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Learning to be gay

LGBTQ forced migrant identities and narratives in Belgium

Within the wider population of forced migrants, LGBTQs face particular challenges. While sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) are recognised grounds for asylum, academic and civil society observers are critical of the imposition of Western identity labels and liberation narratives on asylum seekers. This paper explores the situation in Belgium, where an increasing number of people obtain asylum based on SOGI claims. First, the relevant regulations and practices are discussed, based on desk research as well as interviews with advocates. Second, the personal experiences of forced migrants are discussed, based on in-depth interviews with gay-identifying men. The advocates confirm the prominence of (Western) conceptions and narratives of sexual identity in the procedure. While the forced migrants seem to reinforce this view, by expressing Western views on sexuality in the research interview, this paper explores the degree to which this can be attributed to the asylum procedure.

Keywords: LGBTQ; refugee; asylum; sexual identity; homonationalism

In the wake of the so-called refugee crisis, most media and government attention in Europe goes to the large groups of Syrian and other refugees escaping violent conflict (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). However, the population of forced migrants is very diverse, not only as to country of origin but also in terms of gender, age, class and motivation for migration. On one level, their problems and needs are similar, including security, food and housing (Gillespie et al., 2016). Beyond that, they face a variety of challenges, which for some includes discrimination and persecution, for political or other reasons. One such group are sexual and gender minorities, whose motivation to migrate is often (partly) related to stigmatisation, which complicates their journey as getting away from the home country does not necessarily entail

getting away from discrimination (Lee & Brotman, 2011). At the same time, their sexual and gender identity may offer a legitimate way out, as it is a ground for asylum (Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011).

Over the past years, an increasing number of people have applied for, and obtained, asylum in Belgium based on their sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). Belgium is recognised as one of the European countries where sexual and gender minorities are best protected, and where authorities are inclined to accept asylum applications invoking fear of persecution on account of sexual orientation or gender identity (European Migration Network, 2016). However, while comparatively beneficial, the situation is far from perfect, as both applicants and adjudicators are faced with manifold problems. This paper aims to explore these from two perspectives. On the one hand, the relevant regulations and practices are discussed, based on desk research as well as interviews with six people involved with associations working on and/or for LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) forced migrants. On the other hand, the personal experiences of forced migrants are discussed, based on eight in-depth interviews with gay-identifying men. While the overarching discussion deals with the broader group of LGBTQs and will use that inclusive umbrella term, the empirical research focuses on gay-identifying men and will use the term ‘gay (men)’ to avoid unjustified generalisation. Similarly, ‘gender identity’, while an element in the SOGI procedure, will only be discussed in relation to sexual orientation, which is the key focus of this paper. While gender identity and sexual orientation are related, it is important not to conflate them, in particular as transgender people are the object of other discourses on gender dysphoria as pathology (Jordan, 2011).

The aims of this paper are threefold. First, it aims to contribute to the international literature on these topics by adding insights from Belgium, a country that has not been academically discussed to date. Second, it aims to explore the telling, and assessing, of narratives about sexual identity within the asylum procedure. What are ‘good’ and ‘credible’ narratives? And to which degree are such narratives and identity models stimulated, or even imposed, through the asylum procedure? Third, by analysing the narratives of people in different stages of the procedure, it aims to address the actual role of the procedure. While using the overarching term ‘forced migrants’ to refer to all participants, I will use the term ‘(undocumented) migrant’ to refer to those who were not (yet) in the asylum procedure at the time of the interview; ‘asylum seeker’ for those who had initiated the procedure; and ‘(recognised) refugee’ for those who had obtained asylum (UNHCR, 2016).

Discourses about LGBTQ migrants

This paper is situated at the intersection between research on sexuality and on migration. Fortier (2002) calls this field ‘queer diaspora’ research, stressing the need to both reconsider heterosexist norms underlying definitions of ethnic diasporas, and to explore transnational connections within queer communities. Luibhéid (2008) makes a similar point, criticizing the overarching assumption that migrants are heterosexuals while queers are citizens, calling for ‘queer migration research’. As part of this broader field of queer diaspora and migration research, this paper aims to explore how sexuality is implicated in, and complicates, the migration process.

In the literature on LGBTQ migration, a key point of criticism concerns the way Western sexual concepts and norms are both imposed on migrants from the Global South, and discursively opposed to non-Western cultures. Luibhéid (2005),

working in the American context, calls for increased attention to the ways immigration control regulates sexuality and reproduces oppressive sexual norms. She is also critical of the overarching narrative of movement from repression to freedom, of a heroic journey in search of liberation, which reinscribes nationalist myths of the US as a land of freedom and democracy while erasing racial, gender, class, cultural and language barriers confronting migrants. This critique evokes Puar's (2007) notion of 'homonationalism', the tendency to present a narrative of progress for gay rights, built on the back of racialized others. In her 2013 reflection on the topic, Puar writes:

The gay and lesbian human rights industry continues to proliferate Euro-American constructs of identity (not to mention the notion of sexual identity itself) that privilege identity politics, 'coming out', public visibility, and legislative measures as the dominant barometers of social progress. (Puar, 2013: p. 338)¹

Puar's influential notion of homonationalism builds upon a number of earlier analyses, including Massad's (2002) critique of the 'Gay International', the international gay movement which sees it as its mission to liberate non-Western (in particular Arab and Muslim) practitioners of same-sex contact from oppression, in the process transforming them to 'gays' and 'lesbians' by imposing these labels on them.

Focusing more specifically on forced migration, Manalansan (2006) states that the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity as a reason to grant asylum led to the demonization of the applicants' home countries as well as the export of sexual identity labels, setting up a hierarchical East-West dichotomy. Based on his analysis of migration narratives, Murray (2014) detects the same tendencies: on the one hand the predominant 'migration to liberation nation' narrative, in which the country of

origin is presented as anti-gay and the country of arrival (in this case Canada) as a safe haven; and on the other hand an essentialist linear path of sexual identity development, from closeted to out. As a consequence, doing research on LGBTQ refugees from a Western perspective presents a number of challenges, as summarised by Jordan (2011):

how to write about persecution without othering cultures or countries as monolithically homophobic; how to write about the shifts and realignments in identity that occur with migration, without reproducing a transnational version of the coming out story; how to ensure access to refugee protection for those facing homophobic or transphobic persecution, without reifying Western identity categories; how to represent the traumas that occur under persecution and precarious migration without fuelling a politics of rescue. (pp. 179-180)

Murray (2011) takes a closer look at the asylum application process, arguing that applicants have to learn the terms through which they are defined within the refugee system and to identify with ‘an authentic LGBT self-identity’:

For the refugee, this is an essentialist form of socio-sexual identity that is associated with a normative Euro-American sexual identity formation, that is, a staged model of sexual identity development applied to one of 4 sexual identity categories (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender). (p. 132)

This ‘learning’ is of crucial importance because a credible personal narrative is the key element in asylum applications invoking persecution because of sexual

orientation. As Berg and Millbank (2009) meticulously explain, applicants have to narrate a convincing story following a linear, staged identity model. Besides being essentialist and culturally specific, this expectation is hard to meet for a number of other reasons: the applicants' reluctance to reveal membership of a stigmatized group; internalised concealment and avoidance strategies; the difficulty in addressing sexuality because of trauma, shame, depression or memory problems; the difficulty in discussing sexual assault; and problematic assumptions in relation to sexual experiences and the ability of the claimant to discuss those.

Other researchers analysing LGBTQ refugee narratives confirm these problems, while adding other ones. For instance, based on participant observation and interviews in Canada, Jordan (2011) notes the difficulty for applicants in discussing sexuality because of dominant discourses of sin, deviance and pathology, and the ensuing shame; the difficulty in making a claim based on sexuality to an anonymous border officer, coming from a situation where officials are the people to fear; essentialist, Western conceptions and assumptions about stable sexual identities among immigration and refugee board members; and expectations about participation in the LGBT community, or certain sexual behaviour. Equally discussing the Canadian situation, Lee and Brotman (2011) add gender expectations to the list of factors complicating the adjudication of applications, gender conforming (e.g. masculine gay men) applicants more often being met with disbelief. Reviewing the European situation, Jansen and Spijkerboer (2011) also note the reliance on gender and sexuality stereotypes in the assessment of asylum applications, adding a long list of other recurrent problems, including the abovementioned difficulty in assessing the credibility of a claim, and the problem of 'late disclosure' of one's sexuality because of shame.

Overall, working across different national contexts with differing legislations, the authors discussed above come to similar conclusions: Western sexual concepts and norms permeate discourses and practices concerning LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers, setting up a divide between gay-friendly Western countries and homophobic non-Western countries, which refugees can only cross by adapting Western-style identities and narratives. Belgium has not been discussed in this context so far, so a first objective of this paper is to explore whether Belgium fits within this wider context or presents culturally specific variations. Secondly, the paper aims to further explore the mechanics behind these narratives: how and why are they created, repeated and stimulated?

Methodology

This paper will consider these issues from two perspectives. Firstly, the national and institutional context is discussed, drawing on desk research as well as interviews with professionals working in this field. As part of a broader project on LGBTQ migrants, I interviewed six people involved with associations working for and/or with LGBT refugees. At the time of the interviews, in the Autumn of 2013, they were involved with LGBTQ refugees at different levels: Joel Le Déroff was working for ILGA Europe (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), with a focus on asylum; Kenneth Mills was working for Çavaria, the Flemish umbrella body of LGBTQ associations; Jan Beddeleem was the coordinator of Merhaba, a Brussels-based association for LGBTQ people with a migration background; Bart Hermans both worked for Fedasil, at an asylum centre, and organised True Colours Café, a Hasselt-based initiative for LGBTQs with a migration background; and both Albéric Akiteretse and Christian Pratt were recognised refugees and respectively president

and vice-president of Why Me, an Antwerp-based association for LGBTQ asylum seekers.

Secondly, the personal experiences of refugees are discussed, based on eight in-depth interviews with gay-identifying refugees from a variety of countries. These interviews were conducted in the language the interviewees were most comfortable with, either Dutch or French (two of the Belgian official languages) or English. The participants were recruited through a broad call for participation, mainly on social media, and by contacting organisations working with LGBTQ migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. All interviewees were male and cisgender, despite my attempts to reach a variety of participants in terms of gender. This reflects the predominance of male participants in associations geared towards LGBTQ migrants in Belgium, such as Why Me. Jordan (2011) notes a similar predominance of men in the association she studied and attributes this to social and legal sanctions against independent travel by women as opposed to access to education and mobility for men. Jansen and Spijkerboer (2011) confirm the predominance of gay men and the invisibility of LGBTI refugees, who seem less inclined to apply for asylum on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

All the men I interviewed felt they had to escape their country of origin partly or mainly because of their sexual orientation. They came from different countries (alphabetically: Burundi, Russia, Iraq, Morocco (2), Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone), which implies cultural differences which are beyond the scope of this paper. In one respect, however, these countries are similar: all, to different degrees, criminalise homosexuality, and all participants experienced problems related to their sexual orientation. At the time of interview, four (from Burundi, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Russia) had been granted asylum based on SOGI claims, and will be called

‘recognised refugees’ in this paper. One (from Senegal) was in the asylum procedure, invoking SOGI claims, and will be called ‘asylum seeker’. Three others (two from Morocco, and one from Iraq) had not obtained asylum nor applied for it (for reasons they didn’t disclose to me) at the time of interview; they will be described as ‘undocumented immigrants’. Economically and legally speaking, the recognised refugees were relatively secure, having a job or receiving a state allowance; the asylum seeker similarly got financial support, but his future was insecure; and the undocumented migrants lived in precarious conditions, all working on the informal job market.

The interviews with refugees were part of a larger project focusing on sexual and ethno-cultural identification and media use among LGBTQ migrants in Belgium. Refugees proved to be the hardest group to reach, which is related to the delicate nature of sexuality as a continued (potential) source of discrimination in Belgium, as will be discussed below. Due to their often traumatic experiences and precarious living conditions, the interviews were conducted with the greatest caution, in the location each participant felt most comfortable in and repeatedly checking what they were willing and able to talk about. As a consequence, the information gathered about their escape from prosecution and asylum procedure is limited to what participants brought up themselves. However, because of this, it is possible to analyse how certain narratives and arguments came up spontaneously, which is what I will focus on here. All participants signed an informed consent form, and their names were changed to other names in common use in their country of origin. Only the asylum seeker, Moustapha, did not want his interview to be recorded, so his account is based on field notes.

Before discussing the results, a note on power. As in any interview, as a researcher I occupied a relatively powerful position, being able to both ask questions and subsequently interpret the responses. As a gay male researcher, sharing the respondents' gender and sexual identification, I was able to bridge some of that divide, which however was exacerbated by my privileged position as a white, middle class person without a migration background and with a secure legal position in Belgium. While being aware of this imbalance, and trying to counterbalance it by creating an open, equal conversation where I took the position of the uninformed, interested outsider, I could not completely eliminate the power inequality. In the interviews and subsequent analysis, my main aim was to give a voice to the interviewees, but the power imbalance remains an issue, as will be discussed below.

Institutional context and the views of advocates

Belgium is a Western European country where sexual and gender minorities are strongly protected. For instance, it was relatively quick to pass antidiscrimination legislation and to allow gay marriage and adoption (Borghs & Eeckhout, 2007). At the time of writing, in 2017, Belgium ranks fourth on ILGA Europe's Rainbow map,² even if instances of discrimination continue to occur. Belgian asylum authorities are also inclined to accept SOGI claims invoking fear of persecution on account of sexual orientation or gender identity. In this paper, I will focus mostly on sexual orientation, as none of my interviewees invoked gender identity in their asylum application nor mentioned it as their reason for migrating.

Refugees constitute a specific group of (forced) migrants, defined by the United Nations as any person who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or

political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (UNHCR, 2010, art 1). In subsequent qualifications of the original 1951 refugee convention, gender and sexual minorities were increasingly accepted as social groups with a risk of persecution, in particular through a European Directive from 2011, stating:

For the purposes of defining a particular social group, issues arising from an applicant's gender, including gender identity and sexual orientation, which may be related to certain legal traditions and customs (...), should be given due consideration in so far as they are related to the applicant's well-founded fear of persecution. (European Union, 2011)

This directive was adopted into Belgian law in 2013 but SOGI applications were already accepted well before that time, their number rising steeply from 188 in 2007 to 1059 in 2012. That year, 21% of SOGI applicants (222) were granted asylum (Addae, 2013), which is higher than the overall recognition rate of 15.4% (Van den Broucke et al., 2015). This proportion rose to 34% (289 of 840) in 2014 and 39% (236 of 609) in 2015 (De Roover, 2016a). However, it should be noted that the overall recognition rate also rose, to 36.6% in 2014 (Van den Broucke et al., 2015) and even 58.9% in 2015, mostly because of the violent contexts many applicants escaped from, in particular Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq (CGVS, 2016). These numbers are hard to compare internationally, as Belgium is one of the only countries in the EU to systematically register the reason for the asylum application, including SOGI claims, but Belgium does have a relatively good reputation in dealing with SOGI claims (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; European Migration Network, 2016),

Despite the relatively high recognition rates, the Belgian situation for LGBTQ asylum seekers and refugees is not without its problems. Applications are assessed by a politically independent administration, CGVS (Commissariaat-Generaal voor de Vluchtelingen en Staatlozen). The key element in the assessment of SOGI claims is the credibility of sexual orientation or gender identity on the one hand and persecution on the other. In a report based on an analysis of negative CGVS decisions, Addae (2013) comes to a number of conclusions echoing the international literature discussed above. To assess sexual orientation, she states, the CGVS uses problematic, Western presuppositions about gay relationships, the discovery and experience of sexual orientation, participation in the gay scene, and the expression of sexuality in private and public settings. However, in a more recent interview Sophie Van Balberghe, deputy commissioner at CGVS, refutes these accusations and states that their protection officers are specifically trained and do all they can to avoid stereotypical questions while at the same time aiming to detect fraudulent SOGI claims (De Roover, 2016b).

Many of the problems identified in the international literature were confirmed by the advocates interviewed for this project. In his interview on 18 November 2013, Le Déroff explained how asylum granting authorities want to assess the credibility of SOGI applications like other applications, where there is a public and visible motivation such as an armed conflict, so they ask for proof that the applicant is really gay, which to Le Déroff is not the right question because one can also be persecuted without being gay. Similarly, the presence of anti-LGBTQ legislation supports SOGI applications, but its absence does not mean there is no repression. In their 2011 paper Beddeleem and Mills, who were also interviewed for this project, discussed the difficulty of assessing the credibility of LGBTQ asylum applications. They stated that

the ‘well founded fear’ of being persecuted is hard to document, as is sexual orientation. As a consequence, these claims are assessed based on certain presuppositions about what it means to be homosexual, as well as the coherence and sense for detail of the narrative, which are not necessarily good indicators of the soundness of claims. Beddeleem and Mills did comment on the goodwill of the CGVS and increased training of its officers, but at the same time they noted the absence of a comprehensive manual on how to assess the credibility of SOGI applications.

In his interview on 18 September 2013, Mills reconfirmed these problems, adding that in his experience, the applicants who are rejected are either not believed to be in danger, or not to be gay because they have not had a relationship with a man before coming to Belgium (or at least: are not able to tell a coherent, detailed story about it). Hermans, in his interview on 19 November 2013, also addressed the delicate nature of the asylum interview, where applicants hesitate to discuss such private issues as their sexuality in front of a Belgian stranger and particularly an interpreter from their own culture, who they suspect to be homophobic and who may not (want to) translate correctly:

I have also tried to explain that to the CGVS. I said: ‘Don’t forget that those people may have only come out the week before or the day itself, coming from such a culture. They are sitting there in front of you, with an interpreter from their own culture, don’t underestimate that.’

The academic literature discussed above criticized the application of Western concepts and assumptions about same-sex sexuality in the asylum procedure. Le Déroff agreed, arguing against assumptions of closed and fixed categories and the

tendency in legal contexts to follow majority views in society, which in Europe is the gay/straight binary:

If you come from elsewhere and you don't necessarily have this idea that there's gays and straight people, you will have a hard time. I think that's what's at stake in training, to make people who treat asylum applications understand that realities are different, also in Europe but even more so elsewhere, so they can't ask questions like 'Do you often go to a gay bar?', in particular to someone who just arrived from a country where there are no gay bars.

Mills also commented on the imposition of Western terms such as 'homosexual', which often have very negative connotations in the applicants' home countries so they are reluctant to use these terms, but at the same time the procedure forces them to take up this identity:

Even if they come from a country where they consider themselves to be part of a certain subculture but do not want to call themselves homosexual, they suddenly arrive here where homosexuality coincides with a similar but not identical subculture. And then they are actually forced to adopt that label.

Similarly, they are encouraged – if not forced – to present themselves as gay and to come out within the asylum procedure. Mills argued:

If you don't engage in associations, if you don't build up LGBT networks, that strongly affects your credibility. So those people are, so to speak, forced to march in the Pride parade and to do their coming

out, at the risk that it gets known in their asylum centre, purely for their file.

To Mills, the asylum procedure clearly affects applicants' visibility management, which actually makes it harder for them to return. Hermans confirmed this view:

I have known people who, before their interview, participate in the Pride march, enormously visibly, really standing out, so that they can use the media, to say: 'Look, my picture has appeared on the Pride website, now I can't return'.

In a similar vein, Hermans noted an expectation of non-conform gender appearance in gay men, so that feminine men have a stronger chance of getting asylum:

Sometimes I see it the day someone enters the asylum centre, I know I will have a talk with him the week after and I know he is going to get a positive result, just by the way he looks. But if a very sturdy guy walks in and tells the same story...

This echoes the stereotypical gender expectations discussed above (Lee and Brotman, 2011; Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011) and is particularly problematic as many refugees come from countries where homosexuality and effeminacy are so stigmatized that men prefer to assume a hyper-masculine role (Bhana et al., 2007).

Taken together, the interviews with advocates suggest that the Belgium situation for LGBTQ refugees is rather similar to the one discussed in international literature: if they want to apply for asylum based on a SOGI claim, asylum applicants have to present clear, 'Western' sexual identities and tell recognisable narratives

about self-realisation and coming out. Of course, not all sexual minority refugees choose or manage to (successfully) apply for asylum, and in the next section the different experiences and narratives of undocumented immigrants, asylum applicants and recognised refugees will be discussed.

Forced migrant narratives

Throughout the interviews a number of discursive patterns and narratives could be identified, echoing the issues discussed in literature and by the advocates. At the beginning of the interview, to avoid imposing Western identity categories, all participants were asked how they self-identified in terms of sexuality. Interestingly, all used the terms ‘gay’ (in English), ‘homo’ (in Dutch) or ‘homosexuel’ (in French), all referring to the same ‘Western’, clearly delineated sexual identity category. All four recognised refugees and the asylum seeker were comfortable with these terms, also identifying with them, which is very much in line with Lee and Brotman’s (2011) conclusion that most of the men they interviewed self-identified as gay and male. Similarly, in this project refugee Alain from Burundi said: ‘I’m gay, one hundred per cent.’ When subsequently asked how long he had known this, he answered: ‘For a very long time, since I was a child.’ Not only did they unambiguously identify as gay, they also considered their sexual orientation as an important part of who they were. These participants tended to be out and proud, for instance refugee Samuel from Sierra Leone:

Q: And now, are you out to people? Is that important to you?

Samuel: Yeah. I never regretted being gay, I am still proud to be gay.

Belgium gives me the opportunity for me to live the way I want to live my life. So that makes me feel proud, I live my life the way I want to.

Q: How much do you feel gay? Is this very important to you?

Samuel: I feel it's very important, being gay. Being identified in the gay community and having a lot of contacts with the gay community makes me feel proud.

Not only did they consider their sexual orientation as quite an important part of who they were, it was also the reason why they came to Belgium in the first place, for instance refugee Peter from Nigeria:

Q: Is sexuality the reason why you moved to Belgium?

Peter: That's 100% why I moved. I didn't move here because of economic reasons, I know a lot of people do that. But I moved because I know there's a future here for me. (...) For me, I moved because I knew there is a place like this for me, there's a place I can be able to live free as a gay person. I never lived with a man all my life, but this is the first time I'm starting to do it and I really feel happy, I feel like: ah, I think my dream is coming true.

Asylum seeker Moustapha presented a similar account about early realisations of being gay, repressing and not accepting it, feeling ashamed and forced to present in a very masculine way in order to avoid insults.

For the undocumented immigrants the situation was less clear-cut: while one, from Iraq, strongly identified as gay, two others, from Morocco, preferred to avoid the term. For instance, Ahmed noted on the negative connotations of the term in his home culture:

Q: Would you call yourself gay?

Ahmed: No, not this term, for us it's bad.

Q: So you wouldn't use that term in Moroccan?

Ahmed: No, just a man.

At the same time, he did use the term throughout the interview, also to refer to himself, so his use of the terminology was ambiguous, reflecting his own identification as he was only 'out' to a very restricted number of people, as well as the position of homosexuality in his home culture and cultural community in Belgium, where 'secrecy' is the core value:

Before law, if you're gay and you advertise yourself saying 'I'm gay' and you bring a man home, then the law in Morocco says you go to jail because the police will come. But there are many gay men in Morocco, but they do everything discretely. For sex, they go to the hammam, or a bar, for example in touristic cities.

Although the low number of interviews cautions against generalisation, it seems that the undocumented migrants identify less clearly and openly with Western identity categories, which is a first indication that the asylum procedure may have an impact on self-identifications – or, alternatively, that people clearly identifying as gay according to Western identity models have a better chance of obtaining asylum.

Despite this difference in sexual identification, all participants clearly opposed the situation in Belgium to that in their home country, contrasting a difficult 'before' (in their home country) to a much improved 'after' (in Belgium). All recounted how they started to realise, in childhood or adolescence, that they were attracted to men, as well as realising that this was wrong, sinful, or unnatural:

Samuel: The whole part of my adult life I had to keep things to myself.

It's difficult to live that way.

Q: From what age?

Samuel: From around the age of 15-16. I began to realise my sexuality.

I was strange among my peers, I did not have that much friends, so many things.

Q: Was it impossible to discuss this with anyone then?

Samuel: No, you cannot. Never. Because it is something you cannot be proud of, in my country, not like here. Saying it to someone is like selling your soul to the devil. You cannot predict what will happen next.

Samuel, like three other recognised refugees interviewed in this project, had to leave the country after being exposed:

I had to leave, because my life was in danger. My parents could not, especially my father, could not protect me. He is a very religious man and he has too much ego and he could not swallow his pride.

Discovering my sexuality wasn't comfortable with him. He acted before thinking.

Moreover, several recognised refugees were verbally and physically threatened for being involved in HIV and AIDS activism, which was one of the reasons they had to leave their country.

All refugees described their situation in Belgium as 'better', particularly the recognised refugees who obtained asylum. They appreciated the freedom and state

protection they enjoyed in Belgium, as 'out' gay men. The recognised refugees seemed to correspond to the ideal of the 'happy migrant', as discussed and criticised by Murray (2014), drawing on Sara Ahmed:

it is assumed that the LGBT/SOGI refugee is a happy migrant because they have arrived in a nation where sexual diversity is held aloft as a feature of a 'civilized' society, opposed to 'uncivilized' societies characterized by their rampant homophobia (p. 453).

According to Murray, this silences experiences of (among other things) homophobia and racism. However, when asked about homophobia in Belgium, the participants reported no or very limited bad experiences, with the exception of people from their home country, culture or religion. For instance, Mounir from Iraq (an undocumented migrant) mostly got hostile reactions from his Iraqi neighbour. This is very much in line with Lee and Rotman's (2011) findings:

All of the sexual minority refugees we interviewed reflected upon their fears of exposure to and actual experiences of homophobia/transphobia from members of their particular racialized community, resulting in complex psychological and emotional responses. (p. 259)

The recognised refugees also tended to be positive towards the Pride parade, which reflects their 'out and proud' attitude towards their sexual orientation. For instance, Peter from Nigeria said: 'For me, the gay pride is nice. I mean, it's a day set aside to celebrate gay people. It's a very nice day.' Some participants, in particular the undocumented immigrants, were more negative about the event, which is in line with

their greater secrecy about their sexual orientation and may be yet another indication of their greater resistance to Western sexual identity models.

When asked about racism, which they (as brown or black men in a predominantly white country) could be confronted with in Belgium, the verdict among both groups was predominantly positive. The gay men interviewed for this project had limited experience of outright racism in Belgium, but they did comment that it was hard to integrate, partly because they found Belgians not to be very open and open-minded. Peter, a recognised refugee from Nigeria, did recount arousing a lot of suspicion, for instance in shops or restaurants.

Peter: But in restaurants, that's where you find, they can be snobbish a little bit, they want to know....(...) Often when I go to the restaurant with my partner, I like... Especially this posh restaurant, there is this attention like: who is this? I get that all the time.

Q: So that's an environment where you are perceived as very different?

Peter: That's where I am perceived to be black. Aside that, I never perceive myself to be black, but the restaurant, that's where you see: who is this, who is bringing him to this restaurant?

Beside these more gentle forms of xenophobia, none of the participants reported on experiences of blatant racism, all instead focusing on the degree of freedom they experienced as gay men in Belgium.

Discussion and conclusion

A first objective of this paper was to add the Belgian case to the discussion on LGBTQ migrants and asylum. As the analysis shows, despite its relatively good

reputation in relation to SOGI applications, the Belgian asylum procedure does present many of the shortcomings identified in other Western countries, as the assessment of SOGI claims is equally based on problematic, Western assumptions and expectations.

Secondly, the paper further explored the telling, and assessing, of narratives about sexual identity within the asylum procedure. Confronting the interviews with Belgian advocates and gay forced migrants with the international literature on the topic, many parallels emerged. The advocates generally confirmed international findings, as they commented on the difficulty of assessing the credibility of applications, which should document a well-founded fear for prosecution and belonging to social group of people with a stigmatized sexual or gender identity. In the process, Western conceptions of sexual and identity are used, which leads to unjustified rejections and stimulates the performance of particular identities on behalf of the asylum seekers.

The interviews with the forced migrants also confirmed a number of tendencies noted in the literature review, as they tended to be mostly male, identify as gay, and their narratives, particularly those of the recognised refugees, confirmed the image of the 'happy migrant'. They unanimously opposed their homophobic home countries to the gay-friendly atmosphere in Belgium, in the process replicating a narrative that has been criticised in academic literature as being 'homonationalist', when uttered by Western politicians and activists. Similarly, the recognised refugees in particular eagerly embraced and identified with Western identity labels.

Thirdly, by also studying undocumented migrants, the paper aimed to pinpoint the role of the asylum procedure in stimulating and replicating these identities and narratives. On the one hand, the key role of the procedure seems to be confirmed as

the undocumented migrants identify less with Western identity models, which suggests that these identity models are imposed in the asylum procedure, as many of the advocates state. However, the undocumented migrants do replicate liberation narratives opposing the sexually liberated West with their homophobic home countries, which questions the (sole) attribution of this narrative to the asylum procedure, and by extension the key role of the asylum procedure in imposing Western identities and narratives.

Knowing the ‘right’ terminology, identifying with Western identity and gender categories, and telling a clear and coherent narrative are indeed important aspects of the asylum procedure. As a consequence, the recognised refugees, in particular, may have successfully interiorised these identity models and narratives, as part of their ‘learning process’ during the asylum application. However, based on their own accounts, it seems that the successful applicants participating in this research were actually identifying as gay well before they left their country. They may have refined their self-presentation and narrative during the asylum procedure and replicated those in the research interview, but these do not seem to be purely external or imposed. Put differently: it may also be that those who most clearly identified as gay before coming to Belgium, and whose experiences most closely matched the expectations of the adjudicators, were granted asylum.

Moreover, qualifying these identities and narratives as purely ‘Western’ is problematic, as gay identity models have been globally spread for a while now and have entered into dialogue with local cultural models of sexuality across the world. As a consequence, identifying as ‘gay’ does not necessarily imply the wholesale adoption of Western identity models. Similarly, the participants’ narratives about Belgium as a great country to be gay should not simply be dismissed as a replication

of a hegemonic, homonationalist discourse; rather, they express lived realities which should be valued rather than condemned for their parallels with Western narratives which – indeed – reappropriate them and use them to claim the moral high ground. All of this is not to diminish the – indeed problematical – forces at work during the asylum procedure, but to contextualise them as part of broader internationally circulating discourses about sexuality and identity.

In part, the narratives of the interviewees may also be influenced by the method used, as the research interview to some degree resembles the asylum interview, also asking questions in such a way as to evoke a chronological account of sexual discovery, gradual self-expression, and migration, as equally noted by Murray (2014). Furthermore, the research interview may replicate the power relations as well as expectations operating in the asylum interview, for in both cases a white person as a figure of authority assesses the credibility of the refugee's story. Murray (2014) comes to a similar conclusion when his research participants made statements resonating with the hegemonic narrative, 'which may have been due in part to my presence as a white North American gay identified cis-male academic asking questions that the interviewee might imagine to be similar to what is asked by the IRB [Immigration and Refugee Board] adjudicator at their hearing, and in part to their knowledge that replicating the hegemonic narrative is an important component of the model refugee identity that is circulated in media and stories about successful refugee claim hearings.' (pp. 465-466)

This methodological note brings me back to some of the issues raised before: not only is the interview format unescapably tainted by power imbalances, the low numbers of participants discussed here also warrants against broad generalisation. However, the interviews do contain elements that question the key role attributed to

the asylum interview in the replication of identity models and narratives, suggesting that Western identity models are globalised beyond this particular context. Further research comparing more forced migrants before, during and after the asylum procedure is needed to corroborate these findings.

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¹ For parallels in the Dutch context, see Jivrai and de Jong (2011) and Mepschen and Duyvendak (2012).

² See <http://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking>