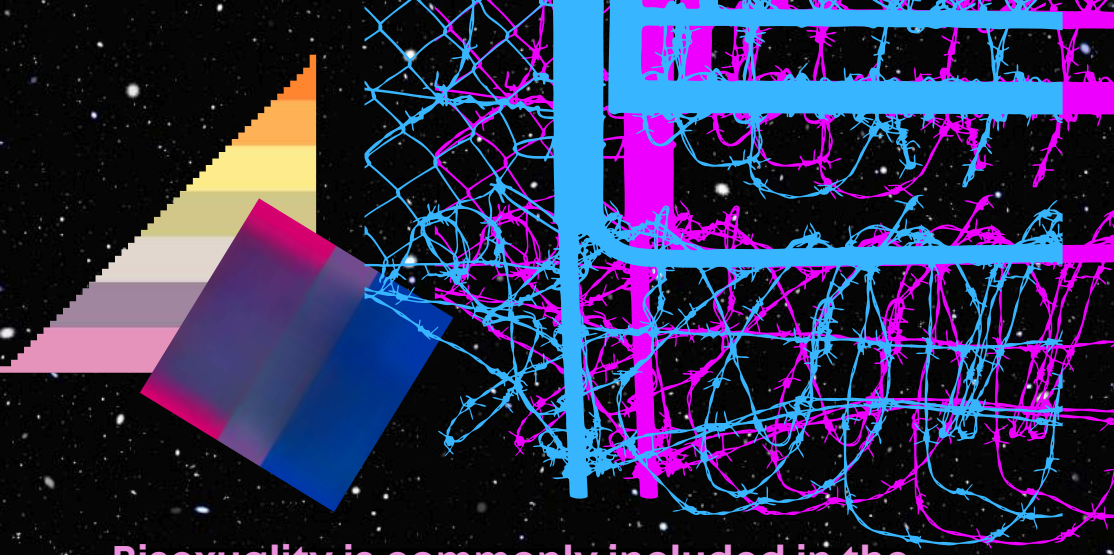
Migrants' Rights Network

Bisexuality, BiPHObia + MiGRAtion

-a "who is welcome?" zine

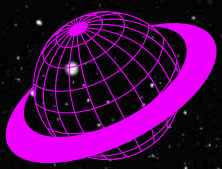

Co-authored by Aine Bennett

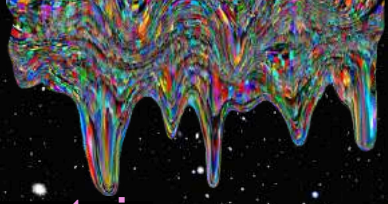

Introduction



Bisexuality is commonly included in the LGBTQ+ acronym, yet bisexual+ people are often left out of the conversation about sexuality or ostracised/erased[1] from the queer community. From straight communities, bisexual+ people can face homophobia or fetishisation[2]. Stereotypes and erasure of sexuality beyond heterosexuality and homosexuality, and how these manifest in state infrastructure such as immigration systems, mean that queer people who experience multiple gender attraction can fall through the cracks, and experience violence as a result.

[1]Erasure often looks like gay or lesbian people assuming that bi+ people are straight if they are in a straight-passing relationship, or that they aren't "really" bi+. Bi+ women are seen to be straight, and bi+ men are seen to be gay.
[2]Fetishisation of bisexual+ women includes being treated as sexual objects for the entertainment and gratification of straight men.

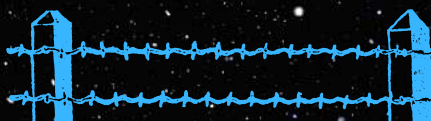




‘Queering’ migration has its roots in decolonisation and undoing borders. For us at MRN, the struggle for queer liberation goes hand in hand with our vision for a world where people are free to move, and where racist, discriminatory migration systems are dismantled. The structure of the modern world (and its immigration systems) was formed by colonialism, and the concept that the nation state has the innate right to determine who is welcome within its borders. The British Empire forcibly imposed its narrow ideals of gender and sexuality onto the people and cultures it oppressed, and these are mirrored in the immigration system in the 21st century. Modern bordering regimes uphold both the wealth inequalities resulting from colonial extraction, and gendered, sexualised and raced hierarchies between the Global North and Global South.



Queer people seeking asylum face the sharp end of the Home Office’s ‘disbelief culture’ while navigating the hostile and complex UK immigration system, and the intersection of queerphobia, xenophobia and racism. Furthermore, the experiences of bi+/M-Spec migrants have been largely overlooked by migration advocacy organisations.




WHAt is
BiSEXuality
+WHAt is
BiPHObiA?

What is bisexuality?

At MRN, we define bisexuality as "attraction to same and non-same gender". Bisexuality has also been described as "the potential to be attracted – romantically and/or sexually – to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree". Therefore, we use the term 'bisexual+' as a trans- and non-binary-inclusive [3] term, and also as an umbrella term for multiple attraction spectrum (M-Spec). In other words, we use bisexual+ as an umbrella term for the numerous ways in which people express attraction beyond gender. For more information on the definition of bisexuality, see this footnote[4].

[3]Some people have incorrectly asserted that the prefix 'bi' in bisexual reinforces attraction along the lines of the gender binary, which is a colonial invention.

[4]Bisexuality encompasses a wide range of identities or terms including pansexual (attraction to people regardless of gender identity), abrosexual (fluid), demisexual (sexual attraction is experienced only after forming a close emotional bond), omnisexual (attraction to all genders) or polysexual (attraction to multiple genders). Bisexuality is both a label and an umbrella that is distinct from lesbian and gay people. While some queer people distinctly label themselves as 'bisexual' others identify as sitting under the bisexual+ 'umbrella'.



more info

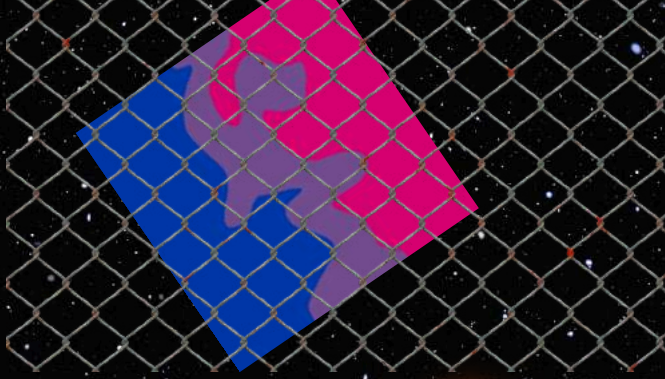


In 1990 the magazine Anything That Moves published their Bisexual Manifesto entitled Anything that Moves: Beyond the Myths of Bisexuality. Frustrated by the stigma around, and erasure of, bisexual+ people, they wished to define bisexuality in their own terms with an emphasis on dispelling the myth that bisexuality reinforces the gender binary:

"Bisexuality is a whole, fluid identity. Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or dougamous in nature; that we must have "two" sides or that we MUST be involved simultaneously with both genders to be fulfilled human beings. In fact, don't assume that there are only two genders. Do not mistake our fluidity for confusion, irresponsibility, or an inability to commit. Do not equate promiscuity, infidelity, or unsafe sexual behavior with bisexuality. Those are human traits that cross ALL sexual orientations. Nothing should be assumed about anyone's sexuality—including your own".







What is biphobia?

Queer people who fall under the bisexual+ umbrella experience a unique form of discrimination and prejudice known as biphobia [5]. This can take many forms and makes navigating already queerphobic immigration systems even more difficult for bi+ migrants.

Biphobia can often manifest as prejudicial attitudes or harmful stereotypes that bisexual+ people are:

- **Deceitful, dangerous or perverse**
- **Greedy, promiscuous or exotic**
- **Confused, indecisive or "going through a phase"**
- **Spreading disease**
- **Damaging or infringing on the rights of gay and lesbian people**

[5]While generally acceptance of same gender relationships has increased, evidence shows that attitudes towards bisexual+ people have not improved and that biphobia remains prevalent. Only 20% of bi+ people are out to their families in contrast to 63% gay and lesbian people.





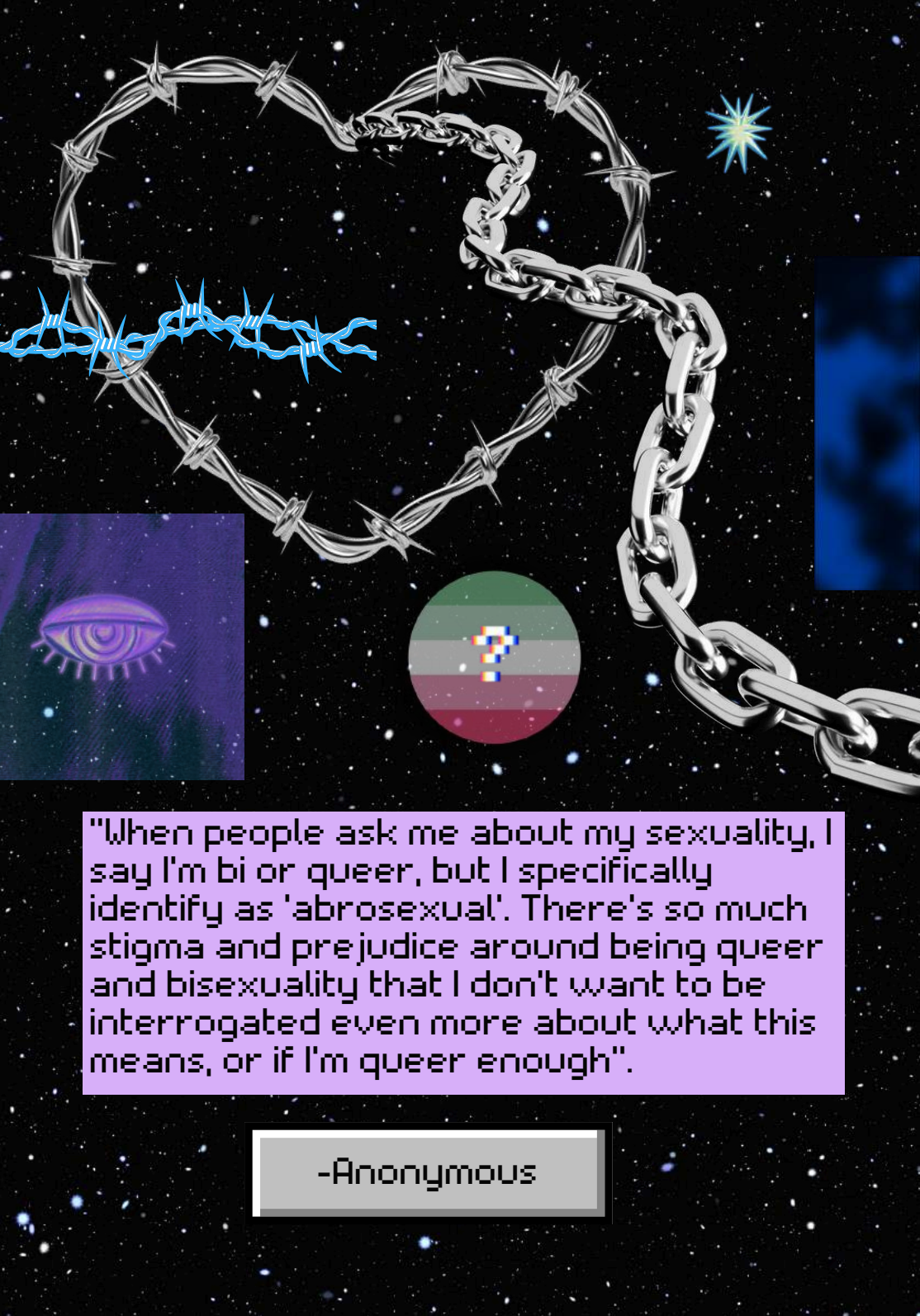
Biphobia can also encompass bisexual+ erasure: the process of rendering bisexual+ people and their experiences invisible within discussions of LGBTQ+ identities, experiences, and issues, or simply assuming that bisexuality does not exist. Bisexual+ people have reported instances where others have denied the possibility of bisexuality, where they have had to explain or justify their sexual orientation, where they have to repeatedly disclose their bisexual+ identity, or where they have been incorrectly labelled as gay, lesbian or heterosexual depending on the gender of their partner. This erasure contributes to a variety of harms such as health disparities or reinforcing inequalities and discrimination (unemployment or housing discrimination). This erasure can also be psychologically harmful, contributing to feelings of alienation.



“Oh, so you’re Straight now”?

Thanks to biphobia and bisexual+ erasure, M-Spec desire, behaviours or identity are often misunderstood, ostracised, invalidated or dismissed. This can commonly result in the assumption that bisexual+ men are ‘really’ gay while bisexual+ women are ‘really’ heterosexual but merely ‘bicurious’, or worried about “missing out on something”. These assumptions are informed by and uphold mononormativity - a binary logic where the only legitimate or complete forms of sexuality are straight or gay.

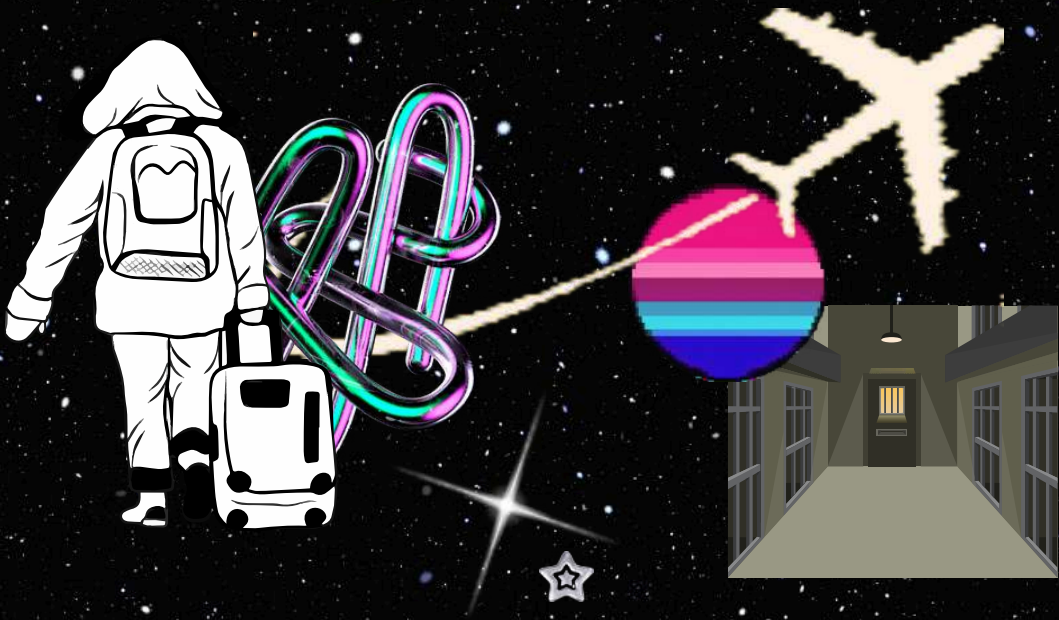
Some bisexual+ people also report feeling a form of ‘imposter syndrome’ in that they are made to not “feel queer enough”, particularly if they experience hostility from other LGBTQ+ people for entering into ‘straight-passing’ relationships or dating people of a different gender (e.g. people who present as cis-hetereosexual) /straight- passing).



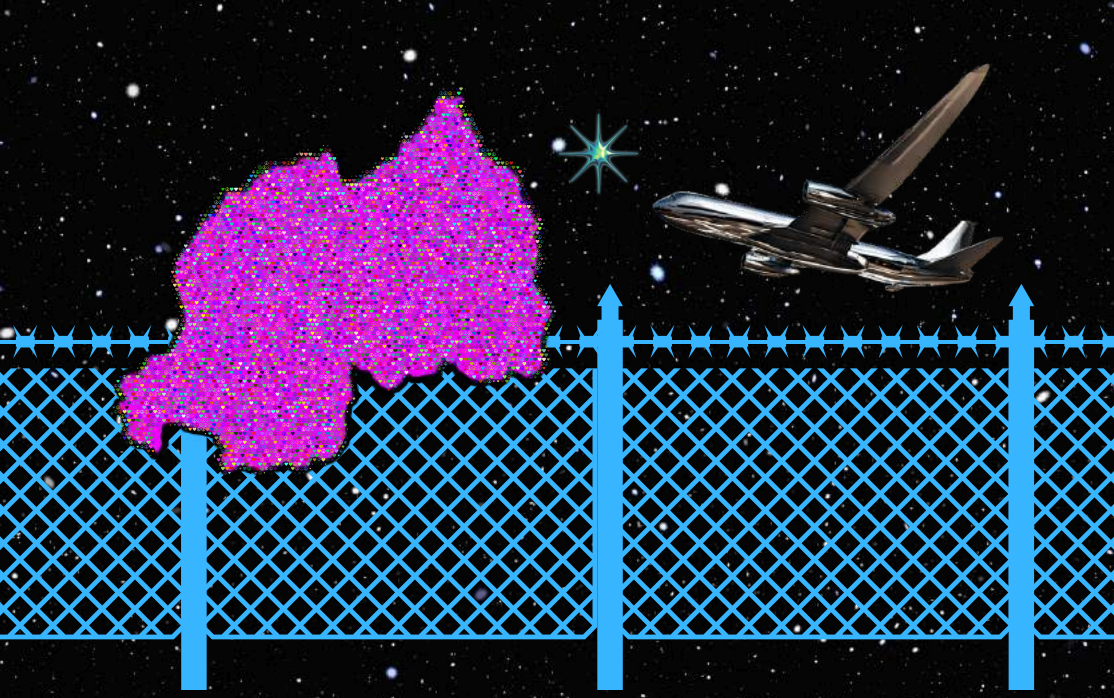
"When people ask me about my sexuality, I say I'm bi or queer, but I specifically identify as 'abrosexual'. There's so much stigma and prejudice around being queer and bisexuality that I don't want to be interrogated even more about what this means, or if I'm queer enough".

-Anonymous


QUEERPHOBIA
+ THE
ASYLUM
SYSTEM



In the UK asylum system, the Home Office shows data on the number of asylum claims made where a person's sexual orientation formed part of the claim. This encompasses claims with a "lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) element, but other forms of sexual or gender identity may also be considered when addressing a claim". This means that we know, for example, that in 2022 1,334 asylum claims (or 2% of the total for that year) included sexual orientation as part of the basis for that claim. But we do not know proportionately how many were gay, lesbian or bisexual+ respectively. Likewise, we do not know how many queer people sought asylum who do not view their sexuality through one of these three identity labels, or how many people sought asylum because they are trans or gender non-conforming.

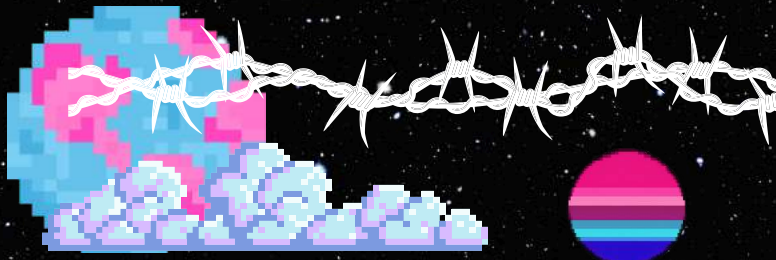


The Home Office's disbelief culture is likely to become more hostile, particularly with the introduction of the inhumane Migration Act and the Government's intent to pursue offshoring schemes such as the Rwanda plan. Several charities and organisations have raised concerns to the Government that Rwanda is a particularly unsuitable place for processing LGBTQ+ people's asylum claims and that it is not "generally a safe country" for queer people, due to colonial-era homophobic laws and attitudes that have persisted in Rwanda, and across Africa more generally.

[6]It is also important to question the concept of "safety", and remember that anywhere is unsafe if you are forced to go there against your will. Nowhere is truly safe: it's all relative and subjective.







Borders and immigration systems reinforce a harmful and narrow "particular demand of queer migration". Queer migrants are expected to perform a certain idea of queerness, and to perform the identity of the "deserving queer" by "proving" their queerness in a way that is legible within a White, Western understanding of queerness. In Truths, Fakes and the Deserving Queer Migrant, this idea is presented as being especially problematic for queer migrants because of the difficulty in proving something as subjective as sexuality or gender; it is difficult to link this to their membership of a 'particular social group'[7] under the Refugee Convention.

[7]One of the grounds for recognition as a refugee in the Refugee Convention is a "well-founded fear of being persecuted" due to "membership of a particular social group". Since 2004, the EU has recognised members of a group as those who "share an innate characteristic, or a common background that cannot be changed, or share a characteristic or belief that is so fundamental to identity or conscience that a person should not be forced to renounce it", and that sexual orientation can be a particular social group.

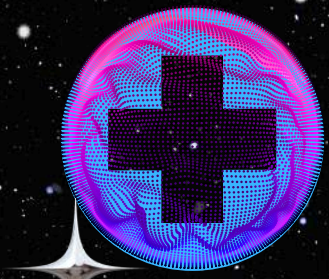


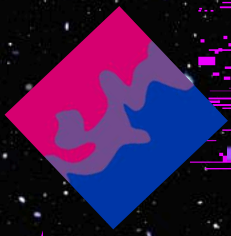
BiPHObiA + MiGRATion: stiGMAtisation OF Bi+ MiGRAnts



In the UK, the rise of anti-migrant and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment creates numerous barriers for queer migrants. Bisexual+/M-Spec migrants are impacted by multiple forms of systemic discrimination based on race, nationality and sexuality, both in their origin and destination country. In the pre-colonial non-Western world, sexuality was often seen as more of a "spectrum", and "approaches to sexuality and gender often reject[ed] binary categorisations". Because of this, biphobia or an erasure/demonisation of M-Spec desire is also a lasting legacy of colonialism.

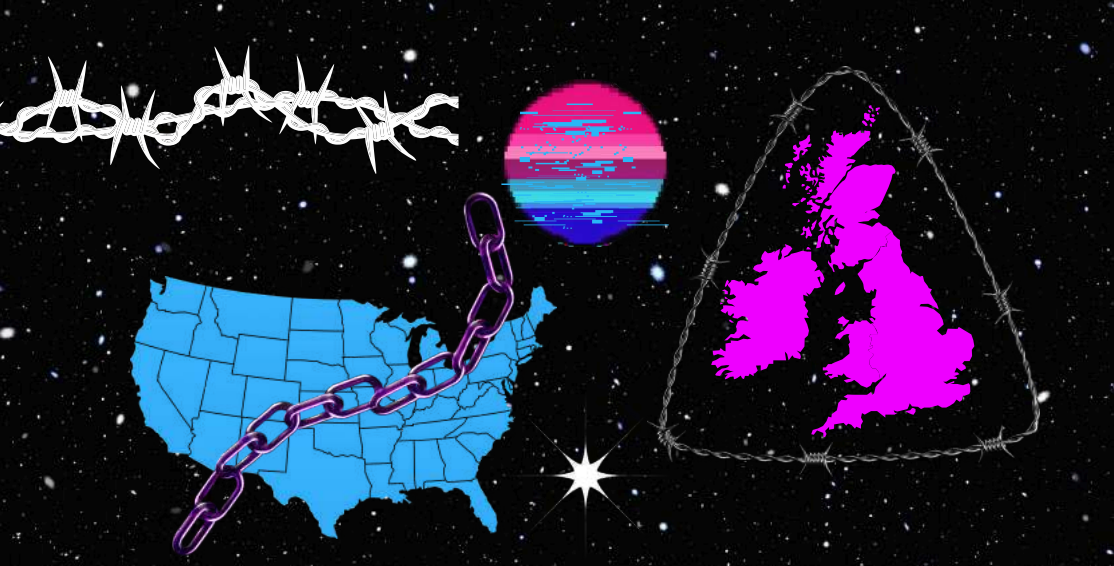
In their origin country, colonised queer and M-Spec people are subjected to erasure and oppression, often due to colonial-era homophobic laws and attitudes. Upon arriving to their destination country, they encounter stereotypes about how their race should intersect with their queerness, or are seen to be inauthentically queer due to certain culturally or religiously informed behaviours surrounding modesty, visibility, party culture, and coming out. Migratised bisexual+ men (such as Black men or men of Colour) are also often fetishised by White gay communities, as both their bisexuality and their race is exoticised and sexualised.







Just as racist myths about migrants and refugees being carriers of disease are common tropes in media and popular political discourse, bisexual+ people were often portrayed as cheaters who spread disease from the queer community to the straight community, particularly during the AIDs pandemic. The news media spread unsubstantiated claims that bisexual+ men who slept with gay men were spreading HIV to straight women they had sex with. HIV stigma and over-sexualisation of bisexual+ people helped these claims contribute to biphobia. Bisexual+ people are still perceived as being the 'bridge' between gay and straight people: the false idea that they transfer illnesses from queer people to straight people. These myths were supported by the hypersexualised stereotypes of bisexual+ people.



Several states have historically placed border restrictions on migrants who are HIV positive, such as the United States which had an immigration and travel ban for HIV positive non-US citizens from 1987 until 2010. While the UK did not officially deny entry to HIV positive immigrants, there were reports of more informal restrictions. Some countries still limit travel for HIV positive non-citizens, and right-wing politicians called for a UK entry ban in 2014. We can see the relation between anti-Black racism and HIV stigma in the following quote by Nigel Farage in 2014: "But Zimbabweans come, to put it bluntly, with the wrong skills, in the wrong colour skin and possibly, given the HIV rates there, in the wrong state of health". People who are both migrants and bisexual+ therefore risk facing intersecting unfounded stigma around disease during or following their migration.

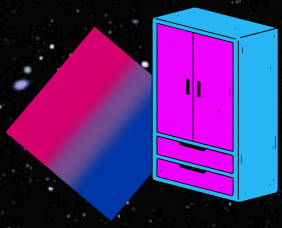
"Coming from a culturally conservative background, openly discussing my identity as a bisexual individual is not a deliberate choice I make. In my home country, identifying as LGBTQ+ is often viewed as a temporary "rebellious phase" rather than a valid aspect of one's identity. In less progressive areas, particularly outside of metropolitan cities, individuals who choose to come out, especially to their families, may face initial shock and frustration, only to be later convinced that their identity is merely a "passing phase".

For bisexual individuals, these misconceptions are particularly prevalent. Within conservative circles, there's a pervasive belief that bisexual individuals will ultimately "revert" to heterosexuality once they meet a suitable partner of the opposite sex and eventually marry them. Furthermore, amidst the ongoing tensions between heterosexual and homosexual communities, bisexual individuals often find themselves side-lined and ostracised, perceived as disloyal to both sides.

As a result of these societal pressures and misunderstandings, many bisexual individuals opt to remain closeted, conforming to societal expectations and potentially marrying partners of the "opposite" sex, as presumed by those around them.

Before arriving in the UK, I envisioned confidently embracing my identity in this "land of freedom". However, upon my arrival, I found myself hesitating once again. Unless directly questioned about my sexuality, I struggle to openly share it with those around me. I fear judgement for currently being in a relationship with a man – would others see me as exploiting diversity? This fear is compounded by my knowledge of the UK's asylum application system and its mistreatment of bisexual asylum seekers. The government's official practices only deepen my concerns, as they seem to reflect broader societal attitudes towards individuals like myself".

- member of MRN's community

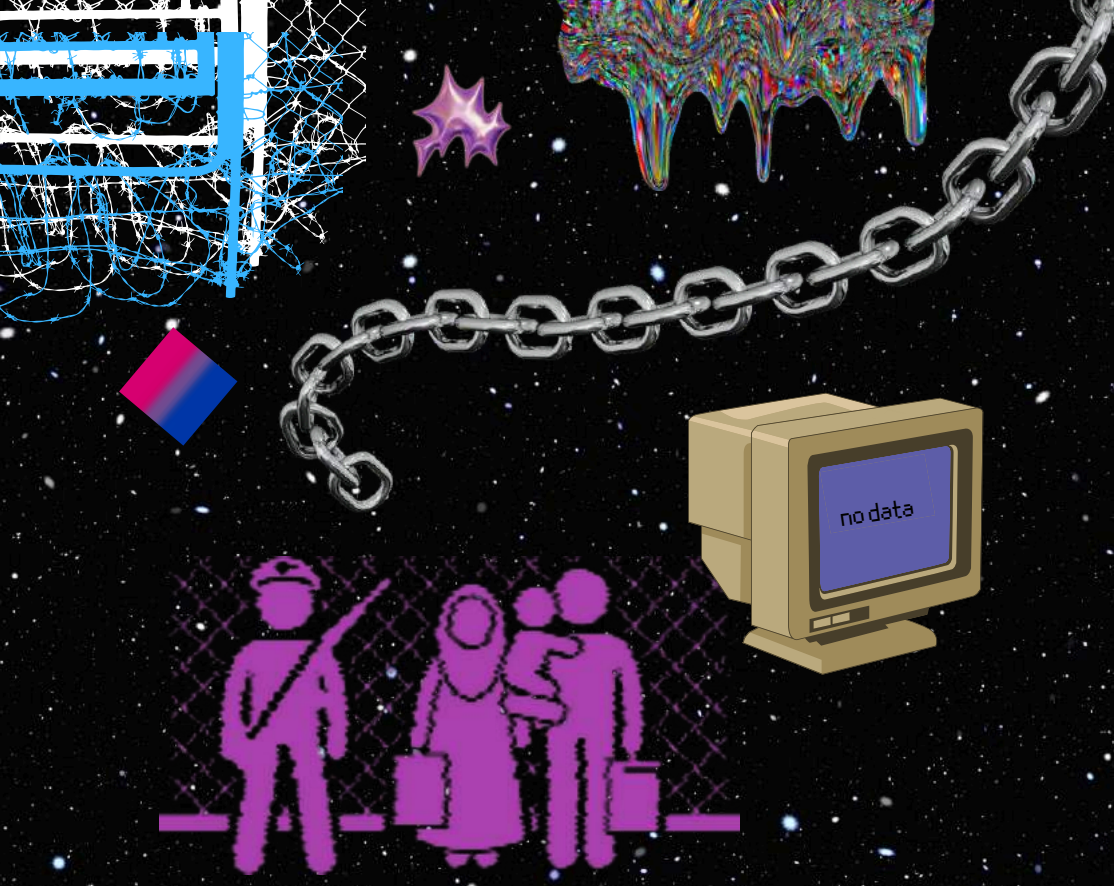



BiPHObiA
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In Home Office guidance on sexual orientation in asylum claims, bisexuality is described as “an individual who is physically, romantically and/or emotionally attracted to both men and women.” This is an incredibly narrow and inaccurate definition of what bisexuality is, and contributes to bisexual+ erasure.

Despite Home Office guidance instructing caseworkers not to stereotype LGBTQ+ people, it is well documented that decision making about queer asylum claims is often informed by biphobic stereotypes: that bisexual+ people are untrustworthy, promiscuous, greedy, manipulative or unreliable. There is some evidence that decision makers will disbelieve bisexual+ people making a claim who do not behave in these ways, or when they do not fit into decision makers’ preconceptions about queer people. Decision makers’ reliance on stereotypes therefore makes it harder for bisexual+ people’s claims to be recognised.



At the same time however, stereotypes around deceitfulness also risk making bisexual+ people less credible in the eyes of decision makers, which can detrimentally impact their asylum claim.

Furthermore, as a result of bisexual+ invisibility or erasure, decision-makers often do not have a frame of reference for bisexuality, which means that it can be harder for bisexual+ people to perform a queer sexuality that is recognisable to decision-makers.



Pressure to identify as Gay or Straight

In 2023, ex-Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, claimed that there are "many instances" where people pretend to be homosexual in order to gain preferential treatment in the asylum system. Not only does her statement ignore the traumatising burden of proof for queer migrants in the UK asylum system, but it also serves as a form of gaslighting towards those who are not monosexual (only attracted to one gender).











This is because biphobia and the resultant pressures and discrimination can lead to bisexual+ migrants, including refugees, being pressured to instead pretend to be straight or gay. Researcher Zeynab Peyghambarzadeh finds that European LGBTQ+ asylum activists often erase bisexuality and argue that people claiming asylum who have been in an other-gendered relationship could be lying about their queer attractions. Some of these activists argue that these “fake” (bisexual+) cases have to be excluded to protect “real” queer claims. Peyghambarzadeh also finds that some asylum activists and lawyers will advise bisexual+ claimants “to “perform gayness” to improve their chances of their asylum claim being successful. It therefore appears that it’s not refugees’ bisexuality in itself that is recognised as grounds for international protection but their proximity to gayness.





The case of HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) v SSHD [2010] made it illegal for decision makers to tell bisexual+ people seeking asylum to return to their origin country and be discreet: "no one can be expected, still less required, to conceal who they are in order to avoid persecution". However, this logic of concealment or discretion continues to follow bisexual+ people seeking asylum. We have been informed by a number of people in our Network that many bisexual+ people seeking asylum have been told by decision makers to "go home" and only act on their "straight" attractions. Not only does this put bisexual+ people seeking asylum at risk, but it also upholds their persecution.

Members of our Network also encountered biphobia via the Home Office's disbelief culture. Bisexual+ people seeking asylum have been mistakenly referred to as "gay" in their asylum claim, or have been advised or decided to pretend to be gay in order to navigate the system more simply. Bisexual+ people seeking asylum may also use the language of gayness as an umbrella term to mean multi-gender attraction, but this is erased by a biphobic asylum system. This speaks to how Home Office decision makers are only prepared to recognise fixed, monosexual sexualities, further contributing to bisexual+ erasure and persecution.



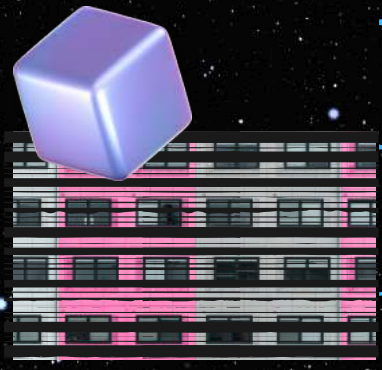
erasure

"During my asylum claim process, I experienced the consequences of the misrecognition and erasure that bisexual individuals often face. As someone who identifies as bisexual, it was important for me to express my true self and provide accurate information about my sexual orientation. However, I soon discovered that the system's lack of knowledge and understanding about bisexuality could have serious implications for my case.

In my initial interview at the Home Office, I confidently stated that I identify as bisexual. I explained that my attraction extends to multiple genders, emphasising the significance of this aspect of my identity in seeking asylum. To my surprise, I noticed that my case file had been marked as "gay," completely disregarding and erasing my bisexual identity.







This misclassification was not an administrative oversight; it reflected the misunderstanding of bisexuality and the unique experiences that bisexual asylum seekers face. It felt as though my identity was being boxed into 'gay'".

-a member of MRN's community, is seeking asylum.





Biphobia, racism + the asylum system



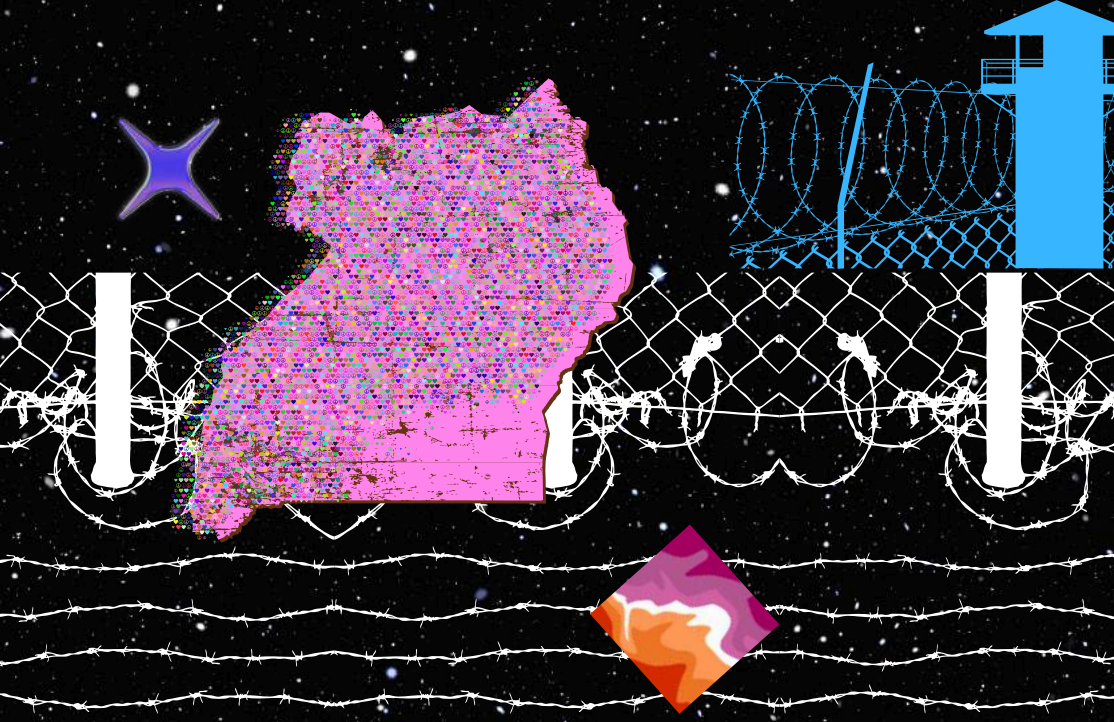
Bisexual+ People of Colour are subjected to specific forms of racism and biphobia. These intersecting forms of oppression have detrimental impacts on their mental and physical health, which are compounded by the discriminatory treatment embedded in the UK's immigration system.

The UK's asylum system prioritises a very rigid, Western-centric definition of LGBTQ+ identity that is ignorant to the intricacies of non-monosexual identities, but also the intricacies of sexual difference across different cultures. Given the erasure and demonisation of M-Spec desire as a lasting legacy of colonialism, the UK asylum system's policing and gatekeeping of queerness serves as an extension of colonial-era dismissal and erasure of non-Western cultures: it is a colonial deployment of queerness.





For all queer people seeking asylum, especially for those from colonised countries, meeting the burden of proof can be difficult. This is because non-Western contexts focus on family and community as essential elements of someone's identity, and so sexual orientation is merely conceptualised as a behaviour, as opposed to an identity. This can make it hard for queer asylum seekers, such as those from Oman, Uganda and Egypt, to articulate their sexual orientation as an identity for the purposes of their claim, or to prove an "emotional journey" of "self realisation". In other words, "where a person is not imbued in the Western context of self-focus (as opposed to focus on family or communal duty as core founding features of identity), expectations of emotional journeys will often be culturally inappropriate". This can then affect someone's ability to provide digital or photographic "evidence" of their queerness in order to gain protection.



One example of the asylum system disbelieving racialised queer people seeking asylum, is a Ugandan lesbian's asylum claim being initially rejected since she had been forced to marry a man in her origin country. Here, we can see the ramifications of Britain's colonial-era homophobia manifest as a tool of gaslighting in order to exclude racialised queer people from the UK, and also from queerness.

Specifically for racialised bisexual+ people seeking asylum, this Western-centric burden of proof is further compounded by the general disbelief culture shown towards bisexual+ people seeking asylum.


Conclusion

"Instead of reducing the net of who is marginalised, we should aim to break the net that strangles us all".

-Diaspora Dyke Manifesto





Bisexual+ migrants and people seeking asylum face a number of interrelated systems of oppression, such as biphobia, racism, and the violence of the immigration system.

Fluid sexualities, such as bisexuality, are demonised by legacies of colonialism, and are seen to automatically undermine the 'consistency', legitimacy and credibility of someone's asylum claim, especially where a person is in or has been in an other-gendered relationship, despite all these elements being internally consistent to bisexuality. At the hands of monosexual normativity, disbelief culture and an oppressive asylum system, bisexual+ people seeking asylum continue to face erasure and persecution.



Heightened visibility is not the antidote to persecution. Only the dismantling of oppressive systems will create a world where migrants, bisexual people and those at the intersections of queerphobia, biphobia and bordering, are treated with dignity and respect.





Migrants' Rights Network is a UK charity that works alongside migrants in their fights for rights and justice. We co-curate campaigns using anti-oppression practices to create transformational change, extending beyond the individual impact on migrants' lives, to tackle oppression at its source.

We are a values-led organisation with an intersectional approach. Our work is led by a diverse team majority led by migratised people and People of Colour, essentially first and second generation migrants, who also have numerous other intersecting identities, including religion, nationality, age, gender, sexuality and those with disabilities. These wide ranging identities and experiences inform our work, and particularly our work on language and how we challenge policies, established norms and narratives.



Migrants' Rights Network

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migrants_rights_network migrants_rights Migrants' Rights Network

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