

# **Parallel discursive arenas and LGBT Asylum: enhancing the protection of LGBT+ people on the run outside of Europe**

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## **Abstract**

More than 70 countries in the world criminalize same-sex sexual activity or the “promotion” of such activity (ILGA, 2017, as cited in Vitikainen, 2020, p. 64). Beyond criminalization, LGBT+ people across the world are subject to stigma and other disadvantages and dangers (Vitikainen, 2020, p. 64) that might force them to flee and seek protection as “refugees” in a different country. However, discourses of “crisis” that are often used when addressing humanitarian emergencies, such as the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, might conceal the diversity of displaced populations and the specific needs of different categories of refugees, including LGBT+ refugees.

This essay discusses the problems of the “crisis” vocabulary and the potential of the categorization of “LGBT+ refugees” to recognize the specifics of their plight and develop humanitarian responses better adapted to their needs. Furthermore, it presents the example of a workshop which can be considered as a “parallel discursive arena” where students and professionals working with refugees could reflect on the identities, interests, and needs of LGBT+ refugees and work towards rights-based humanitarian strategies to tackle the challenges faced by LGBT+ people on the run outside of Europe.

## **The “crisis” vocabulary and the “refugee” label**

At the beginning of 2015, the increase in the number of migrants entering Europe was commonly referred to as “refugee crisis” in the media, political debates, and even in scientific output (Krzyżanowski et al. 2018; d’Haenens et al. 2019; Betts and Collier, 2017, as cited in Rea et al. 2019, p. 16) in the context of apocalyptic statements about an exodus described as “unprecedented” (Rea et al., p. 17). The “crisis” framing has been linked to “securitization” practices (Neal, 2009, p. 352) which allow for the implementation of “exceptional politics of speed and enemy exclusion” (Aradau, 2004, p. 388). In the case of the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, this logic of exception and emergency contributed to the creation of moral panic and the perception of migrants as threats (Rea et al., p. 17).

On the other hand, it has been argued that security approaches have an attention-catching potential that might contribute to the mobilization of more political support and economic resources to address humanitarian emergencies (Aradau, 2004, p. 394). This could be seen as an advantage in terms of managing situations deemed as “emergencies” and considering the way it connects the urgency of a “crisis” with a sense of moral obligation (Nyers, 2006, p. 4). In this vein, some scholars have re-named the 2015 migration flow as a “refugee protection crisis” (Orchard 2014, p. 33), a “refugee reception crisis” (Rea et al., p. 16) or a “crisis of European solidarity” (ibid, p. 19) in order to highlight the need of coherent and convergent policies to effectively manage migration in Europe.

However, the “crisis” vocabulary remains uncritical of the regulatory role of the “refugee” label, which differentiates between “citizens” (seen as the “proper” and “enduring” form of political identity), “refugees” (seen as a “temporary aberration to the norm” [Nyers, 2006, pp. 7-9] which disturbs the “national order of things” [Malkki, 1992, as cited in Nyers, 2006, p. 9]) and “economic migrants” (who are not considered to qualify for refugee status [Nyers, 2006, p. 13]). In addition to that, this type of discourse tends to promote a view of refugees as sharing a common humanity that masks their individuality as well as “the historical and political circumstances that forced them into this identity” (ibid, p. 16), and portrays them as “invisible, speechless, and non-political” in opposition to citizens with “visibility, agency, and rational speech” (ibid, p. 3).

## **The particularity and universality of LGBT+ refugees**

In a move of “emancipation” (Aradau, 2004, p. 402) from the general category of “refugee”, the categorization of “LGBT+ refugees” allows for a more situational and specific consideration of the complexity and polymorphism of forced displacement, while also invoking the universal right of “equality and non-discrimination” which “applies to all people, regardless of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity” (UN, 2017, p. 1). This is not to say that LGBT+ refugees are more deserving of protection than other refugees, but rather to recognize the specifics of their plight and argue for the development of more inclusive responses in accordance to their needs.

Refugees worldwide face common challenges, such as security, food and housing (Gillespie et al., 2016, as cited in Dhoest, 2019, p. 1075). In the case of LGBT+ refugees, these problems intersect with issues related to their sexual and gender identity, including stigma, criminalization, and structural injustice (Vitikainen, 2020, pp. 64-65). Even after achieving the official status of refugees and being guaranteed protection in a given host state, LGBT+ refugees might still face the disadvantages and systematic power imbalances associated with typically heteronormative societies (ibid, p. 69) in addition to potential harassment, violence and discrimination from families, other refugees, communities, and religious leaders (Alessi & Kahn, 2017, p. 23). In fact, it has been argued that the very same process of establishing the “genuineness” of LGBT+ asylum claims exposes LGBT+ refugees to often invasive methods (ranging from physically degrading, such as phallometric testing of physical arousal, to privacy-invasive interrogation and interviewing methods) which aim at “proving” their sexual or gender orientation in order to achieve the status of “deserving” refugees with a “well-founded fear of persecution” on the basis of “membership of a particular social group” (Vitikainen, 2020, p. 67).

## **A workshop to enhance the protection of LGBT+ people on the run outside of Europe**

In this context, the constitution of “subaltern counterpublics”, defined as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate

counterdiscourses”, represents a tool for LGBT+ refugees and their allies to “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67) and move towards a “rights-based humanitarianism” (Harrell-Bond, 2002, p. 52) that recognizes the agency, visibility and narrative authority of LGBT+ refugees.

An example of such parallel discursive arenas is the “Leave No One Behind: Migration Policy Lab” held in Aarhus (Denmark) on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021, and in Copenhagen (Denmark) on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021. These workshops were organized by LGBT Asylum, an NGO that “works for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in the Danish asylum system and for the rights of LGBT+ refugees in Denmark” (LGBT Asylum, 2022) and invited students from different disciplines and universities to “develop innovative strategies that would help to enhance the protection of LGBTQ+ people on the run outside of Europe and present them to a panel of experts” (LGBT Asylum, 2021).

The workshops started with presentations by academic professors (Jesper Lindholm in Aarhus and Marlene Spanger in Copenhagen) and NGO workers (Mads Ted-Drug Jensen, LGBT Asylum, in Aarhus; and Sigrid Bjerre Andersen, LGBT Asylum, and Rikke Enggaard Olsen, DRC, in Copenhagen). They presented some reflections on the situation of LGBT+ people on the run outside of Europe as well as some protection gaps identified by NGOs, which include collecting information about the specific needs of LGBT+ refugees in order to develop more inclusive responses and the development of social networks for LGBT+ refugees to rely on.

Additionally, “the students had the opportunity of watching an interview with Mohamad Sourity, a Syrian refugee in Denmark who talked about the challenges of being queer outside of Europe” (LGBT Asylum, 2021), and “ask him questions in order to gain more insights on his personal story as a queer refugee” (ibid). Finally, the “students watched a video about the Cameroon-based NGO ‘Working for our Wellbeing’ and a short movie by the director Anne Eline Friis-Rasmussen” (ibid).

Inspired by these presentations, the students began to think about strategies to tackle some of the challenges faced by LGBT+ refugees. While working cooperatively and engaging in various interactive activities, the students came up with different strategies. Regarding the gap on collecting information about the specific needs of LGBT+ refugees, the students thought about a possible educational program for humanitarian

staff working with LGBT+ refugees. In addition to that, other students focused on the development of social networks for LGBT+ refugees and thought about a potential mobile app for queer migrants to communicate with diaspora communities and an LGBT+ network to establish a local safe space for queer students. Additional strategies tackling other areas of intervention included the creation of a quota for LGBT+ refugees and a program with social media influencers that could advocate for the rights of LGBT refugees across the world. These ideas were presented to a panel of experts composed by academics, NGO workers and politicians, who discussed the strategies and provided feedback to the students.

In sum, these workshops, seen as a parallel discursive arena, served to move away from a vocabulary of “crisis”, “emergency” and “securitization” to focus on the particular category of LGBT+ refugees and the universality of their plight in terms of “equality and non-discrimination [...] regardless of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity” (UN, 2017, p. 1). Taking into consideration the interests and needs of LGBT+ refugees, it was possible for students to conceive of rights-based humanitarian strategies that could contribute to the protection of LGBT+ refugees and share these reflections with various professionals who can implement these considerations into their work with refugees.

## **Conclusion**

Questioning the vocabulary that we use is necessary if we want to be critical to ahistorical and de-politicized portrayals of refugees while avoiding “securitization” practices and “exceptional politics of speed and enemy exclusion” (Aradau, 2004, p. 388). In this sense, the constitution of parallel discursive arenas or “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67) allows for a reconsideration of the identities, interests, and needs of specific categories of refugees, such as LGBT+ refugees. The example of the workshops organized by LGBT Asylum shows the potential of such parallel discursive arenas to mobilize students and professionals working with refugees and move towards a rights-based humanitarianism that is more aware of the complexity and polymorphism of forced displacement.

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