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Queer asylum seekers in Belgium: Navigating reception centers

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Abstract

While Belgium is viewed as one of the most LGBTQ-friendly countries in Europe, its asylum system operates on problematic assumptions, compelling forced queer migrants to be out in a particular way and rejecting those who do not conform. By applying a qualitative case-study and intersectionality-informed methodology, this study investigates the key factors that influence queer asylum seekers and refugees' decision to come out (or not), and how they negotiate the closet within an environment that is often experienced as hostile. In doing so, this article shows that to both stay safe and receive protection, queer asylum seekers in reception centers in Belgium have to navigate a complex context where they need to constantly balance between their hypervisibility at the very individual level – as 'queer' – and their invisibility at the more structural level – within the asylum system itself.

Keywords

Queer asylum seekers, Coming out, Closet, Reception centers, Belgium

Introduction

According to Rainbow Europe¹, Belgium has been reported to be legally speaking the second most LGBTQ-friendly country in Europe. This means that queer people are supposedly able to enjoy quite elaborate protections. Belgium is also the second country in the world – and still one of the few countries – that has legalized same-sex marriages. Belgian asylum legislation foresees the possibility to seek refuge on the grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI). The majority of Belgian citizens seem to have positive attitudes towards receiving refugees in their country (European Commission, 2018). This creates a generally positive international image and attracts those queers who are in search of a safer place to live in. It does not come as a surprise then that at the time when Belgium is experiencing shortages in reception centers and is hence forced to deny asylum claims due to the lack of reception capacity (Asylum in Europe, 2019), the number of applications on the grounds of SOGI continues to grow (Addae, 2013).

Along with proving ‘well-founded fear of persecution’, forced queer migrants who arrive in Belgium seeking it to become their country of asylum have nonetheless to provide the evidence that substantiates their SOGI (Gartner, 2015; Verhaeghe et al., 2019). Attaining the reception centers, queer asylum seekers are then forced to expose their vulnerabilities in a highly complex context that is informed by their ‘inferior’ citizenship status and limited access to facilities, as well as by the dominant heteronormative binary gender beliefs actually entrenched in the Belgian society (Dierckx et al., 2017). Although one could assume that Belgium has eradicated homophobia, transphobia and biphobia, its ‘progressive’ non-discrimination and equality legislation is not immediately translated into just society and non-exclusionary structures.

As the findings of this study suggest, Belgian reception centers are indeed experienced as hetero-cis-sexist² environments, where queer asylum seekers are highly exposed to both hypervisibility and invisibility. On the one hand, they are hypervisible at the very individual level, as ‘queer’; on the other hand, they are invisible at the more structural level within the asylum system itself. In such circumstances, queer asylum seekers become particularly vulnerable and might finally decide not to come out when requested to substantiate their asylum application. Their choice to come out, or the lack thereof, is then influenced by a number of factors with safety concerns being the common thread running through the informants’ stories.

By conducting a qualitative case-study based on an intersectionality-informed methodology, this study hence investigates how forced queer migrants experience reception centers in Belgium. With the term ‘forced queer migrants’ we refer to those queer asylum seekers and refugees who had no choice but to leave their countries of residence and look for a safer place to live due to their queerness. This article mostly builds on primary data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with forced queer migrants in the spring of 2020.

This article is structured as follows. In section one, we review the extant literature on queer migration and elaborate on the theoretical underpinnings this research builds upon. In section two, we briefly describe the methodology and research limitations. In section three, we discuss the key findings through the concepts of hypervisibility and invisibility. Finally, in section four, we conclude by discussing how ‘the closet’ is negotiated in the context of Belgian reception centers.

¹ Rainbow Europe is the annual benchmarking tool used by ILGA-Europe to rank forty-nine European countries on their laws and policies regarding LGBTI equality (ILGA-Europe, n.d.a). ILGA-Europe is an independent, international non-governmental umbrella organization, which is part of the wider international ILGA organization (ILGA-Europe, n.d.b). For consistency purposes, the acronym ‘LGBTI’ used by ILGA is replaced here with ‘LGBTQ’. On the terminology employed by this article, see footnote 3.

² This term is used to indicate the attitudes that discriminate against people who do not comply with binary heteronormative cisgender expectations.

Reviewing queer migration scholarship: Liberation, closet, and power

This research is located at the intersection of queer and migration studies. Namely, it contributes to the growing body of literature on queer migration that explores the interlockings of queer and migrant identities (Jung, 2015). Although it has already been more than a decade since Luibhéid (2008) criticized migration studies for heavily focusing on heterosexual identities and sexuality studies for poorly representing migrant communities, more recent research conveys that the demand for an extended queer perspective on migration studies is still increasing (Chávez, 2013; Peumans, 2018; Dhoest, 2019).

Central to this field is queer theory that rejects the heterosexual binary dichotomy as an innate model (Butler, 2006) and suggests that such binarism is socially constructed while gender is performed in accordance with the ubiquitous norms (Butler, 2009). Sedgwick (1990) also pointed out the limitations of viewing sexuality as being restricted to only homosexuality and heterosexuality. Thus, it is key to overcome pervasive dualistic thinking and recognize the many variations of sexuality as well as its unstable nature. Building on such theoretical ground, queer migration scholarship explores the intersecting regimes of power and the way they generate and reshape identity categories (Luibhéid, 2008).

The overwhelming majority of queer migration studies is mainly centered in North America and the UK, and contributions from the Belgian context are relatively limited (see Jansen & Spijkboer, 2011; Addae, 2013; Peumans, 2014, 2018; Dhoest, 2015, 2018, 2019). The Belgian case, though, is particularly relevant given its complexity, the existing hegemonic ideologies concerning the denial of race and racism, and the rising popularity of right-wing political parties in Flanders at the time when reception centers in Belgium have been reaching their capacities (Peumans, 2018). Providing new insights and empirical evidence, this research therefore sheds light on a still overlooked phenomenon, thus advancing European queer migration scholarship.

Both activists and academics have voiced concerns about the hegemonic discourses on forced queer migrants and how they are reflected in asylum policies and procedures. One of the main points for criticism refers to the romanticized narratives of the long-awaited transition from the oppressive environment to the land of liberation that queer asylum seekers allegedly go through. Researchers problematize such discourse by pointing out the many obstacles forced queer migrants have to endure based on their race, gender, language, culture or class (Luibhéid & Cantú, 2007; Puar, 2007; Luibhéid, 2008; Shuman & Bohmer, 2014; Jung, 2015). Peumans (2018) and Dhoest (2019) extend this analysis to the Belgian case as well. Peumans (2018) particularly specifies that a number of queer asylum seekers even choose to change the ground of their application as they fear that coming out may complicate their precarious situation – thus, further obscuring their relationships with their loved ones.

Peumans (2018) and Dhoest (2018) also observe that (queer) asylum claimants are often not familiar with and/or not willing to use the concepts commonly employed in Europe and Belgium to identify SOGI. The acronym LGBTQ proves, for instance, particularly problematic³. Massad (2002) and Luibhéid (2008) argue that labels like lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender are socially constructed and often imposed on queer people who have not necessarily identified as such previously. Queer asylum applicants and the officials interviewing them during the asylum procedure may indeed ascribe very different meanings to these labels. On the one hand, queer asylum applicants may not necessarily refer to and/or identify with LGBTQ when claiming asylum. On the other hand, asylum interviewers may

³ Recognizing the complex diversity of queer identities with rich transnational backgrounds and the limits of Eurocentric LGBTQ labels that are being inscribed to the queer asylum seekers when they cross the borders, the term 'queer' is adopted throughout the paper as the most appropriate. Yet, we remain aware of the fact that this term is in no way exhaustive and holds a risk of essentializing identities and reinforcing dominant Western approaches.

not be aware that other terms and categorizations exist elsewhere (e.g. *muxes* in Mexico, *bakla* in the Philippines, etc.) and may interpret the applicant's performance as not compliant with Western (LGBTQ-related) standards. As a consequence, whilst particular bodies are deemed more valid and legitimate to be granted a refuge, others are frequently rejected as lacking credibility (Gevluchte holebi's, 2013; Gartner, 2015). In other words, there are those who are officially proclaimed to deserve asylum as opposed to those who do not deserve it (Gartner, 2015; Jung, 2015). As for Belgium, Dhoest (2018) further confirms that despite the generally positive reputation regarding queer asylum, decision-making on asylum claims has proven to build mostly on Eurocentric expectations and assumptions.

Along the same lines, one of the routines that are expected to be performed by queer asylum seekers in order to gain credibility in asylum procedure is coming out. This implies that they should be ready to openly speak about their sexuality, sexual activity and/or gender identity and how these aspects of their personality have been manifested in their everyday life. While Fortier (2002) suggests that queer migrants are often unable to be open about their sexuality in their homelands and are therefore forced to emigrate in order to come out, some researchers note that queer asylum seekers are frequently highly encouraged, if not even forced, to come out in their asylum procedure (Luibhéid, 2008; Gartner, 2015; Dhoest, 2018; Peumans, 2018). Moreover, the act of coming out is increasingly presented in public narratives as a universal tool of 'gay liberation'. Such discourse opposes the allegedly more progressive and emancipated mostly white⁴ gays who are 'out and proud' living their successful lives to the supposedly backward migrant gays who are less willing to openly express their sexuality and are thus in need to be emancipated by their white saviors (Massad, 2002; Luibhéid, 2008; Bracke, 2012). As Peumans (2018) underlines, the act of coming out as contrasted with hiding in the closet is clearly presented as a norm and is vastly applauded as a way to be true to yourself. Under such conditions, queer asylum seekers are expected to come out in certain ways following certain patterns that fit western ideas of queerness and exclude experiences that differ from them and are also contrasted with them. Another issue is that while coming out is put into focus and highly encouraged, the struggles that proceed, accompany and follow it in the country of asylum are barely discussed.

Problematising such an 'act of liberation', Luibhéid (2008) argues that since the notion of 'closet' is always socially constructed, the coming out process is performed differently and to a different extent depending on the given circumstances that reflect the existing power dynamics. Closet is often understood as a state of privacy that allows for keeping one's sexuality and/or gender identity hidden in order to avoid potential precariousness. Such conceptualization is normally heavily focused on the identity that is supposedly hiding in that closet and is imagined as something static. However, closet is normally co-constructed by those a queer person interacts with, depends on their background and perceptions, and is therefore dynamic (Decena, 2011). In another study, Dhoest (2019) demonstrates how queer women in Belgium negotiate the balance between 'being in the closet' and 'being out', and how depending on the context their tactics are heavily instructed by their sexuality and ethno-cultural identity. Peumans (2018) presents further evidence showing the dissimilarities in the coming out strategies among queer Muslims in Belgium whose choices among other factors are also informed by their religion and strong kin relations.

These studies exemplify the dynamic nature of the closet constructed by the multifarious interplay of power relations. Yet, there is little known about the implications of the performed acts of coming out and being out for queer asylum seekers in their everyday life throughout the asylum procedure. In the case of Belgium, the testimonies of queer asylum

⁴ We acknowledge the hegemonic power of whiteness as a structurally advantaged position and do not limit this concept to marking skin color. In line with extant studies on colour-blind intersectionality (see, among others, Carbado 2019), we believe that it is necessary to name whiteness and problematize it in order to avoid perpetuating its understanding as a racial default.

claimants and refugees available in online magazines and newspapers suggest that being out can expose them to discrimination and violence while they find themselves in a highly vulnerable position (De Vriendt, 2017; Depoorter, 2018; Gieghase, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). This paper contributes to bridging this gap by exploring the ways queer asylum claimants negotiate being out and interact with the construct of ‘closet’ and the factors that influence their decision to (not) come out in the context of reception centers in Belgium.

Methodology

In order to investigate the complexity and singularities of the lived experiences of queer migrants during their stay at the reception centers in Belgium, this research conducts a qualitative case-study using an intersectionality-informed methodology. Understood as a ‘power-conscious way to look at the world’ (Bilge, 2019), intersectionality serves here as an analytical lens for deconstructing the complexity of queer asylum experiences and the dynamics of power occurring in the context of the Belgian reception centers. In particular, exploring our case-study through an intersectional lens allows us to always ‘ask the other question’ (Matsuda, 1991) while conducting our research – both in the data collection and analysis processes.

Primary data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with forced queer migrants (both asylum seekers and refugees) who arrived in Belgium between two and twenty-two months prior to being interviewed in the spring of 2020. Since data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in times when the quarantine restrictions were in place in Belgium, interviewing options were limited to online means exclusively (namely, Skype and Zoom). The interview topic guide was developed deductively based on the literature review (Fobear, 2015; Fremlova, 2017; Dhoest, 2018; Peumans, 2018; Windsong, 2018) and the testimonies of forced queer migrants in Belgium available online (De Vriendt, 2017; Depoorter, 2018; Gieghase, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Literature review and testimonies were also used as secondary data sources, providing supplementary material for analysis. English was chosen as the most comfortable interview language for all the participants. Yet, in some cases the language barrier caused the need for translation assistance which in the absence of a professional translator was mediated by amateur translation conducted by the friends of the interviewees. This has inevitably led to the limited nuancing of some responses.

The recruitment of respondents was carried out by means of purposive snowball sampling methods based on previously established contacts. The sample includes eight young people between the age of twenty-one and twenty-nine, who self-identified as ‘black gay nonbinary persons’, ‘white gay men’, ‘white bisexual transgender women’, ‘white straight transgender women’, and ‘white lesbian women’. All the participants come from urban areas with six of them being from capitals. Although our initial recruitment strategy was aimed to form a varied sample that would reflect the heterogeneity of the target group, the COVID-19 pandemic that broke out during the research activities significantly impeded and hindered the sampling process. It has markedly restricted the means of connecting with the potential respondents who belong to a social group that is not easily approachable even in usual circumstances. Notably, white gay men were more responsive to a call while a number of potential queer female informants declined the call explaining it by mental exhaustion or left it without response altogether. As a result, while this paper sheds some light on the environment that queer asylum seekers have to navigate throughout the asylum procedure, it is in no way representative of a highly diverse community they comprise. As for the (small) size of the sample, we want to further specify that this article does not aim at providing generalized and/or generalizable findings, but rather to get in-depth into individual lived experiences. In order to guarantee data anonymity, the respondents’ names have been replaced by pseudonyms. The informants signed a consent form agreeing to being interviewed and recorded and to the collected data being used in this study. None of them has expressed a desire to withdraw from the research. Considering that three of the respondents were residing in a reception center at the time the interviews were conducted we

had first confirmed that they would be able to call in a comfortable and safe setting. Further details regarding the interviewees are deliberately not provided here so as to further ensure their anonymity, safeguard their privacy and respect their private life.

Interviews were analyzed via qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis allows for pinpointing relevant themes and eliciting meaningful interpretations with close attention to the context in which the content was produced (Roller, 2019). The codebook was developed on a three-component basis including code, example, and definition and the recurring themes were identified. Research reflections and notes made after the interviews and throughout the transcribing process were used as supplementary tools during coding. The codes were generated by the employment of both the inductive category development (e.g. invisibility and hypervisibility) and deductive category application (e.g. decision-making factors and negotiating strategies), with the latter being mainly instructed by the topic guide. The identified themes – such as perceived queerness, queer-blind⁵ assistance, unprepared personnel, queer-blind asylum application registration – were present in most interviews and are discussed with close attention to the themes that were relevant to a limited number of interviewees. In what follows we elaborate further on the findings and discuss the identified themes.

Hypervisibility and invisibility in hetero-cis-sexist environments: Navigating Belgian reception centers

Despite including SOGI as grounds for asylum, the European asylum systems still function on the premise that refugees are heterosexual (Gartner, 2015). The lived experiences of queer asylum seekers whose stories lie at the core of this research indicate that this is also the case in today's Belgium. After reaching the country, forced migrants are required to register their application at the arrival center in Brussels, where it is checked for eligibility by the Immigration Office (Fedasil, n.d.). If eligible, the next step is the interview with the Commissioner-General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), which decides whether to grant them asylum or not. During the examination of their asylum application – which may take months and more – asylum seekers may be offered reception at the arrival center before they are relocated to reception centers. Given the lack of alternatives, queer asylum seekers are forced to reside at centers that are not always made to safely accommodate them.

Fleeing persecution or serious harm in their countries of origin, all the respondents have reported arriving in Belgium with an idealized image of their destination as a safe country where they can be themselves without fear. However, even when choosing Belgium as an allegedly queer-friendly destination, some forced queer migrants lack sufficient information about the protection they are guaranteed and where to apply for it. They arrive in a foreign environment somewhat disoriented, often facing language barriers while carrying the trauma of separation from their close kith and kin and of being rejected and persecuted based on their sexual orientation and/or queer identity. Our findings also substantiate the critique of a widespread idea that once in a supposedly queer-friendly country a queer is out and proud (Luibhéid, 2008; Bui, 2014; Peumans, 2018; Dhoest, 2019) and prove that coming out is not a one-time act, but rather a constant negotiation of the closet that is informed by the context reflecting power relations (Decena, 2011). We argue that navigating the spaces where cisgender heterosexual bodies are the norm, queer asylum seekers are subjected to both *hypervisibility* (at the individual level) and *invisibility* (at the structural level).

Hypervisibility

At the arrival center, queer asylum seekers find themselves surrounded by other asylum applicants – including those who come from their same country of origin. Anticipating

⁵ This term is used to refer to an attitude or behavior that is based on the assumption that one is by default a binary cisgender heterosexual person.

queerphobia⁶ some of the queer applicants might choose to stay discreet and try to pass as heterosexuals or simply remain unnoticed to avoid potential danger. Davit (a white gay man who fled his country with his boyfriend), for example, shared that on the day they came to apply for asylum at the arrival center, they recognized some of their fellow citizens when they heard them speaking their own national language. As a result, they ‘tried to be as quiet as possible’ to not get noticed by them. Yet, the testimonies of queer asylum applicants demonstrate that even when they wish to refrain from revealing their SOGI, it is not always possible to avoid the risk of being targeted by queerphobes.

The analysis has shown that throughout their stay at the reception centers, all the informants have experienced a certain level of hypervisibility. In most cases, the respondents were exposed to a hostile hetero-cis-sexist environment due to their perceived queerness based on their appearance and/or behavior. Hence, the mere fact of not fitting into binary heteronormative cisgender expectations of how a person is supposed to look or act can make queer asylum seekers be perceived as a queer person. This makes them hypervisible and therefore easily identifiable to the aggressors. Thus, Natia (a white lesbian woman) stated that due to her shaved head she would be approached by others and asked: ‘Are you a boy or a girl?’ Both Manana and Mariam (white transgender women) were asked the same question. Such encounters demonstrate the pervasiveness of stereotypes about femininity which led to the womanhood of all three women being questioned. The aforesaid attitudes – although not necessarily accompanied by hostility – inevitably add to applicants’ fear of violence and sense of discomfort. At the same time, male informants reported being harassed and verbally abused due to nonconforming to the masculinity stereotypes. Davit said: ‘My boyfriend had died his hair in blonde and it seemed too much gay for them, and they would make fun of it’. The workers of the reception centers are also reportedly carriers and perpetrators of binary gender stereotypes. Eric – who self-identifies as a black gay nonbinary person – testified:

I remember me being there the first day that I came, and there was this man that works there and the one who is like – who welcomes us, and who is like: ‘Ah, yeah. You are a boy. You look like a girl.’

Receiving such remarks from the workers forced migrants depend on when it comes to seeking assistance further exacerbates their vulnerabilities. On the other hand, queer asylum seekers also might make use of heteronormative stereotypes to identify a queer looking person and potentially form kinship. We can therefore conclude that starting their asylum procedure, queer claimants find themselves in an environment that embeds heteronormative cisgender beliefs both on part of other asylum seekers and reception center workers. Such a status quo provides fertile soil for queerphobic attitudes that first of all affect those who do not fit an image of a heteronormative cisgender person. Those, on the other hand, who can pass as heterosexuals may not feel safe to reveal their queer identity which can eventually negatively impact their asylum procedure. This seems to be problematic since Belgium is offering queer migrants the right to protection on the ground of their SOGI but at the same time appears to be unable to provide safe environment for queer claimants.

Invisibility

The research findings demonstrate that the issues of the hypervisibility of queer asylum applicants are tightly connected to the issues of their invisibility within the asylum system. Namely, the analysis allowed to determine three factors through which the invisibility of

⁶ The term *queerphobia* encompasses discriminatory attitudes and treatment of diverse sexualities other than heterosexuality, as well as against diverse gender identities other than binary cisgender identities (i.e. a man or a woman).

queer asylum applicants in the context of reception centers is manifested: *queer-blind*⁷ *asylum application registration*, *unprepared personnel*, and *queer-blind assistance*.

Queer-blind asylum application registration

Coming to the arrival center to register their asylum application, queer asylum seekers face complete disregard for their privacy and possible ramifications for their safety while not all of them are equally ready to be open about their identities. The testimonies of informants demonstrate that queer activists who were publicly advocating for their rights in their countries of origin tend to place a higher value on coming out. The data also shows that such a stance can be motivated by the importance of being able to be yourself as well as the intention to incite social change by bringing the awareness about queer identities. At the same time, some informants stated that talking about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity is highly intimate for them and they prefer to disclose this information only to their close circle of friends. Yet, they are asked to disclose the ground for their asylum claim in a public space with other applicants waiting for their turn. This means that they are forced to perform an act of coming out having little if any control over who is going to eventually receive this information. As most interviewees report, such a status quo inevitably adds to stress and can lead to the exposure to queerphobia that otherwise could have been avoided. Additionally, their stories confirm that such circumstances can also compel queer asylum seekers to change the ground for their application fearing the implications (Gartner, 2015; Peumans, 2018).

Unprepared personnel

The testimonies of informants highlight that in the context of reception centers, asylum seekers are highly dependent on the center staff. Certain encounters with the workers show that quite often they look at the queer asylum seekers through a binary heteronormative cisgender lens. Davit, for example, describes the worker as 'confused' after he came out to him as a gay man:

I had to take some clothes and I said that I... I gave two badges, mine and his [i.e. of his boyfriend], and he was like: 'You are brothers, right?' And I was like: 'No, we are boyfriends.' And he would be like: 'What? What boyfriends?'

While none of the white respondents referred to their whiteness during the asylum interviews, in case of non-white applicants – such as Eric, a black gay nonbinary person – their experience is also heavily instructed by their skin color which signifies the interplay of gender identity and race:

White people telling you, like, these other guys in the center: 'You know, you don't look masculine.' You know, like in this image of white people having this image of, like, a black person is supposed to be like this.

Most white informants stated that the questions were understandably detailed, repetitive, and did not make them feel uncomfortable. Eric, on the other hand, repeatedly described their interview as well as the whole asylum procedure in Belgium as 'violent':

It's really tough, tiresome. And... you just go there, you be bombarded with questions and all that stuff. And you don't even get the chance to...you know, to express who you are. You're just there, you know. You're talking, you're showing queersome, all that stuff. And it's really hard. For me, I didn't even get that opportunity to say that I should be identified as a nonbinary person. [...] The good

⁷*Queer-blind* is used in this paper as an antonym to *queer-conscious* to characterize that asylum procedures by default exclude the possibility of queer presence.

thing for me, I was in activism, I knew such questions, I knew that – sometimes I wanted to tell that person: ‘Do you know what? Those questions you are asking me – actually, they are only for white people. Me being black in Africa, this is not how we live our sexuality.’

The analysis hence suggests that applicants from countries in which queer experiences diverge from Eurocentric ideas around SOGI are impacted differently by the Belgian asylum system. Thus, they often have to undergo higher stress levels as they cannot relate to the questions they are asked. While the asylum interviewers seem to expect the applicants to be familiar with and adhere to the Western-based LGBTQ terminology and standards, not all queer asylum seekers necessarily know, use and/or identify with labels like lesbian, gay, transgender, and so on. Consequently, they might be confused by some questions asked during an asylum interview which can make them sound less convincing to the interviewers. Additionally, they are also expected to be aware of the queer organizations and/or communities in their countries of origin. Those queer asylum seekers who are aware of such expectations, feel compelled to come out in a certain way in order to receive a desirable approval. Eric, for example, chose to pass as a gay man to ensure a positive decision. Those who come from rural areas, however, often lack such knowledge and face a higher risk of rejection:

People coming from those villages, they don’t even know what being gay means. [...] even the term homosexuality, they don’t even know it. They get to know it once they move out of the village, they go to a capital city or even coming here in Europe and they tell them: ‘You know what? Well, actually you are gay. We call you homosexual.’ [...] That’s why when they face those people in the interviews, they get lost. They get lost, cause that’s not their lives. That’s not how they lived their sexuality (Eric).

Such findings further prove the scholarly arguments that asylum procedures in Belgium and Europe alike are centered on Western concepts, having little or no regard for the diversity and specificity of practices in the countries of origin (Addae, 2013; Gartner, 2015; Jung, 2015; Dhoest, 2018; Peumans, 2018).

Queer-blind assistance

The invisibility of queer asylum seekers in the context of the Belgian reception centers does not only manifest itself in the ways queer applicants are talked about or talked to but also in the manner that their issues are (not) addressed. The testimonies of the respondents show that while providing transgender applicants with a private room seems to be a regular practice, other queer asylum seekers might be denied such accommodation despite repetitive instances of harassment, verbal abuse, and death threats. The case of Davit and his boyfriend also demonstrates that the reception workers might discriminate in favor of heterosexual couples and ignore the requests of homosexual couples. Most importantly, the experiences of informants indicate that the reception centers systematically fail to ensure the safety of queer asylum applicants. Unable to provide them with safer spaces, the workers might resort to encouraging them to look and behave heteronormatively:

Even my assistant was telling me: ‘Be a man.’ Can you imagine? He was telling me: ‘[Eric], you don’t have to show who you are, you know. We are here to survive. [...] Just act as a man. You’re acting as a girl’ (Eric).

The queer-blind approach also proves to be problematic when it results in the placement of queer asylum seekers at the reception centers in distant areas, which hinders their access to queer safe spaces and organizations that assist queer migrants. In such circumstances, the

majority of informants stress the importance of queer awareness both among asylum seekers and among reception center workers, recognizing the fact that in many instances queerphobia is incited by the lack thereof. Thereby, applying the queer-sensitive institutional lens in the work of reception centers seems necessary since it can significantly improve the environment queer asylum applicants have to navigate. Detrimental effects of institutional queer-blindness hence create a highly complex context with considerably substantial health and safety risks. As illustrated in the concluding section below, understanding this context is crucial for investigating the motives that drive the decisions of queer asylum applicants to (not) come out and the strategies they develop and apply.

Discussion and conclusions: Negotiating the closet

This article has shown that arriving in an allegedly queer-friendly Belgium, queer migrants attribute different value to the act of coming out. In the context of the Belgian reception centers, the degree to which queer asylum seekers decide to be open about their SOGI highly fluctuates and depends on the level of safety. However, as discussed in the section on hypervisibility, coming out and being out may in some cases also equal to not bringing one's behavior and/or appearance into compliance with binary hetero-cis-normative expectations. Thus, for a gay couple a mere act of displaying affection to each other in public becomes a performance of coming out even when in the first place it is a gesture of support and care. In many instances being subjected to harassment, verbal abuse, threats, and in some cases physical violence, queer applicants choose to be more discreet by avoiding certain behaviors, changing their appearance and/or self-isolating in their rooms if it is possible. Half of the interviewees reported that on some occasions, they would even skip meals to avoid confrontations. As previously mentioned, such tactics may also be encouraged by the reception center workers. Receiving insufficient or no assistance from the people asylum seekers heavily depend on, even those who deem being out important at some point might choose to comply with binary hetero-cis-normative expectations:

And I was like: 'Let me just try to act masculine.' You know. And I remember, like, me shaving off my hair, me not wearing again these, like, jewelries and all that stuff. [...] I did it, cause it was so heavy to me. [...] I was like: 'Let me just be the way they want me to be and once I move out of here I'll... I don't know... I will try to be myself again' (Eric).

It is notable that all of the white informants felt comfortable approaching the reception center staff with their issues and overall seem to have a better impression of their attitude. Black queer asylum seekers and queer asylum seekers of color, on the other hand, appear to be more likely to choose not to discuss their issues with the reception center workers and hence not to come out to them, fearing queerphobia and rejection:

They got me someone like a social assistant and I told him that I'm queer at the end when I was moving, you know. [...] And it was queer migrant coming from Morocco who is in the center in Wallonia who was telling me: 'You know [Eric], I can't get the courage to go and complain about my issue, cause maybe I just fear the rejection. [...] I fear people telling me: 'You know what, you are just a migrant. You are just a queer migrant' (Eric).

Analyzing this experience through an intersectional lens, we further see that it is not only the fear of being marginalized as a queer person, but also specifically as a queer migrant. Positioned at the intersection of their SOGI, race, ethnicity and migratory background, queer migrants are exposed to unique interlocking systems of oppression. Resorting to police or organizations that provide shelter for queer people in search of protection from aggressors, queer asylum seekers might, for instance, be denied assistance due to their citizenship status.

Queer applicants can also search for safe connections beyond the reception centers utilizing allegedly queer-friendly spaces and social media. Yet, even those spaces are not necessarily free from prejudice and homonormative expectations. This can, on the one hand, drive some forced queer migrants away and, on the other hand, become the place of subjection for others. Such a status quo compels them to be out in a particular way in order to be accepted and feel like they belong. This seems to be especially relevant for black forced migrants and forced migrants of color who often find themselves in spaces dominated by white people. In such circumstances, they are likely to experience racism.

The testimonies signify that not every asylum seeker is ready to publicly manifest their SOGI at any given moment. Yet, seeking protection as a queer person requires disclosing one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity as a part of legitimization of the application (Luibhéid, 2008; Gartner, 2015; Dhoest, 2018, Peumans, 2018, Verhaeghe et al., 2019). Furthermore, in circumstances when applicants are expected to come out in a certain way to get their application approved, those who do not meet the expectations may not even get an opportunity to fully express themselves as they may not be able to relate to the key concepts operated by the interviewers. As a consequence, they face higher risks of being rejected as unconvincing.

The asylum system in Belgium both reflects and reinforces the prejudices that queer asylum seekers have to navigate. Moreover, it has become obvious that while they are granted the right to apply for protection on the ground of their SOGI, forced queer migrants tend to be invisibilized on an institutional level. In the context of reception centers such invisibilization is manifested in a queer-blind approach to asylum application registration, personnel training and asylum seeker assistance. Not only are the needs of forced queer migrants ignored under such conditions but it also substantiates the environment with deeply embedded binary hetero-cis-normative beliefs which makes every non-conforming person hypervisible. Hypervisibilization consequently results in a high exposure to aggression, violence and discrimination. As a result, queer asylum claimants are subjected to preposterous circumstances in which they constantly have to balance between invisibility and hypervisibility. On the one hand, they are forced to adapt to a hostile environment and hence grapple with hypervisibilization in order to stay safe while on the other hand they are both expected to be visible to prove the legitimacy of their application and have to come forth as queer in order to ask for their issues to be addressed. Such a status quo makes evident the urgent need for a queer-sensitive approach in an asylum system in Belgium if it is to genuinely provide protection to forced queer migrants.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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