

LGBTQ+ refugees

Around the globe, more than 80 million people have been forced to flee their home countries due to conflict and persecution (UNHCR, 2021). Among these, there is an invisible category: the LGBTQ+ community. There is a lack of data on the numbers of LGBTQ+ people forced to migrate in the world or applying for asylum in England, and there is no information about how many LGBTQ+ refugees are still hiding their identity or for how many their sexual orientation is still their main reason to leave (UNHCR, 2020). Studies about forced migration have mainly focused on legislation; existing research has not taken refugees' sexual orientation into consideration.

This research explored the meaning of home for LGBTQ+ refugees in London. In this study, the term 'refugees' encompasses the different definitions of forced migration* including displaced people, asylum seekers and irregular migrants. LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer; the plus sign represents other identities such as pansexual and Two-Spirit. The term LGBTQ+ includes both sexual orientation and gender identity.

There are more than 72 countries where homosexuality is criminalised and persecuted. LGBTQ+ people are subject to arrest or the threat of arrest and in some of these countries, LGBTQ+ people face the death penalty. The top five nationalities in terms of number of asylum applications to the UK are Iran, Albania, Iraq, Eritrea, and Sudan (Gov.uk, 2020). According to the UK Home Office (2019), asylum claims based on sexual orientation in England came mostly from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Uganda, and Nigeria. All these countries are part of the 72 where LGBTQ+ people are persecuted and victimised.

One of the key areas of study about refugees is their experience of home. The idea of home is relevant in order to support their process of leaving their original place and to understand their positionality in a new location. Boccagni (2020a) explains that understanding the meaning of home can contribute to the individual and collective process of belonging, identity, emotional attachment, and mobility. Earlier, Mallet (2004) explained the relationships between the meaning of home and concepts such as "house, family, haven, self, gender, and journeying" (p. 5). The meaning of home in the refugee community has been approached from several angles and some studies have focused on specific groups. For instance, Ahmadi (2001) analysed the meaning of home for elderly immigrants, Sirriyeh (2010) explored home journeys for female refugees and Taylor (2015) focused on the Turkish Cypriot refugee community. These studies have approached the concept of home from the perspective of a heteronormative narrative of family, where people must fit a set of Western values generally connected with faith. Heteronormativity has been portrayed as an accepted social hierarchy based on sexual orientation. This hierarchy is normally headed by white heterosexual men who perceive homosexuality as a threat to their masculinity. Social structures such as faith groups perpetuate this ideology by labelling homosexuality as a menace to their concept of family (Ray, 2020). Heteronormativity impacts what people who do not conform with what society frames as normal are able to access and how they are accepted - or not - by families, groups, and social structures. Heteronormative ideology is at the base of anti-gay hostility, oppression, and inequality experienced by minoritised groups.

The meaning of home for LGBTQ+ refugees has not been explored and this community is still underrepresented in studies. This lack of inclusion is highly problematic because it has homogenised how the refugee community is perceived, leaving out people who are forced to move but who do not conform to social norms and cultural values.

* Internally displaced LGBTQ+ people do not fall within the scope of this study.



THE MEANING OF HOME
AMONG LGBTQ+ REFUGEES

Exhibition to share the findings of a one year participatory research and artistic project by Sonia Quintero

Art pieces and poetry created by the participants

Sonia is a queer Colombian-British community organiser and poet based in London, UK. As an LGBTQ+ individual she identifies with some of the challenges this community faces. Her curiosity and interest are driven by the continuing lack of visibility of the LGBTQ+ community in the forced migration field. Sonia did her undergraduate Psychosocial studies, as well as her MA in Conflict, Displacement and Human Security at University of East London (UEL) where she is an active member of The Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB).

Contact: newhampoetrygroup@gmail.com