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The praxis of research about queer migrant lives: an Iranian case study

Posted on [4 February 2025](#) by [Web Team](#)

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Does an academic, theoretically framed, multidisciplinary research project have anything to contribute to migration policy and practice in the context of discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)? LGBT+ History Month is a good time to ask this question, and we do so in this blog, based on a current University of Sussex research project.

[Negotiating Queer Identities Following Forced Migration \(NQIfFM\)](#) is a comparative research project about queer Iranians living in exile in Turkey, the UK and Canada. Led by a multidisciplinary team at the University of Sussex, the project is currently drawing to a conclusion. Alongside our academic articles and the project monograph and other [outputs](#), we are looking for opportunities to use the research findings to positively influence policy, practice and public discourse. The [call for evidence](#) on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in relation to forced displacement made by the UN Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in 2024 was one such opportunity and the research team made [a submission in January 2025](#) in which we identified some of the drivers of forced displacement, experiences of violence and discrimination, and flaws

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in refugee status determination and support for queer Iranians that our research has uncovered.



The project explores identity within a reflexive postcolonial framework using innovative methodology, including poetry workshops to provide insights into how queer Iranians' experiences of seeking international protection, migration, and resettlement are shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, sexuality, religion, class, age, 'race', ethnicity, and nationality, as well as the assumptions, perceptions, and priorities of the international organisations, agencies, and authorities with which they have to interact. Not all of this work mapped directly or easily onto policy agendas. However, in the extensive fieldwork at the heart of the research – 57 interviews with queer Iranian individuals and supporters on their experiences with asylum and migration – we heard of the difficulties experienced in Turkey as a transit country, and in Canada and the UK as resettlement or final destination countries. Participants also identified some of the changes necessary to improve the social, psychological, and legal experiences of SOGIESC asylum applicants and migrants. In the snapshot provided here, using pseudonyms and descriptors chosen by our participants, we highlight two themes from the project: the drivers of forced displacement, and the experiences of discrimination and violence, particularly in Turkey.

Drivers of forced displacement

The starting point for our research, and a catalyst in the lives of our participants in many cases, was the homophobic and transphobic legal norms and societal practices in Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) criminalises 'sodomy' as a capital offence and suppresses non-conforming sexual and gender practices. Beyond state repression, queer Iranians also grapple with family rejection, social stigmatisation, and everyday violence. The lack of legal protection in Iran from SOGIESC and gender related discrimination exposes queer people to abuse at the hands of state officials and community members, as we heard. Khalil, a gay man now living in Turkey, shared that his father reacted violently to his coming out:

You want to ruin my honour. I will find you wherever you are and kill you.

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Rima, a questioning (trans/gay) Iranian now living in Turkey, spent much of their life hiding their identity by 'putting [on] makeup and feminine looks'. They explained:

... I didn't want my LGBT identity to become an obstacle for my progress. So, I kind of killed it in myself. This is what happens in Iran.

Saman, a gay man now in Canada, explained how, as a queer individual in Iran, one is a criminal without legal recourse.

When you have been subjected to injustice, you cannot defend yourself. You have no rights.

Queer people in Iran experience discrimination on a daily basis. This affects trans and gender non-conforming people as well:

Arshia, a gay man now in Turkey, was detained by the moral police for inappropriate attire.

Alireza, a nonbinary homosexual now in Turkey, was stopped by the police on multiple occasions and interrogated about their clothes, hair and nails.

Transgender individuals, in particular, experience persistent discrimination. Arghavan, a trans woman now living in Canada, observed that even following state-subsidised gender reassignment surgery, many transgender individuals continued to be called out.

If you were not passable as a female and you were easily recognised as a transgender person, you would never have a safe life and you would always be in danger. And I was witnessing that, in the life of almost every trans woman that I visited. And even the trans men.

A number of our participants told us they had experienced rape or sexual assault, often as their first sexual experience. Themes of shame, humiliation and powerlessness were common among our participants. Shahab, a gay man / questioning Iranian now in Canada, was raped by the moral police in their van when they were detained. They found it difficult to talk about their experiences for two reasons: personal shame and concern about the impact it would

have if their family found out. Shahab imagined their sisters crying together if they found out about it.



Still from *The Other Place – a documentary film by Mehran Rezaei-Toroghi for NQIfM*

For a number of people, sexual abuse happened during their military conscription. In Iran, males over the age of 18 (with some exceptions) must carry out up to two years' military service. This was a time of abuse for some. Amir, a gay man now in Turkey, was raped twice during conscription but could not report it because he risked the death penalty as receiving male in the act of sodomy.

Prevailing medical and psychological practice in Iran fails to understand or meet the needs of SOGIESC minorities. Instead, state-subsidised gender reassignment, medical and psychiatric services act to impose binary gender roles, with care for the needs of the individual rarely a priority. Amira, a trans woman / nonbinary Iranian now in Canada, was threatened with electric shock therapy. Farhan, a nonbinary homosexual currently in Turkey, had behavioural therapy and was dosed with 'anti-depressive, anti-psychosis meds, SSRIs, ... strong medications.'

These conditions force many from Iran's sizable queer community to seek refuge in what they hoped would be safer countries.

Discrimination and violence in Turkey

Rather than finding safety however, many of our participants encountered discrimination and violence in their new locations, facing anti-refugee stigma and xenophobia as well as homophobia and transphobia. In Turkey, several of our participants suffered physical and verbal sexual harassment, abuse and rape, including in large, reputedly more progressive cities like Istanbul. Taha, a trans woman, complained that:

*[P]eople on the street spit at us when they see us!
In Turkey, I can't dress and live the way I want.
(...) I am forced to act this way in order to avoid*

physical violence, conflicts, or negative consequences from the people in this society.

Queer Iranian asylum applicants often experience intensified discrimination and isolation in Turkey, as there is no housing support and applicants typically end up in inadequate housing and subjected to hate crimes and sexual violence. Applicants are also often forced to live in rural areas, far from other queer individuals and the support of SOGIESC organizations based in cities. Taha, a trans woman, told us that:

When we try to rent a house, when they realize that we are transgender or LGBTQ+, they refuse to provide us with housing. They look at us with great disdain. They say, “You are selling your body! You do such and such things!” It is truly painful when they accuse us of selling our bodies, while they only see us through a sexual lens. (...) This has happened numerous times

Hannah, a trans woman, told us about being charged exploitative rents and being sexually harassed by landlords.

Amir, a gay man, experienced homelessness and physical assaults when sleeping on park benches.

Refugees do not have formal access to the labour market in Turkey, which severely curtails their livelihoods in Turkey. Working in the informal economy – often in combination with violating the limitations on free movement in order to work in a neighbouring town – may lead to deportation from the country, but refugees still do it for the sake of making a living. This puts all refugees, including queer Iranian refugees, in very precarious situations. Farhan, a nonbinary homosexual, explained this:

I have worked informally, also not being paid, and I have seen such behaviours, merely because they are Turks and I am not, and they know I cannot do anything about it. The guy comes every day to touch my crotch [...]. And if you went to do something [complain] about them, they would respond in a way and would turn your life into such hell that you would wish you

hadn't done anything about it and that you should have even let them do whatever they wanted with you.

Taha, a trans woman, told us that

[I]n many places where I had a job and a position, when they found out that I am LGBTQ+, they fired and humiliated me, and, in some cases, I even faced physical violence.

Access to adequate medical and psychological care in Turkey for queer asylum applicants and migrants is often hindered by their invisibility within the system, social isolation, and discrimination. This increases the likelihood of mental health problems, which can negatively impact their asylum and resettlement claims. Ali, a gay man, had been waiting for 6.5 years for resettlement while suffering from a debilitating joint-and-bone disease and serious dental problems.

Several of our participants suffered from serious health issues, such as insomnia, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder. Some of our participants were HIV-positive – like Amir and Taha – needing regular medication, only affordable through health insurance, which refugees are unlikely to have.

This is only a snapshot from our submission to the UN Independent Expert. While his thematic report is not expected imminently, we are hopeful that it will recognize and address some of the factors we have identified, leading to improvements that will be of benefit to all queer Iranians in exile and all SOGIESC refugees as well.

Acknowledgment: *The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged (Grant Ref: ES/V017497/1).*

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