

Muslim LGBTQI+ refugees more likely to gain asylum in Germany if they conform to stereotypes, study

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LGBTQI+ Muslims seeking asylum are more successful if they speak, dress and act in accordance with Western notions of homosexuality, according to a new study.

The study, published in the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, found that LGBTQI+ [asylum](#) applicants reported they were often expected to be "flamboyant" and "outspoken" in their asylum interview, and that overall, asylum seekers were more successful if they could prove their 'gayness' by being involved in gay/queer activism in their country of origin, visiting gay bars, being members of lesbian and gay groups and attending gay pride marches.

For the study, Dr. Mengia Tschalaer, an anthropologist at the University of Bristol interviewed 15 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) refugees and asylum seekers from Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, Iran and Pakistan. She also talked to asylum lawyers and judges from Berlin and Cologne, as well as representatives of LGBTQI+ refugee counselling centers in Cologne, Munich, Heidelberg and Mannheim.

She found that the vast majority of successful applicants were from middle to upper-class backgrounds, were assigned male at birth and had been actively involved in gay/queer activism in their country of origin.

Along with class and educational background, membership of LGBTQI+

organisations and access to local queer and gay refugee organisations in Germany were the most important factors in securing a successful asylum claim.

"In order to gain asylum, asylum seekers must convince officials of their permanent identity as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'trans', 'bi', and/or 'intersex', says Dr. Tschalaer. "They also need to demonstrate that their sexual and gender identity has led to them being persecuted in their home country."

"My research showed that most successful applicants were very well informed about what is expected from them at the asylum interview—which was for their asylum story to align with Western notions of queer/gay lifestyles, i.e frequent visits to gay discos and parties, public display of love and affection, wearing rainbow-coded clothing etc."

In addition, and despite efforts to render the asylum process safer for LGBTQI+ individuals, it was reported there were still incidences where asylum seekers were expected to answer questions about their sex life during their asylum interview—despite this being against EU law—and some interviewees stated they felt judged on their clothing, or how they acted in the interview.

The study also found that people who were more open about their sexuality and gender identity in their country of origin as well as the country of arrival were much more likely to be granted asylum, in part because they were more likely to seek out LGBTQI+ refugee organisations in Germany and receive support for the preparation of their asylum interview.

However, people who were not 'out' at the time of their interview, or who found it difficult to speak about their sexuality due to fear of persecution, stigma or shame felt marginalised.

"LGBTQI+ asylum seekers who felt forced to hide their sexuality and/or [gender identity](#), and who felt uncomfortable talking about it were usually rejected, as were those who were married or had children in their countries of origin. This was either because they were not recognised or believed as being LGBTQI+, or because they were told to hide in their country of origin since they had not come out yet," says Dr. Tschalaer.

"Quite a few of my interviewees also mentioned that they felt that their translator held a homo-/transphobic attitude or did not translate properly due to their lack of knowledge of gay/queer/trans issues. For example, one Somalian man said that his fear and shame of coming out as gay—coupled with his translator's known negative attitudes toward homosexuals—stopped him from being able to talk openly about his sexuality, leading to the rejection of his asylum claim."

The study also found that asylum applicants who portrayed Germany as a liberal, tolerant country free of discrimination, while portraying their Muslim countries of origin as homophobic and morally 'backwards' were more likely to receive refugee protection. While Germany, and Europe more generally are traditionally seen as a safe havens for LGBTQI+ refugees compared to many majority Muslim countries—where homosexuality is illegal—there is a concern that the narratives and stereotypes perpetuated by the German asylum system may serve right-wing discourses on immigration in Germany.

According to Tschalaer, the findings suggest that more needs to be done to ensure that all Muslim LGBTQI individuals enjoy the same right to asylum.

"We need to train decision makers, judges and translators around the topic of LGBTQI+ so that they are more knowledgeable about LGBTQI+ identities and sexualities, and so as not to reproduce Islamophobic tendencies in the current immigration practices and

debates in Germany." says Tschalaer.

"Access to legal resources and support for LGBTQI+ also needs to be streamlined, as LGBTQI+ [asylum seekers](#) who had access to information on the asylum process in Germany were much more successful."

More information: Mengia Tschalaer, *Between queer liberalisms and Muslim masculinities: LGBTQI+ Muslim asylum assessment in Germany*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1640378](#)

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