In Law and Practice: Understanding Exclusions in Citizenship and Migration through the

Georgian LGBTQ Experience

by

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ABSTRACT

Through the lived experiences of Georgian queer migrants, this thesis argues that the international and national refugee laws and practices are an essential starting point but remain weak and, in some cases, even exclusionary when it comes to protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQI) individuals. Specifically, this thesis documents the experiences of Georgian LGBTQ migrants to reveal the social, political, cultural, and economic factors in Georgia and recipient countries essential to shaping their experiences with belonging and protection. It critically explores how one's LGBTQ identify shapes their sense of belonging in Georgia, how their identity played a direct role in deciding to migrate, and how queer migrants' identities shape processes in migration and resettlement. Engaging the academic scholarship on citizenship and migration, this thesis contributes new insights for understanding how international and national institutions and laws overlap to create a restrictive regime that forces Georgian migrants to navigate asylum by detaching their claims from their persecution as LGBTQI individuals. Through centering the experiences LGBTQI, this thesis reveals injustices and harms as well as possible top-down legal remedies to improve identity-based protections in national anti-discrimination law and international asylum law.

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INTRODUCTION

Soviet Past of Georgia

Life for LGBTQ people in Georgia is full of marginalizing and violent experiences. Georgia's Soviet history and events that followed from the dissolution of the USSR have influenced the current condition of the LGBTQ community. Understanding its Soviet past is crucial for understanding the current situation of LGBTQ people in Georgia. As a former member of the USSR, Georgia was isolated from the cultural processes happening in the rest of the world. In the West, the 20th century was the period of the rise of various social movements. However, since Georgia remained under the USSR rule, critical social movements were banned in the country. Soviet propaganda associated homosexuality with an unfamiliar (middle class/bourgeoisie) threat. Queer people were viewed as agents sent from the West to corrupt socialist values. Russian soft power is still utilizing this story to feed anti-western sentiments. In this narrative, the West is portrayed as a place of moral degradation, while Russia is equated to pure Christian and traditional family values. This cultural code remains strong even today, and for many in Georgia, homosexuality is associated to the West, the "Other," moral corruption, and a danger to the nation-state.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Georgia witnessed a resurgence of nationalism. The 1990s were the time of recovering "Georgianness" and returning to the imagined past which of what Georgian nation had been preceding its Soviet colonization (Chikovani, 2012; Jones, 2015). In this new era, the Georgian Orthodox Church assumed a pivotal role and situated itself as the unifier and the moral leader of the country. Since then, the Church has been able to maintain

a substantial impact on Georgian society. Over 80% of the Georgian public declared that they belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church (BBC News, 2013). The Orthodox Church remains the most trustworthy institution in Georgia, with 95% of the Georgian population having a favorable opinion of its work (ibid).

The analysis of the new Georgian nationalism shows that it became a tool for gaining electoral success for political forces and, in this process, homophobia was weaponized to attack and discredit political opponents (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016). Media monitoring analysis of Georgian media since the dissolution of the USSR showed that the increase in coverage of LGBTQI issues used to coincide with elections. In the process of fighting for power, certain political forces created homosexual conspiracy theories and fueled myths of homosexuality as a western threat. By some anti EU political forces homosexuality also became a way to fuel anti-Western sentiments in the society and gain electoral support (ibid).

Fight for political power was ongoing beyond partisan realm. In its efforts to demonstrate its political power, the Georgian Orthodox Church used every instance and opposed every LGBTQ supportive initiative and LGBTQ-led public demonstration openly and sometimes violently (JAM News, 2018). For example, the Georgia Patriarch named May 17 – an international day against homophobia, a day on which Georgian LGBTQI activists, since 2012, have been attempting to publicly gather and organize a demonstration for LGBTQ equality and rights - as the day of Family Purity and Values (ibid).

The consequence of Georgia's Soviet and post-Soviet heritage is that sex and sexuality remain taboo topics in Georgian culture, and even today, sex is viewed as something to be addressed

only through Christian and familial moral paradigms. This has had important consequences on how certain communities (e.g., women and LGBTQ persons) can enjoy their rights.

Legal Environment in Georgia

Given its deep history entangled as part of the USSR and subsequent nationalism, the development of Georgia's civil rights laws has been complicated and contentious. The newly emerged nationalism was based on the idea of Europeanness of Georgia prior to its occupation. In 1999, the speech by the incumbent Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, and especially one famous phrase, which summed up the main point of his speech, "I am Georgian, and therefore I am European" at the Council of Europe, clearly defined the path of Georgia (Georgian Journal, 2013). In this new era of reclaiming the Georgian identity, going back to European family, expressed through continuous efforts to integrate into the EU, become a national consensus. Governments have been making efforts to harmonize national policies and laws with the EU. However, beyond legal improvements, not much was done to work with the society and address public attitudes against LGBTQ people. Moreover, as the Georgian Church remained powerful, it successfully managed to push conservative agenda and tie LGBTQ rights to the threat of moral degradation of the country. This has caused new laws on the books that end discrimination hard to enforce in reality – particularly the rights of LGBTQ. As a result, oftentimes, civil rights on the books even provides cover for anti-LGBTQI violence to persist on the ground.

Legal environment for LGBTQ persons in Georgia has been improving the in past decade. As of 2020, the country ranked 30st in the ILGA-Europe map on national LGBTQ legal

protections (ILGA-Europe, 2020). This position is higher than even some of the EU member states. In 2014, Georgia adopted the comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, a prerequisite for the country to receive a visa-free travel agreement into the Schengen zone (Takhar, 2016). The adoption of anti-discrimination legislation was preceded by an addition to the 53rd article of the criminal code of Georgia a couple of years earlier, which stipulates that bias-motivated crime based on the sexual orientation or gender identity of a victim may be an aggravating circumstance during the determination of sanctions. Additionally, in 2016, the Ministry of Interior created a unit, which was tasked with monitoring hate crime cases and serving as the primary communication point between the ministry and the civil society (UN Women, 2018).

However, the local LGBTQ organizations report that the improved legal environment was "a side-effect of the broader process of Georgia joining and/or aspiring to join European institutions, rather than the result of government's targeted efforts to eliminate homophobia" (WISG, 2012b, p. 97). Due to the lack of political will of the Georgia government, there is a huge challenge in the implementation of the existing legislation.

Violence and Discrimination of LGBTQ community members in Georgia

Beyond legal improvements, no government of Georgia made any substantive efforts to address neither the aggressive rhetoric and actions by the Church and the far-right groups, nor the homophobic public attitudes in the society in general. Therefore, the biggest source of

anti-LGBTQI violence is not the laws on the book, but rather the public opinion which has worsened over time. Homophobic attitudes remain highly widespread in Georgian society and are the biggest challenge currently faced by the community. Religious leaders and some political and far-right groups portray any effort of LGBTQ activists to advocate for equality as "gay propaganda". The results of the World Value Survey (WVS) across various decades shows that homophobic attitudes have worsened in Georgia. Based on the results from the World Value Surveys from 2005 to 2008, Georgia ranked first among the most homophobic countries. As a result, LGBTQI persons often experience exclusion from public spaces, discrimination, and violence (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016).

Local research shows a similar picture. A study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies in 2003 revealed that 84% held negative attitudes towards homosexuality, while only 2% were positive (ibid). Similarly, a survey conducted between 2009-2011 on "Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia," showed that 90% of the population stated that "homosexuality is never acceptable" (ibid). According to the report, only 1% thought that "homosexuality was always acceptable." (ibid).

As a result of prevalent negative attitudes towards queer people in Georgia, LGBTQ persons often experience exclusion from public spaces, discrimination, and violence. The research conducted and reported by a local LGBTQ human rights organization - WISG's (2012a), found found that nearly a third of all respondents (32%) said they had experienced violence at least once in the past two years (ibid). The majority of the respondents who experienced physical violence within the last two years were men (33 men and 15 women). The survey found that gay men were the most at-risk group to be attacked (ibid).

Additionally, the survey found that the most widespread form of physical violence was beating - 58.33% (ibid). The second most prevalent form of violence was sexual harassment - 11%, whilst sexual violence and assault with the use of a gun, as well as other forms of violence (destruction of property, choke attempts, having things thrown at, fight, use of a weapon for self-defense and being thrown of a door, etc.) were 10% each (ibid).

From the 48 individuals who had experienced physical violence, 27.08% said they did notify police, while 72.92% of all victims did not do so (ibid). As for the reasons for not reporting to the police, eight of the participants said that they believe the police would be ineffective in such cases, and 11 were scared to report the incident to the police fearing homophobic reactions (ibid). Out of those who sought help from the police, almost half (46.15%) regretted doing so because the police reacted in a non-friendly and homophobic manner (ibid). On the other hand, 30% of individuals reported being received with a friendly attitude by the police, and 23.08% said they were treated in a neutral manner (ibid). In addition to physical violence, the experience of psychological violence is widespread and frequent; 89.33% of respondents said they had experienced some kind of psychological violence within the last two years due to their sexual identity as an LGBTQI person (ibid).

Purpose and Structure of Thesis

Despite the positive changes the rights of LGBTQI under the law, homophobic climate remains a serious and growing challenge. There is a huge gap between the existing legislation and its enforcement. First-hand accounts show that Queer migration from Georgia is quite widespread, even possibly increasing after Georgian enacted anti-discrimination law. As an

NGO representative, I personally witnessed a dramatic increase in requests for assistance in migration cases soon after Georgia received visa-free travel into the Schengen area in 2015 (after the adoption of antidiscrimination legislation among other policy harmonization efforts). No research exists to date that uncovers why members of the queer community chose to leave Georgia after 2015 let alone their experiences of exclusion, belonging, and the migration process.

The first chapter of this thesis critically explores the primary factors behind the decision to migrate from Georgia and the role of LGBTQ identity in that decision. Chapter 2 illustrates how the queer migrants experienced the migration process' laws, state and non-state institutions, and general atmosphere of acceptance. Finally, the third chapter examines how LGBTQ migrants adapt to their new environments and the impact this has had on their identity and sense of belonging.

By exploring these questions through the lived experiences of Georgian queer migrants, this thesis argues that the national refugee and other human rights laws and practices are essential to advancing rights and belonging but remain weak and, in some cases, exclusionary when it comes to LGBTQI protection. Further efforts, especially focusing on addressing homo and transphobic public opinion, are crucial for ensuring full access to human rights for the LGBTQI community.

DESIGN OF THE THESIS

Literature Review

Citizenship and Belonging

Citizenship is much more than a legal status, and laws on the books are never enough to establish rights or a strong sense of belonging (see Behl, 2019; Colbern & Ramakrishnan, 2020). For the Georgian LGBTQI community, the recent push to protect rights is challenged with overturning a long history of legal exclusion. In particular, legal exclusion provided a foundation for homophobic believes to spread throughout major institutions and actors, making anti-discrimination laws harder to enforce. Socialization of exclusionary beliefs and practices have also, in part, fueled the recent backlash to progressive laws that can be argued to be originated from foreign sources (the EU) rather than an organic domestic process. This thesis bridges scholarship on citizenship and migration because it is at their intersection that we see exclusionary laws and practices conflict with progressive ones, placing LGBTQI into liminal statuses both at home and internationally. This thesis seeks to uncover this liminality in both citizenship and in migration.

Queer migration is a complex phenomenon and entails citizenship and a sense of belonging to a nation as the core aspects. Why do queer community members choose to leave their home countries and migrate to new ones? How do queers choose specific countries to migrate to? These questions, which seem to pertain to migration scholarship, inadvertently presuppose the issues of citizenship and belonging. There may be various reasons LGBTQ people migrate – from avoiding persecution to exploring other sexual lifestyles or living with a partner who is

national of another country (Yue, 2013). Sexual citizenship, or the lack of it, which produces a sense of exclusion from the social body of the nation-state, is one of the prime factors fueling queer migration.

Laws on the books can conflict when it comes to citizenship rights. Thomas H. Marshal important theoretical framework on citizenship illustrates this by explaining that three phases of citizenship exist: the civil (or legal), the political, and the social. Civil rights represent the rights to freedom that every individual has, political rights represent participating in the political process, and social rights connect individuals to social welfare. A person can have one of these rights, while being denied the other. Building on this scholarship, Elizabeth Cohen followed by Allan Colbern and Karthick Ramakrishnan, develop multi-dimensional concept of citizenship rights that illustrate in greater depth how, in the United States, citizenship rights can be bundled together in both inclusionary and exclusionary ways (Cohen, 2009; Colbern & Ramakrishnan, 2020).

Citizenship laws on the books, however, are only part of the story. Laws often come into conflict with practice. Recent scholarship that has focused on sexual aspects of citizenship argues that citizenship claims are modeled on heterosexual and male individual (Kessler & Robson, 2009). The notion of the sexual citizen was initially developed by Jeffrey Weeks (1998), who explored recent debates about citizenship by looking at the issues of sexuality that had been concealed in such debates at the time. Latyer, David Evans (2007) coined the term "sexual citizenship," where he studied how sexual identities are formed as the effects of the complex relationship between the market and the state. Diane Richardson is another scholar

who has also theorized the construction of sexual citizenship in critical ways. Her main analytical tool is the concept of a grid of sexual rights, which she ties to sexual citizenship.

Similarly, David Bell and Jon Binnie, in their book Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond provide the most comprehensive analysis of sexual citizenship via queer theoretical, critical lens (2000). Their main argument is that queer theory enabled criticizing the problematic sexual citizenship paradigm based on acceptance, recognition, and inclusion into the heteronormative capitalist nation-state: "good gays" vs. "bad queers" (ibid). They argue that this paradigm has worked to improve the conditions of the relatively privileged, white middle-class gays and lesbians.

Different sexual citizenship regimes produce different forms of belonging among LGBTQI citizens. A sense of belonging is about feeling home and attachment (Yuval-Davis, 2006) and is shaped, among others, by the form of the sexual citizenship regime. If it is hostile towards queer subjects, the community members will lack the sense of home in their home countries, and vice versa. However, most of this scholarship is based on theoretical and legal analysis and does not incorporate queer subjects' real lived experiences and perspectives. There is lack of scholarship, which links the legal aspects of sexual citizenship to the lived experiences of the queer citizens. Moreover, the research on queer citizenship and migration from the Eastern European/Eurasian context is almost non-existent.

In one of the rare cases of queer migrants from Eastern Europe, Mole (2019) documents Polish queer migrants' experiences in the UK. He identifies the factors motivating queer migration in the post-communist rise of nationalism in Poland. According to him, the new

Polish national identity was built upon the ideas of Polish traditions before the communist era, where conservative gender roles were integrated into the picture as part of traditional gender, sexual and familiar norms "in an attempt to maximise predictability in an uncertain world"(Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 28). Mole argues that more than the fear of persecution, for most of the Polish queer migrants interviewed by him, the motivation stemmed from the desire to explore and live their sexuality in accordance with their desires more freely.

This thesis aims to fill in the gap by exploring how queer subjects experienced belonging shaped by the sexual citizenship regime in a post-soviet Eastern European/Eurasian country – Georgia – as well as in host countries. I will explore the effects of sexual citizenship in Georgia on queer subjects in order to critically examine the primary factors that motivated queer migrants to leave their families, friends, and familiar places and culture for the search for a better life. Instead of engaging in legal research based on a theoretical analysis, I aim to uncover the challenges of Georgian sexual citizenship regime through the experiences of queer subjects' perspective.

Queer Migration and Legal Environment

Like in the study of citizenship, scholarship on migration often spotlights tensions between laws and practices that shape reception of migrants. Indeed, the growing literature on migration experiences of LGBTQ people has opened up entirely new topics for research. Some of the explored issues within this scholarship are: the relationship between sexuality and migration (Binnie, 1997; Mai & King, 2009; Manalansan, 2006); legal issues LGBTQ people are faced with when crossing borders (Berg & Millbank, 2009; Cantu, 2009; Dauvergne &

Millbank, 2003; Kessler & Robson, 2009; Luibhéid, 2008; C. Stychin, 2003; C. F. Stychin, 1995); (re)construction of sexual identities subsequent migration (Kuntsman, 2009); and finally, the newly emerged queer diasporas and the lived experiences of the diaspora members (Fortier, 2001; R. Mole, 2018).

In general, the global refugee system is relatively new. The modern concept of asylum emerged through the 1951 Geneva Convention, in the aftermath of WWII, when the world learned about the necessity of refugee mechanism through the humanitarian horrors of the Nazi regime and the consequential migratory crisis. The asylum system has been designed with having a male persecuted individual in mind, who is fleeing an oppressive political regime (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007). The closer LGBT individuals' narratives come to this male heterosexual subject, the more likely they are to be granted asylum (ibid). There are many challenges associated with this model. For example, Lewis (2014) argues that due to this model, which is predicated mainly on state persecution, heterosexual and lesbian women's cases are frequently rejected since they mostly experience violence from private actors, and their claims are perceived to lack sufficient evidence.

Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention provides the following definition of a refugee:

> Any person who … owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 1951, p. 14)

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The Convention does not explicitly mention sexual orientation as the protected ground eligible for refuge. However, LGBTQ individuals can claim asylum based on belonging to a "particular social group".

The UNHCR has issued a "Guidance Note relating to refugee claims based on sexual orientation or gender identity." It defines how to evaluate sexual identity-based claims (Gower, 2010). The United States issued its own specific guidelines for the evaluation of asylum claims in 2011. In most asylum regimes, the main principle for claiming asylum for sexual minorities is the construction of a personal story that reveals and documents the belonging to the LGBTQ community, as well as the history of persecution (Yue, 2013). However, scholars criticize this model for assuming the universality of western ideas regarding sexuality. Oftentimes, when claimants fail to provide evidence that matches the western preconceived ideas regarding sexual identity development and persecution history, they are mistrusted and risk deportation back to their home countries (ibid). The UNHCR guidelines state that persons' sexual identities vary depending on the context, and some level of intrusive questioning during the interview – such as questions about their identity, belonging, and difference – can be asked. However, questions regarding sexual relationships and activities might be entirely inadequate for people who have not had any sexual relationships before. Relying on these questions signifies the prevalence of the Western model of sexual development in the asylum regimes.

Despite the existence of the refugee mechanism in international law in relation to queer subjects, the system has a number of challenges that negatively impact (LGBTQ) asylum

seekers. Fleeing Homophobia is the most comprehensive overview of the LGBTQ asylum and refugee laws and procedures in the EU. According to the publication, the Dutch court was the first court in the EU, which recognized sexual orientation as the ground for claiming asylum. This precedential case later resulted in the 2004 EU Qualification Directive (Council Directive 2004/83/EC) stating in Article 10 that 'a particular social group might include a group based on a common characteristic of sexual orientation (Spijkerboer, 2013). Gender identity was added to Article 10 of the EU Qualification Directive in 2010 (ibid). One of the main challenges the authors of the publication found is that the refugee laws and practices are not harmonized among the member states and that these practices do not correspond to the international human rights standards, which results in frequent denial of fundamental human rights for LGBT asylum seekers (ibid). Therefore, as this thesis will too show in later chapters, the experiences of LGBTQI migrants are not homogenous and depend on the recipient country's refugee and other human rights laws and practices.

Importantly, nation-states themselves help define and enforce international law and human rights, particularly the right to asylum. Indeed, in Immigration and Membership Politics in Western Europe, Sara Goodman delineate national paths asylum seekers go through to become fully recognized citizens (Goodman, 2014). Civic integration, which has also become a common practice in Western European countries, where migrants are taught civil duties and skills, such as language, laws, and traditions of a country, is the path through which the countries integrate the migrants into the social body. Through these policies, states are also articulating the state identity that may or may not be in tension with the identities of asylum seekers – namely, LGBTQI. Identity itself is a part of the nation-building process that migrants' rights are subject to (ibid).

Recent scholarship in the field of queer migration studies has shown that LGBTQ migrants are at heightened risk of state violence in the form of the global detention and deportation regime (Lewis, 2014; Lewis, 2019). Lewis (2014) argues that the detention and deportation practices, where LGBTQ asylum seekers are deprived of their freedom of movement and their cases are pending for uncertain periods of time, put queer refugees in subaltern positions and force many queers to abstain from engaging with the asylum system altogether.

The problems identified in the queer migration scholarship challenge the idea that liberal states are inherently welcoming and inclusive towards LGBTQ asylum seekers. However, this prevalent idea of gay friendliness among liberal states is used for problematic purposes, such as Western imperialism, colonialism, and racist nation-building. Homonationalism has become one of the key theoretical concepts in queer (migration) scholarship, which captures this phenomenon. It signifies how certain liberal states use LGBTQI rights to position themselves as 'gay-friendly'' and civilized, through which global imperialist and colonialist project is justified (Puar, 2018). Sexuality has become a tool through which modernity is claimed and where the line between the civilized and uncivilized is drawn on the global political map. Similarly, Eric Fassin (2010) coined the term 'sexual democracy'' to illuminate how liberal democracies (mostly in the West) define their borders against the 'uncivilized' Others. Nevertheless, there is a paradox in such an asylum regime - queer subjects are simultaneously both objects of protection and claiming rights, and in need of protection, and "an unwelcomed object of scrutiny" (Giametta, 2017, p. 2).

In a specific example, in his book, Giametta (2017) shows how LGBTQ migrants experience various forms of subalternity in the UK and that the simplistic vision that has prevailed in the global arena and the media – one of starting from oppression in their home countries to liberation in the UK - is much more complicated.

In general, the literature regarding queer migration shows that while liberal states portray themselves as LGBTQ inclusive and sexually progressive entities national, national refugee laws and practices insufficiently address the needs of queer migrants, and there is a need to address the shortcomings. In later chapters, this thesis will attempt to analyze whether these shortcomings apply to LGBTQ asylum seekers from Georgia and identify other challenges as seen through the perspectives of Georgian queer respondents that the existing scholarship might have missed.

Methodology

For this thesis, I engage in qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methodologies allow unearthing tremendous information from a smaller group of participants (King et al., 1994). As a scholar, I place this research in interpretivist tradition. By using an interpretivist approach to knowledge production (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013) I aimed to address the limitations and problematic areas of positivism – especially the positivist obsession with objective truth and its hegemonic way of knowledge production. This research does not treat the gathered data as a replicable, objective truth. Instead, I see my observations as situated in the wider context of political, social, economic, and historical power relations and shaped by my personal

positionality. I aim to give voice to the marginalized community members by depicting their stories from their perspective as much as possible. Critically reflecting on my positionality, I hope, will help the readers understand the limitations of my attempts in unveiling the indigenous meanings.

Interpretivist approach to research is based on abductive knowledge production. Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2013) use an abductive way of knowledge to delineate an approach that uses a singular-spiral approach to research design. In this approach, the researcher may start the research with no pre-set solid design. As the researcher chooses the topic or the community to observe, the main research question emerges through the observation process. However, as the researcher continues their observation, the research question, as well as research design, might change. There are no rigid start and finish points in this type of research; there are only temporary stops to analyze and write about what has already been gathered. When deciding to engage with the Georgian queer migrant community, even though I did have a pre-set interview instrument and the direction I wanted to take, I allowed the participants to lead the participants by employing semi-structured open-ended questions conversation and for unanticipated topics to emerge.

For this project, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interview questions were all open-ended and allowed the participants to allow unanticipated topics to emerge during the interview process. The interview instrument was used to guide me through the process. I did not rigidly follow the questionnaire sequence. I chose this method as it allowed me to develop conversations in a more friendly, relaxed manner without

interrupting the participants' chain of thoughts. This method allowed me to produce thick analysis.

The interviews were conducted at the beginning of October 2020. All interviews, except for one, were conducted via Facebook Messenger video call or Zoom video call. Simultaneously, I was also writing notes in my notebook during the interviews. One face-to-face interview was conducted in my apartment. Every participant agreed on audio recording except for one person, whom I interviewed in my home. I was recording every interview through my iPhone audio recording application with their consent. I was later uploading the interview files to the ASU protected cloud, to which only I have access. All interviews were conducted in Georgia. I transcribed the interviews and then translated them into English. I coded the responses to see the patterns and key themes. Initially, I had anticipated each interview session to last for about an hour. However, most of the interviews lasted 1.5 – 2 hours. Participants did not receive any incentives for the interview.

In total, I conducted 13 interviews. All of my interviewees were Georgian, over the age of 18, and identified as LGBTQ. I use 'queer' and LGBTQI interchangeably to refer to individuals whose sexual and gender identities fall beyond cis- and heteronormative categories. During the interview process, I asked them to self-identify to avoid imposing my own assumptions. All respondents had left Georgia in the period from 2015 to 2019. Initially, I was planning to also interview queer migrants who had left Georgia through other ways – for example, through studying and later staying in another country, through employment, or simply staying in a new country without documents. However, due to limitations of the MA thesis and my time, I had to narrow down my respondents' pool to only the queer migrants who have gone through a

formal asylum process based on the persecution based on their sexual and/or gender identity. You can see the list of respondents, their identities, and their countries in table #1. To protect my respondents' safety and security, their responses were collected in a confidential manner and anonymized. For their anonymity, I changed their names and other sensitive information, which could enable someone to identify them. For every participant, the recruitment process was exactly the same. I knew each of the respondents personally through my past relationships with them as the community members. This means that I was unable to reach queer migrants who did not have any access to queer party series - HOROOM NIGHTS - or the local LGBTQ organization – Equality Movement – where I was working. Moreover, unfortunately, I was unable to interview a lesbian, a transgender man, or an intersex person. Therefore, my research is limited by not sufficiently accounting for the experiences of those identity holders. It is noteworthy that most of the respondents reported lower-middle-class status. Everyone reported leaving Georgia after they became adults.

The first part of the interview instrument contained questions about their experiences in Georgia in relation to their sexual and/or gender identity and other identities. In this part, I aimed to uncover how each participant's experiences were shaped by their LGBT and/or other identities, how these identities formed their sense of belonging to or exclusion from the Georgian society, and what were the primary factors motivating them to leave Georgia in search for a better life. The second part of the questionnaire was focused on their experiences with the asylum regimes – laws, procedures, people, and service provider entities – in the recipient countries. The third and fourth parts were focused on adaptation to new environments and their visions of their future.

During the analysis of their responses, I tried to employ a theoretically informed approach to refugee narratives, one which analyses these voices and narratives as situated, positional and relational to the existing socio-political power relations (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014). Instead of taking their interpretations of their lives and migratory experiences as face values, I attempt to analyze them by considering political, cultural, economic, and social power relations that influence these interpretations. However, I engage in respectful analysis of my respondents by attempting to portray their stories from their perspectives as much as possible and, in doing so, I strive to portray their images according to how they see themselves as much as possible.

Table #1

#	Name	Identity	Country	Immigration status
1	Lasha	Gay man	Belgium	Pending final decision
2	Tornike	Gay man	Belgium	Pending final decision
3	Tamuna	Bisexual woman	USA	Granted refugee status. Decision on permanent resident / greed card granted.
4	Nukri	Genderqueer	USA	Pending final decision
5	Salome	Transgender woman	Belgium	Granted refugee status. Permanent resident status.
6	Natalia	Transgender woman	Belgium	Granted refugee status. Permanent resident status
7	Sopo	Bisexual woman	Spain	Granted refugee status. Permanent resident status pending.
8	Ana	Genderqueer	Spain	Granted refugee status. Permanent resident status pending.
9	Shota	Gay man	Belgium	Granted refugee status. Permanent resident status.
10	Vato	Gay man	Belgium	Granted refugee status. Permanent resident status pending.
11	Guga	Gay man	Netherlands	Granted refugee status. Permanent resident status.
12	Tea	Transgender woman	Belgium	Granted refugee status. Permanent resident status.
13	Ivane	Gay man	USA	Pending decision.

Positionality

In this research project, I engage in a feminist interpretivist framework of knowledge production. Interpretivist approach, in contrast with a positivist one, sees data not as objective truth, waiting to be discovered by the researchers using 'pure' data collection methods, but as cogenerated by the observer and the observed and embedded into various political and social power relations (Ackerly & True, 2010; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). Since data and analysis cannot be separated from the researcher's implicit prior assumptions, knowledge, political and religious views, gender, sexuality, and other identity categories, the feminist approach requires the researcher to critically reflect on their positionality (Nagar & Geiger, 2007). This allows research to be transparent and allows the reader to understand why and how the data collection and their analysis took the form it did.

I chose to study the experiences of Georgian queer migrants for several reasons. First of all, as a queer person myself, who has spent most of his life in Georgia, I have experienced persecution numerous times. The persecution experiences included physical attacks, the psychological trauma of family and societal rejection, verbal attacks, and emotionally and mentally exhausting constant paranoid fear of unsafety while navigating public spaces. I recently started looking back and critically reflecting on my urge to stay out of Georgia's borders for as long as possible. I have applied to study abroad numerous times. For a citizen of Georgia, a relatively poor country outside of the West, studying and international scholarships have become one of the few ways to leave the country for prolonged times legally. I was introduced to migration studies in my graduate courses both at Central European University at the program MA Gender Studies, and at Arizona State University, where I am

currently studying at MA Social Justice and Human Rights program, which motivated and enabled me to reflect on my urge to stay away from Georgia critically. In this process, I started realizing how the experiences of anti-queer marginalization and victimization have shaped my sense of belonging or, to be more precise – exclusion, which in itself has fueled my desire to leave the country. However, while my relatively privileged position due to my social class, my knowledge of English, and the consequential access to international study and scholarship programs did not force me to go through the formal asylum process, I have spent a lot of my life trying to migrate, the essence of which is quite similar to the those of LGBTQ refugees. The affinity I felt with the community encouraged me to explore it through my thesis.

Second of all, I am a queer, feminist, leftist activist with a conscious dedication to social justice and human rights as well as formal experience in such activist civil society circles. My dedication to social justice and human rights motivated me to select and work on the topic, which, in my opinion, could potentially be beneficial to one of the most marginalized subjects in the Georgian context – queer community – by documenting the injustices, the community is experiencing and critically analyzing Georgian state practices as well as the US and the EU refugee laws and practices which further create injustices for the queer community. My hope is that by documenting these experiences from the queer asylum seekers and refugee perspectives, this paper will play its role in addressing the conditions because of which queers chose to leave their countries and start their lives in completely unfamiliar and precarious environments. The hope that this research will also help reveal and address the unjust conditions queer refugees are met in their recipient countries was one of the primary motivating factors.

Moreover, as an activist with formal experience in LGBTQ civil society organizations, in the year of 2015, I was approached by an overwhelming number of queer individuals, who were seeking advice as they were either planning to migrate from Georgia in the nearest future, or they were already in the recipient countries and needed help from a Georgian LGBTQ organization to corroborate their asylum claims. Unfortunately, despite my efforts to gain access to data on LGBTQ migration trends from Georgia, either from the Georgian state or from the EU, I was unable to get them as none of these parties gather or publish such data. This makes it impossible to either see the scale of the LGBTQ migration from Georgia or see the patterns of migration, which, by linking them to the national or global political, social and economic developments, would enable the analysis of the issue nuanced way.

As an executive director of Equality Movement – an LGBTQ human rights NGO in Georgia - and as a co-founder of HOROOM NIGHTS – the largest queer nightclub series in the Caucasus region (and maybe been in Eastern Europe) - a lot of queers knew me personally. However, obviously, I did not know every LGBTQ person in Georgia. When I looked at my emails, I had sent around 75 emails to the individuals who were either planning to migrate or were already in the asylum process in the recipient countries. This email contained a bibliography of various reports and media materials that described the situation of LGBTQ people in Georgia and my desk research produced for the UK asylum court. This email was used to support queer individuals and their lawyers in their asylum claim cases. I was sending these emails under the same subject line, "Situation of LGBTQ people in Georgia," which made counting the mails easy. I had counted 75 emails from 2015 to 2019 (the time when I left my position at Equality Movement as I received the Fulbright scholarship to study in the

US). The number of people personally approaching me was shocking, and it indicated a widespread phenomenon.

Therefore, my personal experiences, as well as my personal connections with the Georgian queer community, enabled me to approach this issue from an "insider-outsider" perspective (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). My position and my experiences as a queer person influenced the perception of the Georgian situation for LGBTQ people as well as my respondents' motivations to migrate. This shaped my approach by influencing the questions I was asking during the interview process and how I was interpreting their responses. My affinity with the group enabled me to connect with these individuals on a personal level, establish trust, and navigate the interview process smoothly. I was able to culturally and socially contextualize and understand some of their experiences due to my Georgianness. Moreover, the shared mother tongue – Georgian – also enabled me to connect with them in more nuanced ways without the need to culturally and linguistically translate their narratives – a process where some of the nuances are inadvertently lost and misinterpreted.

On the other hand, some of my identities served as a barrier to enabling the respondents to open up completely. Obviously, during the interview process, there was a power imbalance as I was the researcher, currently studying with a prestigious scholarship in a prestigious American university. In the past, as I was the director of the organization, there had also been power imbalances between the respondents and me. Due to this, my respondents probably saw me in a more privileged position, which might have potentially affected their narratives as a result of negotiating their self-image with me or other reasons.

CHAPTER #1: LIFE IN GEORGIA – BELONGING AND FACTORS FUELING

MOTIVATION TO LEAVE

In this chapter, I explore how the sexual citizenship regime in Georgia shaped the experiences of queers and how it affected their motivation to leave their home country. Hector Carrillo argues that to conceptualize queer migration fully, we also need to consider the lives of queers "in their places of origin, their exposure to local and foreign sexual ideologies prior to migrating, their agency in adapting and appropriating ideologies and practices prevalent in both home and host countries, and the transformations in sexual identities and behaviors that they experience after migration" (2018, p. 58). According to him, sexuality can be direct as well as the indirect factor for migration. He calls this concept "sexual migration.". Similarly,

> Richardson (1998) interprets sexual citizenship as a system of rights, which is particularly shaped by a concern with conduct (or practice), identity, and relationship-based claims. She produces a grid of sexual rights following a triple differentiation: seeking rights to various forms of sexual practice in personal relationships (campaigns for sexual freedom and safety), seeking rights through self-definition and the development of individual identities (right to be lesbian and gay, female sexual autonomy) and finally seeking rights within social institutions (same-sex marriages) (Giametta, 2017, p. 11).

Even though Georgia improved its human rights legislation in recent years, one of the most notable improvements and widely discussed changes being the adoption of the comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, these improvements changed almost nothing for Georgia's LGBTQ community. They thought this legislation was only adopted to show the EU and

international community that this mechanism exists in Georgia. However, as laws in general, anti-discrimination law only existed on the paper, and there was no will to implement. Even though initially they were hopeful that this new law would improve the situation, they soon became frustrated. Only two respondents thought that due to this law, the attitudes among the police improved slightly.

Therefore, the law did not in any way play a role in their decision to leave the country. In their opinion, it also did not improve the condition of other minority and vulnerable groups in Georgia. "People are the same; politicians are the same; the police are the same. How will this legislation change anything when these people have not changed?" said Natia. On the other hand, the availability and accessibility of sexual rights, as well as public attitudes towards LGBTQ citizens, played a crucial role in motivating queer subjects to leave their home countries.

By allowing queer migrants to reveal their stories of inclusion and marginalization in Georgia at various aspects of their lives – such as families, public spaces, social attitudes, access to safety and protection, possibilities to live their lives freely and express their identities, and opportunities to form intimate relationships - I argue that sexual citizenship regime in Georgia is constraining and exclusionary towards non-heteronormative citizens. However, constraining sexual citizenship is not experienced through exclusionary and oppressive legislation per se, as the migration scholarship has focused on. Rather it is experienced through homophobic public attitudes and the state's lack of will to address it. Even the adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation did not improve the lives of LGBTQ citizens as the state lacked the political will to implement the law. In what follows, I show that except for

very few places and communities, queer subjects do not have a sense of belonging to the nation. Rather, they form a strong sense of exclusion from the Georgian nation, which is based on negative public attitudes, lack of will by the state to protect its queer citizens, and impossibility to live their authentic lives. In this chapter, I will reveal that fear of and mistrust towards the police, lack of opportunity to live happy and fulfilling lives, and, most importantly, a constant fear of getting physically attacked and killed when navigating public spaces were the primary factors queer migrants chose to leave the country. Analyzing the stories of migrants reveals that the international refugee law, which presupposes specific threats from the state, does not fit the persecution forms experienced by Georgian queer migrants. The primary factors of motivation to migrate stemmed from the overall homophobic and constraining atmosphere, which is hard to pinpoint down to specific (state) persecution acts.

Childhood

Homophobia in Georgia is rampant (see Cooperman et al., 2017; WISG, 2016). The constraining and marginalizing atmosphere in Georgia revealed itself in every other aspect of their lives. Queers find it hard to explore and express their identities. "I was not able to explain what was happening to me as I did not even have adequate terminology to make sense of it" (Vato, personal communication, October 2, 2020). Lack of access to supportive information in childhood and teenage years is the primary reason identity formation was difficult. Sexuality, in general, is tabooed in Georgia (Lomsadze, 2010). The most prevalent issue among respondents was the confusion or hardship in realizing their identity. Most of the respondents realized their sexual attractions and/or gender inclinations at a young age. This illustrates that

queer children are one of the most vulnerable communities as they do not have access to affirming information and supportive systems neither at their families nor at schools.

Generally, childhood was one of the most vulnerable periods in their lives. Apart from confusion over identities resulting from lack of access to supportive information, for most queer migrants, childhood was associated with unhappy, negative, and traumatic experiences of exclusion, violence, and confusion due to lack of access to supportive systems, including and bullying atmosphere in their environments. Frequent thoughts, and in two respondents' cases, attempts of suicide were also present. Schools were associated with most of the traumatizing experiences. Bullying at schools and in the neighborhoods was evident in all cases except for female-bodied persons. "I had a completely normal childhood, like everyone else in my village. I didn't even know what sexuality and gender meant at that time" (Nukri, personal communication, October 4, 2020). Nukri explained this through the lack of knowledge and homophobic discourses at the time. They stated that because neither her, nor her parents or relatives and neighbors were informed about such deviances, because homophobic discourses were not so prevalent in culture and in her surrounding at the time, neither her nor her parents associated her relatively more masculine behavior necessary to homosexuality. In addition to this, lack of gender policing can also be explained through the masculine culture in Georgia. One possible explanation for this is that the gendered behavior of young girls and boys are policed differently. Different gendered expectations make it hard for anyone to notice gender non-conformity in young female-bodied persons, and even when more masculine behavior is evident, it is not seen as a threat in the same way femininity of young male-bodied persons is seen and punished. Therefore, in my study, female-bodied

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respondents did not recall their childhood in such traumatic and negative terms as male-bodied persons did. For them, childhood was ordinary.

Those who experienced bullying at school said that the sources were peers at school and in the neighborhood. However, many respondents also mentioned homophobic bullying, aggression, or lack of support during such incidents from schoolteachers. Due to such a violent environment, many were forced to take bypass roads to avoid contact with the neighborhood boys. Generally, the neighborhood was perceived as one of the most threatening places. However, it is interesting that some of the respondents reported having sexual relationships with peers who were bullying them on a homophobic basis and who later established heterosexual families. One sex worker trans woman even recalled how her villagers, who used to bully her when she was a child, later would come to her as clients. This again demonstrates the intensity of rigid sexual norms and social control of sexual behavior in Georgian society. Individuals who enjoy same-sex sexual activities, in order to conceal it, as well as due to internalized hatred of same-sex sexual urges, might express aggression towards individuals who openly live and express their non-normative sexual and gender identities in more severe forms.

Families were another primary source of marginalization for most of the respondents. Fathers seemed to be more homophobic in general than mothers. In most cases, they did not recall direct aggression towards them in family environments unless they explicitly came out or their parents learned about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity some other way. However, almost everyone recalled discussions in their families about LGBT issues, which was filled with disgust and phrases like "I would kill myself if my child was like them." From

early childhood, these conversations installed in them the idea that their non-normative sexual and/or gender inclinations were wrong and needed to be concealed.

Societal pressure to be homophobic was evident in most cases. For example, their family members' reactions frequently would be motivated and incited by their relatives or close neighbors' homophobic attitudes. In some cases, even when the parents were not aggressive and more accepting themselves, they feared neighbors' and relatives' reactions. One bisexual woman reported that she was forcefully taken to a religiously affiliated psychologist to cure her by her parents. She later had to lie to her parents that she changed and was no longer interested in women to get out of the never-ending conflict cycle with her parents.

Adult Life

The vulnerability of queer subjects does not cease to exist after they become adults. Homophobic attitudes also impacted their employment opportunities and financial situation. Employment opportunities were limited, and most of them deliberately chose queer-friendly places to avoid an unwelcome atmosphere. Those who successfully managed to work in such places – either bars and nightclubs or LGBTQI organizations – rarely experienced homophobic treatment. However, those who were not as lucky faced various forms of aggression and degrading treatment from colleagues. Aggression was based on their appearance. Usually, colleagues and employers would not directly refer to their orientation but use their behavior or appearance to demean them and create an atmosphere where they were forced to leave their jobs. One person additionally reported that he was forced to leave his

work due to his HIV status. His employer was uninformed of how HIV could be transmitted and was afraid he would infect everyone at his work.

The reality for transgender women is entirely different. "When you are transgender, no one will hire you even to clean a toilet" (Salome, personal communication, October 3, 2020). In their cases, their financial situation was severe. Sometimes they were unable to pay rent and were forced to sleep on the street. All of them reported being forced into survival sex work to survive. All of them were forced to engage in survival sex work at some point in their lives. Few managed to find work at the local LGBTQI organizations. As sex workers, they encountered various forms of violence from clients, by-passers, and even the police and medical workers: physical assault, kidnap, rape, mistrust, and demeaning behavior from the police when they were being called. Even after such incidents, when they required a hospital visit, they encountered demeaning and aggressive behavior from the hospital staff, including doctors and nurses. Many times, in fear of additional victimization from the police and health workers, they refrained from using these services and try to help each other instead.

Feelings of Belonging and Marginalization

These constant marginalization experiences, violence, and discrimination shaped how queer migrants viewed and experienced Georgia and their place in it. When discussing their feelings about Georgia, they reproduced Western-centric discourses by portraying the West as progressive and modern, and Georgia as backwards. Most of the respondents used strong words to describe their feelings about Georgia: "disgust," "irritation," "hate," and "painful to recall." They characterized the Georgian nation as "backwards," "uneducated,"

"undeveloped," and "brainwashed." However, some of them also acknowledged that they have compassion for ordinary citizens as the responsibility for this situation is on those in power – the church, the state, the media, and politicians. Some of the respondents said that despite such negative feelings towards Georgia, they still appreciated the level of humane understanding and closeness of Georgian people. They also missed the potential to form more close relationships like they did when living in Georgia.

Except for one respondent, none of the queer migrants in this study said that they felt they belonged to this country. "I felt like an alien, that I was born in the wrong country, and it never felt at home," said Ana. "Even though I spoke the same language, I could not understand them," (Tornike, personal communication, October 3, 2020). Due to this sense of non-belonging thoughts to leave the country was prevalent from early childhood. They felt that staying there meant being forced to negate their authentic selves. These feelings were less strong in female-bodied persons and among persons whose gender behavior was more conforming. Again, one possible explanation for this is that female-bodied persons, as well as those whose gender behavior was not easily identifiable as non-normative, experienced forms of persecution that were less, leading to the sense of exclusion and marginalization from the Georgian nation.

To fill in the void of marginalization and exclusion experienced by queers, not many alternative communities were available. The LGBTQ community was the most named community they felt the belonging to. Tbilisi's nightlife rave community – specifically HOROOM NIGHTS and BASSIANI specifically - were also mentioned frequently. LGBTQI organizations - Identoba, WISG, and Equality Movement - and generally human rights activist circles were

also places where respondents experienced feelings of belonging and safety. One genderqueer person named Georgian Baptist-Evangelical church as a supportive and safe space. It is noteworthy that all of these institutions and communities are explicitly queer or queer-friendly. The Georgian Baptist-Evangelical church is the only religious institution that has publicly expressed its support to the LGBTQ community numerous times.

On the other hand, as expected, far-right groups and specific group leaders were seen as the main marginalization sources. Among the specific groups mentioned were the Orthodox Parents Union and the Georgian March. Some of the respondents also directly named Gia Korkotishvili and Levan Vasadze – the leaders of far-right groups. In general, queers experienced marginalization primarily from religious groups and institutions. Others also mentioned men in general, society, and politicians. Among political groups, the Georgian Patriotic Alliance and its leader Irma Inashvili was stated. Finally, Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarchate and politicians manipulating with LGBTQ issues were also stated but with less frequency. Respondents thought that the media is usually portraying LGBTQ people in scandalous and exotic ways. They said that LGBTQ people are portrayed as clowns in the mainstream media.

Homophobia among the police was almost omnipresent in every respondents' memory. None of the queers interviewed trusted the police or had a willingness to address them when needed. Especially trans women associated police with abuse and victimization. Ana, a genderqueer person, recalled how after a homophobic incident, the police officers whom they called for help, instead of helping and supporting, told them, "Look like a proper girl, and nobody will attack you" (Ana, personal communication, October 4, 2020).

The picture depicted by queer migrants showed that they constantly feared physical violence, and, in such incidents, they did not have anyone to turn for help to, including the institution which is supposed to prevent and address it – the police. Physical safety was the most mentioned reason in the decision to leave Georgia. Most of the respondents revealed that they were afraid of being killed if they were to stay in Georgia. Navigation in public spaces – streets, more precisely – was the most stated reason for leaving the country. The fear of being murdered was shockingly prevailing in almost every respondents' response. The second most stated factor in their decision to leave was psychological stress and depression. Opportunity to study, develop, and better future were other important factors. Finally, finding an intimate partner and developing private life was also an important factor for migrants. Only one person mentioned the opportunity to economically improve his own situation, among other factors. However, even for him, this factor was one of the least important ones, among others.

In general, most of the respondents reported having an average economic situation in their families. Most of the respondents' reported that their individual financial situation prior to leaving the country was either average or, in some cases, better than their current situation in the recipient country.

On the other hand, the homophobic atmosphere and their marginalized and constrained lives were the primary reasons queers chose to leave Georgia. As Lasha said when speaking about his life in Georgia, "I was not living, I was merely existing" (Lasha, personal communication, October 3, 2020). Mistrust towards the state and law enforcement was the most distressing factor. One respondent additionally reported that when living in Georgia, his communication

was monitored. However, out of fear, he did not want to disclose who was listening to his phone communication or what purposes.

In general, there is no evidence that state authorities practice such intrusive forms of surveillance to control activists on a systematic scale. However, in the past, certain activists have reported state security service involvement with activists with the aim to instill fear, confusion, and disrupt mobilization. This issue certainly needs to be explored further.

Respondents thought that while discrimination and violence are generally widespread in Georgia against any minority group due to the common fear of different, LGBTQ people were targets of the most severe and aggressive forms of violence and discrimination. The common thing among various minorities in Georgia was the oppressor. They thought it was the same people and institutions committing violent and discriminatory acts against minorities. Queer migrants believed that racism and xenophobia against people of color or other nationalities, especially against Armenians and Azerbaijanians, were prevalent. Some of them also recalled hate-motivated incidents against Jehovah's witnesses. However, in their perception, these minority groups rarely experienced physical violence. Another differentiating factor between the oppression of LGBTQ people and other minorities was that other minorities have supportive parents and communities in their childhood, while for LGBTQ people, their immediate families and communities are often the source of violence. They also thought that attitudes towards national and religious minorities had slightly improved recently, while they did not think that same was true for LGBTQI people.

In their study among Latino men who have sex with men migrants to the USA, Bianch et al. (2007) find that the primary factors motivating for migration were homophobia in their home countries and sexual freedom in gay epicenters, such as New York. In the process of migration, queer subjects evaluate their conditions in their home countries and juxtapose it with the sexual freedoms potentially offered by other sexual citizenship regimes, and in this process, they exercise their agency and (re)construct their identities.

Due to their assessment of human rights conditions in Georgia, LGBTQI migrants saw their future in Georgia in dark colors. The existing sexual citizenship regime, as well as cultural, social and political forces, placed this community in a precarious space, where, on a formal (legal) level, LGBTQI subjects were acknowledged and included in the social body of the Georgian nation, while, at the same time, they lacked any substantive and meaningful access to enjoyment of human rights. They said that in case of staying in Georgia, they would be forced to continue to hide, would not have any future, and would have to abandon hopes of having a fulfilling life and family. Transgender women's concern was that they would not be able to study or find employment. Again, many of the respondents in my study voiced their fear that they saw their murder as one of the possibilities in the future in case of staying in Georgia.

CHAPTER #2: MIGRATION EXPERIENCES

By looking at the migration experiences of Georgian queers, I argue that migration paths for queer subjects are simultaneously traumatizing and rewarding. In this chapter, I show that there is a lack of accessible information regarding the procedures of claiming asylum and asylum claimants' rights, which complicates the migration paths of queer subjects. Therefore, the selection of destination countries is usually complicated and based on informal consultations with and hope for financial and moral support from other Georgian queer migrants. I also show that while national laws and practices on refugees and national refugee laws and practices pertaining to LGBTQI asylum seekers has improved, there are still several challenges that result in insufficient access to primary purposes of the international refugee system - freedom, safety, and enjoyment of human rights - for queer subjects. To address these challenges, towards the end of this chapter, I advocate for increasing and sensitizing state services for queer refugees by giving specific recommendations derived through the analysis of migration stories of Georgian queer subjects.

Support Systems in Migration Process

Periods when respondents in my study left Georgia differed. The earliest was in 2015. The majority left Georgia in 2019, which may be interpreted as a sign that the tendency of queer migration from Georgia still continues. One possible explanation for this might be in several factors: the increased awareness of migration as an option and of the procedures, as well as increased availability of support in the destination countries among the Georgian queer community due to personal connections with migrants who have already passed through this process.

Having a friend or an acquaintance in the destination country who had gone through a similar migration process and, therefore, could help explain the procedures as well as provide moral and sometimes even material support (housing, for example) was omnipresent in the responses. "My friends told me where to go and what to do when I came here. I would not have had an guessed everything myself" (Salome, personal communication, October 3, 2020). Every single respondent said that knowing someone in the recipient country, from whom they were offered support, was the crucial element in their decision to choose the specific country. As they learned based on others experiences what the migration path looked like and they knew that they would have someone who would help them navigate the procedures and, in some cases, provide with housing and other material support at the beginning of the process, respondents developed hope, which was one of the main factors in the decision regarding the selection of the destination country. This means that the more LGBTQ migrants will have successful stories of migration, the more Georgian community members will have access to the support systems in the potential destination countries, which might increase their access and motivation to migrate.

Help in accommodation, finding a job, and navigating asylum procedures were the most widespread support forms helping queers to make a decision on migration. This was especially present in the US context. Moreover, the laws that made the migration process easier for those who migrated in the EU member states were the state welfare programs before obtaining the necessary documents and language skills to be able to find a job. One possible explanation for this can be found in the difference between welfare systems in the US and the EU. The USA has less social welfare systems at place on which newly migrated queers can rely. Therefore,

support from private individuals – friends and even family members – is more essential than in some of the European states, which have strong welfare systems.

Getting a visa and the ideas about the US, or particularly New York City, as the symbol of freedom and progressiveness, gained through popular culture, were the primary factors in the decision to select this country as the destination. All three respondents who currently live in New York revealed that they had many preconceived ideas about New York City. "I thought of New York as a place of freedom and opportunities" (Tamuna, personal communication, October 6, 2020). For example, they equated the city with multiculturalism, freedom, and opportunities (i.e., American Dream). Additionally, receiving a US visa was also perceived as a lifetime chance to achieve success based on the ideas they had about New York City. Generally, obtaining a US visa for Georgian citizens is extremely hard. For example, the adjusted refusal rate for B (tourist) visas for Georgia in 2019 was 63.85% (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2019). Due to the US consular office's highly exclusionary practice, getting a visa can often be perceived as being among the very few privileged and deserved to be given a lifetime chance.

In contrast, migrants who chose the EU member states were not relying on the financial support of Georgian queer migrants per se. For those who decided to migrate to one of the European states, the primary factor in choosing the destination country was a friend who could help them navigate migration procedures and provide moral support in a new and unknown environment. They were highly interested in the simplicity of the asylum procedures and the rate of successful cases of LGBTQI asylum seekers. Respondents said that they chose specific countries because they knew a few persons who had gone through the asylum process,

and the positive outcome rate was quite high. "The primary reason I chose to migrate to the Netherlands was that it was the first country to allow same-sex marriages, and it was relatively easy to receive refugee status as I had heard" (Guga, personal communication, October 10, 2020). Only one queer couple said that they chose one of Spain's seaside cities because living in that particular city had been their childhood dream.

During the interviews, the respondents relied on the recommendations they received from their friends and lawyers with whom they had a prior consultation. These lawyers were mostly made available through LGBTQ NGOs. They also received financial and other material support from friends and family members. They went to queer refugee events organized by local LGBTQ organizations where they met other queer refugees. In some cases, respondents also received psychological therapists and lawyer consultations. In Belgium and The Netherlands, respondents received housing, monthly allowance, healthcare insurance. They also received education allowances to study the local language and for the mandatory integration course.

Immigration Equality was named by two respondents in the USA. Through them, they received an initial consultation and a lawyer. The lawyers helped them navigate the system and, in one case, even helped one applicant to obtain a work permit. A gender non-conforming responded residing in New York also frequented The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, where they received supportive services and met with other community members.

In the Netherlands, COC Netherlands offered supportive services to one respondent. In Belgium, Rainbow House was mentioned by every respondent I interviewed. And in another case, Le refugee was the organization that provided housing to a queer migrant who was left homeless due to coronavirus lockdown.

Except for LGBTQI organizations, queer migrants did not address any state or international organizations for support. The only state entities they addressed were the state migration entities. They also did not use much of informal support. The only exception was the informal Facebook groups for Georgian migrants, which respondents in the US used to find jobs.

Migration Journeys

Generally, scholarship on queer asylum shows that those who go through the asylum process are met with suspicion and mistrust, which undermines the essential principles of the Convention – protection and hospitality (Giametta, 2017). No other group faces as much scrutiny and mistrust. For example, in contrast to LGBTQ people, in most cases, members of a persecuted religious group are not required to prove their belonging to the religious community, nor that this particular religious community is persecuted widely I their home country (ibid).

Some EU member states also practice rejecting asylum claims by LGBT people based on the assumption that if they were to hide their sexual orientation in their home countries, they would not have to fear persecution (Spijkerboer, 2013). Many countries outside of the EU

have rejected such arguments and have deemed it against the fundamental principles of human rights, dignity, and the intent of the refugee convention. The UNHCR Guidance Note states: "There is no duty to be discreet or to take certain steps to avoid persecution, such as living a life of isolation, or refraining from having intimate relationships" (UNHCR, 2018, paragraphs 25–26).

Even though some EU member states have rejected the 'discretion' requirement, a growing number of LGBTQ asylum seekers whose applications get rejected because of their sexual orientation and or gender identities are disbelieved (Spijkerboer, 2013). Some EU member states practice overly intrusive and demeaning practices to prove one's sexual orientation. They sometimes use psychiatrists, sexologists, and even pornographic material and sexually intrusive interview questions to verify if the person belongs to the LGBT community or not. The authors of this research argue that frequently the recipient state courts and other decision-making bodies assume the universality of LGBTQ experiences, shared cultural tastes, and engagement in cross-dressing (ibid). This approach has caused many LGBTQ asylum seekers to produce sex tapes to make their stories compelling for the western gaze. The common disbelief that LGBTQ people are met with puts them in a vulnerable position where they have to make a compelling case for their queer identity. However, this might also jeopardize their asylum claim decisions if they are perceived as "too gay" and therefore faking it (Lewis, 2019). Another problematic issue with this approach is that bisexual individuals are frequently deemed unworthy of protection based on the assumption that they are able to go back to their home countries and live heterosexual life and hide their same-sex attractions. It is noteworthy that intersex and transgender individuals' cases are usually successful, which illustrates the asylum regimes' reliance on visual markers of identities (Lewis, 2019).

When describing their migration journeys, all of the respondents used the word "hard." For those who came to the US, one of the hardest steps in their journey was obtaining a visa. "Receiving the US visa was the hardest step min my migration and when I finally obtained it, I came here right away" (Nukri, personal communication, October 4, 2020). Most of them experienced emotional and psychological stress due to multiple factors: a sense of leaving everyone and everything familiar behind, anxiety due to uncertainty of their journeys in the nearest future, and hardships in understanding and adapting to new languages and cultures. The language barrier was omnipresent in the responses of every migrant. However, for those, who had some prior knowledge of the English language, the language barrier was experienced in less challenging ways as it enabled them to establish some level of communication with local institutions even in countries where English is not the primary language.

The first year for every respondent was the hardest as they did not have any cultural competence or financial means to support them in their journeys. In every case, friends or acquaintances who had already gone through similar procedures were providing information that helped new queer migrants navigate the system. Only one respondent, who migrated to the US, said that her migration experience was good as she easily obtained a visa and all the asylum procedures were transparent for her.

Those individuals whose cases were reviewed fast and received their decision relatively soon characterized the migration process as easy. Generally, the length and the bureaucratic complexity of the whole asylum process was the single omnipresent factor of dissatisfaction with the asylum regimes among my respondents. They characterized this process as tremendously stretched in time and complicated. "The most stressful experience for me was

when I had to get up at 4 AM in the morning to go to the immigration office and when I went there at 7 AM and I saw never-ending line," said Natalia. This was giving them a sense of losing time, uncertainty, and continued anxiety over the fear of the negative outcome of their asylum case. For example, long waiting lines in front of the migration institutions were perceived as one of the most stressful experiences. Moreover, these fears were exacerbated by the lack of clarity about the procedures and their rights in an accessible language.

Many LGBTQI people flee their countries because they are afraid of violence not only from state authorities but also from ordinary citizens (ibid). According to Article 7(2) of the EU Qualification Directive, the states are required to protect their citizens. While this can be seen as a positive approach as it highlights the obligation of states to protect their own LGBT citizens, for some LGBT people, this can be problematic as in many countries the law enforcement and other state institutions are themselves homophobic and LGBT people are deprived of access to such state protections (ibid). For some, asking the state for protection in itself can be dangerous.

Another challenging issue in the queer migration studies is at the reception centers, where LGBTQI people are frequently harassed by other asylum seekers (especially those from the same countries) and administration and staff. Scholars advocate for a system that would enable LGBT people to be transferred to other safer reception centers when such situations occur. A number of human rights reports (see UNHCR, 2008, 2011) have shown that LGBTQ individuals are vulnerable in refugee camps, and since sexual orientation and gender identity are relatively new categories for claiming asylum, many LGBTQ people face hardships in their attempts to translate their experiences of persecution into identifiable narratives for states.

Generally, queer migrants in this study experienced significant distress at the reception centers in the EU. While few reported respectful treatments from the administration, most of them said that the conditions at these centers were poor. Only one person in Belgium, Vato, said was happy about his stay at the reception center - "I was treated respectfully by the administration. I really liked living there. They even had some Georgian literature in the library" (Vato, personal communication, October 2, 2020). Others felt that the staff used to look down on them. Most of the staff members did not speak English, and it was hard for asylum seekers to communicate or understand anything at the shelters. Moreover, the sanitary and privacy conditions were also poor in some shelters. Some asylum seekers were placed in shelters that were located far from major cities. One respondent even reported that his phone was confiscated in the shelter. Another respondent recalled how he was harassed by other asylum seekers, and whenever he complained, he was met with mistrust from the administration.

Homophobic abuse from other asylum seekers was a frequent problem. "Georgians, Arabs and Chechens were very aggressive when I was in shelter" (Lasha, personal communication, October 3, 2020). Especially other heterosexual Georgians used to harass them at the shelters. They all complained that there was no privacy in the shelters, and it was rare for the administration to take their safety complaints seriously and address them. Lack of supportive treatment from the administration and inaccessibility of information about the rights of migrants was the most severe problem named by the migrants at the shelters. They reported that whenever they were treated negatively by the staff, they did not know what rights they had and whom to turn to for help in such cases.

Another stressful factor in the migration process was the ban to travel back to Georgia and even outside of the recipient country. One respondent said that his fingerprints were collected every week to make sure he was within the Netherlands. This ban lasts until the migrants receive the final permanent residence. This ban is a great difficulty since it disables them from visiting their friends and family members that could potentially ease their migration stress. Again, it illustrates the problematic model of the asylum regime – one that is based on a heterosexual male who is persecuted by the state. Because of this model, those who want to return temporarily back to their home countries are seen as suspicious. However, for queers, who experience persecution from private individuals, and the fear of persecution is not necessarily linked to a specific (state) actor, but rather an overall societal atmosphere that poses a high risk of violence, wish to go back to home countries temporarily should not be viewed as suspicious.

On the other hand, among the positive experiences in regard to their migration journeys named were the new experiences in new countries, the senses of freedom and safety, and the sense that they had finally permanently left Georgia. "I have a sense of freedom and safety, I feel that they I am no longer constrained by the homophonic atmosphere and I can safely navigate the streets without the fear of an attack" (Vato, personal communication, October 2, 2020). Some also mentioned sightseeing in new cities as one of the most rewarding experiences in regard to their migration journey. Finally, finding a job was the most positive experience in their journey for some as well. It symbolically and materially meant that they were finally integrated and accepted in the new society.

It is noteworthy that there was no preexisting list of documents the asylum claimants were requested to provide in order to prove their persecution stories. Most of them were told to write a personal story and provide whatever evidence they had to support it. Asylum seekers were prepared for this through informal consultations with their friends and/or acquaintances who had gone through the same procedures and brought certain documents with them. To corroborate their stories, they provided evaluation documents from their psychologists, and existing reports on LGBTQ human rights situation in Georgia obtained through LGBTQ organizations. Those who had engaged with LGBTQI activism in Georgia also provided video and photo materials from demonstrations and other activists events. Some, which had some involvement histories with LGBTQI organizations, also showed their past employment documents. During the interviews that were asked to provide online bullying and threatening messages. One person in the US, based on his friend's advice, provided online dating application – Tinder – profiles and his same-sex matched profiles. Finally, some respondents, who had numerous encounters with the police and ambulance, also brought their official police and ambulance reports obtained through the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Health of Georgia to prove that they had been attacked multiple times. This was more frequent for transgender women.

"The interview process as the most important stage in the asylum case. Everything depends on that. You have to convince them in your truth" (Lasha, personal communication, October 3, 2020). While most of them remembered the interview process as respectful and supportive, three respondents said that some of the interview questions were uncomfortable and uncanny. For example, two queer male migrants in Belgium were asked about the age they started to think of themselves as homosexuals, the age when they started using women's clothes, if they

had any sexual partners in Belgium, in which pose they enjoyed having sex, and whether they felt more as a man or a woman. However, none of the respondents reported feeling disrespected and humiliated during the interview.

None of them, except one, said they had to invent anything in their story to make it comprehensible for the interviewers. In most cases, their stories, together with other relevant documents, were enough to claim asylum successfully. Only two respondents said that they had to dramatize their stories to ensure it met the asylum criteria. One respondent in the United States said that she completely invented one story as most of her stories, in her opinion, did not rise to the level that would enable her to apply for asylum. Another respondent in the USA said that he dramatized his story by adding some details to it. "They needed drama, and I gave it to them," (Tamuna, personal communication, October 6, 2020). In both cases, the applicants did not have any evidence to prove their persecution in Georgia. They had many incidents of homophobic treatment – at work, from family members and relatives, at educational institutions and public spaces. However, they had never called the police, nor had they used any other resources to document these persecution instances. Moreover, it is noteworthy that both of these respondents' gender presentations did not necessarily make them targets of the most severe homophobic attacks. Due to this, they felt that the overall homophobic atmosphere and their minor instances of homophobic treatment would not qualify them to receive asylum.

Again, this illustrates that the asylum system is predicated on the model where an asylum seeker can provide evidence of specific persecution instances, the risk level of which is everlasting. However, for LGBTQI community members, it is hard to translate their

persecution cases into this model as for some of them, persecution comes from the overall atmosphere of homophobia, negative attitudes, potential harm in case their identity is revealed, the forced alteration of their lifestyles due to constant need for concealing their identity and lack of opportunities for the development of happy and fulfilling life.

Additional Barriers During Migration Process

Additional barriers reported by the respondents were racist and anti-immigrant attitudes in the recipient countries. They felt that they were looked down upon due to their migrant status and lack of knowledge of the local language. Whenever they had problems with the reception center administration, they found it hard to communicate their concerns with them properly and lacked accessible information about their rights. However, those who knew some English reported that it made everything much easier, even in countries where English is a foreign language.

Another factor named by migrants residing in the EU member states was that for some countries, Georgia is considered a safe place of origin, which makes the asylum process harder. This problematic issue of 'safe countries of origin' among the EU member states has also been identified in the scholarship is the practice (Spijkerboer, 2013). Through this practice, the member states deem certain countries safe, meaning that no severe human rights violations exist in the country, and based on this assertion, they deny access to asylum procedures to LGBTQ people. Article 33 of the Amended Proposal of the EU Procedures Directive states that 'where an applicant shows that there are valid reasons to consider the country not to be

safe in his/her particular circumstances, the designation of the country as safe can no longer be considered relevant for him/her'(cited in Spijkerboer, 2013, p. 10).

Finally, the global Coronavirus pandemic that resulted in complete lockdowns in many countries dramatically worsened asylum seekers' cases, who were at the beginning of the procedures. During the lockdowns, migration institutions also halted their services temporarily. Those, who were at the beginning of their asylum claims and were particularly dependent on services, experienced heightened vulnerability. One of my respondents recalled that during the complete lockdown in Belgium, he and another asylum seeker from another country, whom he met at the reception center, were left homeless and without any help as everything was closed. He recalled that the administration of the reception center, where they were initially transferred to, had blamed them for using illegal drugs. Even when they had searched their rooms several times without finding any evidence, they still treated the two queer asylum seekers with mistrust. At some point, the situation became so tense that they decided to leave the shelter. This coincided with the Coronavirus lockdown. Eventually, he managed to find an NGO in Brussels - Le Refuge Bruxelles - which helped them in obtaining temporary accommodation.

CHAPTER #3: ADAPTATION TO NEW ENVIRONMENTS

By looking at the migration experiences of Georgian queers, I argue that the linear emancipatory migration path perception that has prevailed on the global stage that after fleeing oppressive countries, refugees enjoy freedom and acceptance in the recipient countries is much more complicated and nuanced. As the migration experiences of Georgian queers show, oppression and marginalization do not completely disappear from their lives. The new environments in the recipient countries are simultaneously emancipatory and limiting. While homo and transphobic marginalization become irrelevant, queer migrants experience other forms of exclusion stemming from racist and anti-immigrant public attitudes in the recipient countries. I also show that in the process of adaptation, they reconstruct their identities by adapting to new liberal citizenship models available in the recipient countries.

Belonging – New "Homes"

Adaptation and forming a sense of belonging to the new environments differed in the respondents. Half of the interviewed said that they did not feel that they could call their host countries a home because the environment was not welcoming. Another half of the interviewed said that they could call the host country a home. All of the individuals residing in New York City and one of the cities in Spain said they could call these new places their homes. However, this was motivated due to the multicultural and multiethnic composition of the cities rather than the welcoming atmosphere in the country. "I feel that NYC has many migrants living from all over the world, and therefore, I did not feel like an outsider (Tamuna,

personal communication, October 6, 2020). People living in New York City also said that they did not experience much cultural shock, and the feeling of belonging was achieved within a couple of months when they came to the city.

Most of the respondents, however, required around 2-3 years to form a sense of belonging to the new locations. A number of factors needed to happen before they could call the new places a "home." For most, the initial decision of the migration authorities, giving them the right to stay in the country, was the marker of belonging. For others finding a job and friends after leaving the refugee reception centers was the marker of belonging. When asked whether they felt accepted in the country or not, most of them either blamed themselves and their insecurities for not feeling accepted or they blamed the lack of proper documentation.

Newly forming subjectivities and the belonging issues are an important area of study for queer migration scholars in general. For example, Anne-Marie Fortier (2001) explores how the issues of belonging shape LGBT individuals' perception of home and how, in the process of migration, "home" is reclaimed as not the origin but as a destination. Similarly, Acosta (2008) argues that queer migrants' sexual, class, and racial identities are situation and context-dependent. In her study on Mexican lesbian migrants, Acotsa (2008) documents how her respondents develop Mestiza consciousness (see Anzaldúa, 1999) – i.e., multiple identities. This happens when, for example, their racial identity shifts as in the new environment – the USA – they are seen as people of color. She also finds that Mexican lesbians crossing the border develop alternative safe spaces. They romanticize these spaces as spaces of sisterhood and protection. Lesbians also maintain separate worlds as they do not reveal their identities with their families in Mexico in order not to lose connections with them.

Respondents in this study did not feel discriminated against for their LGBTQ identities in the recipient countries. However, the nationality and refugee status did show up in some respondent's interviews as sources of discrimination. They said that because of anti-immigrant and racist public attitudes, they felt aggressive behavior from citizens and from state representatives. This was particularly true in Spain. "There are so many Georgians living in Spain and a significant number of them are engaged in criminal activities, which is often covered by the Spanish media and therefore Spaniards have developed anti-Georgian attitudes," (Sopo, personal communication, October 7, 2020). On the other hand, LGBTQ identities eased their adaptation to new environments. Respondents claimed that because they were LGBTQ community members, they were able to meet people in queer places, which would not be the case if they were not queer. They used to frequent local queer bars and clubs, meet people on dating applications, visit LGBTQ community centers, where they met other queer people.

All of the respondents admitted that if they could go back in time and change anything, they would leave Georgia earlier and be more prepared for immigration. They said that they would study the language, save more money, and gather more information about the procedures beforehand.

When looking back at Georgia from this new perspective, they all felt that the situation was even worse than when they had left the country. They were happy that they had left the country. Some said that they were sorry for the Georgian society as politicians and people in power manipulated them. One transgender woman said that she loved Georgia and was even

thinking of going back soon. "I want to go back to Georgia when I am fully realized woman and live a peaceful life somewhere in a village" (Salome, personal communication, October 3, 2020). However, for most of the respondents, sentiments about Georgia had faded. They recalled good times they had spent in Georgia with friends and family and Tbilisi's notorious nightlife. For most of them, Georgia was a place where they were simply born. They tried to divert their attention to new environments and their future plans instead of reminiscing about Georgia. Thoughts about returning to Georgia also faded away in the respondents who were thinking about returning at the beginning of their migration journeys. Very few missed Georgia. Most of them said that they hoped to go back someday for a week or two to see their friends and enjoy Tbilisi nightlife but not for more than that.

(Re)constructing Identities

In this study, almost half of my respondents reported feelings of assurance and confidence in their identity after migration. They linked this to relatively more freedom to explore and express their identities in new environments. Two respondents explicitly said that due to Georgia's limiting atmosphere, their perception of their identity changed after migration. One of the respondents said that they were identifying as a trans woman in Georgia. However, after coming to the US, they started identifying as a genderqueer person. Another respondent reported identifying as a gay man in Georgia, and after migration, due to the freedom to explore sexuality, he now identifies as a bisexual man.

In Global Divas Manalansan, through an ethnographic study of Filipino gay men migrant community in New York, explores how globalization processes shape the identity formation

of the community (2003). He argues that instead of passively internalizing the new identity categories in the West, the Filipino gay men exercise their agency through negotiating identities, which are local and global at the same time.

Migration changed the respondents in many ways. Most of them admitted that this process made them grow up and develop independent living skills. They feel they have become more free-spirited persons. Respondents felt more confident in themselves. They became more purposeful and oriented towards the future. Generally, future plans became more solid and tangible. A lot of them started thinking about continuing education, which was not the case when they were living in Georgia. Those suffering from anxiety and depression overcame them after migrating. However, when around heterosexual Georgians, respondents reported getting anxious, and these encounters brought them back to negative and traumatic memories. All of them were very hopeful about their future and saw it in bright colors. They said that they had specific plans and those plans were not simply dreams but tangible and achievable things.

They were afraid of losing this opportunity, and the fear of being forced to go back to Georgia was present in most cases. Respondents living in the US were concerned about the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg as they thought that her death could potentially mean the reversal of some of the pivotal advancements made by the LGBTQ community in the US. Elections generally and the possibility of Donald J. Trump winning his second term was another important issue of concern as respondents were fearful that his anti-LGBTQ and anti-immigrant stances and policies could potentially harm them.

On the other hand, they were happy that they were no longer living in Georgia and they did not have to be afraid of their physical safety when navigating public space. Freedom and lack of fear were the most mentioned phrases. Trans and gender non-conforming respondents were also happy about their opportunity to live "normal" lives, get an education, and express their gender through clothes, make-up, or any other means freely. Finally, some were also happy that they had already managed to find intimate partners and had plans to develop their personal life which was impossible in Georgia.

Unfortunately, one of the cost respondents had to pay for migration was losing friendships. Their relationships with Georgian friends faded, and they were not able to find many new and close friends in new environments. Cultural differences, as well as the language barrier, plays a huge role. They are unable to establish deep connections with local people the same way they were used to in Georgia. Therefore, they mostly had friendly relationships with other Georgian queers living in the same countries. Queer parties were the primary ways respondents would make friends with the local community. Some who had already started jobs said that they also met friends through work. Relationships started through work were not necessarily with other queer persons. While relationships with friends in Georgia faded as time went by, relationships with family members improved in most cases. Again, apart from longing, this might also be explained through the fact that as queer family members move away, there is less social pressure on the families, which allows the cultivation of more nurturing and accepting relationships.

Sexual life and preferences did not change at most. However, they said that they felt more open in terms of sexuality. "Back in Georgia, I only had one type – masculine gay men. In the

US, I started appreciating feminine gay men more. I have also noticed that my own femininity was also annoying when I was living in Georgia, and now my attitudes towards my own femininity have changed" (Ivane, personal communication, October 6, 2020). This phenomenon can be explained by social pressure, internalized homophobia, and the fear of being outed. According to psychology, anger towards the features of other people is usually an externalized hatred of the same character in one's own self, which is expressed through projection on another person. Because of homophobic social pressure, gay men might hate their own femininity, and this might translate into negative attitudes towards other feminine gays. Moreover, fear of being outed motivates many queers to stay away from queers whose gender performance makes them easily identifiable and vulnerable to violence.

People living in the US did not feel safe due to their perception of high rate crimes. They also felt insecure in terms of their health. They said that they were no longer afraid of the police, and they had hopes that if something were to happen, they could have the hope of local LGBTQ and other human rights organizations' help. They felt that they could trust that the law would function properly, and they would not get killed on the street. The only thing the US refugees were not secure about were financial aspects. They felt that they had a lot of expenses and were insecure about their financial situation.

CONCLUSION

I engaged in this study to document the experiences of Georgian LGBTQ migrants. It enabled me to reveal enabling and constraining structures in Georgia and in recipient countries from their perspective. When critically exploring the primary factors behind the decision to migrate from Georgia and what role did their LGBTQ identity play in that decision, I showed that Georgia's sexual citizenship regime is exclusionary towards its queer citizens. Although the literature focuses on legislation as the primary source of experiencing citizenship, I showed that in the Georgian case, sexual citizenship is experienced primarily through homophobic public attitudes and the state's lack of will to address it. Even the progress in Georgia legislation, such as the adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination law and the amendment in the criminal code of Georgia, which introduced hate crime as an aggravating circumstance, did not improve the lives of LGBTQ citizens as the state lacked the political will to implement the law and address the extreme hostility and violent atmosphere in the society. Therefore, queer subjects did not have a sense of belonging to the nation. Most importantly, the interviews revealed that the fear of and mistrust towards the police, lack of opportunity to live happy and fulfilling lives, and constant fear of physical attack and murdered were the primary factors queers chose to leave the country. Analyzing migrants' stories illuminated that the primary factors of motivation to migrate stemmed from the overall homophobic and constraining atmosphere, which was almost impossible to pinpoint down to specific (state) persecution acts.

Moreover, in documenting the migration journeys of the queer migrants, I also presented how they experienced the migration process – laws, state and non-state institutions, and the general

atmosphere of acceptance. I showed that migration outcomes for the respondents were simultaneously traumatizing and rewarding. Lack of accessible information regarding the procedures of claiming asylum and their rights as asylum seekers were the most challenging aspects in their journeys. I also showed that while national refugee laws and practices have improved, there are still several areas to be improved. To address that, I provide several recommendations (at the endo of the conclusion) that I identified through this research, which will hopefully result in improved access to freedom, safety, and enjoyment of human rights for queer subjects.

Finally, I examined how LGBTQ migrants adapt to new environments and how they (re)construct their identities in this process. I showed that the linear emancipatory migration path perception is much more complicated and nuanced. The migration experiences of Georgian queers showed that, instead of completely disappearing from their lives, oppression and marginalization changed forms and intensity. In (homo)nationalist liberal states, while discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity became irrelevant, queer migrants experienced cultural, class-based, racist, and anti-immigrant marginalization forms. I also showed that in the adaptation process, queer respondents reconstructed their identities by adapting to new liberal citizenship models available in the recipient countries.

I hope that this thesis will incite other researchers to explore sexual citizenship and sexual migration issues further, and the scholarship will help improve not only the refugee regimes in recipient countries but also sexual citizenship regimes in the countries around the world so that queers will not be forced to leave their familiar environments and loved ones to live a safe and dignified life.

Recommendations

Because of these migration experiences, my respondents named several key issues they thought would improve their migration experiences:

1. The availability of information about the procedures, deadlines, responsible institutions, and their rights in accessible language was named by every respondent. They said that having a lawyer or a case manager who would help them navigate the system would help them significantly.

2. Reducing the long waiting periods was another most commonly mentioned issue. Unreasonably long waiting periods creates stress and anxiety over uncertainty and hinders their ability to plan their life.

3. The existence of separate refugee reception centers designated for LGBTQI asylum seekers, with LGBTQ sensitive administration and staff, was another issue of concern. Homo and transphobic attitudes from other asylum seekers and lack of safety were one of the most traumatic experiences through their migration journey.

4. The availability of hormone therapy and other gender-affirming medical services was crucial for transgender individuals. Without access to these supportive services, they felt depressed and vulnerable.

5. Finally, many migrants also desired the possibility to get higher education. Language and integration courses were welcomed by most of the respondents. However, they said that it only allows you to work for low-paying jobs, and as immigrants, they lacked resources to attain higher education and reach higher professional development.

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