



Negotiating Queer Identities following Forced Migration

An intersectional approach to LGBTIQ+ Iranian refugees in the United Kingdom

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Introduction

In the present text I will briefly contextualize the current situation LGBTIQ+ people face in Iran, as well as the difficult process they go through when trying to apply for refugee status in Europe. I will then explain the concept of intersectionality, its importance as a theoretical perspective, and the way it can be applied to research projects regarding LGBTIQ+ refugees. This text is written within the framework of the project “Negotiating Queer Identities Following Forced Migration”, that I was a part of during my research stay as an International Junior Research Associate at the University of Sussex.

An Iranian contextualization

There are [69 United Nations](#) member States that criminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity. It has been verified by [ILGA](#) (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) that at least [34 UN member States](#) have actively enforced these laws over the past years. However, the number could be higher. Six nations that are member of the UN impose the death penalty for [same-sex sexual activity](#), Iran being one of them. The Islamic Republic of Iran is an authoritarian, theocratic regime –a form of government in which one official religion is recognized as the main source of legislation. Alexandros explains that, from the viewpoint of Islam, the government crystallizes the [political aspirations](#) of a nation united in faith with the only goal of moving towards God.

Presently, there are several human rights violations in Iran, from the absence of freedom of speech to the extremely harsh LGBTIQ+ policies. According to the [Center for Human Rights in Iran](#), this community faces severe legal and social discrimination. As previously mentioned, same-sex sexual acts are punishable by flogging and death, therefore, LGBTIQ+ people are forced to stay hidden. Iran’s Parliamentary Research Center did a [study](#) which showed that 17% of 142,000 students self- identified as gay. In a survey of Iranian LGBTIQ+ individuals, 77% reported violence, including at work, from immediate family, in public spaces, in the education system, etc. Ali Larijani, who was the Speaker of Parliament in 2011, said that the death penalty for same-sex sexual conduct is [“effective in keeping society safe from perversion”](#). Activists can also be convicted on national security charges for LGBTIQ+ advocacy.



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As for transgender rights, there is a narrow degree of official recognition of their identities by the government, under the condition of undergoing sex reassignment surgery. Those who do not go through with it do not have any legal recognition, and those who do first must go through a very invasive process which includes virginity tests, parental approval and psychological counseling that often reinforces feelings of shame on the person. Iran considers transgender identities as a disorder and does not have laws protecting this population against hate crimes. As [OutRight Action International](#) has asserted:

“The Iranian trans community faces pressure from both state and non-state actors, ranging from hostile public attitudes to acts of extreme violence, risk of arrest, detention, and prosecution. Most trans individuals interviewed for this report highlighted their personal experiences with bullying, domestic violence, social discrimination, and legal persecution as a result of their gender identity”.

Applying as refugees

LGBTIQ+ Iranian people can apply for refugee status in foreign countries in order to escape discrimination. They often go to European countries, but there are plenty of instances where they go to Canada and Turkey as well. The process itself makes these people target of various forms of discrimination, such as brutish treatment, disdain for their mere existence, sexual assaults and the presence of anxiety and fear. It is important to note that seeking asylum is extremely difficult for anyone going through that process, since they are leaving everything they know behind in search for a better life, which has the potential of being alienating; however, LGBT people also have to face a hostile environment because of their diverse sexualities or gender identities. Obtaining international protection can be a long and painful process, full of stereotypes regarding LGBT people, and arriving at the place of safety has the potential of also becoming a difficult experience.

The concept of intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that allows researchers to recognize how power and discrimination intersect, and how different groups of people can experience them differently. It helps us understand how gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, etc. do not exist isolated from each other. Rather, [they are intertwined and influence one another](#), changing how we experience the social world and how it perceives us. Discrimination and its disempowering effects may take several forms, depending on one's position in different structures, such as the ones mentioned above.



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As argued by [Pierce](#): “Inequalities are seldom the result of a single factor, but rather ‘the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences’” As mentioned by [Pierce](#) this theoretical framework can provide nuance to our analysis, which could allow us to move away from static and simplistic conceptualizations, in this case, of the refugee crisis. It can provide us with analytical tools to study the way multiple identities intersect.

Importance of an intersectional perspective regarding LGBTIQ+ Iranian refugees

When one is doing research regarding LGBTIQ+ refugees, it is important to view their situation from an intersectional perspective, paying attention to different social dimensions experienced by individuals, and not just seeing them as refugees or as people from the LGBT community. As mentioned by [Chossière](#), it is important to investigate how the administrative category of “refugee” constrains the everyday lives of queer migrants, but also vice versa. Within an intersectional framework we can see how these categories are negotiated and mobilized in different contexts. We need to “analyze how the [intersection](#) of refugeeness, sexuality, and gender is spatially experienced by queer asylum seekers and refugees, underlining the implications of migration status on individuals’ experiences, an aspect that remains rarely addressed in gender and sexuality studies”. He also emphasizes the experiences of inclusion queer refugees encounter, as they can be victims of racism in queer communities, and homophobia or transphobia in their national communities.

Conclusion

Migrants and refugees flee their countries for many different reasons. We need to understand that LGBT people face a double hardship, since their existence as a refugee and their existence as LGBT individuals intersect, along with the problems they carry. This creates a profound marginalization and distancing from traditional support and resources. As mentioned above, seeking asylum is a complicated process, especially for those individuals whose claims regard sexual orientation or gender identity, given the fact that these claims are difficult to file, argue and win, since it is very hard to prove LGBTIQ+ identities. It is vital for us social researchers to look at the intersectionality of the subjects that we work with, in order to understand better the struggles they go through, since they can face at least two types of marginalization in Europe: discrimination because of their migrant status and because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. An intersectional approach allows us to go beyond a superficial look, to understand [that these power relations are mutually constituted](#).