




# Liminality and transactional sex among queer refugees: Insights from Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, and Switzerland

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## Abstract

People of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions who have been forcibly displaced (hereafter referred to as ‘queer refugees’) encounter liminal conditions along their displacement journeys that reinforce their marginalization. We conducted interviews with 46 queer refugees in four countries: Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, and Switzerland. We found that restrictive border controls, migration and refugee policies, asylum processes, and integration efforts structured queer refugees’ liminalities. In turn, they employed survival strategies, including engaging in transactional sexual practices, to meet their basic needs; however, these practices introduced health challenges for which they had limited access to services. In many instances, queer refugees engaged in transactional sex under exploitative and abusive conditions that heightened the risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Thus, we conclude that forced displacement emplaced queer refugees in states of multidimensional liminality that reinforced their marginalization.

**Keywords:** Liminality, Forced displacement, Queer, Transactional Sex, Structural Vulnerabilities, LGBTQI+, People of Diverse Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE), Refugees, Asylum Seekers

## Introduction

Persecution, conflict, and crises force people to flee their home countries for safety and new ways of life. People of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions (SOGIEs) who face severe persecution (OHCHR 2023) experience overlapping forms of abuse, discrimination, and violence during their displacement journeys and in countries where they seek asylum

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(OHCHR 2022). Statistics on forced displacement due to persecution based on SOGIE are not easily generated or well-validated. However, international organizations have observed that significant numbers of people of diverse SOGIE seek asylum in European countries to live authentically and fully exercise their rights (OHCHR 2023).

There is a great need to understand the challenges that people of diverse SOGIE face in forced displacement and how they navigate humanitarian systems and work to establish lives in new countries. We refer to this group of people of diverse SOGIE as 'queer'. Queerness is about rejecting the here and now and insisting on potentiality and concrete possibility for another world (Munoz 2009). Queer is an empowering term that seeks to advance 'the social standing of non-normative subjectivities and identities, avoiding conventional attempts at classification and definition'. Our research aims to deepen our understanding of survival strategies queer refugees employ to navigate liminal conditions of forced displacement—*en route* and in host countries—focusing primarily on the ways transactional sex (TS) becomes an important survival strategy for queer refugees. Our research thus contributes to a broad multidisciplinary scholarship in refugee and migration studies on gendered liminality in the context of forced displacement.

The field of migration studies has embraced a concept of liminality theorized in anthropology as an 'in-between' and uncertain condition that holds transformative potential akin to a ritual or a rite of passage (van Gennep 1960; Turner et al. 1969). Displacement is a liminal state wherein one might transition from one phase of life to another. To study liminal displacement conditions, scholars have examined processes of settlement or naturalization into host countries via refugee camps, transit areas, asylum homes, and shelters (Mortland 1987; Groeninck et al. 2020; Wimark 2021). They critique the 'myth' of transformation attached to liminal sites of immigration (e.g. refugee camps) and argue that processes and sites of migration reinforce refugee liminality by creating dependency and powerlessness rather than 'transforming' their occupants into potential citizens (Mortland 1987).

The concept of liminality has thus been used to describe how refugees exist in an 'in-between' state, not being entirely 'illegal' but not fully recognized by the state (Martinez-Aranda 2020). This body of research finds that refugees' liminal subjectivities are closely tied to state-controlled regimes that constrain their agency (Wimark 2021; Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022), leaving them circumscribed by state control. Yet, their subjectivities are also uncertain or left underdetermined (Dale and Burrell 2007; Kallio et al. 2019; Mason 2020; Mountz 2021). Scholars in queer refugee studies examine how liminal subjectivities are structured in 'transit' countries as refugees navigate legal, governmental, and humanitarian bodies, evaluating the 'authenticity' of their identities and the 'legitimacy' of their claims. These studies show how queer refugees learn to master specific forms of telling and performance demanded by states, NGOs, and communities to carve space for themselves as they craft ways to embody their own and others' sexualities and genders (San 2020).

Anthropologists of humanitarianism have made similar observations about how international actors produce refugee liminalities in the governance of refugee mobility (Malkki 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Fassin 2012). They contend that the production of liminality must be understood within a process of dispossession, whereby neoliberal border and forced migration management policies are integral to the emplacement of migrants and refugees (Genova 2017). Georgina Ramsay has underscored the need to understand liminality as a process of dispossession—notably, emphasizing how the refugees are dispossessed of their present and future. From Ramsay's perspective, refugees encounter non-navigable situations wherein dispossession constrains the possibility of a self-directed future (Ramsay 2020). Forced displacement has alerted scholars to how state sovereignty is exercised at the border and beyond. Amid increasing displacement patterns, migratory flows are integrated into contemporary global governance through carceral regimes of sovereignty that exceed the state (Balaguera 2018). They draw our attention to the ways sites and processes of confinement exceed carceral facilities' walls, blur distinctions of shelter and homelessness, motion and boundedness, freedom, and unfreedom (Balaguera 2018).

Queer scholars problematize the framing and implementation of protections for queer refugees by the UNHCR, drawing critical attention to the ways practical restrictions on the implementation of protection leave queer refugees unsafe (Pincock, 2021). Indeed, there are staunch inconsistencies in the universality of human rights, and what it means to commit a 'violation of human rights' by a given state or citizen is arbitrary and contingent on the place and time of the act. The recognition of queer refugees in the human rights regimes relies on essentialist and timeless notions of identity that ultimately marginalize non-normative subjects (Shakhsari 2014). Under this system of governance, queer refugees tend to become suspended in in-between zones of recognition where rightfulness and rightlessness come together in a temporal standstill (Shakhsari 2014).

Yet, further research argues that refugees create survival strategies to cope with liminality and dispossessing processes, striving towards three interrelated needs: housing, income, and citizenship (Bhagat 2020). Refugees pursue informal and low-paid labour, outside of official state recognition, which creates opportunities to identify and pursue survival strategies and introduces additional vulnerabilities (Bartolomé 1984). Given limited livelihood options, refugees may resort to TS to meet economic needs, cover necessities, access essential services or find protection (Amnesty International 2016). Analysts have observed how women enter sexual relationships and form couples with men whom they believe will protect them from sexual harassment and violence by others during the journey, in camps, or settlements. They suggest that women may also engage in TS to facilitate border crossing or to pay smugglers to continue the onward journey (Amnesty International 2016). Refugees, especially women, face heightened vulnerability to sexual extortion and coercion into TS as they navigate border crossings or when confronted by law enforcement and border guards or in interactions with peacekeepers and aid workers. In many instances, these TS practices constitute *de facto* sexual exploitation and abuse (Obradovic 2015; O'Brien 2017; Beber et al. 2017).

Refugees encounter harsh conditions along their displacement journeys. The closure of borders and the securitization and militarization of migratory routes have made reaching destinations such as the European Union or the United States increasingly challenging and expensive (Freedman 2021). Border closures and travel restrictions, which were tightened amid the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced access to destination countries and, in some cases, more strictly confined refugees to camps and accommodation centres, thus restricting their access to economic and social support. Lockdowns and closure of businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic limited refugees' access to work, especially in the informal sector (Mutambara et al. 2021), and particularly impacted women and queer refugees. These new realities increased refugees' reliance on TS for their journeys or livelihood (Jacobson et al. 2020).

Media reports suggest that TS is a survival strategy to navigate conditions of refugee liminality. However, the empirical evidence on this phenomenon is sparse. There is little, if any, research that examines why and how queer refugees engage in TS to counter the liminalities of forced displacement. Scholars in queer migration studies have argued for the need for further empirical research on TS as a survival strategy among queer refugees (Shah 2022) and have warned that this research must not pathologize non-normative practices resulting from transitory processes (March 2021).

Our research aims to fill this gap and expand our understanding of how queer people are subjected to and experience overlapping liminalities in displacement as they navigate migration policies, asylum processes, and humanitarian systems. We explore how a specific set of vulnerabilities impacting queer people reinforce the marginalization of queer refugees during their displacement journeys, thereby fostering the emergence of TS practices as a survival strategy to cope with dispossession and create new possibilities. We draw lessons from the literature on sex work in migration to not conflate trafficking with prostitution and to not reduce people who sell sexual services to tropes of cisnormative female victimhood and helplessness (Shah 2022). We define TS as adults engaging in sexual activities, with the implicit or explicit understanding to access material or non-material benefits, such as money, gifts, goods, services, and

favours, to meet the needs and wants of the parties involved. Our working assumption is that people who engage in TS often do not identify as sex workers and may engage in TS as a single or repeated encounter or constructed as a longer-term relationship and may or may not recognize/disclose that they exchange sexual activities to obtain material or non-material benefits. Our working definition of TS in the context of forced displacement includes the possibility of exploitation without other choices.

## Methods

This analysis draws from interviews with a subset of participants in a broader multi-country research project on survival strategies and health repercussions in forced displacement. The larger project included participants across the gender spectrum, irrespective of sexual orientation. Data from complete in-depth interviews (IDIs) involving queer displaced people in Lebanon (Beirut), Turkey (Istanbul), Greece (Athens), and Switzerland (Geneva, Zurich) are included in this analysis. The research protocol, instruments, and data management plan were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Geneva Graduate Institute (Geneva, CH), American University of Beirut (Beirut, Lebanon), Middle East Technical University (Ankara, Turkey), and Academic Council of KMOP (Athens, Greece). Privacy and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process according to the protocol and data management plan.

To reach queer refugees, the research team established close collaboration and partnership with local organizations, international organizations, UN agencies, and community organizations that provided services or support to refugee populations, including queer refugees. These research partners disseminated information about the research to the individuals they served and invited them to contact the research team directly if they were interested in participating. In Turkey and Greece, study teams engaged with NGOs and LGBTQI+ organizations to facilitate recruitment of queer refugees by distributing an information sheet about the research and inviting them to contact the research team if interested in participating in the research project.

Data on sexual orientation and gender identity were collected as shared or disclosed by the participants, either before or during the interviews. In adherence to the approved protocol, all participants were offered a small compensation, either a voucher or monetary equivalent (10 EUR), to cover expenses related to transportation or other indirect costs associated with their research participation, irrespective of interview completion.

Due to various ethical, legal, and practical considerations, researchers from refugee communities could not be recruited. However, every effort was made to ensure a diverse research team comprising nationals from the research countries, individuals with firsthand experience of displacement and migration, individuals representing diverse SOGIE, and those with cultural ties or roots in the countries from which most refugees originated. The research team actively engaged in reflexivity during regular team meetings, debriefing sessions, and analytical processes. They deliberated on their positionality and subjectivity, considering how gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, religion, and other dynamics might influence interview interactions.

Given the sensitivity and lack of consensus definition of TS, we refrained from explicitly using the term in our interviews. We focused mainly on eliciting narratives about the refugees' journeys and survival strategies. We included one direct question asking participants whether they engaged in, witnessed, or heard of women, men, or queer refugees who provided or were forced to engage in sexual activities or intimate relationships, either temporarily or long-term, in exchange for support or something they needed or wanted (cash, food, housing, onward migration, goods, services, or benefits). Due to the topic's sensitive nature and to reduce desirability bias, questions about TS relations were posed in a way that allowed research participants to share personal experiences from a third-person perspective. Specifically, we asked, 'Have you heard stories of refugee men and women who provided or were forced to engage in sexual activities or intimate relationships in exchange for support or for something they need or want (e.g. for food, cash, favours, somewhere to sleep, gift, or to migrate to another country, or anything else) during

**Table 1.** Overview of queer IDI participants.

SOGIE	Lebanon	Turkey	Greece	Switzerland	Total
Gay/bisexual cis men	4	7	4	5	20
Lesbian/bisexual cis women	0	1	1	0	2
Transgender women	4	4	1	4	13
Transgender men	2	0	2	1	5
Non-binary individuals	0	3	0	3	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>46</b>

their migration journey or current location?’ This approach allowed us to gather information on different ways TS can occur and explore the phenomenon without imposing a specific label. The combination of direct and indirect questioning was also intended to minimize desirability bias while allowing insights into the circumstances, characteristics of sexual interactions, perceptions of exploitation, and implications for sexual and reproductive health related to TS.

Between September 2021 and December 2023, 46 individuals of diverse SOGIE participated in IDIs across research sites in Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, and Switzerland. Most of our participants had fled from Afghanistan, Iran, and Syria. Demographic data (e.g. gender, age, legal status, country of origin, occupation, and civil status) were gathered during study enrolment, and additional information on SOGIE was obtained throughout the interviews based on self-identification. Participants predominantly self-identified as gay or bisexual cis men (20), transgender women (13), or non-binary individuals (6). Participation of transgender men (5) and lesbian or bisexual women (2) was limited, and no participants self-identified as intersex (Table 1).

To maintain anonymity, we will refrain from providing extensive demographic information when presenting quotes. No personal identifying information was collected, and participants provided verbal informed consent in the presence of a witness. Interviews were conducted in the participants’ preferred languages, mainly Arabic and Farsi, by research assistants fluent in one of the languages or in the presence of a trusted and trained interpreter. Interviews were audio-recorded when participants consented, and all interviews were transcribed and translated into English.

Transcripts were analysed through theory-informed inductive reasoning. Dedoose was used for collaborative coding and analysis by multiple research team members, including interviewers and data analysts. A codebook was developed to conceptualize and explore challenges and survival strategies during the displacement journey and in transit or host countries related to housing, income generation, aspirations for onward migration, strategies to overcome challenges, sexual and reproductive health and mental health, and experience of violence. One subset of codes explored queer vulnerability dimensions. Another subgroup of codes explored varieties of TS. Codes were developed and iteratively refined jointly by the research team members from each site before and during the coding process. Two members of the research team coded all transcripts. Inter-rater reliability (IRR) was assessed among the researchers by applying ten of the most frequently used codes across a sample of 10 excerpts from randomly assigned transcripts. In this IRR test, the team members achieved an excellent Kappa score of 0.88. Our analysis assessed code co-occurrence by measuring when queer vulnerability dimensions co-occurred with elements of the displacement journey—*en route* and in host countries. Of the 224 total codes, the top 10 per cent of codes that co-occurred with queer vulnerability dimensions were included in the analysis ( [Supplementary Material I](#)).

## Findings

Our findings demonstrate the multiple overlapping liminalities that queer refugees faced during their displacement, reasons for displacement, challenges during displacement journeys, and living conditions in transit and host countries. Their displacement journeys were layered with

economic hardship, social isolation, and discrimination based on ethnicity, migration status, and SOGIE. To cope with and navigate these challenges, they pursued survival strategies, including engaging in TS, which introduced risks for their sexual and reproductive health. Consequently, they had to access health care and navigate limited SOGIE-friendly services.

### Liminality in forced displacement: navigating asylum systems

Beyond the impact of war and conflicts in their home countries, queer refugees are displaced due to persecution, including intimate forms of discrimination and harassment because of their SOGIE. Many queer refugees reported fleeing because of threats, abuse, and violence from the regimes in their country of origin and their families:

*I was escaping both from the law and my family. My family threatened to send me to my aunt's husband—who was working on explosive materials and was in the war—to be killed. They wanted to get rid of the shame. (Lesbian cis woman, Istanbul)*

*They hit me and broke my hand. For no good reason, for evil—just because of my sexual orientation. I did not feel safe because they knew my house. They could shoot me whenever they wanted. I had to escape. (Gay cis man, Istanbul)*

*In [my country of origin], it's impossible to live as a transgender person. I experienced lots of bad things. The police arrested me during pride month; I was attacked multiple times while I was doing sex work, and I was threatened by my partner's family multiple times. They wrote me messages saying, 'We will kill you'. (Transgender woman, Zurich)*

Refugees fled their countries of origin due to discrimination and abuse, including by their employers. One transgender woman who worked for a government agency in her country of origin reported that her physical and medical procedures were subject to scrutiny.

*I worked for the government. I submitted a report stating that I have a cyst in my breasts and need someone to remove it. Usually, after the operation, I have to take a break for a month. However, right after the surgery, 15 days, I was called to the office. They told me, 'You are transitioning, and it is illegal; get us the name of the hospital and the doctor's name so we can do our investigation'. I came here to Lebanon out of fear. (Transgender woman, Beirut)*

Forced displacement placed refugees in a state of legal limbo as they left their country of origin and grappled with uncertain legal status throughout their journey to seek asylum and protection. This legal liminality persisted as they navigated inhumane migration policies and inefficient asylum processes, encountered inadequacies in humanitarian systems, and were offered limited, if any, access to legal and social protection. In the absence of secure migration routes and adequate legal and social security, queer refugees faced dispossession of their material assets. They were subject to financial extortion as they were compelled to cross dangerous routes in pursuit of safety:

*Every army checkpoint stopped us and took money from us. (Bisexual, cis man, Beirut)*

Queer refugees reported encountering discrimination, harassment, and extensive interrogations at borders. This increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, and additional verbal and sexual abuse during border crossings compelled them to hide their sexual orientation and gender identities. Transgender refugees further reported experiencing discriminatory legal procedures, and being accused of identity fraud. Displacement exacerbated the harsh realities and experiences of abuse and harassment that they faced in their home countries. They reflected on the discriminatory treatment they experienced and witnessed at border crossings:

*The borders are the ugliest thing I have ever seen—they are disgusting. The way they treat people ... they do not treat us as humans. (Gay cis man, Beirut)*

Queer refugees encountered pervasive abuse, discrimination, and violence throughout the forced displacement journey, at borders, in camps, and when navigating legal liminality in host countries. They encountered ridicule from other refugees and mistreatment by employers, landlords, healthcare providers, and communities because of homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia:

*Turks hit me and [people from country of origin], even [they hit me]. [People from country of origin] hit me because I am gay, and Turkish people did it because of racism. Some [people from my country of origin] even tried to take my photos. I was subjected to violence and betrayal by Turkish people, but I could not complain about them because I would be guilty. No law protects us. There were protests against [refugees]. It did not cause violence, but people could not go to work or go out. Some people are beating [refugees from the country of origin] when they encounter them. (Gay cis man, Istanbul)*

*An army checkpoint stopped me. [The officer] started abusing me and telling me I am a male, Trans, louti, gay, and shit. I told him I was born this way; I have small breasts ... They put me in a room with other people and a car near a river ... in their custody, I was tortured a lot. (Transgender woman, Beirut)*

*You will be put in the streets, and no one would say anything, even the police. I have friends who are gay, and they have been raped. And when they went to the police, they did nothing for them. (Transgender man, Athens)*

*As a queer, trans person, it's impossible to eat at the camp. Because you go to the food court and everyone is looking at you, making fun of you, you don't have a chance to eat there. So, it would be best if you ate outside of the camp. I try to stay out of the camp as much as possible. (Transgender woman, Zurich)*

Upon reaching a new country, queer refugees' legal liminality persisted due to inefficient and lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Extended asylum processes left queer asylum seekers to linger months or even years in legal limbo. They continued to face discriminatory migration and asylum policies and were harassed by immigration officers because of their SOGIE. As they explained:

*Trans individuals ... they got harassed. The police, army, police those entities don't know how to deal with vulnerable communities. They bully them. They are harassed and searched more. (Gay cis man, Beirut)*

Queer refugees perceived tightened immigration and refugee policies and experienced growing difficulties in obtaining official documentation, fearing the risk of deportation. They talked about how their fundamental rights had become fleeting aspirations, or as one participant explained:

*We are losing our rights. Our rights have become dreams. (Transgender woman, Istanbul)*

Without official documentation, queer refugees faced additional vulnerabilities, including threats from intimate partners and others aiming to exploit them sexually or financially.

*Like, 'If you look for or go with someone else other than me, I won't send money anymore, or I will stop helping you' or, even, depending on the situation, 'I will make you leave the country and not legalize your identification papers'. (Gay cis man, Beirut)*

When registered asylum seekers were granted asylum and residence permits, they were afforded certain legal rights and, in some cases, entitled to access essential services in the host countries. However, most participants' conditions in the host countries were marked by uncertain legal status, which hindered them from establishing their lives, fully exercising their rights, and accessing necessary services in the new country.

### **Navigating economic hardship in the face of legal uncertainties**

Legal liminality calibrated a set of structural vulnerabilities that permeated the everyday lives of queer refugees. Due to restrictions on their legal rights to employment, they experienced prolonged periods of unemployment and thus faced extreme economic hardships.

*They do not give you the right to work here. I do not understand this law of UN. One needs food, one needs money for accommodation. The UN does not pay for it. (Gay cis man, Istanbul)*

Some queer refugees had maintained contact with families and reported the ability to seek financial support from familiar networks. However, this was impossible for most participants who originated from the MENA region due to persecution and prevailing economic conditions.

*Since I am unemployed, I am in a tough spot financially. I sometimes ask my friends in [country of origin] and abroad [...] to help me out financially. I told my family in [country of origin] to help me when I was ill and could not do heavy work, but I know they have financial problems, too. I have moved a lot because of problems with my roommate and joblessness. The problem is that I cannot save any money. (Gay cis man, Istanbul)*

Housing was a recurring and significant concern. In certain situations, participants registered in the asylum system were provided temporary accommodations; in most cases, these housing arrangements were not sensitive to the specific risks and needs of queer refugees, and they were left to secure their housing. Financial hardship, coupled with stigma and discrimination based on both their refugee status and SOGIE, resulted in precarious living conditions, including periods of being unhoused. Queer refugees reported being forced to transition between different housing options frequently, and some were forced to falsify their identities in social settings to secure and maintain housing.

*I face many problems concerning my accommodation—this is my fifth house. I moved a lot due to my gender identity. I lived in a shared house three times, once alone, then we were living with a Lebanese man; a short while ago, he quarreled with [my friend]; he said we were gay and had sex together, although I used to clean the house, making it neat. I worked a lot and did not show that I was trans. I was trying to stand up for myself and not be weak. This is how I look. Then I changed the house ... for the 10th time, this is me even if they did not accept it; it is their problem. (Transgender woman, Beirut)*

*Our neighbors know us as a married couple, a man and a veiled woman. Here in Turkey, they do not give houses to LGBT people because they are afraid of LGBT. They think LGBT people will make the house a place for sexual activities. They do not know that some LGBT people do not do that. If you want a house, you must go to Taksim; the rent is too high, more than 3000 liras. My partner does not have a permanent job ... He has an Istanbul identity card. So, I hid my identity from my neighbors. (Lesbian cis woman, Istanbul)*

Queer refugees encountered challenges in accessing essential health and social services. Support for financial aid, food vouchers, legal and psychological counselling, and sexual and reproductive health services were often sought from NGOs and other humanitarian organizations, some of which extended their support to undocumented refugees. However, service provision was frequently reported as fragmented and limited, with a lack of queer-friendly services. Additionally, queer refugees encountered stigma and discrimination from service providers, leaving the majority unable to fulfil their basic daily needs.

### **Survival strategies in forced displacement: TS**

As overlapping liminalities of displacement and asylum processes reinforced their precarity, queer refugees created strategies to survive, secure social protection, and gain access to services. TS was reported as a common survival strategy to navigate conditions of liminality and dire economic circumstances in each of the four research sites. For some queer refugees, engaging in TS emerged as viable means to generate income and establish a pathway for survival within the limited choices they were offered. TS offered opportunities to assert agency and cultivate resilience. Numerous participants reported involvement in TS for financial gain or were aware of others who had.

*I used to know a deplorable guy who was jobless and was not living with his family. He would do anything in return for money. He is gay. (Gay cis man, Beirut)*



*Yes, they resort to transactional sex to live, save for rent, food, and water. (Transgender woman, Beirut)*  
*I had to start sex work because I had no other choices. I had nothing. I was going to die. (Transgender woman, Istanbul).*

*When I arrived, I did sex work to get some money as I did not know the language. (Non-binary person, Geneva)*

A cis gay man explained that TS was a solution to limited employment opportunities because employers discriminate against queer refugees. In his words:

*Being LGBTQI ... you go to look for a job, and they say you are not qualified because you are who you are—you are being rejected. ... you need food to eat, a place to stay ... you are forced to do it ... [to sell sex] ... or you remain hungry. (Gay cis man, Athens)*

While humanitarian organizations offered some financial aid to alleviate daily living expenses, these were often insufficient and queer refugees still had to seek additional sources of income for their survival. As a lesbian cis woman in Istanbul explained:

*The UN provides a card for [transgender] persons. It was equal to 750 liras (approx. 40 USD). Now, it equals 1000 liras (approx. 53 USD). Still, it is insufficient because rents are high, and we also have bills and other necessities. It leads transgender persons to engage in sexual activities for money. If we cannot find an economic source, we cannot live because we cannot find ordinary jobs. In ordinary jobs, employers will abuse us. So, we are forced to engage in sexual activities. The best way is to determine a certain amount of money as salary for trans people. If they do that, no trans person will engage in these activities. (Lesbian cis woman, Istanbul).*

Queer refugees faced the risk of sexual exploitation within refugee camps or made decisions to have sex with other refugees in exchange for money or goods. One gay cis man reported how he navigated an exploitative sexual relationship with another refugee during his displacement journey. At the time, he was in Greece, and he met another man from the same country of origin, with whom he did not want to have sex but decided to engage in TS for a small amount of money ('2 or 3 euros') and to secure a tent. He reflected on the conditions in Greece that led to his decision, for himself and others he witnessed engaging in TS:

*The government gives 90€ each month, but nothing to the underaged. It was so hard for them. Prostitution was widespread among them. (Gay cis man, Geneva)*

Queer refugees observed how worsening economic conditions led to increased TS activities in their local communities:

*Recently, the number of such men is increasing due to the situation. Before, they were working and not in need. Now, they are not, so they are obliged to. They do not like to do so but are obliged due to the economic situation. (Transgender woman, Beirut)*

Engaging in TS was also frequently reported as a strategy for securing or maintaining housing arrangements, often accompanied by elements of coercion and exploitation. This type of housing TS occurred in transit and host countries. One gay cis man we interviewed in Athens described how he navigated such a situation when he was in Turkey:

*I stayed a month and a half to two months ... with a friend I did not feel comfortable or safe with. [...] First of all, I did not know this gentleman before. I was introduced to him by the gentleman who helped me get the visa. Secondly, I could not work when I arrived, so he asked me to satisfy him sexually. ... I was not legal because the visa I had got for two weeks expired, then he started asking me for that, and because my papers were not legal, I could not go to the police. So, he gave me two options: either I could stay at his house and do what he asked me to do, or he would throw me out. (Gay cis man, Athens)*

The people we spoke to also recognized how different forms of social exclusion influenced queer refugees to resort to TS:

Society does not accept them ... They have no support or someone to help, so they are obliged to do so to secure food, shelter, medications. (Transgender woman, Beirut)

For some of the queer refugees we interviewed, social exclusion, poor housing conditions, and limited legal protections structured their liminality and made them more vulnerable to exploitative TS. One transgender woman described how these conditions all impacted her experience as a refugee in Zurich, as she was residing in refugee housing while seeking asylum:

*I was on a whole floor alone, so I was scared. At that time, I had just received my rejection [for asylum], you know, so I was in a mentally traumatic situation. And then men were trying to sexually approach me and everything, so I was in a really, really bad situation. I think they put me in that room because I am a trans person, but I'm not sure.* (Transgender woman, Zurich)

Limited access to essential health services compounds the vulnerability of queer refugees and reinforces the liminalities of gender identity and expression for transgender refugees by disrupting treatment schedules. Indeed, navigating these liminal conditions is a motivating factor to pursue survival strategies, including facilitating TS, as a transgender man reflected on this:

*They push people to sell their bodies ... As someone who wants to be trans now, there is no possibility of doing all these surgeries in the public hospital, so I had to do it. What can I do? I will sell my body.* (Transgender man, Athens)

*And here in Greece, the only way that you can live, you have to sell your body. There is no work, and once you get the acceptance [international protection], the government kicks you out of the place. You have no place; you have no work, so ... How can you buy the hormone therapy/medication? And how much money do you need to implant the penis? [...] So, go to [a neighborhood in Athens] and see how all the LGBT community is having sex to live.* (Transgender man, Athens)

## Risks associated with TS: abuse, extortion, violence, and ill-health

Coercion, exploitation, and violence were frequently reported in the context of TS practices. Several queer refugees disclosed being coerced into TS by employers and others. In some instances, involvement in TS was further used as extortion to sustain these relations. Others felt unsafe when practicing TS because of the risk of violence and abuse:

*When I want to go out with someone, I ask for payment before anything happens to guarantee my rights. Sometimes, people took advantage of me. They did what they wanted: beat me and took my money and identification papers.* (Transgender woman, Beirut)

*A man took my phone and put a gun on my head and did a thousand things to me. After that, I promised myself, even if I die of hunger, I would not do [transactional sex] anymore.* (Gay cis man, Istanbul)

*It is possible for women to be beaten and subject to humiliation. It happens to me a lot, a lot. One guy made me walk like a dog while saying you are a 'bitch', look at yourself in the mirrors.* (Transgender woman, Beirut)

In Beirut, a transgender woman reflected on the risks of this survival strategy, highlighting its association with drug use, violence, and theft.

*What is disturbing about sex is how dangerous it is. I want to say something: if I go with someone who takes drugs, I am forced to take them with him. If he drinks alcohol, you must drink the whole bottle with him for the money. You are ready to do anything with him till the end of the time he specified. Also, it is dangerous because sometimes, they hit you. Some clients hit us, threw us out of the cars, and took our stuff. For many of them (clients), this is how they snatch stuff.* (Transgender woman, Beirut)

This person explained how transactional sexual encounters involved violence:

*The client would arrive. He asks how much. You tell him the amount. He asks if you have a place, and you say I have a place or a hotel. He says I want this and this. Sometimes, he says I want both of you (you and*

*your friend). I want a girl; I want to beat you; I want this and that, and he pays you. I accept all the conditions; I am obligated to accept, and before you can go with him, you must accept the conditions first. We are forced to do it even if we will be beaten.* (Transgender woman, Beirut)

These examples, along with other reports, illustrate the severe health consequences suffered by queer refugees engaged in TS. They also faced an increased risk of substance use and sexual and reproductive illness. For some participants, the enduring abuse exacerbated adverse mental health conditions, suicidal ideation, and substance use disorders.

The vulnerability of queer refugees to extortion, exploitation, and violence in the context of TS practices and the severe consequences arises from a combination of factors. Sex work and other TS relations are commonly stigmatized in numerous countries, including in research sites. Sociocultural rejection and denunciation of TS, same-sex practices, and non-heteronormative gender identities places queer refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented individuals engaging in TS and who have limited or no rights in a precarious legal position. These intersecting structural vulnerabilities heighten their fear of criminal charges and deportation, leaving them without any avenue for legal recourse in case of exploitation, violence, and abuse in the context of TS and deterring them from seeking health and other legal services. One gay cis man we interviewed in Athens navigated this situation during his time in Turkey. He explained:

*I disagreed with what he asked me to do. Many times, I would complain and tell him that if he continued, I would go to the police, and he would tell me that 'if you go to the police, I will report you for being a homosexual and say that you illegally entered my house.' [...] he did not give me money.* (Gay cis man, Athens)

Aware of their precarious, uncertain legal status, some queer refugees perceived themselves as too vulnerable to participate in TS. They also did not believe the police would protect them if they were victims of violence or abuse.

*It has been on my mind a lot to do sex for money in Turkey. Because I am a foreigner and do not speak Turkish, I constantly worry about being abused physically and sexually. Considering this, I realized I would not have the necessary security—the law is with the people of Turkey, who do not give [refugees] the respect they deserve.* (Gay cis man, Istanbul)

Participants reported facing significant health and security risks associated with TS. The negative health consequences faced by queer refugees who engaged in TS were exacerbated by their limited access to essential health services, including those addressing sexual and reproductive health and mental health:

*I need to pay the insurance here, and sometimes it's too much, and I cannot pay. It is so luxurious) to be sick here, haha. I chose the cheapest Insurance here! So, in this case, I cannot go to the hospital to take some tests because I need to pay 2500 CHF by myself. No, it's not possible; it has been three years since I could not go to the hospital. Every 4–6 months, I need to test myself, so I go to [local sexual health clinics].* (Non-binary person, Geneva)

Queer refugees reported high awareness of health risks associated with TS. Concerns about the health and security risks related to TS dissuaded some from engaging in TS:

*When I was working as a sex worker, I got sick three times. Once I got skin disease. I wanted to commit suicide.* (Transgender woman, Istanbul)

*I do not want to walk the dirty way because it results in diseases. Personally, I do not like these sexual activities; I do not want to do them for money.* (Lesbian cis woman, Istanbul)

Some queer refugees who engaged in TS and were able to access health services were denied the best available biomedical options for HIV prevention, including PrEP, and only offered condoms to navigate sexual health decisions.

*The doctors and others told me that I should use a condom. I told them that I have relationships/intercourse every day, but they don't give me pills. They told me to use the condom and insisted. (Gay cis man, Geneva)*

## Overlapping liminalities, survival strategies, and impact on aspirations

Multidimensional liminality experienced by queer refugees intensified conditions of dispossession, robbing queer refugees of both their present and the potential of the future. Many reported a lack of plans, expectations, or ambitions. In their own words:

*At the moment, I do not know. I do not have any plans now. (Gay cis man, Athens)*

*In this country, no expectations and ambitions. They destroyed us; we just want, like animals, to eat and survive. (Transgender woman, Beirut)*

*I have no plans for the future now because I cannot see any future. I wish to stay alive in this situation. (Non-binary person, Istanbul)*

*I don't trust anyone, and I have to struggle to make my dreams come true. I can pursue my dreams here, but here I must do that by the dirty way. I don't want to walk the dirty way. (Transgender woman, Istanbul)*

When queer refugees attempted to cultivate aspirations, they frequently expressed a wish to move to another country.

*My plan for the future is to go to another country and work there. (Lesbian cis woman, Athens).*

They voiced apprehensions about the future and often expressed uncertainty regarding their capacity to navigate the conditions of liminality and precarity they experienced.

*I am scared of the future. (Transgender woman, Beirut)*

*I want to have goals. Until then, I will wait? This is a lifetime, and it passes. (Gay cis man, Istanbul)*

*I think one person should have intentions so they can live. My courage was my family; they are not here. (Non-binary person, Istanbul)*

*I have not had a plan for several years now because my soul is not at peace. I am thinking about it. (Transgender woman, Istanbul)*

*The most important thing for me is to stay alive—to live the way I am and what I am. That is the most important thing for me. (Transgender man, Athens)*

At the end of one interview, a Transgender woman in Zurich was asked to speak about her thoughts about her future. In response, she thanked the interviewer for this research project because it has the potential to impact the lives of queer refugees positively:

*I just want to thank you because I think research like this can change something in the future. I think research like this can change something. I hope that important people will seriously consider this research. (Transgender woman, Zurich)*

## Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis offers crucial contributions to the field of queer migration studies, advancing established scholarship on liminality in forced displacement. A notable strength of our research is its contribution to the scarce literature on TS in forced displacement. We present compelling evidence of the structural vulnerabilities and intersecting liminalities of displacement, pointing to the frequency of TS and how TS is performed as a survival strategy by queer refugees.

By applying a 'queer' lens, we worked to affirm Jose Estaban Munoz's assertion about queerness—that it demands advocating for potentiality and concrete possibilities for a world

where queer life can thrive (Munoz 2009). Some scholars suggest that the liminality of displacement opens avenues for positive transformation, which may be particularly promising for queer individuals who can break free from concealment and persecution based on their SOGIE. However, our findings, like others, shed light on an opposing effect, revealing that for many, overlapping liminalities reinforce dispossession, and precarity, exacerbating the challenges and structural vulnerabilities faced by queer refugees. We have thus illustrated how processes of marginalization have overshadowed the potentiality of queerness within the liminal conditions of forced displacement.

Previous queer theoretical approaches to humanitarian crises have championed intersectional analyses that examine specific vulnerabilities within LGBT communities. These scholars contend that representing 'LGBT' groups singularly as a monolithic group can risk obfuscating how different structural forces compound precarity (Reid and Ritholtz, 2020). Rather than reinforce this set of claims, we focused on the critical and aspirational elements of queerness as essential to the liminal conditions that queer refugees face, the survival strategies they create, and the ways they craft solutions to establish lives in host countries. Undoubtedly, individuals of given subject positions encounter vulnerability differentially. Yet, queer refugees are united by a common aspiration to occupy a non-normative present and establish ways of living amid displacement.

Our research also advances the body of work on refugee liminality by examining new sites and processes of displacement. Whereas previous research focused on settlement or naturalization into host countries by examining refugee camps, transit areas, asylum homes, and shelters (Mortland 1987; Groeninck et al. 2020; Wimark 2021), we analysed contemporary processes of forced displacement for queer refugees, beginning with their reasons for displacement, and continuing through their survival strategies in new host countries. Most of the displacement journeys in this article originated from MENA, which transited across nearby countries and into Europe. By examining these further processes of displacement in new host countries, we add significant empirical material to a growing body of scholarship concerned with the ways liminality is reinforced for queer refugees.

Our findings shed new light on the challenges posed by the overlapping liminalities experienced by queer refugees in forced displacement and illuminate the survival strategies employed to navigate uncertainty, precarity, and dispossession against the backdrop of everyday discrimination due to cultural and legal non-acceptance of SOGIE in the research sites. As a qualitative study, this research provides valuable insights into some of the common structural challenges faced by queer refugees across the research sites.

Most importantly, our research encourages a further rethinking of liminality beyond the subjective potential for normative moralities and identities and towards a series of socio-structural challenges refugees navigate during their displacement journey. The liminal conditions of forced displacement leave refugees in a state of limbo—devoid of legal status, protection, or economic opportunities. This places them in precarious situations with restricted access to basic needs, including housing, employment, education, and healthcare. These conditions enforce marginalization and heighten vulnerability, significantly impacting the safety and well-being of queer refugees. Ultimately, this prolonged marginalization had a profound impact on their ability to foster aspirations and actualize the transformative potential of this transitional state for establishing a new life, realizing their right to live in alignment with their SOGIE identities openly. Similar to Ramsay's analysis of dispossession (Ramsay 2020), we find that liminal conditions not only lead to social and physical dislocations as individuals navigate increasingly hostile economies, environments, and socio-political contexts but also impede the ability of queer refugees to move beyond these situations, imperilling their aspirational futures. Instead of envisioning new possibilities, their focus shifted to living in the moment, merely surviving amid the hardships of being queer and liminal.

Our research also points to the urgent need to recognize the structural conditions created by migration policies, asylum practices, and humanitarian systems that perpetuate the

marginalization of queer refugees. Queer refugees experience structural vulnerabilities due to the imposed liminalities stemming from the absence of safe and legal migration routes, inefficient and protracted asylum processes, and inadequate humanitarian systems. These systems not only fail to recognize and address the pervasive discrimination and abuse that queer people face due to their SOGIE, but often perpetuate and exacerbate violent experiences. Since 2016, the European Union has streamlined and simplified the procedure for international refugee protection. However, asylum claimants in Europe tend to wait up to four years (or even longer) for a final decision (Tschalaer 2023). Prolonged legal uncertainties result in socioeconomic precarity, and limited social and legal protection facilitates harmful coping mechanisms and exposure to violence. Indeed, financial insecurity emerged as a significant driver of TS. Restricted work permissions, lack of labour rights, informal and exploitative employment practices, and discrimination based on SOGIE, among other barriers, constrained the livelihood options available to queer refugees. Financial aid from humanitarian sources or states to queer refugees, if deemed eligible, is often inadequate or unavailable. These precarious socioeconomic conditions facilitate engagement in TS practices. The absence of legal and social protection further allowed TS to occur under threats, extortions, or intimidation, constituting *de facto* sexual exploitation and abuse.

Those engaging in TS are even more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and violence. Sex work activities (or any practices perceived as such) and same-sex practices are either legally or culturally prohibited in the majority of the research sites. Even in Switzerland, where sex work is legalized, individuals engaging in TS may face risks of retaliation due to the lack of work permits and necessary licenses. As such, queer refugees engaging in TS, while likely in greater need of health, legal, and social protection services, may have limited access, even when at risk of abuse and violence, due to fear of deportation, retaliation by law enforcement and authorities, and social stigma. This situation perpetuates a vicious cycle that further marginalizes them and hinders them from realizing new identities and establishing new ways of life.

Another critical finding highlights the necessity for more nuanced research and approaches to elucidate the gendered and diverse experiences of various sub-identities within the SOGIE umbrella. Our data illuminates the specific needs and experiences of transgender people, as well as indicating differential experiences among other SOGIE sub-identities. Due to the lower participation rates of transgender men, non-binary, lesbians, and bisexuals, our study cannot provide comprehensive and nuanced insights into the gendered experiences of displacement. Our failure to reach and engage with the diversity of queer sub-groups, despite our best efforts, underscores the invisibility of certain groups and likely disparate experiences in terms of accessing communities or organizations or other factors that render them harder to reach.

Overall, our findings contribute to the body of evidence on the experiences of TS and queer refugees while also suggesting new research and policy directions. At a systemic level, changes are needed to identify and address structural factors in migration policies and asylum procedures contributing to the multidimensional liminalities experienced by queer refugees to connect queer refugees with more viable potential futures. We echo queer scholars who argue for a more critical and context-specific approach to 'protection' in humanitarian assistance, which honours its place within the broader dynamics of global refugee governance (Pincock 2021).

Enabling safe and legal migration routes and asylum procedures, training border officials on human rights and refugee laws, and ensuring safety at borders, reception centres, and refugee settlements can decrease occurrences of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, and additional verbal and sexual abuse, particularly among queer refugees, as reported by our findings. Expediting the asylum process can reduce the extent of liminal conditions and facilitate faster integration in the host countries. Furthermore, host countries must provide adequate health, social and legal protections, regardless of migration status, to prevent abuse, discrimination, and violence for queer refugees. Indeed, our findings suggest that queer refugees, who lack social and legal protections, experience the greatest marginalization in host countries.

Building on our findings, host countries and humanitarian actors can enhance support for refugees throughout their displacement journey and asylum procedures. Offering tailored housing options for individuals of diverse SOGIE is crucial, as housing frequently becomes a site of abuse and exploitation. By providing streamlined pathways to legal employment, host countries can help queer refugees evade financial vulnerability and embark on more prosperous economic paths. This will enable them to mitigate the abusive and marginalizing aspects of displacement linked to exploitative work and precarious housing environments while also reducing opportunities for coercion, exploitation, and violence.

Under improved conditions, queer refugees will have more effective tools and options to navigate the liminality inherent in forced displacement and migration. Queer people who choose to engage in transactional sexual practices or sex work as a means of livelihood would have enhanced access to engage in such activities with dignity and safety, free from discrimination and abuse. Additionally, they would have better access to adequate health and protection services.

Efforts to improve the conditions and circumstances of queer refugees must avoid treating queer refugees as a homogenous population. Instead, an intersectional gender lens is necessary to identify and tailor interventions to address the distinct and varied needs of different SOGIE subgroups. Overall, further research is needed to understand how and under what conditions queer refugees will be able to develop and pursue their true aspirations, insist on queer potentiality, and fight for the concrete possibility of another world. Future studies should strive to make visible the diverse experiences of different SOGIE sub-identities to inform policy and practice more effectively. All authors have contributed significantly to the research and preparation of this manuscript.

## Supplementary Data

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *Journal of Refugee Studies* online.

## Author Contributions

S.H. conceived the study and served as the Principal Investigator (PI), providing overarching direction for the project's design and execution. M.O. served as co-PI, making significant contributions to the study's conceptualization and analysis. J.U., T.T., and M.C. played instrumental roles in developing the research protocol and spearheading data collection and analysis within their respective countries. R.W. oversaw the data management and led the multi-country analysis, with support from A.R., and all other researchers. The initial draft of the manuscript was prepared by R.W. and S.H., with critical input from M.C., T.T., J.U., and M.O. Subsequent revisions were led by R.W. and S.H., incorporating feedback from all authors to enhance the manuscript's intellectual content and clarity. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, neither financial nor personal, that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of the work presented in this article.

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