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in response to migration stigma and other systemic oppressions. While the effects of necropower were challenging to manage, and they had worked hard to resist internalizing stigma, directly affected participants found ways to draw on their strengths to resist and persist. This strength had been built through a lifetime of struggle and exposure to psychological trauma and harmful conditions in the country of origin, in transit, and the UK. Many persevered by focusing on their loved ones and helping others in need, with the ongoing expression of humanity serving as an essential form of resistance against the dehumanizing effects of necropower. These findings align with others (Renkens et al. 2022; Skorzack 2019), exemplifying how resistance can manifest in less visible ways for individuals seeking asylum (instead of, for instance, engaging in advocacy or protests). Indeed, directly affected individuals silently worked to challenge the effects of necropower in their daily lives, even as they felt dehumanized and lacked agency.

Along with previous studies (Alessi 2016; Lasowski et al. 2023; Ongwech et al. 2024), the findings challenge reductionist portrayals of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum as powerless victims by emphasizing the complex and relational nature of agency and resilience. The notion that freedom can exist even under pervasive restrictions highlights how individuals can demonstrate agency under necropolitical conditions (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Skorzack 2019). At the same time, these findings should not divert attention away from the sociostructural and necropolitical conditions that create disproportionate risk and vulnerability for LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum. Instead, the findings intend to show that despite all that directly affected people experienced, they still had moments in their lives where they could break free from their suffering to find a person they could trust, shift their perspective to keep going, or distract themselves from their circumstances, even if just for a little while.

This study has noteworthy limitations. First, because interviews were conducted only in English, the findings did not include the perspectives of directly affected individuals who spoke languages other than English. These individuals may face additional challenges and may be further isolated from potential sources of formal and informal support, necessitating their inclusion in future research. Similarly, the present study did not focus on people who are intersex or those with diverse sex characteristics. Scholars have called attention to the lack of discussion of this group within asylum contexts and have pointed out the need for research that seeks to best understand their needs without conflating their identities with those in the LGBTQ community (e.g., see Camminga 2024 for a recent discussion). Thus, future research is needed to identify and address the distinct challenges that intersex people face when seeking asylum in the UK.

Additionally, we were unable to recruit directly affected people who identify as bisexual or transgender men. Because their experiences may differ from those identifying as lesbian, gay, or transgender women, future studies should include their perspectives to examine the impacts of necropower related to their multiple marginalized identities. Moreover, most directly affected participants had obtained legal assistance or were connected to various forms of social services; however, LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum who have not yet secured such support may offer additional perspectives on the impacts of necropower and migration stigma. Finally, causation cannot be inferred from the results; thus, the process that we identified (i.e., that necropower contributes to hostile migration policies that propagate migration stigma, which permeates the experiences of LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum) should be considered preliminary at best. Future research should use additional methods to understand the dynamics that underlie connections between necropower and various migration processes.

5 | Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study reveals the necropolitical processes that perpetuate policies and social norms devaluing the worth of certain groups, specifically focusing on their impact on LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum. The findings highlight the need for advocacy to drive policy changes that ensure the safety and protection of asylum seekers. Advocates, researchers, and policymakers are encouraged to question how necropolitical conditions emerge and persist, and to examine why this occurs (Sandset 2021). Additionally, expanding access to culturally and trauma-informed social, health, and legal services can reduce stigma and empower LGBTQ+ asylum seekers to achieve a sense of freedom even in "unfree conditions."

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Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board # Pro2022000772.

Consent

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data are not publicly available due to the participants' need for confidentiality.

Permission to Reproduce Material From Other Sources

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

[1] The Home Office does not report asylum claims related to gender identity. The statistics they provide should be considered a crude estimate as it does not account for LGBTQ+ people who may ultimately apply for asylum or are unaware that applying for asylum is an option.

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