

Chapter 6

LGBTQ+ Forced Migrants: Precarious Experiences of Arrival and Settlement in Wales



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6.1 Background

The refugee crisis has brought to the fore conversations on ‘asylum-seekers’ and ‘refugees’, terms that suggest a linear progression through the legal system and risk over-simplifying migration patterns (Crawley & Skleparis, 2017).

In 2012, the UK Government introduced its ‘Hostile Environment Policy’, designed to make the UK a difficult place to live for people, such as asylum-seekers, without leave to remain. The recent controversial Immigration Bill: An End to Free Movement complicates the legal process even more, as it aims to create a single immigration system, solely controlled by the UK government, with similar restrictions to the anti-immigration policies of the 1905 Aliens Restriction Act and 1919 Amendment Act. UK migration policy was relaxed at the end of the Second World War with the 1948 British Nationality Act – a time of labour shortages that resulted in Commonwealth citizens joining the UK workforce. The 1971 Immigration Act and the various policy and legislative amendments of the late 1970s propelled the race discussions in Britain – which was branded as ‘multicultural’ – and paved the way for subsequent amendments that prevented discrimination based on race, colour and ethnicity. In 1981 the Nationality Act changed the character of British citizenship from ‘*jus sanguinis*’ to ‘*jus solis*’, meaning that those who had been living in the UK had the right to apply for citizenship, instead of limiting the citizenship privileges only to those who had been born in the UK or who had at least one British parent (Spencer, 2011).

The 1993 Asylum and Immigration Act created a binary separation between refugees – who are allowed to work and access education – and asylum-seekers, who live in dispersal accommodation and who are not allowed to seek employment.

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Later, the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act imposed restrictive measures on the social rights of asylum-seekers by centralising their housing and welfare assistance. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) was created in 2000 to co-ordinate accommodation and financial support for asylum seekers. Under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, Section 4, asylum-seekers have the option of a weekly allowance, primarily chosen by those who already have family and friends in the UK. Similarly, under Section 95 of the 1999 Act, they are provided with a weekly allowance of £37.75 and accommodation, on a 'no-choice' basis, which means being moved within the UK to wherever accommodation is available. Through NASS, the Home Office has awarded the responsibility for asylum housing to private companies, resulting in asylum-seekers being moved into poor-quality housing in difficult-to-rent areas and into communities which lack expertise on migration (Netto, 2011; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008).

Their housing issues continue when asylum-seekers are awarded refugee status, as NASS requires them to find new accommodation and enter the labour market within 28 days, otherwise they will face eviction and be potentially homeless (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). During the asylum process it is difficult for claimants to save money for their move into private accommodation (Basedow & Doyle, 2016). The 2006 Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act meant that there is more uncertainty when it comes to refugee employment, as employers turn them down due to a lack of information and clarity from the Home Office about their status (Stewart & Mulvey, 2014). As the literature suggests, refugees are treated, from a policy and integration perspective, as a collective.

Academically, 'refugees' are defined through the location in which they belong; thus, their identities are understood only by their relationship with space and legal status (Lems, 2016). Their home transforms from a place of origin to a notion of socio-cultural space that negotiates with a plurality of communities and links 'here' with 'there' (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002). Refugees become symbolic representations of displacement, as they represent global mobility and the geographical transition from citizens to non-citizens (Castles & Davidson, 2000).

According to Papastergiadis (2010), displacement is usually seen as disruptive, suggesting that forced migrants acquire agency only by interacting socially and participating in community practices in their new locations. However, global and local social structures impact on their access to networks, and community experience proves even more difficult for LGBTQ+ people from particular ethnic groups (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Ali & Tas, 2017). Atkinson (2015) explains that displacement cuts the ties between people and communities and results in material and emotional breakage. Hubbard and Lees (2018) argue that forced migration mirrors the aggression associated with cultural ownership and impacts on people's willingness and ability to create meaningful community ties (Manzo et al., 2008). Philo (2005) suggests that research in forced migration is paramount for understanding the real-life experiences of structural processes in order to highlight the need to restructure imposed barriers and empower marginalised identities (Lentin & Titley, 2011). Those marginalised identities are usually defined through a lack of privilege and socio-cultural power, by creating collective and individual experiences. Such

intersectional perspectives (Shields, 2008) capture how a multiplicity of minority socio-cultural statuses shape experiences and attitudes, claiming that the plurality of identities creates unique experiences that fit the categories of existing identities (Collins, 1993).

In this chapter, I highlight LGBTQ+ refugees' lived experiences of discrimination resulting from UK immigration and asylum policies. Such policies shape their stories of arrival and settlement in the UK, which impacts the refugees' mental health and livelihoods. I explore how the LGBTQ+ refugees experience otherness, either created by Home Office processes or by their new resettlement local communities, thus raising questions around ideas of belonging and acceptance as well as everyday expressions of otherness and barriers.

6.2 Methodology and Fieldwork

I conducted qualitative research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of hard-to-reach groups (Silverman, 2014). Due to the sensitivity of the topic, I used one-to-one interviews, relying on Dervin et al.'s (1976) reflexive interviewing strategy. I adopted Guba's (1981) strategy relating to the researcher's reflexivity by developing an appropriate data analysis commentary and by identifying emerging patterns in the collected data. Migration is not devolved but housing and mental-health services are, which means that the findings are only applicable to my fieldwork setting, Wales.

Researcher positionality is particularly important for this study, as it is the context that shapes subjectivity, which manifests itself through life experiences (hooks, 1984). I use my privileged position as a social scientist and LGBTQ+ activist to amplify the marginalised voices of LGBTQ+ forced migrants and represent them within academic research. The idea for this study started in 2016, when I became involved, in an activist capacity, with a LGBTQ+ grass-roots community group based in South Wales which I used to recruit participants. As a result, I had built trusting relationships with my participants prior to entering the field and thus benefitted from an insider/outsider perspective (Labaree, 2002). This unique position gave me the opportunity to scientifically assess my insider knowledge and access otherwise well-guarded truths (Merton, 1972). As this study crystallised, I consciously took a step back from group activities to avoid putting pressure on the members to participate.

6.2.1 Participants

I interviewed an overall nine LGBTQ+ new refugees living in Wales; seven men and two women. All the participants arrived as single asylum-seekers in the UK and claimed refugee status but, for the purposes of this chapter, I will be referring to

three men, whose experiences and life stories are representative of the wider picture. I employed a purposive, deviant case-sampling approach, as this study focuses on researching niche demographics to increase visibility and highlight issues that are specific to this group (Patton, 2002; Robson, 2002). The sampling criteria were that the participants identified as LGBTQ+ refugees and had recently obtained their refugee status. Over the course of 3 months, I was contacted by a total of 12 potential participants; some could not participate because of schedule conflicts or dropped out for reasons unknown.

Gora was born in Mauritania. Being gay is punishable by death in Mauritania and he experienced severe physical and emotional violence because of his sexuality. He works as a mental health support worker for vulnerable young adults and is not very active in the LGBTQ+ community.

Aazar was born in Afghanistan. Being gay in Afghanistan is, like Mauritania, punishable by death and he also experienced physical and emotional violence there because of his sexuality. Aazar is a PhD researcher and an active LGBTQ+ activist; he regularly organises fundraisers for various LGBTQ+ causes and financially supports LGBTQ+ initiatives in Afghanistan.

Medhi was born in Tunisia, where he was persecuted for his sexuality. He was kicked out of his family home when he was 'outed' against his will. Mehdi is an actor and uses theatre to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights in North Africa.

6.2.2 *Ethical Considerations*

The ethical considerations were a key part of the design of this study. I used pseudonyms throughout the research and all the participants' demographic tags were altered. I was concerned that there may be a shift in the researcher-participant relationship should the boundaries become blurred, especially since I am undertaking research on a group which has experienced social trauma. Therefore, I clarified my role as a researcher prior to the interviews, so that any issues surrounding 'hidden agendas' were ironed out. To reduce the power imbalance between myself and the participants, I used self-disclosure as one of my interviewing techniques. By sharing my personal experiences, as a second-generation refugee, I invited the participants to narrate their stories (Birch & Miller, 2000). Post-interview care was available to the participants if they needed it (Boser, 2007). To alleviate my own anxiety, I kept informal diaries which provided an opportunity for reflection (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018).

6.3 **Precarious Experiences: Housing**

All my participants had arrived legally in the UK. They fled their home countries to escape violence and persecution because of their sexuality and shared similar experiences of arrival in the UK, as Gora tells us:

I landed at Heathrow and claimed asylum. I was kept in the airport for hours in a small room. They did not give me any information and I was so scared that they were going to send me back. I wasn't given a choice of where I can live but I didn't care, I would have gone anywhere, if they allowed me to stay in the UK. If they sent me back to Mauritania, I'd probably be dead.

Mehdi explains:

Back then my English was limited so, when I claimed asylum, I thought I was going to stay in London. To be honest with you, I wanted to stay in London because of the great gay scene. I agreed to come to Wales because I didn't realise how far from London it is, I actually thought Wales was a neighbourhood in London. I was very shocked when the driver told me Wales is basically another country.

These experiences of arrival showcase the urgency of asylum, as well as the fact that the incomers were not given the option of where to live in the UK. This touches upon the UK's policy of 'no-choice displacement'. The displacement policy aims at discouraging asylum-seekers from entering the UK (Steel et al., 2006) and is associated with enhancing the stress of the asylum process. The 'no-choice' policy results in a loss of power (Bleich, 2002), is linked to high levels of social isolation and impacts on the mental health of asylum-seekers, especially when they have previously been exposed to human-rights violations (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Steel et al., 2006).

NASS has 12 designated dispersal areas in the UK of which Cardiff is one. Upon arrival in Cardiff, the asylum-seekers were directed to a dispersal hostel, which they call 'The House'. The House's management appeared apathetic concerning socio-cultural differences, variances in religious beliefs, sexual orientation and the gender identity of the residents, resulting in incompatible residents being forced to co-exist in small rooms. This often resulted in tensions and violent outbursts. To protect themselves, the participants had very little to no contact with their roommates and other asylum-seekers. All three men describe the atmosphere at The House as toxic, dangerous and homophobic, as Gora elaborates:

The House staff did not ask if I was comfortable with sharing a room. I was sleeping in a room with five men. That gave me serious anxiety and I was afraid to speak because I did not want people to know I am gay.

Aazar goes on to explain:

There were some men at The House and I think they understood by my manners that I'm gay. Even though they never blatantly asked me if I'm gay, they were making homophobic jokes loudly outside my room so I could hear them; they were eyeing me up and down in the corridors, whispering abuse or making sexual hand gestures. They refused to sit and eat with me, like I have cholera or something. I was crying myself to sleep every night. I left my home country to escape all of this. I came to the UK to be free and be myself. The moment I entered The House, I was back in the closet.

The participants highlighted that they felt unsafe and abused in the dispersal accommodation. They were 'back in the closet' out of fear for their lives, which is detrimental to their mental health. Milne and Travis (2003) suggest that the housing and mental-health needs of asylum-seekers are problematic, as there is a growth in the

number of racist incidents due to ethnic tension, backgrounds and religious differences. LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers are at higher risk of sexual harassment, non-contact violence and victimisation in the hostels, often leading to suicide attempts and post-traumatic stress (Hobbs et al., 2002). Other factors, such as internalised homophobia and avoidance, are present in LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers' experiences of dispersal accommodation (Blackaby, 2004). After more than 60 days at The House, the men were moved into dispersal accommodation, as Gora remembers:

The move increased my anxiety. I was embarrassed to bring friends over because the new house was a mess. My room was so small that, when I stretched my arms, I could almost touch both walls. The furniture was old and destroyed, the walls were dirty and full of holes and the carpet had stains. My room had only one window but it had bars so I didn't jump out. Apparently, it happened a lot.

Mehdi also told me:

I was just settling in the new house when the manager came and said, 'On Monday you are moving to Swansea'. That was on a Saturday morning. That is not even two days' notice. I had no choice; you are not allowed to argue. That move knocked me down. I did not know anybody in Swansea. I had to start again from zero. It took me a long time to build up my mental health. For six months, I closed myself off and was not even getting out of The House. I was so alone.

The move to new accommodation appears to be a violent transition for the participants, as they struggle to cope with their new surroundings. Asylum-seekers living in displacement accommodation have significantly more mental-health issues than those living with friends or family (Carter & El-Hassan, 2003) and the harsh living conditions appear to be a predicting factor for depression (Pearl & Zetter, 2002). Onofrio and Munk (2003) indicate that the housing conditions for asylum-seekers are poor and pose a significant risk of fire. Private accommodation used through the displacement policy falls below acceptable standards and is often found in areas of low demand that usually suffer from high levels of crime (Carter & El-Hassan, 2003).

6.4 Precarious Experiences: Proving the Authenticity of Sexual Orientation

Since March 2007, in the UK, all asylum applications are dealt with by the New Asylum Model (NAM), in order to speed up the initial decision-making. Under NAM, each asylum claim is allocated a single case-owner who is responsible for having continuous contact with the claimant (Home Office, 2008). All asylum-seekers undergo interviews conducted by their allocated NAM case-owner; during the interviews, the claimants are asked to disclose the reasons why they are fleeing their home country, to state whether they are persecuted and to argue why they are worthy of refugee status (Fazel et al., 2014). Asylum-seekers' mental health is severely affected by Home Office interviews, with some studies reporting an increase in post-traumatic stress disorder post-interview (Fazel et al., 2005; Llosa

et al., 2014). The process becomes even more stressful if the claimant is not proficient in English and receives no psychological support (Priebe et al., 2012). According to the Home Office, the interview process is transparent; however, it has been continuously criticised for creating a lengthy appeal process with the purpose of ‘catching out illegitimate claimants’ (Stevens, 2004). This is a particularly prevalent struggle for LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers, as they are asked to justify the authenticity of their sexuality by narrating in detail their experiences of sexual violence and to prove that their identity is not fraudulent. Mehdi remembers:

I was allocated my asylum interview after a month. It was an awful interview. The guy was asking me unnecessary questions like ‘When did you find out you were gay? How did you know you were gay? When were you first sexually harassed? How were you sexually harassed?’ I said to him, ‘How do these questions help? Why are they important?’ and he said ‘Because lots of people lie about their sexuality and, if the Home Office does not believe you are gay, you are not gay’. He was explicit. He told me he judged the way I look when making his decision and said ‘You do not look too gay, you can be discreet in your country’. He said that to my face. As I expected, I got rejected the first time. I was a mess when I found out. My court was a month later. That month I was emotionally suffering. My court appeal was successful but it was horrible to be interrogated about my sex life.

Aazar confirms the stress of the ordeal:

The paperwork was relatively straightforward but the interview was very intense. I had no boyfriend then and was not part of any LGBTQ+ organisation, so all I had was my story. If the Home Office sent me back to Afghanistan I would be persecuted because being gay is a criminal offence. In the month leading up to my interview, I read as many asylum cases as I could, so that I knew what questions to expect. I was not going to be intimidated but, when I entered the room, I saw a chair with an ankle chain and my heart started beating so fast. I was an asylum-seeker, not a murderer.

The LGBTQ+ claimants are required to present an intimate narrative to convince the interviewer about the authenticity of their sexual orientation – which is not a membership but a form of self-identity. The LGBTQ+ claims cannot be verified through group membership and are seen as more complex; the claimants are required to produce evidence of activity in LGBTQ+ community groups or to introduce evidence of a same-sex partner, which is not always possible. Therefore, the asylum-seeker’s narrative of self-identity is the only evidence and the Home Office decision-maker authenticates the claimant’s sexual identity objectively by questioning their sexual experiences. The asylum-seekers are expected to present a well-constructed, well-rehearsed narrative and be articulate in order to be able to prove the authenticity of their claims. The decision-makers ask for clarifications, which the claimants find embarrassing and intrusive. The asylum-seekers usually do not want to share intimate details about their sexual relationships; however, shying away from answering may be detrimental to their claim. Mehdi said:

Back in Tunisia I was trying to ‘pass’ but when I went out with my friends, I always had with me money for beer and for a bribe in case the police stopped me for ‘acting gay’. I can’t even tell you how many times policemen said, ‘If you do with X and Y with me in the car, I won’t jail you for homosexuality’. And the Home Office guy kept asking me to trust him because he’s on my side. Really queen? I know his type.

During the Home Office interview, there is the expectation that the claimants' memory and perception of life events are linear and coherent, which makes the interview even more problematic. As seen above, it is not easy to discuss self-identity due to experiences of persecution, trauma, sexual violence, assault and torture and many struggle with repression, denial and shame. Many LGBTQ+ claimants have developed various coping mechanisms to avoid stigmatisation, such as 'trying to pass', meaning wearing clothes that will not attract attention. Therefore, disclosing and openly discussing their sexual orientation is threatening and uncomfortable, especially for those from oppressive societies. In such societies, the relationship between authority figures and the LGBTQ+ community is challenging and this then affects their willingness to reveal their homosexuality to the Home Office decision-maker, as Gora says:

I had to go all the way back and re-live all the good and bad moments, remember people I'd forgotten and give the Home Office details about my life that nobody else knows. Not sure what they will do with all the information although I hope that the officer who was asking all these awful questions finds it in his heart to be more compassionate with the next asylum-seeker who comes through the door.

These LGBTQ+ narratives, presented in the form of life stories, capture the claimants' emotional state and decision-making at a particular point in time and shed light on their understanding of the world. Such life narratives are paramount for the asylum process but the success of the claim is based on the Home Office policy-makers' understanding of sexual identity and orientation, as well as the interaction between the asylum-seeker and the decision-maker. The interview outcome rests heavily on the interviewer – how they chose to make the claimant feel about their sexual identity, what information they deem to be necessary for the claim and how they chose to extract it. Thus, LGBTQ+ asylum narratives are not negotiated through the claimants' self-identification but are assessed according to whether or not they fit within the Western notions of sexual orientation. Such a perception of sexual orientation is 'essentialist', meaning sexuality is understood through a particular Western cultural lens as strictly binary – either straight or gay – and inflexible, rejecting transgender and bisexual people (Cossman, 2008). This essentialist perception suggests that the Home Office believes in one authentic identity that is waiting to be discovered by the decision-maker. This presupposes that the queer identity must be justified and be seen to be believed. The Home Office interviews assume that all claimants share the same experiences and identity, disregarding the fact that sexual identities can change over time.

6.5 Precarious Experiences: Being 'The Other'

The experiences of 'othering', which are prolonged by the Home Office's obstructive settlement process and lack of information and support services, are paramount. Examples of 'otherness' concern the refugee's experiences around their right to

work and how alienating the job applications and interviews are. All LGBTQ+ refugees relied on their European and British friends to answer questions about the job search and agreed that it was an unexpectedly long and stressful process, as Azar explains:

The job market is tough for refugees. The whole job hunt is so complicated with lots of steps and I was given no guidance by the Home Office. My friends helped me out by showing me how to fill out the forms and how to present myself in the interviews. Still – it took me a long time to get a job, so many closed doors, so much racism. I was invited for interviews because the companies needed to tick an HR box. In the first couple of interviews, I mentioned my refugee status. You should have seen their faces! They were mortified; like I told them I'm an alien. I bet you they probably thought I was illegal. Obviously, I didn't get those jobs.

Mehdi follows this up:

I was shocked when I realised that I had to fill out an equalities form. I understand why it is important but I feel very uncomfortable discussing my sexuality with people I don't know, especially potential employers! I ticked the 'Prefer not to say' box. I don't want employers to treat me differently and you never know who you are talking to. It's one thing to be a refugee and another to be gay.

These accounts demonstrate that the participants are strangers to the Welsh labour market and applying for jobs is uncharted territory. The Home Office does not offer support and advice on the job application process, employee rights or what is required of the newly settled refugees prior to and following interviews and fails to signpost them to organisations that could assist. The Home Office is aware of their specific needs and requirements and, essentially, the refugees are forced to adhere to one-size-fits-all applications. The Home Office allows refugees to enter the competitive Welsh labour market unprepared, ignoring the social and structural difficulties they will face. Thus, LGBTQ+ refugees are forced to acknowledge the new societal norms and admit their distance from them. Effectively, the Home Office's strategy of disempowerment perpetuates social exclusion and creates two binary categories – 'us', the locals and 'them', those who are seen as not belonging. Here, they are socially and financially 'others'.

The participants were also forced to acknowledge another dimension of their 'otherness' when filling out the equality monitoring forms. These latter are interpreted as the physical representation of society's assessment on where the people stand compared to societal norms relating to location, sexual orientation, ethnic background or race, as well as whether they are located outside their 'suitable' place of belonging or stand within society's boundaries. For the participants, such forms are a cultural shock and signify that the refugees are the outsiders. The participants appear to fear societal homophobia, which results in their unwillingness to disclose their sexual orientation as well as their legal status; both topics incite feelings of internalised shame due to the participants' experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination by people in authority.

The way in which recruiters reacted to the 'refugee status' information indicates that there is an apparent objectification of a collective refugee-otherness. This has financial consequences for such a marginalised group, which is not financially

independent and usually lives below the poverty line, at high risk of homelessness (Krings & Olivares, 2007). Under the 2010 Equality Act, refugees have the 'right to work' in the UK without restrictions. The Labour government revoked this right for asylum-seekers in 2001 (Sales, 2002), as a result of which the refugees' skills, credentials and previous work experiences are usually not recognised or appreciated by their new host communities (Sales, 2002). Economic progress in the early years of displacement is important, as the lack of it has been linked with depression and low socio-cultural integration in ethnic-minority populations (Galarneau & Morissette, 2004; Kaiser et al., 2006; King & Ahmad, 2010).

The participants were not signposted by the Home Office to any relevant organisations in South Wales, which could have assisted with their job search and integration – on the contrary, their integration needs were ignored. The participants claim group membership in the LGBTQ+ and the refugee communities but their intersectionality does not match with either group's internal membership requirements. The refugee men are seen as too distant from either the mainstream LGBTQ+ community or the straight refugee communities, as neither community is willing to understand their struggle. Gora explains:

When I arrived I didn't know any other gay asylum-seekers. The refugees I knew were straight and I wasn't going to mix with them because they were homophobic. I wanted to meet people like me, who have gone through similar situations and will understand my struggles. I met a lot of Welsh gays at the clubs but nobody I could call a friend. The club gays are white and I'm tall and black and I stand out. They think I'm 'exotic'; at the club they are friendly but outside the club I'm just another foreigner on the street.

Mehdi confirms this, saying:

People who say that Wales is diverse are clearly blind. I'm a gay refugee from Tunisia – I'm a minority within a minority – within a minority! It's almost impossible to find people like me around here because Cardiff is so small! The gays here are visible but they are not very welcoming and they don't socialise with ethnic minorities because they don't take us seriously. And don't get me started with the straight refugees! I can't hang out with them; we are from different universes.

The narratives demonstrate that LGBTQ+ refugees want to be accepted and to socialise in the LGBTQ+ community but, in Cardiff, this community appears to harbour a fear of 'the other' and what that may mean for the established community. The narratives point out that the fear may be based on race, as the LGBTQ+ refugees are seen as 'exotic', indicating that whiteness is a prerequisite for membership. This, therefore, would seem to indicate that South Wales is a place of minimal diversity and tight socio-communal relationships that resist outside interference. At worst, the refugees at clubs are seen as social trophy acquaintances for satisfying the appearance of pseudo-inclusivity which is enclosed within the periphery of the gay clubs. The participants distance themselves from the straight refugee community, who engage in different everyday practices. The LGBTQ+ refugees voluntarily 'other' themselves, suggesting that there is a hierarchy of identification. The participants self-identify as gay but are socio-legally identified as refugees; thus, their sexual orientation ranks as more important than their acquired legal status. All three men appear to acknowledge the lack of community spirit within the refugee

community and point out the cultural barriers. The men set themselves apart from the refugee community and express their unwillingness to build a relationship with its members. They negotiate their own otherness by condemning negative and homophobic behaviour and offensive attitudes.

'Otherness' is a criterion which permits group members to categorise people into those who fit in with their norm and those whose experiences, values or expressions make them vulnerable to rejection and discrimination (Staszak, 2008). Moreover, 'otherness' amongst communities epitomises a form of cultural crisis, as it challenges preconceived notions around group membership and engagement that may lead to conflict or antagonism (Staszak, 2008). Sibley (1995) argues that lived communities are paradoxical and fragile. Thus, they are swarming with complexities and tensions, which will always exist in local, less-diverse communities and the newcomers simply trigger questions around the homogeneity, established attitudes and behaviour of these communities (Todorov, 1994).

6.6 Experiences of Discrimination: Expressions of Intersectionality

Intersectionality is central when discussing the refugee status of queer ethnic and racial minorities, as it is paramount to understanding how such identifiers prove to be an advantage and/or disadvantage (Brah, 1996; Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1994). Refugee status intersects with queerness, gender and racial/ethnic identities, which positions refugees as a unique set of social actors (Anthias, 2001). Such intersectional social actors are constructed as 'subordinate', based on their interaction with more-dominant actors (Anthias, 2002). The additional issues arise due to the multiple dimensions through which social structures deploy power and oppression concerning space and mobility, including access to services (McCall, 2005). Steele (2011) suggests that displacement pushes forced migrants to continuously evolve through interacting with self-imposed or socio-cultural boundaries. It is only through such interactions that people discover that difference is not a problem and that it does not pose a threat to social cohesion. Browne and Misra (2003) argue that an intersectional societal approach is problematic as there is the risk of perceiving the interconnecting categories as limitless or set – thus blurring the boundaries between intersectional identities and intersectional structures.

In the South Wales context, there are stark differences between the experiences of gender, homosexuality and racial/ethnic background but the participants explained that their intersectionality transgresses multiple social norms. It is not surprising that they present their identities as either negotiable or flexible. As both sexual orientation and racial background are presumed to be innate and immutable, legal status and ethnic and cultural characteristics are presented as less dominant and are presumed to be easily changeable. The participants come together as a marginalised community and use their diverse voices to publicly discuss their

experiences and negotiate their intersectional identities, with the aim of raising questions about social-identity boundaries and making them more visible and understood, as Mehdi explains:

We were a small group of queens, all refugees by the way – from Iran, Morocco, Pakistan – and myself and wanted to get in the club. We were just starting the night, we were sober. The bouncer looked at us one by one and asked for our ID. We gave him the ID provided by the Home Office. He looked at them with a face of disgust and said ‘We don’t accept these here’. We’ve all been to that club many times and had no issues before. He let all the British in before us in without checking their ID. That moment really broke my heart. All we wanted to do was have fun in a safe LGBTQ+ space and have a drink. I cried all the way back home.

Locating the intersections of several categories simultaneously reveals the complexities of the participants’ lived experiences. It appears that their social interactions are defined by perceptions of identity limitations, as their intersectionality is understood as a burden and vulnerability. They appear to have conflicting ideas around their intersectionality, as they believe that, alongside their refugee status, it impacts on their social status. They also argue that their intersectionality is influential in terms of being in line with ever-changing social dynamics. Interestingly, instead of emphasising the fluidity of their intersectionality in deconstructing the categories of difference, they focus on the comparisons between social-group inequality and privilege, neglecting the fact that social categories are neither fixed nor stable (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Perry (2009) explains that intersectionality requires the assessment of the inter-connections between social structures, human agency, tensions of lived experiences, and social contradictions and interactions. Mehdi explains:

You know I never had a boyfriend in Wales? I dated a few people but I got super-tired because it was the same story again and again. At first, they were all curious to date a brown fem but then they treat me like their humanitarian deed of the month! This one guy insisted that I meet his friends only after four dates. He introduced me and they were like ‘So you are the HIV positive refugee from Tunisia!’ Who says that! I left early and never saw the guy again.

Aazar mentioned:

When I’m at work I wear many hats because I represent so many people, the LGBTQ+, the Afghans, the single refugee men. I put pressure on myself to be the perfect example. I don’t want anyone to turn around and say ‘That gay refugee doesn’t work hard’ or ‘That brown gay is only talk’. I want people who haven’t met a gay, Afghan refugee man to have a great first impression and hopefully this will make them a little more tolerant. I work ten times harder than everyone else, I’m involved with many work-related groups, I’m open about all the different layers of my identity and I communicate my experiences. But sometimes I feel like I’m acting, like my identity is not real and I’m putting on a show to educate the rest of the LGBTQ community or the white British and Europeans. It is not my job and it’s exhausting.

The participants suggest that there are distinct conflicting dynamics that form their lived experiences; such dynamics are expressed through power relations as well as through the intersectional groups’ diversity. Interestingly, they mention that there is a limit on how many intersectional categories a person can be part of, relating to

their specific lived experiences. The participants mention that they are not aware of many people who ascribe to the same intersectional identities – thus minimising the social aspect of their intersections – but they indicate that they create strong bonds with those with whom they share intersectional similarities, suggesting that, amongst intersectional refugees, there is limited power inequality. The participants discuss the idea of friendship and closeness with people from different parts of the world who they would not normally meet if it were not for their intersectionality. Hancock (2007) explains that intersectionality is supposed to capture the interactive dynamic of social categories and produce knowledge around identities and their cultural interconnections that are understood through the sociological contexts that transform them. Collins (1986, 2004, 2015) suggests that looking into expressions of intersectional interactions introduces more categories of difference, which multiply the deconstruction of identity categories and amplify the relationships of inequality amongst social groups. The participants explain that there is limited understanding of who they are, what their lives look like, why and how they are different from the rest of the LGBTQ+ and refugee communities. Intersectional refugees are too far removed from each community's norm for their experiences to be valid or to play a substantial role in the creation of new social interactions.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the effects of UK immigration and asylum policies on the lives of LGBTQ+ forced migrants in South Wales. By focusing on the participants' everyday experiences of settlement and arrival, I negotiated their socio-cultural manoeuvring as well as the role played by intersectional identities in relation to community and social interactions.

The experiences of arrival and settlement of LGBTQ+ forced migrants are primarily influenced by the essentialist Home Office policies and practices that diminish their narratives and reproduce and reinforce damaging stereotypes by questioning the authenticity of the migrants' sexuality and life stories. The NASS-offered services, both during and after the settlement period, operate within neo-colonial frameworks and discard the many layers of the migrants' needs, making them feel unseen and unsupported. LGBTQ+ claimants are forced to 'come out' during their Home Office interviews, to share intimate details regarding their sexual orientation and to narrate any traumatic experiences of violence they had suffered due to their sexual orientation – all of which has significant implications for their mental health. Protecting the mental health of LGBTQ+ claimants during their resettlement process should be a priority, as they must overcome multiple challenges and dangers to it. This study raises questions around the Home Office's systematic presentation of LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers and/or refugees as unworthy claimants and points out the systematic evaluation, negotiation and violent scrutiny of their narratives. Home Office processes are underpinned by narratives of homophobia and racism, demonstrating ignorance of fluid identities and sexual orientation.

The participants found it challenging to exist within very specific social boundaries in Cardiff, which were defined by their economic position, legal status and ethnic background. Within such limiting boundaries, their lived experiences of settlement restrict them from socially integrating, thus highlighting the lack of diversity, inclusivity and acceptance of intersectional identities in South Wales. This study raised questions around group membership, belonging and inter-community clashes and highlighted the increased need for inclusive community development. The participants' intersectional identities revealed the interconnections between socio-legal status and community membership, as well as the different versions, understandings and expressions of their intersectional identities.

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