Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in Frontline Migrant Support Services

CAN WE PLEASE
SET UP A SPACE FOR
US ALL TO SHARE OUR
RESOURCES?
- I'm sure others would help
run it. ❤️

Background to the Project

In May 2024, PhD students Aine Bennett, Vicky Gerrard, and Lizzie Hobbs, along with Julia Tinsley-Kent from Migrant's Rights Network, convened a workshop at the Feminist Library in London with staff and volunteers from frontline migration support services to explore their challenges and strategies in addressing issues related to gender and sexuality within the asylum-seeking, refugee, and migrant community. The session aimed to provide an informed space for participants to produce actionable steps towards better accommodating LGBTQ+ people in their services; mainstreaming a more nuanced understanding of gender throughout their services; and managing potential tensions that arise with the other pressures of service provision.

The session began with presentations about how asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants experience gender and sexuality – and how this affects their experiences of the support they receive. Aine Bennett shared her PhD research about the challenges of claiming asylum on the basis of different sexualities or gender identities. Lizzie Hobbs shared her PhD research on the relationship between gatekeeping, carcerality and masculinities in the migrant rights sector. Finally, Julia Tinsley-Kent from Migrants' Rights Network shared their experience on campaigning around gender, queerness and migration, and supporting the work of a variety of organisations in the sector. Participants were then invited to engage in a peer-to-peer discussion about how gender and sexuality is negotiated in their own organisations before developing workable strategies to make changes where needed. Vicky Gerrard guided the discussion by drawing on her PhD research about how service design shapes care relations, informed by her voluntary work with Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers.

The workshop was well attended, with tickets selling out in an afternoon and many people calling for a follow-up. In September 2024 we convened a second workshop at Pelican House, the home of Migrants' Rights Network. During this follow-up event we invited participants to collaborate with us to develop a resource to support service providers and users overcome some of their own challenges. We welcomed participation from staff and volunteers at migration support services, as well as migrants, refugees and people with experience seeking asylum. The workshop was guided by a series of questions to build off reflections from participants of the previous workshop and collectively develop a useful resource for service providers. Of particular interest to participants was to have a resource which could help them initiate a conversation about gender and sexuality in their own organisations. This small workbook is intended to support these discussions.

This Workbook

The booklet offers a summary of the discussions over the two workshops. This includes an overview of the challenges faced by service providers when negotiating gender and sexuality, as well as some direct quotes from participants. It also offers some activities to aid a guided discussion among colleagues to explore how the issues are experienced in your particular work and how any challenges might be overcome. We don't offer solutions as they will be different for different workplaces but we do offer some support to begin a potentially difficult conversation and develop confidence to build your own strategies to navigate gender and sexuality in your work.

A limited run of booklets will be printed, otherwise the workbook will be hosted on the Migrants' Rights Network website.

How to use it

We hope that frontline migration support services, particularly those that do not primarily focus on sexuality or gender in their work, will keep a copy of this workbook in their premises and/or circulate the digital copy.

It can be read by individuals who may want to think about whether the experiences in other organisations resonate with their own and how they might better respond to or preempt similar issues in their service. Colleagues may also wish to go through the workbook together and discuss the relevance of the issues to them and their work. The proposed activities may offer a more approachable way of starting conversations within organisations, including helping staff and volunteers to feel more equiped to deal with sensitive topics and as a way to frame conversations with service users about the type of support they might need.

How to practically facilitate these conversations at work?

i.e. guidance on how to structure a discussion, ensure its psychologically safe for everyone etc

kindof like a 'how to' guide

Finding the "Right" Words

A common obstacle to talking about gender and sexuality can be a lack of confidence with vocabulary or a fear of "saying the wrong thing". This isn't helped by the fact that language in this field is constantly evolving, has multiple meanings and can be used in culturally specific ways. In the context of migration, it's important to remember that much of the language we use, particularly in the UK, to talk about gender and sexuality is informed by binary, 'rational' and 'scientific' understandings that were formed in Enlightenment Europe and often rooted in Christianity. These understandings have since then been exported to much of the world through colonialism, often accompanied by the violent and coercive erasure of indigenous identities, genders, sexualities, ways of knowing, relationship models, communities, and family structures. The language that we use in the UK may therefore be insufficient or inaccurate to describe other people and their lives. Having said that, in the interest of providing a starting point, we do feel it is useful to offer some possible definitions of some key terms which are commonly used in the UK to inform the basis of a broader discussion.

Gender — The socially constructed characteristics and personal identities associated with the spectrum of masculinities and femininities

Sexuality/sexual orientation — A person's activities, feelings and/or identity related to attraction

Sex — A label given to a collection of physical characteristics such as genitals, chromosomes, and hormone levels. Sex is typically medically and socially assigned as either male or female, but some people do not fit this binary

We all have a gender and a sexuality and our relationship to those parts of our lives and identity can mean very different things to each of us. For example, some people argue that your sexual orientation has nothing to do with your gender, whereas others will feel that the way they express their gender is closely related to their sexuality. The LGBTQI+ acronym tries to capture these diverse identities and experiences.

LGBTQI+ — The acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex. The "+" indicates other identities can also be included.

Some terms which captures different experiences of gender and sexuality include:

Asexual/ace   Someone who experiences a lack of, occasional, or varying sexual attraction

Bisexual/bi   Someone who can be romantically or sexually attracted to people of more than one gender

Cis/cisgender   Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth

Gay/homosexual   Someone who is predominantly attracted to people of their own gender

Intersex   Someone whose anatomy does not fit into a male/female binary

Lesbian   A woman who is predominantly attracted to other women. Some non-binary people also identify with this term.

Non-binary   Someone who does not identify as exclusively a man or a woman

Pansexual/pan   Someone who is attracted to people regardless of their sex/gender

Queer   Someone who considers their gender or sexuality in an anti-normative way. It is also a reclaimed slur

Straight/heterosexual   Someone who is predominantly attracted to people of a gender different to their own

Trans/transgender   Someone whose gender identity is different to the sex they were assigned at birth

Trans man   A man who was assigned female at birth

Trans woman   A woman who was assigned male at birth

Activity 1. Create your own Glossary

It is important not to assume that everybody uses the same terminology around gender and sexuality in the same way. In migrant support services we know that this is compounded by broad cultural and language differences. We therefore think it is useful to take some time to reflect on the terminology you use, as individuals and as an organisation. We offer some prompt questions to facilitate your discussion. It might be useful to compile your answers into your own glossary of terms which can be added to and used for reference by others in the organisation.

1. What do the terms or experiences we've suggested mean to you?

2. What other words do you use to talk about gender and sexuality?

3. What other words or experiences do you know from other languages or cultures?

4. Would you feel comfortable using these terms in your organisation? Why? Why not?

5. What terms feel respectful and inclusive to describe different people and experiences?

6. What terms would you like to use to describe yourself?

7. What terms might be helpful for your friends, colleagues and service users?

Understand that
Home Office / service
provider definitions
of gender / sexuality
doesn't necessarily
resonate / translate to
the service user.

↳ e.g. binary labels or
trans or non-binary
etc may not translate
culturally or linguistically
or even bisexuality

Service Users sometimes
confuse gender and sexuality
and it can then be difficult to
explain the difference

Reproducing Norms

Whether it be the ways that organisations gender particular activities, or make assumptions about the gender and sexuality of service users, service providers felt that their organisations helped to reinforce norms about gender and sexuality.

One common example is the way gender is recorded in organisational databases with registration and referral forms only offering male/female options, which can be confusing and uncomfortable for service users who do not fit into those categories. This also has consequences for accessing services, where the ability to fit into a box is required to access specific spaces.

Some examples of encountering normative understandings of gender and sexuality raised in the workshops were:

During registration or referral of service users:
Asking a client for their gender and sexuality can be confusing and cause discomfort. For non-binary service users, offering only male or female options is exclusionary. There is also a fear among service providers about where the information is going and how it will be received by other organisations.

Somebody who is in the process of altering which pronouns they identify with and being unsure of how to navigate this (not wanting to use No pronouns and risk offending someone who has sacrificed a lot for that terminology)

Service Users sometimes confuse gender and sexuality and it can then be difficult to explain the difference

Referral form Where is information going.

Initial assessment- asking about some- one's gender + that raising questions/ discomfort

Gender fluid person going eg - GP re which group, registers in groups, comment in group

During the running of the service:
In daily conversations, assumptions are made about the types of relationships people have, for example, that people are monogamous or want to get married. Similarly, people make assumptions about the genders of partners, particularly through the use of gendered pronouns. In the running of services, roles are often gendered e.g. who does what jobs or works with which clients.

Male security guards

Gendered Roles in the garden

Normative assumption about relationship styles

who's given apps with specific clients "whose" g. e.g. men

Comments about type of voluntary work men / men can do

Censoring discussions for fear of causing offense or making someone unsafe:
There is a general feeling of uncertainty around the repercussions of openly discussing gender and sexuality for both service users and individual service providers. Conversations are therefore avoided or censored, helping to recreate normative assumptions about gender and sexuality. This is often grounded in assumptions that service users will have more conservative views and may exclude those who do not fit norms of gender and sexuality.

Activity 2. Dismantling Norms

Here are some scenarios based on contributions by workshop participants about times they encounter norms around gender and sexuality in their organisation:

A Someone makes a comment about the type of volunteering women or men can do. For example, women delivering craft programmes and men teaching people DIY. Others laugh or agree, nobody challenges the comment.

B A volunteer is registering a new service user. In their initial conversation with the person, they get the impression that they may be queer. The volunteer is anxious and does not want to embarrass the new service user by asking about their gender or sexuality. The form has two boxes for "male" or "female" and asks if they are "single", "married" or "divorced".

C The service has a programme to support women and children into secure housing. There are several single men who use the service who are homeless or in overcrowded accommodation.

D A non-binary migrant is experiencing street homelessness and comes to a service for access to their night shelters. The service separates their shelters into "men's" and "women's". Members of staff are unsure which would be appropriate to direct them to.

E A local queer association gets in touch with a service and says they run regular events that some of their clients may want to attend. No service users have come out within the service and staff are anxious about offending people who come from countries they perceive as more conservative. They do not circulate the invitation.

Choose a few scenarios and discuss:

1. What norms are being reasserted?

2. Why might someone uphold them?

3. What are the risks for others?

4. How might the risks be mitigated?

Reflect

Spend a few minutes thinking about how this relates to your own organisation. You can use the following prompts to guide your reflections:

1. How do norms of gender and sexuality manifest in your service?

2. What effect might this have on staff, volunteers, and service users?

3. What can you do to dismantle destructive norms?

Use neutral language e.g. partner not boyfriend or girlfriend

Shared spaces where staff + service users can learn together about challenging gender norms

Reflective practice to encourage self-reflection on how we reproduce gender/sexuality norms on an individual level
↳ how this feeds into organisational culture

Not including prescriptive gender categories in forms

Considered a Bespoke Service

Whether it be women's only services or organisations which focus on supporting queer migrants, service providers felt that gender and sexuality was mostly negotiated through bespoke services.
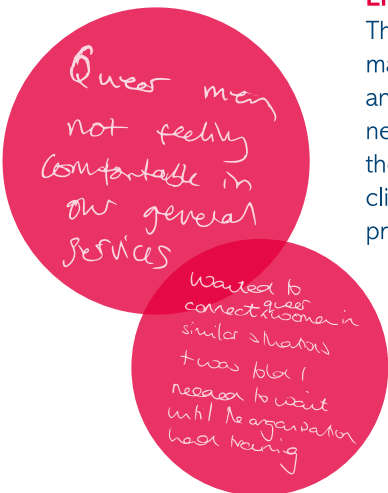
However, they reported that while women's only services are needed there are more of these services than those available to men, despite there being more male service users and more male migrants overall. This is exacerbated by a funding landscape that offers more financial support services for women. Further, many "general" organisations signpost queer clients to specialist organisations as they feel ill equipped to provide the support they need.

As such, people at our workshops raised questions about whether gendered services maintain normative understandings of gender and create spaces where all genders and sexualities feel safe. Additionally, some people may not access services they need from a "general" migration support organisation due to the assumption that they would be better served by a "specialist" organisation.

Some of the challenges from gender and sexuality being considered bespoke or specialist raised by participants were:

Limited support for queer service users:
There is an acknowledgement that queer service users may not feel comfortable using "generalist" services and that they may not be receiving the support they need. However, there is also a reluctance to offer those services due to lack of expertise. Instead, queer clients will often be signposted to a bespoke service provider.
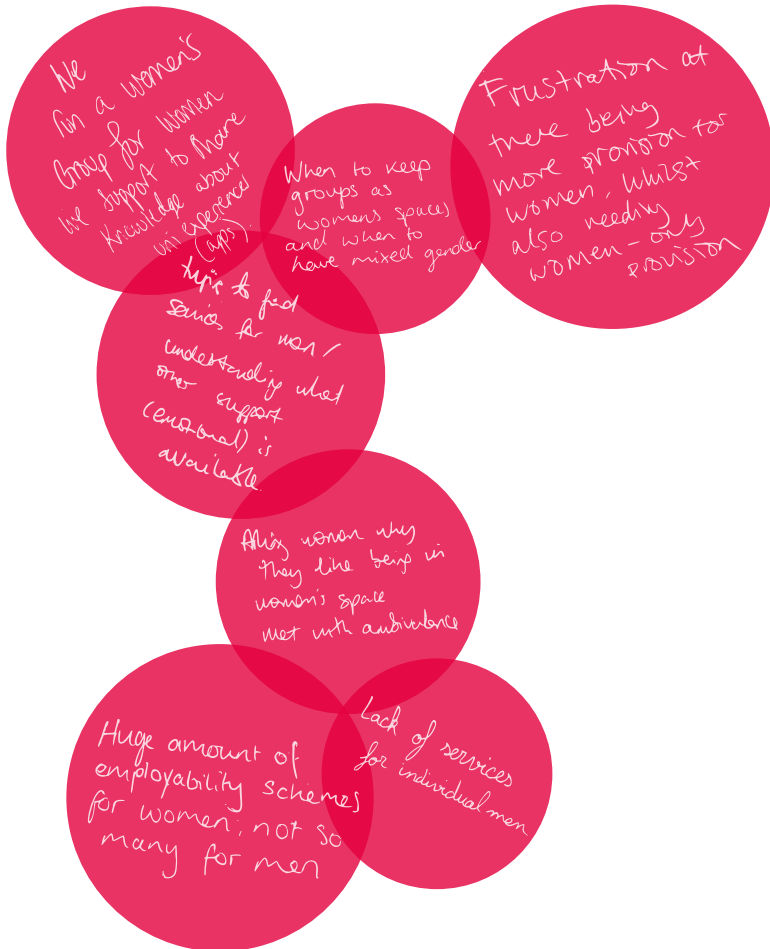
Queer men not feeling comfortable in our general services

Wanted to connect queer women in similar situations + was told I needed to wait until the organisation had more funding

Few specialist services available for men:
There are more services to specifically support women but harder to find for men, such as single gender spaces, peer support groups, employability schemes, support accessing further or higher education, and housing support.

Me for a women's Group for women live support to share knowledge about uni experience (apps).

When to keep groups as womens spaces and when to have mixed gender

Frustration at there being more provision for women, whilst also needing women-only provision

this to feel same for men / understanding what other support (emotional) is available

Ask women why they like being in women's space met with ambivalence

Huge amount of employability schemes for women, not so many for men

Lack of services for individual men

16

Activity 3. Service Offerings

These are some scenarios based on contributions by workshop participants about times they have had to reflect on the challenges of supporting clients with issues related to gender and sexuality:

A A young person you work with tells you that they have a new partner. You do not know what sexual education they have had or if they know what sexual health services are available in the UK.

B A man who comes to your day centre regularly appears with bruises or other injuries. When you inquire about his injuries, he tells you they are from his partner.

C A lesbian woman who uses your services has been going to the women's peer support group. All the other women who go are straight and most often talk about the challenges of parenting as a migrant.

D You have been supporting a service user with regularising their migration status. They disclose to you that they think they might be trans.

E A single man who works as a delivery gig worker and uses your services appears increasingly withdrawn and depressed. They mention feeling isolated.

1. What support may be needed in this situation?

2. What support is available within and outside your organisation and what is needed?

3. What could help this person feel understood, safe, and more included?

Reflect

Spend a few minutes thinking about how this relates to your own organisation. You can use the following prompts to guide your reflections:

1. In your organisation, which services are based on gender or sexuality? Examples might include women's or men's groups, or sexual health provision.

2. What types of dynamics do gender or sexuality based services create? Examples might include creating a safe space, or fostering normative or exclusionary dynamics.

3. Are there opportunities to create more inclusive spaces? Examples might include creating activities for under-served groups or creating opportunities for inter-group sharing.

Suggesting other resources e.g. local queer social media _groups

access to housing, chance of rough sleeping

by the state, employers, other charities

• Sharing big LGBTQIA+ events with people ie Pride etc.

Think expensively abat 'vulnerability' → e.g. men are more likely to experience stop + search, detention + deportation

Think about what happens when people (are) move (a) on → e.g. providing community from afar

Don't make LGBTQ+ people the exception, e.g. 'no detention for LGBT people' or 'no detention for women'

↳ use specifics to make a point/campaign about the general issue/system

Dynamics:
• Can create further separation
• Equally can create safer spaces for communication & support
• Unexpected conversations & education

Personal Experiences

Several participants felt ill equipped to enforce personal boundaries around gender and sexuality, both with service users and with other staff or volunteers. For example, they expressed concerns about sexual or romantic advances, discussions of relationships or personal lives, and critiques of their gender expression or sexual identity.

They felt uncertain about how to navigate the views of both their organisation and service users, including how they might be perceived if they disclosed their gender identity or sexual orientation, and how that affects the service they provide. One particular point of concern was that after disclosure, the person no longer has control over that information.

Participants raised concerns about the consequences of this for service users and service providers. Both service users and providers could be the source of tensions and there were significant discussions in the second workshop about the dangers of assuming that service users would be sexist, homophobic and/or transphobic.

Reflection that service provider identity will affect service:
Participants reflected that their gender or sexuality might affect the service they were able to provide. Sometimes this was positive, in that service users might feel more comfortable when staff or volunteers share their identity. Mostly, however, there was a concern that being openly queer might be detrimental to the service or be considered so by colleagues.

Questions / Assumptions about my own gender and feeling anxious about how that will affect peoples perceptions of me as a practitioner (safe? unsafe? Like them/ not like them)

Presumption about clients' ideas about sexuality

Positive things — People feeling more comfortable when volunteers + staff are also Queer

Advising mentors on what dress code is appropriate: "don't wear something that you think would make you/ your mentee uncomfortable"

Fear of being percieved as more masculine and therefore "less safe" or "less warm".

Yp asking q's / making remarks ie. do you have a boyfriend? 'male teachers are better' you can't trust women

"Your haircut looks like "boy"
&
"your hair will stop you getting a boyfriend."

Service users reasserting norms:
Similarly, service providers must navigate norms of gender and sexuality being reasserted by service users. This often feels complex to navigate because of a desire not to disrupt the running of the service.

A hierarchy of offence:
The complexities of navigating personal identities seems to stem from a general feeling that cultural and religious beliefs should take precedence over personal experiences of gender and sexuality. In many organisations, discussing issues of gender and sexuality is therefore discouraged for fear of causing offence.

it seems like there's a 'hierarchy' of offense? ie. don't talk about sexuality so it doesn't offend someone's religions / cultural beliefs... but what about how not talking about it might offend my views around sexuality?

Intersection of gender / sexuality and religion - not wanting to cause offense - making assumptions

Colleagues expressing their discomfort around issues of gender / sexuality being discussed in workplace / trainings

Boundaries + Safeguarding - people we support looking for relationship

Receiving overt compliments / comments on appearance - learning how to set boundaries early on

Clear volunteer boundaries. ↳ sharing your information.

Challenges setting boundaries:
Service providers also find balancing a caring role with the establishment of boundaries around gender and sexuality difficult. For example, receiving compliments about appearance or invitations to meet outside the organisation.

Explicit homophobia:
Some service users and providers are also explicitly homophobic. For example, service users not wanting to live with a queer couple who hosts asylum seekers. Providers often find it difficult to challenge such views because they feel they hold power in that space and feel discomfort in saying something that a service users says is wrong. These experiences reinforce many of the fears about openly discussing or expressing gender and sexuality at work.

Hosting - clients not wanting to live with gay / queer couples

Activity 4. Supporting Conversations

One key area of discussion in the second workshop was the intersection between gender and sexuality and religious or cultural sensitivities. Some participants were concerned that there is a "hierarchy of offence" whereby gender and sexuality are not discussed openly for fear of offending various religious or cultural groups, suggesting that such identities are less important. Rather than avoiding conversations for fear of causing offence, workshop participants suggested finding ways to facilitate conversations within and between communities. Here are some scenarios based on contributions by workshop participants about when challenging conversations may arise:

A A middle aged man you have worked with for a few months discloses that he hasn't been able to attend his church recently. When you inquire why, he says that they found out he has a boyfriend. He misses his church and the connection it gives him to his community.

B A trans couple visit the centre. Another service user sidles over to you to whisper that they are from her country and that they are both men.

C An ex-client who is now a volunteer talks openly to you about how there are more and more gay people becasue it is in the school curriculum and all over social media.

D A new client hints that they are gay and you take this as a green light to talk more openly. You begin talking to them about the 'queer' community and they begin to get defensive and shut down.

E A gender fluid service user publicly talks to a queer female volunteer about how it is God's wish that the volunteer find a good man. It feels like a test but the volunteer is uncertain about how to respond.

1. How you would respond in the moment?

2. What type of conversations could you facilitate more long term?

3. How you might use the experience to start conversations around people's relationships to faith or culture and their identity?

4. What steps could you take to make people feel safe to share, such as establishing expectations around respect and tolerance?

Reflect

Spend a few minutes thinking about how this relates to your own organisation. You can use the following prompts to guide your reflections:

1. How might you start or support conversations in your own organisation and with others in the sector?

2. What boundaries would be helpful to set for yourself or other people you're talking to?

3. How can you create an environment where it feels easy to discuss these or similar topics?

Values statement
for service users
volunteers inc.
non-toleration of discrimination

How to bring organisations
outside the sector in
ie. IMI (Inclusive Mosque
Initiative) to work collaboratively
in challenging gender/sexuality
norms from within the faiths/
cultures that many of our
communities are part of

Joint spaces for staff +
service users to explore
issues around
gender + sexuality together

(dismantling the divide of
'we know better' b/c
gender/sexual norms
exist within orgs too)

workshop/
lunch & learn
using zine as
a prompt for reflection/
discussion

a space for this project to grow once the zine is done. This space is important for us as staff, individuals, as organisations & for our service users, it's a great opportunity to create a network focused on migration, gender & sexuality!

Next steps

We recognise this workbook is only a first step. We are open to continuing the conversation about what type of support would be useful and hope to establish a network of practitioners and migrants concerned with these issues. This may include resource sharing, peer support, and future events. We are also particularly interested in how we can engage service users in the discussion.

If you are interested to connect with the network please feel free to contact us by email at **gendersexualityinmigration@gmail.com**. We'd also be interested to hear from anyone who would like to help build the network by helping to organise events and pull resources together.

Thank you

We would like to thank a number of people for making this project possible.

Firstly, we would like to thank Royal Holloway who granted us public engagement funding to run two workshops with frontline migrant service providers, and to produce this booklet.

We would also like to thank Migrants' Rights Network, and especially Julia Tinsley-Kent who provided an excellent overview of campaigning around gender, queerness, and migration in our first workshop and, alongside Aya Khedairi, helped to organise the second workshop at their premises at Pelican House. We are also delighted and grateful that they have offered to host the workbook on their website.

Finally we would like to extend a huge thank you to the participants of both workshops including representatives from Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers, British Red Cross, Samphire - Post-Detention Support Project, Hackney Migrant Centre, Refugee Council, Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, Children and Families Across Borders, Action for Refugees in Lewisham, Asylum Welcome, Unfold, Hope for the Young, Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants, Care for Calais, Refugee Education, Napier Friends, and more. Your inputs were crucial to setting the agenda of this booklet and hopefully helping to shape further conversations in frontline migrant support services in meaningful ways. Your reflections and ideas were invaluable and we hope to continue the conversation with you.

Conversations and learning about gender and sexuality takes time and change won't happen in one session.

ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
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OF LONDON

Migrants'
Rights
Network