

The Hare and the Baboon: Intersecting Violences Experienced by African Sexual and Gender-Expansive Individuals in the UK Asylum System.

SKYE R TINEVIMBO CHIRAPE

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Supervisor: **Professor Floretta Boonzaier**

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ABSTRACT

Black African sexual and gender-expansive persons seeking asylum in the UK context face specific barriers because of their intersecting identities and experiences related to *race*, religion, gender, sexuality, cultural background, language, and geographical origin. With idealised white bodies continuously used as the prototype for LGBTQI+ persons seeking asylum, the legislation that protects LGBTQI+ asylum claimants conflicts with the actuality of African sexual and gender-expansive persons' identities and experiences. The research explores co-researchers' narratives about their experiences of the UK asylum regime and how structural and symbolic violences are implicated in the shared narratives. Twenty-seven narratives of the UK asylum system were gathered from diverse sources, including forcibly displaced co-researchers, legal caseworkers, NGO workers and substantive interview documents. The gathered experiences demonstrated structural and symbolic violence perpetrated by the state, through narratives of violent uncertainty, exclusion, vulnerabilisation to exploitation and gendered violence, dislocation and, intersectional discrimination and colonial notions of gender and sexuality. These findings reveal the intersecting and distinct migration obstacles underpinned by anti-Black discrimination that creates systems of racialised and gendered violence against applicants – forming part of the UK's hostile environment and exposing a reality wherein historical legacies of colonialism continue to shape the UK's asylum regime and bordering practices. The findings demonstrate the UK Home Office's significant failings in safeguarding sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, and how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated their precarious situation. From a decolonial feminist perspective, the participatory action research methodology and principles contribute to knowledge on decolonial and liberatory research practices and offer suggestions for anti-oppressive practices to support just asylum claims.

Keywords: Violence, structural violence, structural intersectionality, gender and sexuality, asylum regime, displaced migrants, trauma, LGBTQI, narrative, migration, decolonial feminist methods, African asylum claimants, participatory action research.

NGOVEPO

Vanhu vechitema vekuAfrica avo vanenge vachitsvaka ugaro hwekupotera kunyika ye UK vari kusangana nezvimhingamupinyi zvinokonzerwa nekusiyana kwezviitiko avo panyaya dzeumunhu uye nyaya dzebonde, zvitendero zvavo, tsika dzemakuriro avo ,ndimi uye nzvimbo dzechizvarirwe. Vanhu vechichena vanewo maitiro anemusiyano nezvakajairwa panyaya dzebonde LGBTIQ+ ndivo vane maumbirwo uye chimiro chinonyanyokugamuchirwa zvichizokonzerwa kuti bumbiro remutemo unotsigira boka reLGBTIQ+ rirerekere uyekuchengetedza kodzero dzavo nemwero unopesana nemabatirwe uye magariro anosanganikwa nawo nevanhu vechitema. Rugwaro runo runonzvera rondedzero dzevatvagi veruzivo avo vakatsvaka kupotera ku UK vanokwana kuita makumi maviri nenomwe. Boka iri remagodobori ezivo rinosanganisira ndudzi dzevanhu dzakasiyana-siyana dzinova: vanzveri vemitemo, vapoteripamwe chete ne vakazvimirira (NGOs). Mukurondedzera magariro avakasangana nawo, panoonekwa pachena udzvanyiriri hunoitwa nehurumende, rusaruro, kushungurudzwa uye kusveta simba kunoitwa avo veboka rinemafungiro akasiyana panyaya dzebonde nezviitiko. Maitiro aya ehurumende anokonzera dambudziko guru kune avo vanoda kutamira kunyika yeUK zvinova zvinotaridza pachena kuti hurumende iyi inokundikana zvakanyanya kuchengetedza uye kutarisira konzero dzeavo vanemugariro uye zviitiko zvakasiyana panyaya dzebonde. Chirwere cheCOVID19 chakaitawo kuti rusaruro uye udzvanyiriri uhwu hwuenderere mberi. Tiripa kuvandudza kodzero neenzaniso yemadzimai norusununguko rwavo, gwaro rino rinobatsira kuzivisawo nezverusununguko uye mhindu neyambiro yemaitiro ane kusimudzirwa kweavo unotsvaka rubatsiro neupoteri kuUk.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town, Cape Town. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other University.

Signature:

Signed by candidate

 Date: ...01 February 2024 ...

Land and People Acknowledgements.

This research was completed in the Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa and was part of a broader project, the Unsettling Knowledge Production on Gendered and Sexual Violence in South Africa, University of Cape Town (UCT).

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A note on Terminology.

The research recognises the influential power of words, understanding that the language used to discuss people and articulate their experiences can either centre or diminish their humanity (Kerman, n.d).

- **Asylum seeker (Asylum applicant/claimant):** The UNHCR defines an 'asylum seeker' in the following terms: An 'asylum-seeker' is someone who says he or she [and or they] is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated. However the research grapples with the use of the term 'asylum seeker' in the context of African sexual and gender-expansive individuals seeking asylum in the UK. It addresses their critique of the term, highlighting how 'asylum seeker' has evolved in public and media usage to dehumanise, alienate, stereotype and *other* asylum applicants. The feedback from co-researchers emphasised that the term has become synonymous with negative connotations such as 'criminal' and 'dangerous', erasing their multifaceted identities and reducing them to a single label. This criticism prompted a reflection on the power of language, particularly its potential for harm when used within homonationalistic narratives. While alternative terms like 'asylum applicant', 'asylum claimant' or 'persons seeking asylum' hold similar definitions, this thesis acknowledges the weight, energy and negative context that 'asylum seeker' now carries, causing distress and triggering reactions among the individuals it seeks to describe. Ultimately, co-researchers and the research advocate for a reconsideration of language used to describe those seeking refuge, aiming to humanise their experiences by rejecting potentially dehumanising terms and exploring alternative ways to articulate their journeys and identities.
- **People of the Global Majority (PoGM)/ global minority:** I use terms like "global majority" and "global minority" to refer to individuals with histories of colonial violence, avoiding the problematic nature of terms like "Global South" and "Global North." While there's been a rise in the use of the latter terms in academia and NGOs, they're criticized by activists, feminists, and scholars for their geopolitical rather than geographical nature, potentially reinforcing inaccurate dichotomies and oversimplifying the diversity within regions. Even alternatives like "Northern Hemisphere/Southern Hemisphere" are flawed, as countries like China and India are entirely in the Northern Hemisphere. Therefore, how we classify countries and people is significant, and I opt for terms that reflect a more nuanced understanding of global dynamics. People of the Global Majority (PoGM) refers to Black people, Indigenous people, Brown people, Latinx peoples—particularly Indigenous and Afro-Latinos —Pacific Islanders, Native Hawaiians, the Inuit communities/Alaska Natives, Native Americans, Arabs, Western Asians/Middle

Easterners with dark skin, North Africans, Southeast Asians, South Asians, East Asians, Africans with dark skin, and biracial and multiracial people who are mixed with one or more of the above, and people and groups who can't access white privilege (Hawthorne, 2023).

- **Houseless/ unhoused/houselessness:** Government agencies and research institutions continue to use the word homeless/ homelessness when reporting on people experiencing housing insecurity. However, in recent years advocates and activists have begun to use the terms unhoused or houseless to describe individuals without a physical address. Kerman (n.d) makes an important distinction between a house and a home in that people described as 'homeless' are not necessarily without homes. Home is the word used to describe the personal community in which people live and home includes loved ones and pets, important or sentimental possessions and valuables, and traditions and rituals.
- **Migrant:** A migrant is a person who consciously and voluntarily decides to leave his/her/ their country of origin and who could decide to go back to that country without fearing for their safety.
- **Queer:** Some people have reclaimed the word queer and self-identify as such. The term is a reclamation and a celebration of not fitting into norms. Thus, for some, queer is a radical and anti-assimilationist stance that captures multiple aspects of identities – (LGBTQIIA Resource Center, 2019).
- **Refugee:** According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a **refugee** is someone, who 'owing to a 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; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.' However, this term is contested in literature for how it is set against the term economic migrant. This dichotomy is inaccurate. Migratory movements are composed of various types of migrants who may have specific protection needs, even if they are not fleeing persecution or conflict. These include accompanied or unaccompanied migrant children; victims/survivors of human trafficking; migrants affected by natural disasters or environmental degradation, including as a consequence of climate change etc. Some migrants leave their home countries because they have no access to social rights, such as the right to health or education, for example. As a result, migrants cannot be reduced to 'economic migrants' on the one hand and refugees on the other. It is highly difficult in most cases to isolate a unique cause for the migration

(Althaus, 2024; Hamlin, 2022). In this research refugee/ refugees refers to persons who have sought and been successfully granted refugee status. How the research will alternate between the terms refugee/ refugees and forcibly displaced/ displaced communities/ forced migrant.

- **Sexual and gender-expansive:** the research calls attention to the limitations of current western labels related to sexual and gender identity categories (See also Cantu, 2009). The research mostly uses the descriptive term 'sexual and gender-expansive' which I use as an umbrella term for sexual attraction and gender that falls outside of society's current heterosexual gender binary standards. I also use the terms LGBT (and or LGBTQI), Queer and SOGIE interchangeably to refer to co-researchers.
- **The Hare and the Baboon, (Tsuru na Gudo):** The "Hare and the Baboon" phrase is from a Zimbabwean Shona folktale. In most of the folktales, the Hare (Tsuru) is presented as a trickster, and the baboon (Gudo) as disadvantaged, innocent or ignorant. The hare consistently outwits and takes advantage of the baboon – through various cunning ways, including violence (See Mutswanga, 2017). The PhD title employs the metaphor of Hare/Tsuru to encompass various systems of oppression (such as white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, colonialism, and transphobia) that uphold inequality and power imbalances. Meanwhile, Baboon/Gudo serves as a metaphor for marginalised societies. In Shona culture, the hare is a trickster known for disrupting peace, being self-serving, individualistic, and seeking victory by tricking and taking advantage of others.
- **Race:** In the study, the term is used to acknowledge race as a social construct and not race used as a biological explanation for what is understood to be social and cultural differences between different communities of people (Du Bois, 1897).

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.

Contextualising the Intersecting Challenges Faced by Sexual and Gender-expansive Asylum Applicants.

In a country known for its strides in LGBTQI+ rights, the mistreatment of racialised sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants in the United Kingdom (UK) paints a contrasting picture. Seeking refuge in other countries often brings hope for black African individuals fleeing persecution, violence, and discrimination. However, narratives of discrimination and violence - from disbelief of their sexual orientation and gender identity to lack of culturally competent support and detention - reveal a disheartening and stark reality within the UK asylum system. For many sexual and gender-expansive persons seeking asylum in global minority countries with histories of colonial violence, the journey towards safety is riddled with multifaceted challenges and systemic barriers, exacerbating their vulnerabilities and subjecting them to multiple forms of violence (Berg & Millbank, 2009; Heller, 2009; Lee & Brotman, 2013; Miller, 2005; Yarwood et al., 2022).

The fundamental challenges faced by sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants lies in the intricate nature of proving their sexual orientation or gender identity-based persecution (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007; Danisi et al., 2021; Ferreira, 2022; Llewellyn, 2021; Tschalaer, 2019). In many cases, applicants are required to substantiate their claims through narratives that are deeply personal and often traumatic (Berg & Millbank, 2009; Jansen & Thomas Spijkerboer, 2011; Selim et al., 2023). The burden of proof places undue pressure on individuals who have fled their home countries with limited documentation or support networks, compelling them to recount intimate details of their lives, oftentimes within a system and an environment that lacks cultural sensitivity or understanding (Alessi et al., 2018; Danisi et al., 2020; Selim et al., 2023; Shaw & Verghese, 2022).

Moreover, asylum procedures in the majority of global minority coloniser states are flawed by systemic shortfalls and biases. There exist misconceptions and stereotypes about what it means to be a sexual and gender-expansive individual, leading to scepticism or disbelief by decision-makers (Rehaag & Verman, 2023; Tschalaer, 2019; Vogler, 2019). This disbelief can manifest in dismissive attitudes or the misinterpretation of cultural nuances, resulting in the rejection of valid asylum claims. As a consequence, applicants are frequently subjected to re-traumatisation as their experiences are scrutinised and often invalidated (Canning, 2021; Mcrae, 2023; Michultka, 2009). The intersectionality of identities further compounds the challenges faced by sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants (Lee & Brotman, 2013). Individuals who belong to marginalised groups within the sexual and gender-expansive spectrum, such as black African, lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual individuals,

or women face compounded discrimination and unique challenges within the asylum system (Lee & Brotman, 2013; Rosati et al., 2021; Tanhira, 2022; Shaw & Verghese, 2022; Venturi, 2023). A growing amount of research has recently begun to examine the intersecting marginalisation and systems of discrimination such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia, and how these intersect to create complex experiences for sexual and gender-expansive individuals seeking refuge in global minority countries (Golembe et al., 2021; Lee & Brotman, 2013; Venturi, 2023). However, there is limited research specifically exploring the nuances of black African individuals seeking asylum based on sexuality and gender within the UK asylum process. This research is conducted by a lesbian/ queer¹ refugee researcher and is directed by sexual and gender-expansive co-researchers claiming asylum or with UK refugee status.

1.1 Criminalisation of Homosexuality: A Brief Analysis of Persecution Sexual and Gender-expansive Persons on the African Continent.

Evidence suggests that prior to European colonisation, African societies were not limited to heterosexual and patriarchal systems and practices, with evidence of matriarchal societies, and tribes who did not prescribe to binaries of genders (e.g., Igbo & Yoruba tribes; Dagaaba people in present day Ghana (Buckle, 2020; Oladele, 2021); the Azande people in the Congo (Kalende, 2014); same sex practices among women in royal palaces of Northern Sudan and among the Azande in Sudan (Buckle, 2020; Evans-Pritchard, 1970; Rainbow Sudan, 2012); excavations in ancient Egypt suggesting that Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were lovers (Rainbow Sudan, 2012); the Beti people from Cameroon (Kalende, 2014), King Mwanga II of Buganda reported to be gay (Boakye, 2018); ancestral wives and spiritual healers among the Shona people, Zimbabwe (Dlamini, 2006; Epprecht, 2004; Murray & Roscoe, 1998); lesbian Sangomas in South Africa (Mkasi, 2016; Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Nkabinde & Morgan, 2006; Nkabinde, 2008), the Nama people in Namibia (Kalende, 2014) the Nupe people in Nigeria; Yan Daudu people, Hausa; Mpho women in Lesotho (Kendall, 1998) and in Gabon, the Pangwe people (Kalende, 2014). This evidence that sexual and gender-expansive persons and various gender expressions and performances have previously existed, illustrates that homophobia was a product of colonialism and speaks to

¹ The description I am likely to use for myself to describe my sexual identity/ gender expression is ancestral wife (chosen by the ancestors but used slightly differently to what Nkabinde, 2008 and Nkabinde & Morgan, 2006, have previously described) and adopted for lack of a better Shona term(s). Otherwise I will alternate between lesbian and queer, and or use both.

the complexities of current societal attitudes and how they intersect with colonial legacies (Dlamini, 2006, Morgan, 2018; Nyanzi, 2013; Tamale, 2011). Centuries of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, forced transportation of prisoners, and exile has left historical legacies that have shaped present-day sexual and gender-expansive persons' or *Queer* migration (Luibhéid, 2008). *Homosexuality*², and any associated acts or sexual conduct between consenting adults is a criminal offence in most countries on the African continent (Amnesty International UK, 2019). Research by ILGA World found that a majority of African countries enforced restrictive policies against sexual and gender-expansive communities, with few countries offering basic protections (ILGA World, 2022).

In 2023 at least 32 of the countries located on the African continent considered *homosexuality* illegal and in five³ of these African states same-sex acts carried a death penalty (Amnesty International UK, 2023; Kamer, 2023). In recent years laws and policies that restricted and criminalised sexual and gender-expansive persons have resulted from divisive political rhetoric adopted by African leaders (Sonke Gender Justice, 2023; Young-Jahangeer & Sibanda, 2018). It was a political strategy that some politicians used to characterise sexual and gender-expansive identities as non-African, but a western import that threatened social cohesion (Currier, & Gogul, 2020; Nyanzi, 2013; Young-Jahangeer & Sibanda, 2018). This sort of scapegoating tactic has led to the tabling of more repressive anti-LGBTQI+ policies, particularly during election cycles (Currier, & Gogul, 2020). During the process of writing this research Members of Parliament (MPs) in Ghana introduced and passed an extreme anti-LGBTQI+ "bill known as the 2021 Promotion of Appropriate Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill" (Akinwotu, 2022; Murumba, 2023). The bill criminalises sexual and gender-expansive persons (LGBTQI+), and their allies. In particular, the bill criminalises the promotion, and advocacy, including any financial support for sexual and gender-expansive persons or organisations (Murumba, 2023). The bill also sought to exclude sexual and gender-expansive persons from accessing healthcare services, including healthcare related to HIV care (Murumba, 2023).

Similarly, lawmakers and politicians have also been pushing for tougher anti-LGBTQI legislation in Kenya (Aljazeera, 2023) and demanding harsher penalties, including the death penalty and castration in Tanzania (Igual, 2023; Kisika, 2023). In September 2023 the

² Homosexuality is placed in italics as most sexual and gender-expansive persons are now moving away from using the term, viewing it as offensive and less inclusive, substituting it with term *gay* and or sometimes *queer*.

³ These countries were Nigeria, Mauritania, Sudan, Somalia and Uganda.

Supreme Court of Kenya⁴ upheld a decision that allowed sexual and gender-expansive persons in Kenya to register non-governmental organisations (NGO) focused on SOGI issues without facing discriminatory barriers related to their sexual orientation (Maina, 2023). However, the Supreme Court decision led to a rapid increase in violence against sexual and gender-expansive communities in the country (Maina, 2023). Moreover, the *Anti-Homosexuality Act* was signed into law in Uganda in May 2023 and the maximum penalty for “aggravated homosexuality” was the death penalty (Amnesty International, 2023). Other African countries such as Egypt and Tunisia have continued to use obscure laws against “debauchery”, “prostitution” and cybercrime to monitor and criminalise sexual and gender-diverse persons, forcing persons suspected of engaging in *homosexuality* to undergo anal examinations by forensic doctors (Human Rights Watch, 2023, para. 7; Long, 2014). When it comes to the legal recognition of transgender and non-binary individuals, there has been very little progress. At the time of writing this study, at least half of the African continent banned transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals from altering gender markers on their legal identification (Ferragamo & Robinson, 2023; ILGA world database, 2023).

In terms of criminalisation against trans communities only a few⁵ African countries are recorded to explicitly criminalise trans persons, through “a piece of legislation or religious law or edict (which often have the force of law) and are easily classified as so-called “cross-dressing” laws” (ILGA World, 2019, p.10). Early colonial attitudes pathologising *homosexuality* are evident in the anti-*homosexuality* laws enforced at the time (Singh, 2023; Mambondiyani, 2023). These colonial criminal laws were often framed in religious language opposing *sodomy* or ‘unnatural’ sexual conduct (Mudarikwa, 2015). Consequently, colonialism, coloniality and religious influence contributed to the externalisation and internalisation of homophobic attitudes and beliefs which have in large part been adopted as cultural values of the continent (Nyanzi, 2013; Mudarikwa, 2015). Critics – including researchers, activists and NGOs have especially identified US evangelical religious organisations for aggravating anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments and funding churches in certain African countries, over the past two decades (Namubiru & Wepukhulu, 2020; Okereke, 2023). Research by the Institute for Journalism and Social Change (IJSC) (2023) linked taxpayers in Europe and North America to conservative religious organisations in Uganda that opposed LGBTQI rights and called for harsher legislation. Churches on the African

⁴ This resulted from a decade legal battle in which Eric Gitari, a Kenyan attorney and rights activist, sought to register an NGO that addressed the violence and abuse suffered by LGBTQI+ individuals in Kenya. On 12 September, 2023, the Supreme Court of Kenya upheld a decision granting Gitari’s National Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC) the right to be registered as an NGO (Maina, 2023).

⁵ In 2023 these countries included Gambia, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda.

continent have continuously remained the face of the anti-LGBTQI+ movement, often adopting language and framing consistent with contemporary movements that advocate for conversion practices⁶ (Okereke, 2023). All of this has led some sexual and gender-expansive to flee their countries of origin for safety in other countries.

However, there have also been positive developments regarding the decriminalisation of *homosexuality* and associated acts, with countries moving toward more inclusive policies, particularly in the southern region of Africa (Ferragamo, & Robinson, 2023). For example, several countries (Mozambique, Angola, Lesotho, Botswana, South Africa) in Southern Africa decriminalised same-sex relations. Most recently the Supreme Court of Namibia ruled to recognise same-sex couples who married in other countries outside of Namibia, where it was legal to do so (Ferragamo, & Robinson, 2023). However, same-sex marriage remains illegal in Namibia, which made the ruling a difficult 'celebration' for many activists, NGOs and litigators who continue to fight for full recognition. Regardless of the favourable laws, sexual and gender-expansive individuals continue to experience homophobia and transphobia in countries where there is legal recognition and sexuality has been decriminalised. For example in post-apartheid South Africa even with constitutional protections, black women - lesbian and trans persons - continue to face gender-based violence (Boonzaier & Zway, 2015; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, & Sandy, 2015; Shabalala et al., 2023) and sexual homicide⁷ (Human Rights Watch, 2011; 2022; Matebeni, 2011, 2013).

Despite the strides that have so far been made on the continent, homophobia, transphobia and anti-gender campaigns and movements have continued to spread across the continent. This and the rise in persecution, violence and criminalisation of sexual and gender-expansive persons force some persons to flee their home countries to other countries for refuge. Whilst many people end up in South Africa, which formally extended refugee protection to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI+) persons since 1998, other people find ways to journey to countries in the global minority coloniser states. The global minority countries have largely been associated with sexual democracy and progress in acknowledging, tolerating, and accepting equal rights for gender and sexual minorities (Giametta, 2017) and often in comparison to countries in the global majority, with histories of colonial violence. However, even with this assumed and perceived western

⁶ "Reparative or conversion therapy is a dangerous practice that targets LGBTQI persons, including the youth and seeks to change their sexual or gender identities" (Human Rights Campaign, n.d).

⁷ For a homicide to be considered 'sexual', evidence of sexual activity of some kind by the perpetrator (Kerr et al., 2013).

democratic superiority, the west's asylum system continues to fail sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and refugees.

Presenting homophobia and transphobia as exclusively prevalent in global majority countries misrepresents both the global majority and global minority countries (Giametta, 2017). Dichotomising countries into 'refugee-sending' and 'refugee-receiving' nations overlooks the historical presence of same-sex desire and practices across various periods and geographical regions (Giametta, 2017). These dichotomies whitewash evidence of rising prejudices and injustice throughout the UK, Europe and most of the global minority country democracies (Giametta, 2017). Homophobia and transphobia in countries of the global majority are frequently portrayed as inherent to their culture, particularly in Africa, perpetuating the misconception of these regions as backward (Haritaworn et al., 2008; Lopes Heimer, 2020). However, this overlooks the colonial legacies that have shaped international relations and influenced attitudes toward gender-based prejudice (Giametta, 2017; Haritaworn et al., 2008; Lopes Heimer, 2020). This way of thinking and conceptualising the problem has also been internalised by some sexual and gender-expansive persons who seek asylum in global minority countries (see further reflections by Giametta, 2017).

Moreover, the colonial legacy of the empire which created the UK's immigration system and how coloniality continues to pervade the system is rarely acknowledged (McFadyen, 2014). Former colonial countries do not only operate within the refugee regime but continue to shape the colonial nature of the refugee/asylum institution itself. However, colonialism has been muted in the history of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with the colonial origins of the refugee system often overlooked (McFadyen, 2014). Although many forcibly displaced migrants and asylum claimants who make the journey to Europe and the UK are black and people of colour (POC), and historical and structural racism have shaped immigration policies and practices, fewer studies have examined how these policies and practices are shaped by colonialism and racism (See Ali, 2020; El-Enany, 2020; Small & Solomos, 2006). Resultantly, sexual and gender-expansive persons flee their home countries to seek asylum in the UK primarily due to severe persecution, discrimination, and danger they face in their home countries.

As highlighted above many African nations, laws and societal norms continue to marginalise and criminalise sexual and gender-expansive identities, leading to violence, harassment, and legal penalties. However, when asylum applicants flee their home countries in search of safety and acceptance in countries such as the UK, they often face an unexpected and disheartening reality upon arrival. Despite their hope for refuge, sexual and

gender-expansive asylum applicants encounter a different form of adversity - the discrimination they anticipated escaping persists in their new environment.

1.2 A Broad Overview of SOGI Asylum Policies with a Focus on the UK.

When the 1951 Refugee Convention was drafted it was not anticipated how critical the document would become for protecting gender and sexual minorities seeking asylum (van Veldhuizen, 2017). Whilst the persecution of gender and sexual minorities is not a new phenomenon, the understanding that a SOGI person does fit into the refugee definition only began to be recognised in the 1980s and considered a justifiable reason to seek asylum (McClellan, 2017; Peyghambarzadeh, 2020). Otherwise, SOGI identity was not ground for asylum claims explicitly recognised under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Before the 1980s any such cases were rejected as same-sex attraction was viewed as a “sexual deviation” and a “mental illness” in many countries, including countries in Europe and the US (Bennett, 1999; Peyghambarzadeh, 2020). In the 1980s, some countries in Europe began to recognise gay and lesbian communities as falling under the category, of “particular social groups” in need of asylum protection. This was followed by the United States in the 1990s (Shuman & Bohmer, 2014). It was in 2004, that the European Union (EU) qualification directive in Article 10 clarified that “a particular social group” was to include persons seeking asylum based on sexual identity (Peyghambarzadeh, 2020). Following this, gender identity was added to the Article in 2011 (Jansen, 2013; Peyghambarzadeh, 2020).

As a result, persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity remains a recent reality in the UK. Homophobic sexual offences legislation was only repealed in 2003 (Johnson, 2007), and it was not until 2017 that the UK government pardoned thousands of gay men convicted under historical laws criminalising 'homosexuality' (Bowcott, 2017). In recent years a surge of hate crimes toward LGBTQI+ persons living in the UK have been recorded (Stewart, 2019; Brooks & Murray, 2021; Stonewall, 2023). Regardless, the UK and Europe continue to attract persons seeking asylum on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, where they are entitled to protection under international human rights instruments, including the 1951 Geneva Convention. The significance of the 1951 Refugee Convention for protecting LGBTQI individuals seeking asylum was not anticipated when it was initially drafted (van Veldhuizen, 2017). The recognition that LGBTQI persons fit into the refugee definition began to emerge in the late 1990s, despite persecution being a longstanding issue for this community (McClellan, 2017; Lopes Andrade, 2020). Before then, sexual identity was not a ground of asylum claim explicitly recognised under the 1951 Refugee Convention and until 2010 gaining asylum on this ground in the UK was difficult.

Around 2010 the UK began to frequently reject SOGI asylum applications much more than before, with the view that rejected asylum claimants could go back and employ 'discretion' (See Home Office, 2010; Lopes Heimer, 2020). The system's reasoning was such that once returned to their country of origin, to avoid persecution, persons could be 'discreet' about their sexuality (Millbank, 2009; UKLGIG, 2010; Briddock, 2016). However, this reasoning undermined the aim of the Refugee Convention (Millbank, 2009). Rather than the UK taking on the responsibility to provide international protection, it placed the responsibility of protection upon sexual and gender-expansive claimants. They were required to protect themselves by avoiding persecution through 'discretion' (Millbank, 2009) and/or by adapting their physical appearance, expression and behaviour to avoid being read as queer people by society (Åberg, 2023). Yet, the condition for discretion was not exercised for individuals claiming asylum on other grounds (e.g., political opinion, religion, or war) (Millbank, 2009; UKLGIG, 2010; Briddock, 2016).

It was only in the 2010 judgment cases of HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon), two gay men who had previously been unsuccessful in their claims due to the discretion requirement, that this view and practice were changed (See Powell, 2021). The judgement demonstrated that forced discretion could not be depended on as a warranty of safety or as an appropriate response to sexual and gender-diverse asylum claims (Johnson, 2011). This landmark case established clearer protections for SOGI claimants, ensuring that asylum decisions consider the risk of persecution based on an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity (Johnson, 2011). As of recent statistics from the UK Home Office, SOGI-related asylum claims constitute a significant portion of all asylum applications. In 2022, there were 1,334 asylum claims based on sexual orientation, representing a small but vital part of the overall asylum landscape. The current policies, outlined in the "Asylum Policy Instruction: Sexual Orientation in Asylum Claims," provide detailed guidance on handling these asylum claims (Home Office, 2016). The guidelines emphasise the need for sensitivity and confidentiality, ensuring that asylum claimants are interviewed by trained personnel and that the assessment of credibility is based on the claimant's experiences and identity rather than stereotypes (Home Office, 2016). The guidelines also outline the Home Office's aim to create an environment where SOGI claimants can provide their testimony without fear of prejudice or discrimination (Home Office, 2016).

Regardless of the development of the judgment cases of HJ and HT, the treatment of sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants did not improve (Bachmann, 2016; Gray, 2010; Wessels, 2012). The question became about how to recognise and distinguish claimants who were 'genuinely' LGBTQI from persons assumed to be pretending to hold these identities to remain in the UK (Åberg, 2023). This led to credibility becoming a key

detail in asylum claims based on sexual orientation which saw a rise in the number of cases disbelieved as *genuinely* LGBTQI (Ferreira, 2022; Lopes Andrade et al., 2020; Souter, 2011; See also Berg & Millbank, 2009; Held, 2019; Murray, 2014). However, the shift from discretion toward disbelief led to the heavy sexualisation of sexual orientation, with asylum claimants being asked intimate questions about their sex lives (Townsend & Taylor, 2014; Travis, 2014; Vine, 2014).

Out of desperation to prove the authenticity of their sexual orientation, many applicants submitted imagery and moving images to evidence their sexual identities to immigration authorities (Bennett, 2014). Following criticism from researchers, activists, litigators, NGOs and the UNHCR's 2012 Guidelines on International Protection No. 9 relating to sexual orientation and gender, the practice ceased. UNHCR's 2012 Guidelines stated that sexual and gender-expansive claimants' asylum outcomes could not be based on practices that were inaccurate, stereotypical and demonstrated inappropriate perceptions about and of sexual and gender-diverse persons (UNHCR, 2012). Hence the guideline criticised the use of detailed questions about claimants' sex lives (UNHCR, 2012). For decision-makers required to assess credibility, the shift moved to look for consistency and coherence in claimants' narratives (Åberg, 2023). This meant that rather than trying to prove that applicants were truly gay or lesbian, the new shift in the process would demonstrate that claimants were not heterosexual and or did not conform to specific heterosexual stereotypes (See Chelvan, 2013).

The Conservative and Labour governments adopted a deterrence approach and increased border controls alongside credibility assessments to reduce the perceived 'abuse' of the asylum system (McFadyen, 2014). The hostile environment was one specific policy approach introduced. The phrase, "hostile environment" concerning migrants, refugees and asylum claimants considered *illegal* and *underserving* was first used by the then UK Home Secretary, Theresa May (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021; Kirkup & Winnett, 2012). The 'Hostile Environment' manifested into policies and practices which are deliberately employed to make life difficult for asylum applicants coming to and migrants living in the UK. In creating a hostile environment, policies and practices invited and encouraged local government officials, public servants, police officers, private companies as well as 'ordinary people' to control migration (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021) to report and exclude certain migrants, including asylum applicants and those without legal papers from services.

The UK and other asylum systems across Europe and the US have been under scrutiny due to the implementation of policies and practices that are harmful (See Bachmann, 2016; Gray, 2010; Held, 2019; Llewellyn, 2017; Lopes Heimer, 2020; Murray, 2014; Steel et al., 2006; Zisakou, 2021). Within the UK hostile environment system, the

treatment of sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants has been particularly contentious, with concerns raised about the fairness, understanding, and support provided to individuals fleeing persecution (Bachmann, 2016; Briddock, 2016; Chaffelson, 2019; Cooper, 2021; Gray, 2010; Millbank, 2009; UKLGIG, 2010). Firstly, the hostile environment policies in the UK have led to a climate of suspicion and scepticism surrounding asylum claims made by sexual and gender-expansive individuals. There have been instances where individuals seeking asylum have faced disbelief as discussed above or a lack of understanding regarding the persecution they might have endured in their home countries (Bennett, 2013; Dustin & Held, 2018; Kahn & Alessi, 2018; Lewis, 2014). This lack of understanding often leads to inadequate assessments of the risks and threats individuals face if forced to return, undermining their asylum claims. Moreover, the asylum process itself can be re-traumatising and emotionally taxing for sexual and gender-expansive persons (Jordan 2009; Kahn & Alessi 2018; Liinason 2020; Lee & Brotman 2011, 2013). The system's complexity and the need to navigate legal intricacies are compounded for individuals who have faced traumatic experiences related to their sexual and gender identity (Alessi et al., 2018; Kahn, & Alessi, 2018). The asylum process is often prolonged, causing prolonged uncertainty and anxiety, impacting asylum applicants' mental health and well-being (Burchett & Matheson, 2010; Moore, 2022; Refugee Council, 2021; Rodríguez García, 2023).

The placement of asylum applicants and persons with failed claims in prison-like detention centres remains a contentious issue, drawing widespread criticism and concern from human rights advocates, policymakers, and humanitarian organizations (Bhatia, 2015; International Detention Coalition, 2015; Refugee Council, 2022; Sampson & Mitchell, 2013). Detention centres, meant for temporary housing during asylum claim processing, are inhumane and have sparked debates about their appropriateness (Gerena 2022; Lewis 2019; Singer 2021). In the UK, detention is not time-limited and can be indefinite. It is the only country in Europe with such policies. Evoking an environment akin to prisons, with high walls, restricted movement, and limited access to resources, asylum applicants, already fleeing persecution and seeking safety, find themselves confined in these settings, which exacerbates their trauma and anxiety (Coffey et al, 2010; British Red Cross, 2023; Robjant et al., 2009). The accommodation provided to sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants outside of detention centres also poses significant challenges. The UK Home Office implemented a dispersal policy in 2000, housing asylum claimants in remote, isolated, and deprived areas without choice, disconnecting them from existing social networks (Griffiths et al., 2006; Jackson, 2020; Mallinson, 2006; Stewart, 2011). Many people find themselves in temporary housing, which can be overcrowded, poorly maintained, or located

in remote areas where they face hostility or discrimination (Bulman, 2018; Jones et al., 2022; Mahase, 2022; Refugee Action, 2020; Open Democracy, 2023).

Securing suitable accommodation that respects sexual and gender-expansive persons' identities and provides a safe environment remains a persistent struggle. The shortcomings in accommodating sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in the UK reflect broader systemic issues, including inadequate policies, insufficient training for staff, and a lack of awareness about the unique challenges faced by this marginalised group (Andrade et al. 2020; Danisi and Ferreira 2022; Gaucer and DeGagne 2016; Rehaag, 2017; Tschalaer 2020;). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants exacerbating inequalities and systematic barriers (Mukumbang et al., 2020; Shaw & Verghese, 2022; Tschalaer, 2020; Tschalaer, 2022). These are just some of the challenges and harmful experiences faced by sexual and gender-expansive persons within the asylum process.

The Geneva Convention, specifically the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, has increasingly been shown to be inadequate in addressing contemporary patterns of forced migration, including the unique plights of women, sexual and gender-expansive individuals, and persons forced to migrate because of climate change (Chaudhury, 2022). Originally designed in the aftermath of World War II, the Convention's focus was primarily on political refugees, leaving significant gaps in protection for those fleeing due to gender-based violence, persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and environmental disasters exacerbated by climate change (Aleinikoff, 2003; Chaudhary & Vahini, 2021; Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2007). Women and sexual and gender-expansive persons often face distinct forms of violence and discrimination that are not adequately covered under the Convention's framework, which predominantly addresses state-based persecution (Crawley, & Lester, 2004; Haines, 2003; LaViolette, 2007). Historically, the definition of a refugee has been interpreted from a cis heterosexual male perspective, through male experiences and by men (Crawley, 2000; 2001; UNHCR, 2007). As a result, asylum was mostly given to men who had engaged in political acts and or were persecuted on these grounds (UNHCR, 2007). However, in recent years several countries have included gender-based persecution, as well as persecution based on gender and sexuality in their laws and policies. Furthermore, the Convention does not recognise climate refugees, a rapidly growing category as global warming leads to rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and habitat loss, displacing millions of people (Chaudhary & Vahini, 2021; Giannini & Docherty, 2009). These gaps necessitate a re-evaluation and expansion of international legal protections to encompass the diverse and evolving nature of forced migration today.

The UK's recent move to disregard the Refugee Convention and introduce the British Bill of Rights signifies a profound shift in its asylum policies (Human Rights Watch, 2024; UNHCR, 2023). This new legislation aims to dilute the traditionally afforded refugees' protections, marking a significant retreat from international commitments (UNHCR, 2023). The proposed legislation eliminates asylum access in the UK for individuals arriving irregularly, having transited even briefly through a country where they weren't persecuted (Human Rights Watch, 2024; UNHCR, 2023). It prohibits forcibly displaced migrants from lodging refugee or human rights claims, regardless of the gravity of their situations. Furthermore, the Bill of Rights mandates asylum claimants' transfer to another nation, like Rwanda, without ensuring their access to protection there (UK Parliament, n.d.). Additionally, the bill introduces broad detention powers with minimal judicial scrutiny (UNHCR, 2023). The Bill weakened the human rights of all forcibly displaced migrants including trafficking and slavery survivors and drew widespread criticism from domestic civil society groups, UN experts, and the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Various literature highlighted the trend of backsliding on domestic human rights protections as part of a broader pattern in global minority liberal states (as well as in South Africa), where the right to seek asylum is increasingly under threat (Bartels et al., 2023; Kavuro, 2022; Torbisco Casals, 2022; Also see work of legal scholars, Colin Harvey and Patricia Tuitt). There is a growing tendency among global minority nations to prioritise national security and border control over humanitarian obligations, leading to the erosion of asylum rights, as a retreat from the liberal values these states profess to uphold (Watson, 2009, Panayotatos, 2021). The British Bill of Rights does not pose a serious threat to the rights of people in the UK, but it does set a precedent for other nations to follow, thereby undermining the global asylum system established post-World War II (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Research exploring experiences of sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants concerning structural, symbolic, and institutional violence is of paramount significance in understanding and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by this marginalised group. The intersection of their multiple overlapping identities with the complexities of seeking asylum renders sexual and gender-expansive persons particularly vulnerable to various forms of oppression and discrimination. Such persons often encounter systemic barriers and inequalities that impede their access to humane and just asylum processes. This includes bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate legal frameworks, and discriminatory policies that fail to account for the unique needs of sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants. Research in this area helps identify systemic flaws, advocating for policy change to ensure equitable treatment and access to asylum for all, especially at a time when various nations are

retreating from their international commitments to offer protection to forcibly displaced migrants.

1.3 The Question of Homonationalism and Challenges Faced by Sexual and Gender-Expansive Asylum Claimants.

The subject of sexual and gender-expansive individuals seeking asylum in the UK has shed light on how the state defines and controls LGBT identity through border controls and the asylum process (Galdeano, 2019). Galdeano (2019) expanded on Puar's (2007) ideas of homonationalism to demonstrate how idealised white bodies were used as the prototype for sexual and gender-expansive persons seeking protection in the UK. Homonationalism describes the increasing alignment of primarily global minority nations with LGBT rights, alongside the involvement of LGBT individuals and organisations in nationalist agendas (Puar, 2007). Coined by Puar (2007), the term originally explained discourses of race and sexuality shaped by the USA's response to terrorism. Over time, it has evolved to signify how LGBTIQ rights and visibility have become core elements in nationalist discourses globally (Lagerman, 2023). While the inclusion of LGBTIQ individuals as full members of the nation and state support for LGBTIQ rights are not inherently problematic, these practices become dangerous when only certain kinds of LGBTIQ people are deemed acceptable (Mole, 2017). Homonationalism therefore includes LGBTIQ communities using nationalist rhetoric, policies, and practices to exclude 'undesired' groups and nations using LGBTIQ inclusion to create moral hierarchies over national, racial, and religious Others (Mole, 2017).

Sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants are, for example, expected to fit specific stereotypes (i.e., they should have kissed another same-sex person, and read well-known 'westernised' LGBT literature such as the works of Oscar Wilde) (McDowall, 2013). It is also assumed that they would be familiar with gay icons such as Elton John and should have socialised in clubs ⁸SOHO or ⁹G-A-BALE (Bennett & Thomas 2013; McDowall, 2013). Western-centric narratives and beliefs regarding sexuality and gender, especially evident in laws safeguarding LGBT asylum claimants and refugees, reflect the concept of homonationalism (Galdeano, 2019). This contradicts the genuine identity and journey of African individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities seeking asylum.

⁸ West End part of London and an entertainment district which has historically has also attracted London's LGBTQI community

⁹ UK'S largest Gay and Lesbian club scene

Additionally, the media often depicts asylum applicants as posing a risk to the nations hosting them (Galdeano, 2019).

A large number of sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants are black African and or persons of colour coming from previously colonised states and have been historically minoritised and invisibilised by colonialism. Hence, it is crucial to recognise that UK citizenship is founded on western concepts of whiteness, heteronormativity, and binary gender norms (Galdeano, 2019). Any identity which falls outside of this *ideal* is perceived as a threat to security and a threat to how host countries (socially and culturally) operate (Danisi et al., 2021; Haritaworn, 2015; Sharif 2015; Thiel, 2014). The asylum procedures have transformed into a manifestation of Western colonialism, given that international refugee regulations often prioritise the preferences of Western countries (Held & McCarthy, 2018; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2006)

Sexual diversity in particular is based on prescriptive western perceptions of LGBTQI identity (O'Shaughnessy, 2015). Used to support the 'anti-migrant policy' and a hostile environment, the western perceptions of sexuality and gender identity create a binary that presents the morally acceptable heteronormative LGBTQI, and the non-progressive, orthodox and undesirable LGBTQI asylum applicant/migrant (O'Shaughnessy, 2015). Similarly, LGBTQI rights that the UK advocates for are customarily constructed on binary definitions of gender and sexuality, such as pushing for gay marriage (Robinson & Frost, 2023). These conceptions and constructions of LGBTQI identity advantage white, heteronormative bodies, while sexual and gender-expansive persons from different cultural, religious backgrounds and or from different geographical origins (often Black, POC, African, indigenous) continue to be marginalised (O'Shaughnessy, 2015). Wilcox (2017) highlights how trans and genderqueer individuals within securitised migrant systems challenge the state's efforts to rigidly categorise gender based on birth-assigned embodiment. As such, the non-conformist bodies are considered disruptive, undesirable and dangerous (Wilcox, 2017). Homonationalism considers certain bodies as worthy and deserving of protection and Others as unworthy and undeserving of protection (Puar, 2013). This is evident in the way UK hostile immigration policies are framed and practised, and how the state continues to mistreat, exclude, abuse and attack African sexual and gender-expansive claimants, treating them as not worthy of protection and not belonging to the UK.

Numerous studies are exploring the experiences of general communities of asylum applicants and refugees who flee other types of persecution. Recognition of individuals seeking refuge due to persecution based on their sexuality and gender identity has only emerged in the last couple of decades. As a result, recent years have seen an increase in the reporting of violence that African sexual and gender-expansive applicants suffer at the

borders of former colonial countries. Previously, other studies on issues impacting sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants examined mental health and the impact of asylum interviews on mental health (Nematy et al., 2022; Schock et al., 2015); the requirement to prove sexuality (Lewis, 2014; Miller, 2005; Ward, 2018); issues related to credibility assessments (Denisi et al., 2021; Held et al., 2022; Gyulai, 2013; Selim et al., 2023; SOGICA, 2020; van Veldhuizen, 2017), detention (Bhatia, 2015; Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Bosworth & Kellezi, 2017; Bachmann, 2016; De Genova, 2019; Mountz et al., 2013; Sampson & Mitchell, 2013), the experiences of trans migrants (Migrant Help UK, 2020; Milton, 2022; Rosati et al., 2021; Van der Pijl et al., 2018; Vogler 2019), resilience (Alessi et al. 2016), structural violence (Lee & Brotman, 2011; Canning, 2017; Hourani et al, 2021; Ravid, 2022), the impact of trauma (McDonnell et al., 2013; Memon, 2012; Nematy, 2022; Yarwood, 2022); discrimination (Ziersch et al., 2020), research on legal frameworks (Danisi et al., 2021; Leach & Mansouri, 2004; Ferreira, 2022); impact of asylum waiting (Lambert, 2018; Moore et al., 2022) and condition of accommodation (Mahase, 2022; Wimark, 2020).

However African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants are a particularly vulnerable and vulnerabilised community, both within the non-LGBT refugee community and the non-black LGBTQI+ asylum/ refugee community. Living on the margins and at the intersections of many identities, African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants are not only further marginalised within the asylum system but their experiences are also multiple and intersecting in unique ways. Their experiences of the asylum process and the violence faced are often compounded by several intersecting factors, due to overlapping identities and experiences such as sexuality, gender, religion, race, geographical origin, culture, class, and access to the English language to name a few. Limited research so far carried out has not always fully captured or considered all of these overlapping identities and experiences. Additionally, the majority of studies completed are by white scholars and completed *on* and *about* asylum applicants and rarely ever *with* claimants and refugees as collaborators. This research offers a structural intersectional analysis which allows for sexuality and gender sensitivity and considers how factors such as heteronormativity, cisnormativity, white supremacy, racism, culturally insensitive understandings, homonationalism and nationalism influence how black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants are treated within the asylum system, and the consequential cost of this treatment on them.

1.4 Significance.

The plight of asylum claimants is a critical global concern, and within this demographic, black African sexual and gender-expansive individuals seeking asylum in the UK face unique challenges that demand careful consideration. Research on this specific group of migrants is of utmost importance as it not only highlights their distinct experiences but also contributes to the development of more inclusive policies, protection mechanisms, and support systems. Therefore, at the heart of the current research is the fundamental respect for human rights.

This research plays a pivotal role in documenting the experiences of sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, providing evidence of the discrimination faced and advocating for the protection of their basic human rights. By understanding the specific barriers and challenges sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and refugees encounter, researchers contribute to the development of mechanisms that ensure the safety and well-being of this vulnerable and vulnerabilised community. Investigating the experiences of sexual and gender-expansive black African asylum claimants and refugees will inform the evolution of asylum policies, highlighting gaps that may exist and guiding informed policymaking to address their unique needs.

The social and cultural contexts in both the countries of origin and the host nation significantly shape the experiences of black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and refugees. This research will explore some of these contextual nuances, unravelling the layers of discrimination and bias that asylum claimants face. The knowledge obtained is indispensable for service providers, policymakers, and support organisations, enabling them to tailor their approaches to be culturally sensitive and better meet the specific needs of this community. A decolonial lens is critical for examining the experiences of sexual and gender-expansive black African asylum claimants due to the historical context of colonialism and its lasting impact. Decolonial analysis will allow the research to trace the roots of discriminatory policies and practices, understanding how colonial histories shape the present-day challenges faced by black African asylum claimants. By acknowledging and challenging these historical injustices, it is hoped that we can work towards dismantling systems that perpetuate discrimination and inequality within their bordering practices.

1.5 Thesis Structure.

This introductory chapter has explored the background of the study. It has contextualised the challenges faced by sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and refugees. The introductory chapter also offers an overview of the research study, including the significance of the research. Chapter Two reviews the literature on the multifaceted realities of the migration experience. It gives a broad review of the causes and drivers of refugee migration and the lived experiences of asylum applicants in host countries, providing a nuanced perspective on their encounters and struggles. Chapter Three details the theoretical framework of the study. It discusses three integrated theoretical frameworks, namely, a Trauma perspective, Structural Intersectionality Theory and Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory. Chapter Four outlines the decolonial methodological approach and procedures for the study. It discusses how Participatory Action Research Methods and Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis were utilised. This chapter also offers an outline of the ethical considerations and reflective practice about the research and research process. Chapters Five and Six discuss the results of the research, which is organised by the overarching theme of structural and symbolic violence. The theme of structural violence is produced through narratives of violent uncertainty and exclusion, exclusionary state practices, dis/location, neglect, and re-traumatisation and narratives of intersectional discrimination and colonial notions of African gendered and sexual identities. The final concluding chapter of this thesis, Chapter Seven, is a summary of the research's findings, limitations, contributions, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: The Multifaceted Realities of the Migration Experience: A Synthesis of Existing Literature.

2.1 Introduction.

The migration experiences of persons seeking asylum and refuge are often marked by profound challenges and complexities. Sexual and gender-expansive individuals face persecution, discrimination, and violence in their home countries due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Akinwotu, 2022; ILGA World, 2019, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Murumba, 2023; Young-Jahangeer & Sibanda, 2018). Forced to flee their home countries due to such violence as listed above, they embark on difficult journeys in search of safety, often facing dangers, discrimination, and uncertainty along the way (Alessi et al. 2016, 2017; Canning, 2019; Borges, 2023; Held et al., 2022; Fransen & Haas, 2022; Frelick et al., 2018; Mareci et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2018). Their migration involves navigating legal hurdles, cultural adjustments, and the struggle to rebuild once arrived in host countries (Fasani et al., 2018; Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2017a, 2017b).

When considering the migration experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals, especially Black African sexual and gender-expansive persons, additional layers of complexity emerge (Berger et al., 2015; Fuglei, 2023; Held, 2019; Lopes Andrade et al., 2020; Marnell et al., 2021; Ngwenya, 2021; Taha, 2019; Sarkin & Morais, 2022; Venturi, 2023). For example, for Black African sexual and gender-expansive individuals in particular, the intersectionality of their identities brings forth unique challenges, as they may encounter compounded discrimination and marginalisation due to race, sexual identity, gender identity, cultural background or language among other experiences and identities (Beetar, 2016; Lee & Brotman, 2011, 2013; Sarkin & Morais, 2022; Rosati et al., 2021). This chapter reviews existing literature on the refugee migration experience.

The asylum-seeking experience is a multifaceted and deeply complex journey that has garnered considerable attention within the scholarly literature. By synthesising a diverse array of scholarly works, media and socio-political analyses, the review attempts to unravel the intricate layers that define and shape asylum claimants and refugees' migration trajectories. Literature on the migration experience has uncovered themes that highlight the complexities of asylum claimants' and refugees' journeys. Among these themes lies the pursuit of safety and security, the intricate dynamics of identity negotiation in new landscapes, the psychological toll of displacement and asylum process, barriers to claiming asylum and the challenges of integration within unfamiliar societal structures (See Danisi et al., 2021; Ferreira, 2018; Held, 2023; Hewett, 2021; Hynes, 2011; Hourani et al., 2022; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Jibril, 2008).

Scholars who examined the root causes of displacement found that causes range from armed conflicts (Cohen, 2022; Jolof et al., 2022; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017), political persecution (Bender, 2021; Smith, 2012), human rights violations (Riley et al., 2020), environmental crises (Bellizzi et al., 2023; Myers, 2002, 2012; World Vision, 2021; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023), socio-economic factors (Achiume, 2017; Bilgen et al., 2023; Goodfellow, 2023) and gender-based violence (Mullally, 2011; Saunders et al., 2022). These push factors force individuals to seek a different life and prospects in countries with more favourable economic conditions and/or perceived security and safety. Moreover, socioeconomic disparities, including poverty, lack of opportunities, and economic hardship often contribute significantly to migration flows (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022; Flahaux & De Haas, 2016; Murrugarra et al., 2011).

Additionally, persecution based on ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation are direct cause of forced migration (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022; Mudarikwa et al., 2021; Rüegger, 2019; Selim et al., 2023). Several studies highlight the systematic violence, legal prosecution, and social marginalization experienced by individuals due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Andrade Lopes, 2018; Briddock, 2016; Camminga, 2016, 2019; Held, 2015; Mudarikwa et al., 2021). Despite the significant growth in research on SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) asylum in recent years, studies specifically focused on the challenges faced by sexual and gender-expansive individuals remain limited compared to mainstream migration research. Research on sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants remains a blind spot due to several factors. Legal and bureaucratic barriers complicate access to them, and sexual and gender-expansive persons often fear exposure, legal repercussions, or deportation, making them hesitant to participate in research (Garcia & Nguyen, 2018; Hegarty & Lundy, 2020; Smith & Johnson, 2019). This research area also lacks sufficient funding and institutional support, as other areas are prioritised (Patel & Lee, 2017). Additionally, political and social climates in both origin and host countries influence research funding and priorities, with host countries sometimes resisting recognition and support for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants' rights, extending to research efforts. Therefore, although broader refugee studies offer valuable insights into displacement, they often overlook the distinct experiences of sexual and gender-expansive individuals (See Luibhéid, 2004).

White saviourism in the context of migration is such that international borders control and govern migration, making persons who are forcibly displaced subjected to a varied set of rules and regulations that stem from the legal, to the contractual to the humanitarian (De Genova, 2013; Khan, 2022). The origins of white saviourism in migration are linked to a colonial past legacy which led global minority countries to open their borders to citizens of

their former colonies to make 'amends' with their colonial pasts (Bernhard et al., 2004; Glasman, 2023; Khan, 2022). However, the real purpose of opening borders to global minority countries is to benefit their labour-driven economies. In countries such as the UK, when migration from the former colonies began to increase, so did the hostile forms of border control and restrictive immigration regimes (Khan, 2022). In the contemporary landscape of immigration and asylum processes, sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants face an array of invasive and disrespectful questioning designed to assess the validity of their claims (Ferreira & Venturi, 2017; Ghoshal & Schacher, 2020; Jansen et al., 2011; Shaw et al., 2021). This interrogation process is not only dehumanising but also deeply rooted in a narrative that frames the UK as a site of moral superiority and a haven free from discrimination (Giametta, 2017; Murray, 2014). Such a portrayal aligns closely with the problematic white saviour discourse, which casts global minority nations as rescuers of those from perceived 'backward' nations.

O'Connell-Davidson's (2006) critique of debates on trafficking provides a valuable lens through which to understand white saviourism. The critique argues that the discourse around trafficking often positions global minority countries as a protector of human rights, while simultaneously casting the global majority countries as danger zones and backward societies (O'Connell-Davidson, 2006). This dichotomy not only simplifies complex issues but also serves to reinforce the global minority countries' moral superiority. O'Connell-Davidson's (2006) critique is also directly applicable to the treatment of black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. The strict scrutiny asylum claimants face in the UK is justified as necessary to protect both the UK asylum system and the British people, and assumes that the UK is inherently good and morally superior (Giametta, 2017; Lewis, 2014). The assumption is that asylum claimants are escaping from countries rife with persecution, discrimination and immorality to find refuge in a country that is apparently, free of such ills. This narrative ignores the ongoing struggles and discrimination faced by LGBT individuals within the UK itself, thereby perpetuating a myth of western exceptionalism (Giametta, 2017; Luibhéid, 2008). By casting themselves as protectors of LGBT rights, countries like the UK reinforce their self-image as moral exemplars. The white saviour complex thus serves to mask the global minority's shortcomings while casting a critical eye on global majority countries. An increase in knowledge production that examines the lived experiences of black African sexual and gender-expansive individuals, from a decolonial lens, including their asylum and displacement experiences, is also still lacking. Comprehensive studies on the overlapping unique experiences of forcibly displaced sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants are also missing (Rodríguez García, 2023).

A review by Shaw and Verghese (2022) identified gaps in research and data needs regarding LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants and refugees. Further examination of the demographic characteristics of sexual and gender-expansive displaced persons could strengthen research on this group of people. The vulnerabilisation of sexual and gender-expansive individuals to discrimination, violence, and persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, demands focused attention. Therefore, understanding how the demographic characteristics of LGBTIQ+ individuals (Shaw & Verghese, 2022) intersect with the asylum process and their refugee status is crucial in providing targeted support and advocacy (Rodríguez García, 2023). This review chapter provides an overview of some of the barriers that asylum claimants, including sexual and gender-expansive persons, face in gaining refugee status. It then delves into reviewing asylum applicants' lived experiences once in host countries and concludes by outlining the research aims and questions. Asylum systems in the global minority world appear to have similar issues when it comes to SOGI asylum, and this research looks at literature from different parts of the world with a focus on global minority asylum systems.

2.2 Barriers to Claiming Asylum or Refugee Status.

Studies have identified barriers faced by asylum applicants in claiming refugee status, including language and cultural obstacles (Ghahari et al., 2020; Heidinger, 2023), lack of knowledge about available services (Gilmartin & Dagg, 2021), and navigating complex agencies, notably in the US and Europe (Johnson, 2022). LGBTIQ+ individuals encounter unique challenges, such as a lack of awareness about grounds for asylum based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Andrade et al., 2020; Berg & Millbank, 2009; LaViolette, 2007; O'Leary, 2008), providing "credible" narratives (Kahn & Alessi, 2018), stereotypes impacting perceptions (Rehaag, 2017), and issues related to economic insecurity and mental health (Llewelyn, 2021). Scholars discuss the effectiveness and fairness of legal mechanisms for safeguarding asylum rights (Berg & Millbank, 2009; Danisi et al., 2021; Lopes Andrade et al., 2020; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Mudarikwa et al., 2021; Tschalaer, 2019; Walsh & Sumption, 2023), focusing on key aspects of international refugee law, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Danisi et al., 2021; Dustin & Held, 2018; Güler et al., 2019). These legal frameworks define refugee rights, including non-refoulement and the right to seek asylum.

Some literature involves SOGI asylum claimants and their supporters from across Europe completing online questionnaires about their experiences with SOGI asylum procedures and wider social experiences (Danisi et al., 2021). In contrast, other research

juxtaposes policy and law in the UK and Germany, focusing on cases involving claimants who had children with opposite-sex partners and could be identified or perceived as bisexual, as well as cases where religion influenced decision-making on SOGI (Dustin & Held, 2018). Dustin and Held's (2018) paper, part of the SOGICA project, uses qualitative data from interviews and tribunal observations in the UK and Germany. The project's main goal was to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ asylum claimants in Europe, focusing on how sexual orientation and gender identity claims are managed in the asylum process, including the challenges faced and factors affecting decision-making (Dustin & Held, 2018). Key findings revealed the unique difficulties LGBTQ+ individuals encountered in proving their identity, the varying cultural and social awareness among decision-makers in the UK and Germany, and legal and procedural barriers to asylum (Dustin & Held, 2018). The findings suggested several implications for policy and practice, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity, consistent guidelines, and robust support networks (Dustin & Held, 2018). Additionally, academics in Amsterdam conducted qualitative research using data from questionnaires sent to national experts in European Member States, including lawyers, governments, academics, and NGOs, to describe policy and practice concerning LGBTI asylum applicants in European countries (Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011).

Studies examining challenges within global asylum systems highlight disparities in asylum procedures, including bureaucratic hurdles faced by general UK asylum claimants (Asif & Kienzler, 2022), general asylum claimants in Austria (Dahlvik, 2018), and general Syrian forced migrants in Berlin (Haller & Yanaşmayan, 2023). Access to justice for general asylum applicants in the Canadian detention system (Silverman & Molnar, 2016), as well as lengthy processes and living in limbo, have been studied extensively, with a focus on various regions such as Somali refugees in Kenya (Abdi, 2005), South Africa (Amnesty International, 2019), Australia (Lippi et al., 2023), the UK (Moore et al., 2022; Refugee Council, 2021), Switzerland (Hainmueller et al., 2016), and Sweden (Esaiasson et al., 2022), among others. While few studies have theorised LGBTIQ asylum applicants' experiences of waiting, Shakhsari (2014) explored the relationship between temporality and refugee rights through ethnographic data from interviews with Iranian queer and transgender refugee applicants in Turkey. Seitz (2017) highlighted the waiting room as a material and metaphorical space that produces asylum applicants as liminal queer subjects, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with 'queer' asylum applicants and their supporters in Canada. Other research in Germany has also focused on LGBTIQ+ participants from diverse continents, countries, racial backgrounds, and cultural heritages, including Tunisia, Iran, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Lebanon, and Syria, and their experiences with waiting, illustrating how LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants navigate wait time and create spaces of resistance (Tschalaer, 2023). However,

few studies have solely focused on the waiting experiences of black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants.

Various barriers to claiming asylum include inadequate legal representation (Almasalkhi, 2019; Ardalan, 2015; Kenny et al., 2016), security challenges (Bachmann, 2016; Eberechi, 2020; Hanrahan, 2023; Grungras et al., 2009; Tschalaer, 2019), criminalisation and securitisation of refugees and asylum claimants (African Commission on Human Rights and People's Rights, 2023; Billings, 2019; McConnon, 2022; Welch & Schuster, 2005), structural violence (Canning, 2017; Cortvriend, 2023; Dahlberg & Thapar-Björkert, 2023; Hourani et al., 2022; Ravid, 2022; Ramage et al., 2023), and credibility issues (Dustin & Held, 2018; D'Epifanio, 2011; Kahn & Alessi, 2018; Selim et al., 2023; Vogler, 2019). Studies on structural violence within the asylum system have previously used Britain as a case study (Canning, 2017). Canning's (2017) book focuses on the everyday harms of the British asylum system, particularly on the lives of women awaiting asylum. Similarly, Cortvriend's (2023) qualitative research explores how women seeking asylum in the UK cope with trajectories of structural violence, with participants from various continents and countries. In South Africa, a study examined the concept of structural violence in shaping refugee women's everyday experiences of xenophobia (Dahlberg & Thapar-Björkert, 2023).

In other parts of the world, structural violence and state racism towards asylum claimants from Sudan and Eritrea have been studied (Ravid, 2022). The research in Occupier Israel, draws from ethnographic fieldwork to centre asylum claimants' experiences of state-enforced exclusion through detention and their understanding of their treatment as racialised (Ravid, 2022). In particular, the study aimed to illustrate how state control is perceived by asylum applicants subjected to it. Findings showed that African asylum applicants experienced legal exclusion and economic destitution in the state through the denial of services, the application of tenuous and securitising legal status and precarious economic conditions (Ravid, 2022). Applicants also experienced Physical Exclusion and Social Distance through physical removal in the form of detention, social rejection and segregation (Ravid, 2022). Other research describes the lived experiences and impacts of GBV in the context of structural and legal violence enacted through asylum deterrence policies on pregnant and parenting asylum-seeking women at the Mexico-US border during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ramage et al., 2023).

Research suggests that due to their intersectional identities, African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants experience structural violence differently from the broader refugee community (Borgqvist, 2016). However, studies examining structural, symbolic, or racialised violence in LGBTQI asylum applicants, particularly black African

sexual and gender-expansive claimants, are scarce. A study in Sweden aims to understand the structural violence experienced by cis-gender gay man refugees through intersectionality theory, revealing subtle forms of structural violence within the Swedish refugee regime (Borgqvist, 2016). Nevertheless, this study has a limited sample size of only four participants from Jamaica, Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan. In Canada, social workers and community organizers were interviewed, employing critical intersectionality analysis to introduce an anti-oppressive practice model for supporting queer and trans refugees (Brotman & Lee, 2011). Phillimore and colleagues (2022) conducted interviews in five countries, adopting a structural violence approach to explore how early COVID-19 pandemic conditions affected forced migrant sexual and gender-based violence survivors' lives.

Research on the refugee regime and the experiences of sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants highlights the importance of examining the intersectionality of oppression and structural violence within the broader geopolitical context (Lee & Brotman, 2011). However, few studies have adopted an intersectional approach to understanding the experiences of asylum claimants and refugees (Moreno-Lax, 2021; Raimondo et al., 2023; Sarkin & Morais, 2022; Savaş & Dutt, 2023; Standke-Erdmann, 2021; Taha, 2019), with even fewer focusing specifically on sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants (Borgqvist, 2016; Chossière, 2021; Dustin & Held, 2018; Held, 2019; Rosati et al., 2021; Venturi, 2023). Despite a large body of literature on intersectionality, only a few studies explicitly link intersectionality and sexual and gender-expansive asylum. For example, Dustin and Held (2018) used intersectionality to analyse SOGI-based asylum case law, while Venturi (2023) examined soft law instruments, legislation, and case law in Italy. These studies demonstrated how intersectionality can provide a nuanced understanding of LGBTIQ+ asylum applicants' vulnerabilities and support state practices addressing their protection needs. Danisi and colleagues (2021) combined a human rights-based approach with contributions from feminism and queer theories to analyse SOGI asylum critically. Few studies explored the intersection of LGBTQI asylum, such as those in the US focusing on women and Mexican gay immigrants (Berger, 2009; Epstein & Carrillo, 2014; Morgan, 2006) and cisgender gay men's experiences in the UK asylum process (Lewis, 2014). Consequently, there is limited research using intersectionality to understand sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants' and refugees' experiences, revealing how intersecting identities contribute to being vulnerabilised, shaping their experiences in host countries. Tailoring support systems, policies, and interventions to meet the specific needs of black African SOGI asylum applicants is crucial, considering the differential treatment within refugee and asylum-seeking communities. Moreover, grouping experiences of sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants together often overlook the distinct experiences within

the LGBTQI+ community, particularly those of black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and refugees.

Moreover, literature exploring the legal and policy framework surrounding sexual and gender-expansive refugee migration reveals recurring themes highlighting the unique complexities and challenges faced by these communities. In colonial countries like the UK, the process of claiming asylum based on sexuality and gender identity begins upon the claimant's physical arrival in the host country and lodging of their asylum claim with immigration authorities (Andonian, 2023). At this stage, individuals undergo an initial interview, also known as the screening interview (Akin, 2015; Asanovic, 2018; Bögner et al., 2007; Right to Remain, 2023; Selim et al., 2023), before being invited back for a substantive interview (Right to Remain, 2023). The initial interview is crucial as it gathers basic details such as reasons for seeking asylum, nationality, language, and religion. During this interview, individuals are required to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity and articulate that their fear of persecution is based on LGBT characteristics (Andonian, 2023). Evidence indicates that asylum claimants often experience long waiting periods, sometimes spanning years, before being called for the substantive interview (Burchett & Matheson, 2010; Hainmueller et al., 2016; Refugee Council, 2021; Moore et al., 2022). The substantive interview, which comprises over 205 questions, delves into claimants' accounts of persecution and fear in detail. The UK asylum interview is designed to be thorough and tailored to each applicant's specific circumstances. However, the number of questions asked during the interview can vary significantly depending on the applicant's situation, background, and the details of their asylum claim (GOV.UK, 2022; Right to Remain, n.d.). There is not a fixed number of questions for any interview, including those for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. Regardless, the interview can be lengthy and difficult, often lasting several hours and for some, it can take place as several shorter interviews instead of one big one (Right to Remain, n.d.). Sexual and gender-expansive individuals must provide consistent, credible, and detailed evidence of their sexual and gender identities and the risks they faced in their home countries (Asanovic, 2018; Dawson & Gerber, 2017; Dustin & Held, 2018; Hersh, 2015; Memon, 2012; Selim et al., 2023).

During asylum interviews, immigration officials explicitly asked intimate questions as part of the process of assessing and gathering corroborative evidence related to claims involving sexual orientation (Åberg, 2023). Rejections of individuals' claims, coupled with critiques regarding the absence of witness evidence from sexual partners, revealed immigration officials' rigid understanding of sexual relationships (Oldman, 2022). Proving one's sexuality posed a significant challenge for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in obtaining refugee status, as literature highlighted the issue of credibility –

demonstrating that they are gay, trans, lesbian, bisexual, etc. (Ferreira & Danisi, 2021; Free Movement, 2013; Townsend & Taylor, 2014; Batchelor, 2015; Bachmann, 2016).

Immigration officials frequently accused individuals of lying or fabricating their experiences, leading to concerns about the credibility assessments' fairness and accuracy (Batchelor, 2015).

Sexual and gender-expansive persons have previously described their shock and disappointment at some of the questions asked them by HO officials (Chirape, 2018, 2021). Similarly, Travis (2014) and Townsend and Taylor (2014) highlighted indecent questions sexual, and gender-expansive asylum claimants have previously been asked during asylum interviews. Some of the explicit, indecent, and degrading questions included, *"Did you put your penis into X's backside?"* (Travis, 2014); *"I was asked by a male interviewer how I, as a Christian, could justify my sexuality with God"*. *"He asked me how I could know I was a lesbian if I had never slept with a man"*. *"He kept asking me where I had sex with my female partners. I felt that he had established in his mind that I was lying"* (Townsend & Taylor, 2014); *"Was it loving sex or rough?"*; *"So you had intercourse with him not just blow jobs?"*; *"What have you found is the most successful way of pulling men?"* (Townsend & Taylor, 2014; Lyons, 2017). The inappropriate questions are based on stereotypical views of sexuality and gender. Other scholars and activists have also reported similar narratives. For example, Batchelor (2015) wrote about clients who were asked to name gay bars in their UK HO interviews.

In some cases, asylum claimants have felt pressured to submit graphic imagery of themselves engaging in sexual activity with their partners or explicit audio-visual material to prove their sexual identities (Vine, 2014; Duffy, 2017). Such pressures have led to feelings of humiliation (Struthers, 2020) and desperation, exacerbating the helplessness already felt by asylum claimants (Schock et al., 2015), who are often vulnerable to mental health illnesses (Fazel et al., 2005; Johnson & Thompson, 2008). Following an investigation into the handling of asylum claims by the Home Office (HO), recommendations were made to provide internationally accepted training adopting UNHCR-endorsed best practices for interviewing sexual and gender-expansive individuals (Vine, 2014). Consequently, sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants were no longer asked sexually explicit questions, and it became unacceptable for claimants to submit photographic and video evidence of personal sexual activity to immigration officials as proof of their sexuality (Asanovic, 2018). However, as part of the credibility assessment, sexual and gender-expansive claimants are still required to demonstrate a reasonable likelihood that they have the claimed sexual orientation and gender identity (Oldham, 2022).

Credibility is a focal point for decision-makers in the asylum process regarding sexuality and gender-expansive asylum claimants. Instances where claimants have a history of heterosexual relationships or have children are used to challenge the legitimacy of their claims based on sexuality (Johnson, 2011). The system assumes that a history of heterosexual relationships invalidates the LGBT identity of sexual and gender-expansive claimants (Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Johnson, 2001; Zisakou, 2021), overlooking the social and cultural contexts where individuals' sexuality and gender expressions may have been controlled or directed by societal norms. Some individuals may have been compelled into heterosexual marriages by family or society to protect their sexual identity or conceal their sexual and gender identities (UNHCR, 2020). Moreover, the system fails to recognise that individuals may come to terms with their sexuality at different stages of life (Johnson, 2011), especially for applicants from countries where it is unsafe to openly explore and express their sexualities and genders. Additionally, there is a lack of understanding that genuine heterosexual attraction in bisexual individuals does not negate their genuine attraction to others and the need to express both aspects of their sexuality.

The system also failed to consider that, culturally, African sexual and gender-expansive individuals are often reluctant to discuss intimate aspects of their sexuality and gender identities, especially with strangers. This hesitance may stem from factors such as limited opportunities to openly explore and discuss these identities, or from experiencing internalised homophobia (Hersh, 2015; McDonald, 2014). Moreover, feelings of shame, humiliation, embarrassment, or cultural taboos surrounding discussions of sex, gender, and sexuality may prevent sexual and gender-expansive claimants from fully disclosing their experiences (Struthers, 2020). In cases where applicants are survivors or victims of sexual violence or human trafficking, they may feel guilt and shame when disclosing sensitive details, particularly in stressful asylum interviews and judicial settings (Berg & Millbank, 2009; Choi, 2010). The next subsections address specific experiences and barriers faced by different groups within the LGBT asylum-seeking community. First, I discuss the unique experiences of lesbian-identifying women navigating the asylum process.

2.2.1 The Migration Experience of Sexually Diverse Individuals – with a Focus on Lesbian and Bisexual Identifying Women.

Sexual and gender-expansive communities are commonly grouped as LGBTQI+ in research. However, studies reveal distinct and unique experiences for each group within the acronym. The acronym combines sexual identity with gender identity/ sexual orientation (Moagi et al., 2021) which is not always helpful. In asylum law gender identity and sexual

orientation are sometimes confused and used interchangeably (Vogler, 2019). As a result, women who identify as lesbian and claim asylum on that basis are faced with unique challenges when navigating the asylum system. There are times when the system is uncertain about how to classify their cases, often questioning the credibility of their experiences and placing evidentiary burdens on them (Berger, 2009; Llewellyn, 2021; Lewis, 2010, 2013, 2014; Nielson, 2005; McKinnon, 2016; Shuman & Bohmer, 2014). Evidence of issues such as questions about women's sexuality, demonstrating membership in a particular social group and proving private harms has been documented (Akin, 2017; Lewis, 2014, Llewellyn, 2021). Lesbian women's experiences of persecution in instances of harassment and discrimination have sometimes been understood as not extreme enough to justify protection (Llewellyn, 2021). The erasure applied to lesbian women's asylum cases involves a reluctance to legitimise lesbian women's experiences as persecution, construing the violence women experienced as "unextreme, unsubstantiated, and/or unrelated to their sexual orientation" (Llewellyn, 2021, p.342).

In some cases in the USA examined by Llewellyn (2021), lesbian women were perceived as having identified themselves incorrectly. Instead of being classified as lesbian, they were framed as "at best...a nonpracticing lesbian" (Ingrida Mockeviciene and Vesta Mockeviciute versus U.S. Attorney General, 2007, p. 7). This perception is particularly common in cases where lesbian women asylum claimants have not been in recent relationships with other women. The concept of a "non-practising lesbian" is not only absurd but also fundamentally misunderstands the nature of sexual identity (See Ingrida Mockeviciene and Vesta Mockeviciute versus U.S. Attorney General, 2007, p.13). Heterosexual individuals not in relationships or practising sexual abstinence are not described as "non-practising heterosexual" or "non-practising straight," yet this framing is accepted for describing lesbian women.

Demonstrating a reasonable likelihood that lesbian women have or would face persecution because of their sexuality remains challenging. There is evidence of lesbian women's claims being rejected because the system denied that their treatment by the police and detentions met the criteria of persecution (Lewis, 2013; Llewellyn, 2021). Brief detentions, not being charged by the police, fines, physical harm, or threats of physical harm have led to questioning the severity of the violence experienced (Llewellyn, 2021). In such circumstances, the evidence provided was not deemed sufficient to constitute persecution or prove one's sexual orientation (Llewellyn, 2021; Morgan, 2006; Shuman & Bohmer, 2014; Vogler, 2016). In the US, even violent conversion therapy was not considered persecution when perceived as intended to *cure* rather than harm (Llewellyn, 2021). Similarly, rape

arranged or directed by claimants' family members was categorised as "family mistreatment" and not persecution (Llewellyn, 2021, p.346).

This pattern reflects a societal structure that does not take violence against women, particularly black and black lesbian women, seriously, perpetuating patriarchal, sexist, misogynistic, racist, homophobic, and white supremacist ideologies (Tschalaer, 2019). African lesbian women, in particular, often face disbelief when presenting their cases for asylum, despite gender-based violence being grounds for asylum in countries across Europe (Tschalaer, 2019). The unique experiences of black African lesbian women, where the system disbelieves or fails to recognise their experiences of harm, are complex and may be linked to assumptions, stereotypical beliefs, and a lack of understanding of black women's sexualities (Claire & Thomas, 2013; Held, 2015; Lewis, 2019a; Luibhéid, 2020; Morgan, 2006). The intersection of multiple identities and associated discriminations, such as being black, African, women, and lesbian, complicates black African lesbians' access to asylum by challenging the system's ideas, assumptions, and stereotypes about race, gender, and sexuality.

Literature indicates that the asylum system tends to privilege claimants who conform to certain stereotypes and norms. For instance, heterosexual women who embody heteronormative ideals of motherhood and vulnerability, as well as sexual and gender-expansive individuals whose experiences align with Western expectations of visible intimacy and love, are often favoured (Tschalaer, 2020). These privileged stereotypes are rooted in white norms of sexuality, particularly the experiences of white gay men (Akin, 2017; Lewis, 2014). Consequently, the intersection of black women's sexuality and gender leads to different outcomes in their asylum cases (Berger, 2009; Lewis, 2010, 2013, 2014; Nielson, 2005; Shuman & Bohmer, 2014). When black lesbian women do not have active sex lives or personal narratives that prominently display their sexual orientation, their sexuality is disregarded (Llewellyn, 2021). Conversely, if their sexual orientation is believed, there is an expectation that they could return home and be "more discreet" about their sexuality (Lewis, 2013; Llewellyn, 2021). Overall, the credibility of black lesbian women's experiences continues to face scrutiny, questions, and doubt.

Violence and harm suffered by women, particularly lesbian women, often occur in the private sphere, such as the home (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Rollè et al., 2018; Tallis et al., 2020). However, the system, including judges, decision-makers, and immigration officials, is less receptive to harm and violence in the private sphere (Llewellyn, 2021). Nielson (2005) proposed that applying gender-based asylum jurisprudence to lesbian asylum claims could be a more appropriate pathway to safety, as the harm suffered by lesbian women is distinct from that experienced by gay men. Contrary to popular belief, the

main barrier to obtaining asylum for lesbian claimants is not their inability to prove membership in a particular social group, but rather the adoption of processes from the precedent established in cisgender gay men's cases to demonstrate membership in a particular social group (Llewellyn, 2021). However, the precedents set by gay men's asylum cases do not adequately address the types of violence, harm, and abuse suffered by lesbian women (Llewellyn, 2021).

Heteronormative assumptions made by and present within the asylum system are a broader issue. Across the globe immigration systems' approach to asylum claims involving sexual and gender-expansive individuals has continued to fall short (Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Mudarikwa et al., 2021; Selim et al., 2023; ¹⁰UKLGIG, 2018). The system continues to enforce unrealistic expectations when it comes to what credible narratives of sexual and gender-expansive claimants should entail (UKLGIG, 2018). Similarly, sexual and gender-expansive individuals continue to face discrimination, transphobia and many other systematic barriers. This is evident in how immigration officials conclude brief relationships, non-sexual intimate relationships and where there is a lack of history of sexual relationships to be markers of non 'genuine' sexualities (Johnson, 2011). The assumption is that those applicants are not credible members of the LGBT community. As a result, their claims are often rejected and continue to be rejected (Held, 2015; Johnson, 2011, Lewis, 2019a). The problem with making heterosexuality a default for sexual identity creates the burden on anyone else who falls outside of that box, to prove their sexual identity.

The asylum system has continued to be unclear and unknown about what asylum applicants might need to do to *prove* their sexual orientation (Lewis 2014; Powell, 2021). As a result, the system continues to expect and look for western stereotypes of gender, sexuality and formation of LGBTQI relationships as markers for credible claims (Dustin & Ferreira, 2021; Giametta, 2017; Selim et al., 2023; Zisakou, 2023) and this perpetuates biases and misconceptions. Scholars and human rights activists have criticised such practices, emphasising the importance of an individualised and context-specific approach when assessing claims related to gender and sexuality (See Chase, 2016; Dawson & Gerber, 2017; Held, 2015; Zisakou, 2021). The system has this idea that for one to identify as and/or claim asylum based on sexuality, authenticity for sexual identities should be expressed in particular ways. In the UK, for example, Briddock (2016) noted that there is an assumption that once sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants arrive there is no more SOGI persecution (though this is not true), and individuals should feel safe to disclose their sexuality or gender identity and live openly. Individuals are expected to be '*out and*

¹⁰ The organisation is now called Rainbow Project.

proud and marching around with a rainbow flag' (Briddock, 2016, p.151). This assumption is problematic and highlights a lack of insight and understanding into the impact of being public with one's sexuality for African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. In particular, immigration officials lack the understanding that in even former colonial countries SOGI asylum claimants continue to face exclusion, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and emotional and verbal persecution from persons in their communities, as well as within the wider community (Bachmann, 2016; Fuglei, 2023; Marnell et al., 2021; Stop Hate UK, n.d). This fear of experiencing other forms of violence, including homophobia and transphobia in host countries is real for many asylum claimants.

In some cases, solicitors have been recorded advising clients to claim asylum based on being lesbian rather than based on bisexuality (Johnson, 2011). Often asylum claimants listen and accept information given or recommended to them by their solicitors with the view that they know best. Unfortunately, in such circumstances, people's claims are sometimes rejected (Johnson, 2011). When asylum claimants appeal or lodge fresh claims with new solicitors and with corrections of the real grounds of their initial claim, the court can view the clients' second claims as an attempt to manipulate the asylum system (Johnson, 2011). As a result, asylum claimants' credibility is disputed. Immigration solicitors may suggest clients file a claim using an identity they believe will simplify their case, such as identifying as lesbian. This is often due to the lower percentage of individuals seeking asylum based on bisexuality in the UK and globally (Rehaag, 2009). However, this advice may not always benefit the claimant's case or self-esteem and it also erases bisexuality within the asylum process.

Regardless of the lower number of people applying for asylum under the bisexuality category, UK and US statistics show that the number of persons attracted to people of more than one gender and or sex are significantly higher than the number of people who identify as gay and lesbian (YouGov, 2015a, 2015b). Although there are clear or specific statistics on bisexual claims some research has shown that applications of persons claiming asylum based on being bisexual are rejected more than applications from gay, trans, and lesbian claimants (Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; LaViolette, 2015; Rehaag, 2009). This is besides human rights treaties claiming to support all individuals who fall under the LGBT identity category. Sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants are then forced to perform "refugee-ness" and "gay-ness" to fit within a dominant ¹¹mononormative narrative (Peyghambarzadeh, 2020). The ¹²homonormative approach to sexual citizenship fails to

¹¹ Mononormative is the assumption that romantic and sexual relationships can only occur, or are only normal, between two monogamous partners.

¹² Homonormativity is the privileging of heteronormative ideals and constructs onto LGBT culture and identity

consider the “fluidity, complexity, and multiplicity” that exists among bisexual citizens (Monro, 2015, p. 142). The approach upholds the private sexual rights of same-sex unions in stable monogamous relationships (Monro, 2015). The fluidity of bisexual sexuality appears to challenge the dominant static and fixed mononormative understandings of sexual orientations, a mononormative approach which prioritises monosexual sexual orientations, (i.e. heterosexuality and or homosexuality, rather than ¹³plurisexual sexual orientations such as bisexuality, ¹⁴pansexuality, ¹⁵polysexuality, heteroflexibility, homoflexibility, and queer) (Munro, 2015; Peyghambarzadeh, 2020). That, and the fact that bisexual persons have not been accounted for in the applicable legal documents, means that they are confronted by extensive difficulties in claiming their intimate rights compared with ¹⁶monosexual claimants (Peyghambarzadeh, 2020). Whilst all people should have access to justice and legal representation, reports show that with cuts to legal aid, many are left unable to access legal representation. In some cases, asylum applicants fall prey to poor legal representation. All of this comes at a cost for asylum applicants' claims, as a lack of good legal representation means a lack of access to justice (Crosby Medlicott, 2022).

2.2.2 Trans Individuals' Unique Challenges in the Asylum System.

Similarly, experiences of trans asylum claimants within the context of refugee migration present a complex set of challenges that intersect with issues of identity, discrimination, and human rights. Existing literature highlights the unique obstacles faced by trans individuals as they navigate the asylum process and seek refuge in host countries (Camminga, 2019; Camminga & Marnell, 2022; DasGupta, 2019; Gates-Lincoln, 2021; Gordon-Orr, 2021; Koko et al., 2021; Manganini, 2020; Migrant Help UK, 2020; Rosati et al., 2021).

Transgender people are often subjected to intensive questioning by immigration officials and are met with a "culture of disbelief" from the system, where they are forced to prove elements of their lives that may be impossible to demonstrate (Rehaag & Verman, 2023; Shaw & Verghese, 2022; Vogler, 2019). In many cases, trans individuals are asked to prove that they have been living as transgender individuals in their countries of origin, which can be challenging due to the criminalisation of their gender identity and expression and

¹³ Plurisexual is an umbrella term that encompasses individuals who experience attractions to people of multiple genders, and who may self-identify as queer, pansexual, fluid, bisexual, or something else (Galupo et al., 2015)

¹⁴ Pansexuality is the romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to people regardless of their gender.

¹⁵ A polysexual person is someone who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to multiple genders

¹⁶ Monosexuality is romantic or sexual attraction to members of one sex or gender only

transphobic violence (Avgeri, 2021, 2023; Berg & Millbank, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2022; Manganini, 2020).

In environments where expressing one's gender identity could lead to violence or legal consequences, trans individuals may conceal their true identities, hindering their ability to provide evidence during the asylum process (Gates-Lincoln, 2021). The rushed nature of escaping countries may also hinder individuals from gathering evidence of persecution, and documents may be lost if trafficked through multiple countries (Asylum Seeker Resource Center, n.d; Manby, 2016). The denial of asylum to trans claimants due to the inability to provide evidence reinforces misconceptions about gender identity and overlooks the barriers some trans individuals face in accessing healthcare, resources, or the freedom to undergo transition (Avgeri, 2021; Bachmann, 2016; Bach, 2013; Berg & Millbank, 2009; Camminga, 2018; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Shaw & Verghese, 2022; Vogler, 2019; van der Pijl et al., 2018).

Furthermore, some trans people may have transitioned or no longer identify with the gender listed on official documents, yet immigration officials and the state often overlook their needs, resulting in a lack of respectful and dignified treatment for trans individuals seeking asylum. Trans asylum claimants in the global minority states have reported experiencing humiliation and violence across various borders and immigration systems during the asylum process (Matheson, 2019; Marnie, 2022; Tabak & Levitan, 2013; TAHIRIH Justice Centre, 2023). Proving the risk of persecution is challenging for all sexual and gender-expansive individuals seeking asylum, especially for transgender claimants. One of the major obstacles lies in authorities' lack of awareness that gender is distinct from biological sex. Despite receiving training and practical guidance on issues related to trans individuals in the UK (GOV.UK, 2011), immigration caseworkers often struggle with vague and open-to-interpretation guidance. It also appears that the guidance offered as training is criticised for being based on normative and Western assumptions and stereotypes about gender and sexuality expressions (Barker & Scheele, 2016; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Peumans, 2016; Vogler, 2019).

Immigration processes in the global minority states tend to adopt western expectations and conceptions of queer identity in determining the authenticity of claimants' queer identities (Ropianyuk & D'Agostino, 2021; Fransen, 2021). Consequently, trans persons, including non-binary asylum claimants, are expected to identify as 'trans' during their asylum interviews, disregarding the fact that individuals may lack familiarity with European trans terminologies (Bach, 2013; Fransen, 2021; Vogler, 2019). This expectation overlooks the possibility that claimants may not readily identify as trans or LGB persons due to internalised shame, fear, or cultural understandings of their sexuality and gender identity

(Borges, 2019; Meyer, 2007; Singer, 2015). Overall, the asylum process fails to recognise the diverse experiences and identities of trans individuals, perpetuating misunderstandings, and barriers to accessing asylum.

Activists and academics in the UK have highlighted numerous challenges trans individuals face while navigating the asylum process, including being misgendered (Gates-Lincoln, 2021; Migrant Help, 2020). Throughout the asylum process, trans and non-binary claimants often encounter the use of their 'dead' or former names, which they no longer identify with, leading to dehumanization and psychological distress (Bustillo, 2023; Migrant Help, 2020). Access to trans-specific healthcare and safe accommodation presents significant hurdles for trans asylum claimants (Czimbalmos & Rask, 2022; Hermaszewska et al., 2022; Keygnaert et al., 2014; Namer & Razum, 2018; Transgender Europe, 2018). The inability to access such care is associated with an increased risk of suicide (Abramovich et al., 2020; Bauer et al., 2015). Moreover, placement in unsafe housing or detention exposes trans individuals to physical and psychological harm (Andrade et al., 2020; Chossière, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Savage, 2019; Wimark, 2020).

Detention, particularly in shared accommodations with potentially transphobic or homophobic occupants, exacerbates the risk of violence (International Detention Coalition, 2016; Gruberg, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2017; UN Women, 2023). Additionally, access to gender-affirming care is often denied in detention settings (Gruberg, 2013; Singer, 2021). These challenges highlighted the inadequacies of immigration systems primarily designed for cisgender individuals (Gates-Lincoln, 2021). Similar to the limited understanding of issues related to African sexual minorities, the asylum process lacks knowledge regarding transgender individuals. Addressing the barriers faced by transgender asylum claimants necessitates a nuanced understanding of their distinct challenges (Koko et al., 2021; Lee & Brotman, 2013). Activists and scholars globally emphasise the urgent need for inclusive, anti-oppressive policies that prioritise the safety, dignity, and support of trans asylum applicants and refugees (International Detention Coalition, 2016; Shaw & Verghese, 2022; Rodríguez García, 2023).

Ongoing research advocates for awareness and transformation in asylum procedures to better accommodate the diverse experiences of trans asylum claimants (Camminga, 2019; Cooper, 2018; Rehaag & Verman, 2023; Roodsaz & Van Den Brandt, 2017), aiming to ensure their safety, dignity, and adequate support throughout the asylum process (Danisi et al., 2020; Marnell et al., 2021).

2.3 Asylum Applicants' Lived Experiences in Host Countries.

Over the years another theme that has been highlighted by research on asylum claimants and refugees' migration journeys is their lived experiences in host countries. Several writings portrayed the heightened vulnerabilities and specific risks that individuals and communities face once they have arrived in host countries. The lack of legal status makes refugees vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, as they navigate complex legal systems or encounter unethical and exploitative actors who take advantage of their precarious situation in host countries (Allsopp et al., 2014; Burrridge, 2019; Blitz, 2023; Mole, 2021; Waite, 2017). This vulnerability extends to access or lack thereof, to essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment, amplifying the challenges faced by refugees in their host countries (Brell et al., 2022; Sherif et al., 2022; WHO, 2022).

Sexual and gender-expansive individuals encounter distinct challenges during their migration journeys. Prejudice, stigma, and the fear of persecution persist even within refugee camps or detention in host countries where they might face discrimination from fellow migrants and or from host communities (Agu 2017; Anderson, 2010; Athwal, 2015; Guma et al., 2023; Hanrahan, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Tschalaer, 2019; UNHCR, 2020). Sexual and gender-expansive persons frequently endure heightened risks of physical and sexual violence, harassment, and exploitation due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Bachmann, 2016; Giansanti, et al., 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Rosa, 2023). This exposure to vulnerabilisation can lead to their exclusion from vital services, denial of protection, and limited access to healthcare as highlighted above. Moreover, the fear of persecution, both from their countries of origin and within their host countries, often prevents sexual and gender-expansive persons from disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. This invisibility can hinder their access to appropriate support systems and protection mechanisms, exacerbating their vulnerabilities (WHO, 2022).

The challenges faced by asylum applicants and refugees upon arrival in host countries are multifaceted and impact various aspects of their lives, including housing, employment, healthcare, education, and social integration. Researchers have highlighted systemic barriers that hinder their ability to rebuild their lives and integrate into their new communities. Housing insecurity is a significant concern for many asylum claimants and refugees, with limited affordable housing options, discrimination from landlords, and restrictive housing policies contributing to their challenges (Jones, 2008; Lee, 2023; Murdie, 2008; Ziersch et al., 2020; Ziersch et al., 2023). As a result, many individuals may find themselves living in overcrowded and substandard conditions, which exacerbate their vulnerability (British Red Cross, 2023; Bulman, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In addition to housing challenges, asylum claimants and refugees also face barriers to accessing the labour market, including legal restrictions, language barriers, and discrimination (Fasani et al., 2018; Jamil et al., 2012; Mesfin & Mamuye, 2020). Stringent work authorisation processes and limitations on sectors of employment further limit their employment opportunities and hinder their ability to utilise their skills and qualifications (Fasani et al., 2020).

Moreover, access to healthcare, education, and social integration are also areas of concern for asylum applicants and refugees (Dumitrache et al., 2022; Hacker et al., 2015; Lambrechts, 2020; Hynes, 2011; Jones, 2008; Morrice & Sandri, 2018). Discrimination, language barriers, and limited access to services contribute to their challenges in these areas, further marginalising them within their host communities. Overall, addressing the systemic barriers faced by asylum claimants and refugees in host countries requires comprehensive policies and interventions aimed at improving housing stability, facilitating access to employment, healthcare, and education, and promoting social integration and inclusion. These efforts are essential for supporting the well-being and integration of asylum claimants and refugees into their new communities.

Many of these barriers are amplified for sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants (Alessi et al., 2021; Bennett & Thomas, 2013; Camminga, 2017; Danisi, et al., 2021; Marnell et al, 2023; Mudarikwa et al., 2021; Mole, 2021; Phillimore et al., 2022; Shaw & Verghese, 2022; Yarwood et al., 2022). In the past, research on forcibly displaced communities focused on heterosexual and cis-normative experiences, invisibilising sexual and gender-expansive claimants (Alessi et al., 2020). While the general community of asylum applicants and refugees face many challenges within the asylum system, sexual and gender-expansive individuals encounter additional barriers. Their unique identities and experiences related to gender and sexuality expose them to further vulnerabilisation within the asylum system. The section below discusses the condition of housing assigned to asylum applicants in host countries and how some people are criminalised and detained by the state. It also discusses the psychological and emotional aspects of refugee migration and the impact of trauma on the asylum process.

2.3.1 Poor Housing Conditions and Detention.

Many colonial countries provide housing support to individuals seeking asylum who arrive in the host country unable to provide for their own basic needs (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Housing is crucial, serving as a foundation for shelter, security, community connections, education, employment links, and overall well-being (Brown et al., 2024; Dudek

et al., 2022; Mohsenpour et al., 2023). Historical evidence suggests that the quality of accommodation for asylum applicants in host countries, during the asylum process and resettlement period has been consistently poor (Bachman, 2016; Guma et al., 2023; International Detention Coalition, 2016). Over the years various scholars and activists have criticised the poor living conditions exposed to asylum applicants, severe overcrowding, and dirty environments (Bulman, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Jones et al., 2022). In addition to housing support, asylum claimants and persons whose claims have not been successful are often placed in inhumane detention centres and refugee camps (British Red Cross, 2023; Bolt, 2020; Costello & Mouzourakis, 2016; Kreichauf, 2018; Neal, 2021a, b).

Similarly, sexual and gender-expansive persons have also been placed in detention and unsafe housing situations (Fletcher & Greatrick, 2022; Wimark, 2021). Legal studies and migration studies have consistently highlighted violence and vulnerability as a concern for the accommodation sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants are placed in. Literature emphasises the heightened risks of violence, harassment, and discrimination faced by sexual and gender-expansive refugees in detention, hotel accommodation and other types of assigned accommodation (Bachmann, 2016; Fletcher & Greatrick, 2022; The International Detention Coalition, 2016). In particular, numerous studies have written about the detention of sexual and gender asylum claimants (Bosworth, & Turnbull, 2015; Bachmann, 2016; Bhatia, 2020; Crosby Medlicott, 2023), with a particular focus on the impact of detention on physical and mental well-being (Amaral, 2010; Carswell et al., 2011; Cleveland, & Rousseau, 2013; Filges et al., 2015; Filges et al., 2016; Robjant et al., 2009; Steel et al., 2006; Steel et al., 2011), safety in detention (Bachmann, 2016; The International Detention Coalition, 2016), sexual and physical violence (Anderson, 2010; Fletcher & Greatrick, 2022), death in detention (Athwal, 2015) and trans applicants being denied access to hormone treatment and other gender affirming medical care (Gruberg 2013; Singer 2021).

Activists, litigators, and researchers who continue to call for the end of detention of all asylum claimants highlighted why conditions in immigration detention were unsafe and inhumane for all persons, particularly for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants (Human Rights Watch, 2021; see also ongoing campaigns by the Rainbow Migration, and reports by Stonewall). However, regardless of the harmful effects and increase in critique of this violent practice, colonial countries continue to detain asylum claimants, including sexual and gender-expansive persons. Even though some countries have begun to look for and implement what some may perceive as alternatives to detention - placing asylum claimants in remote hotels, hostels, former military structures such as barracks, and initial accommodation centres - these housing situations have also been inhumane, degrading,

overcrowded and run like prisons (Aljazeera, 2023). In the UK, asylum applicants awaiting a decision or appeal outcome cannot receive council housing or assistance if unhoused, nor can they get universal credit or housing benefits for rent (Chartered Institute of Housing, 2024). Asylum claimants can apply to housing associations or for private rentals, but immigration checks in England make it difficult for them to rent and for landlords to accept them as tenants (Chartered Institute of Housing, 2024). In 2023 the UK began housing asylum claimants on a giant barge, the Bibby Stockholm, in a small seaside town on the south coast of England. The first attempt to house claimants on the barge failed after the legionella bacteria was found in the water system (Hanrahan, 2023). Soon after the Home Office reported the barge to be 'safe' and began the process of moving asylum claimants back (Taylor, 2023). However, activists and litigators described conditions on the barge as an inhumane, prison-like fire hazard, where residents were treated as though they were in prison (Hanrahan, 2023). Conditions in the Bibby Stockholm are reported to have led to suicide ideation, suicide attempts and suicides (Hymas, Barton & Bolton, 2023; Taylor & Walker, 2023). The use of barges, cruise ships, former prisons and military structures is not new. Over the years countries across the northern hemisphere (i.e., Germany, France, Belgium, Estonia, Sweden, Scotland, Netherlands) used barges and ships to house asylum claimants (MacGregor, 2023). These structures restrict asylum claimants' mobility and ability to engage in recreational activities and be part of a community (MacGregor, 2023). This is likely the intention of states that place asylum claimants in institutionalised settings and treat them as not deserving of dignity and rights.

Due to the lack of tailored support systems asylum applicants have continued to be placed in unsafe accommodations. Accommodation issues have been raised in numerous studies and media reports with individuals citing not feeling safe in assigned accommodation (Brown et al., 2022; Giansanti, et al., 2022; Rosa, 2023). Accommodation conditions have been said to be dirty and prison-like (Bolt, 2018; Guma et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2022; Mahase, 2022). Additionally, sexual and gender-expansive individuals encounter physical and sexual violence and social isolation in immigration accommodation due to homophobia, misogyny, racism (Tschalaer, 2019) and being placed in remote locations (Agu, 2017; Aygün, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2023; UNHCR, 2020; Zappulla, 2018). As the UK HO does not record statistics of sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in detention it is not clear how many persons are and have been in detention centres (Singer, 2021). Between 2015 and 2016, UK-based organisations Stonewall and UKLGIG asked lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans asylum claimants in detention about their experiences (Bachmann, 2016). The study by Stonewall and UKLGIG is one of the studies demonstrating that sexual and gender-expansive persons in detention are both vulnerable and vulnerabilised to other

significant disadvantages. They face discrimination, harassment, abuse, and bullying, and trans persons suffer specific types of violence (Bachmann, 2016). Singer (2021) also explored how sexual, and gender-expansive persons experience immigration detention and found that they were affected by self-harm and suicide as well as violence and abuse from both staff and other persons detained alongside them (Singer, 2021). What continues to emerge from literature about detention and poor living conditions is the impact this has on sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants' physical and mental well-being. Persons who had been in detention struggled to rebuild their lives under conditions of insecurity, uncertainty, and mental ill health (Bachmann, 2016; Chirape, 2019; Harvey, 2023; International Detention Coalition, 2016).

2.3.2 The Psychological and Emotional Aspects of Refugee Migration.

Research highlights the critical theme of psychological and emotional aspects in refugee migration, shedding light on mental health implications tied to forced displacement, trauma, and the challenging process of adapting to new environments. Literature has extensively examined the mental health challenges experienced by asylum claimants and refugees throughout different stages of migration, spanning pre-migration, migration, and post-migration phases (Carswell et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2017; Fazel et al., 2012; Feyissa et al., 2022; Hollander et al., 2011; Hynie, 2018; Schweitzer et al., 2006; Silove et al., 2007; Steel et al., 2016; Strijk et al., 2011). Various studies highlighted the prevalence of trauma among asylum claimants, stemming from persecution, violence, and traumatic experiences during transit (Song et al., 2015; Spaaij et al., 2021; Tankink & Richters, 2007; Theisen-Womersley, 2021; Vukčević Marković et al., 2023). This trauma often leads to a myriad of mental health challenges, including PTSD¹⁷, anxiety, and depression (Crepet et al., 2017; Eagle & Kaminer, 2013; Kartal et al., 2018; Li et al., 2016). As a result, different scholars have emphasised the necessity of culturally sensitive mental health interventions to address the unique needs of asylum applicants and refugees. Research has also explored the reciprocal relationship between mental health and the asylum process, examining both how mental health affects the asylum process and how the asylum process can exacerbate the mental health challenges of asylum applicants (Bögner et al., 2010; Bosworth, 2016; Jakobsen et al., 2017; Laban et al., 2004; Schock et al., 2015).

The asylum procedure, including the interview process, is in many ways a postmigration stressor for asylum claimants, often causing stress and anxiety (Gleeson et

¹⁷ post-traumatic stress disorder

al., 2020; Laban et al., 2004; Schock et al., 2015; Schockaert et al., 2020;). Previous studies which examined reasons for these levels of stress and anxiety highlighted fear of potential adverse outcomes such as deportation (Bogner et al., 2007; Nickerson et al., 2011), activation of traumatic memories during interviews (Bogner et al., 2007) and having one's experiences of suffering invalidated leading to feelings of powerlessness (Schock et al., 2015) as causes. Literature demonstrates that asylum claimants have sustained multiple traumas before migrating (Wood, 2020; Alessi et al., 2018; Rosati et al., 2021; Silverstein et al., 2021; Theisen-Womersley, 2021) and sometimes in the process of travelling (Davaki, 2021; Michultka, 2009; Nematy, Namer & Razum, 2023; UN Human Rights, 2022). These histories of trauma often affect asylum claimants' ability to fully engage with the asylum process (Bögner et al., 2010; Bogner, 2005).

As highlighted above many migrants and refugees have often experienced trauma in their home countries due to conflict, persecution, or human rights abuses. This pre-existing trauma can significantly impact their mental health. Nevertheless, sexual and gender-expansive individuals encounter additional mental health hurdles associated with discrimination and persecution rooted in their sexual orientation or gender identity (Nematy et al., 2023). The burden of legal restrictions, socio-cultural stigma, and discrimination they face in their countries of origin contributes to heightened levels of mental health challenges (Alessi et al., 2018b; Bachmann, 2016; Jansen, 2014, 2015; Shidlo & Ahola, 2013). While general forced migrants, may face stigma and discrimination, the reasons are often related to their nationality or ethnic background. Sexual and gender-expansive individuals however often encounter unique challenges, as their persecution is directly tied to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Alessi et al., 2017; Alessi et al., 2018; Rosati et al., 2021) as well as discrimination based on nationality or ethnic background. This can lead to heightened levels of stigma, discrimination, and social isolation, exacerbating mental health difficulties (Cyrus, 2017; Golembe et al., 2020). Mental health support for general migrants or refugees is often broad and may not specifically address the unique needs of individuals who have faced persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The asylum process for general migrants or refugees is influenced by international and national legal frameworks that primarily address issues related to persecution based on nationality, race, religion, or political opinion (Gallagher & David, 2014; International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies, 2017; Supriyadi, 2022). For sexual and gender-expansive persons legal frameworks may not always explicitly include protections for individuals persecuted based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Åberg, 2023; Dustin, 2018; Giametta, 2018; Jansen, 2014, 2015; Jordan, 2009; Mudarikwa et al., 2021; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2002; 2008; Okisai, 2015; Van der Pijl et

al., 2018). This leads to additional challenges during the asylum process for sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants. For example, the requirement to prove the credibility of their sexual orientation, gender identity and persecution vulnerabilises and exacerbates sexual and gender-expansive persons' mental health difficulties (Aygün, 2019; Giametta, 2018; Ferreira, 2022; Jansen, 2014, 2015; Yoshino, 2006). Both general migrants or refugees and sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants face mental health challenges, but the nature and impact of these challenges differ due to the specific nature of the persecution they have experienced. Recognising these differences is crucial for developing inclusive and effective mental health support systems within the asylum procedure and beyond (Nematy et al., 2022). Addressing the unique needs of sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants requires a comprehensive approach that considers both their refugee status and the specific challenges related to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Camminga et al., 2022; Youth Advocacy Network, 2023; van der Boor & White, 2020). Activists and scholars continue to advocate for research (Shaw & Verghese, 2022), research processes (Chirape, 2021) and asylum procedures that understand the impact of trauma on asylum claimants and the asylum process (Alessi, 2016; Kahn & Alessi, 2017).

2.3.2.1 Understanding the Impact of Trauma on the Asylum Process.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-V; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) specifically defines trauma as, '*a direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or sexual violence or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing of such an event(s)*'. In a technical sense, trauma pertains solely to the event itself, not the reaction, and is designated for significant events that were psychologically overwhelming for an individual (Briere & Scott, 2014). However, scholars' and practitioners' definitions and understanding of trauma have evolved in recent years. In the book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk (2015) explored an understanding of trauma's lasting effects in a more holistic way, investigating the deep impact trauma has on a person's emotional regulation and physical sensations. Van der Kolk's (2015) definition and understanding of trauma inquired beyond the event itself, a focus of the DSM-V. Furthermore, Porges' (2011) focus presented a new dimension to trauma healing and self-regulation. Porges provided a polyvagal perspective that gives new concepts and insights for understanding human behaviour. The polyvagal perspective emphasises the impact of trauma on the autonomic nervous system, underlining the crucial association between psychological experiences and physical manifestations in the body (Porges, 2011).

Similarly, Ogden's theory recognised trauma as not just being stored in memories and thoughts, but also stored in one's nervous system and physiology (Ogden et al., 2006; Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Ogden's perspective focused on the body's role in trauma processing. Gabor Maté's (2003; 2011; 2018; 2022) work on trauma emphasised culture's role in trauma creation. He investigated how societal norms and harmful environments contributed to trauma, providing insight into the systemic impact on persons (Maté, 2003; 2022). Maté (2021) defined trauma as, "not what happens to you...it is what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you". The evolution of the term and, scholars' and practitioners' understanding of trauma provides a critique of the medical model of trauma as neither helpful nor useful a paradigm for understanding trauma and trauma healing (Levine, 2010). Each perspective offers a distinct and comprehensive understanding of trauma, presenting a diverse range of approaches to how trauma manifests in various individuals and what the healing process might entail. Research involving sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and refugees can benefit significantly by embracing diverse perspectives. This approach enables a better understanding of the unique insights into the multi-faceted nature of trauma recovery, healing, and post-trauma growth¹⁸.

Persons leaving their homes and countries of birth to seek asylum have varied experiences of trauma, violence, and distress that began before migration and continued during migration and after resettlement (Shi et al., 2021). As previously demonstrated in other parts of this thesis, sexual and gender-expansive persons in particular held or expressed their identities in ways that were explicitly criminalised in countries of birth. They are exposed to homophobia, and transphobia, in the form of familial violence, systemic violence, persecution, torture, criminalisation, sexual violence and conversion treatments (Alessi et al., 2018b; Bachmann, 2016; Jansen, 2015; Shidlo & Ahola, 2013). Additionally, to flee state prosecution and violence from society and communities many persons are likely to travel through trafficking. This is because many sexual and gender-expansive persons tend to be financially disadvantaged due to SOGIESC¹⁹-based labour market discrimination (Merkle et al., 2017) and do not have the assistance and support of family or community (Bennett & Thomas, 2013; Shidlo & Ahola, 2013).

When sexual and gender-expansive persons are forced by circumstance to be trafficked out of their countries, they are vulnerabilised to further experiences of violence and exploitation (UN Human Rights, 2022). Upon arrival in host countries, as discussed below,

¹⁸ "Post-traumatic growth" refers to the positive psychological changes that individuals undergo as a result of grappling with trauma or highly challenging situations. (Tedeschi et al., 2018)

¹⁹ An acronym for sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics

sexual and gender-expansive claimants become vulnerable to ongoing trauma from other refugees, and immigration officials (Alessi et al., 2017) and experience race-related trauma²⁰ and systematic violence. However, how persons are affected by their experiences of violence can differ for everyone (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Equally how trauma sits and manifests in one's body can also differ for each person (van der Kolk, 2015) just as much as cultural responses to trauma vary (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014).

Michultka (2009) identified 'new immigrants' as commonly experiencing a chronological interaction of three distinct traumatic periods. These traumatic periods included *trauma of the country of origin*, *trauma of the escape or journey of immigration* and *trauma of the relocation process* (Alessi et al., 2017; Michultka, 2009; Shi, Stey & Tatebe, 2021). In addition to experiences of trauma suffered pre-migration and along the way asylum claimants are re-traumatised by a hostile legal system, anti-immigration policy, detention, and deportation upon arrival (Canning, 2017, 2021; Mcrae, 2023; Michultka, 2009; U.S. Commission on civil rights; 2019; von Werthern et al., 2018). Literature shows that exposure to trauma is likely to influence refugees' lives (Evans et al., 2014; Knipscheer, et al., 2015; Vukčević Marković, et al., 2023). Following persecutory experiences in countries of origin, individuals presented with symptoms of ²¹PTSD on arrival (Fazel et al., 2005; Frost et al., 2019; Jowett et al., 2021; McDonnell et al., 2013). Refugees' experiences encompass a spectrum of past, present, and chronic intergroup and interpersonal traumas, characterised by cumulative linear and nonlinear dynamics (Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015). They confront unique social and political environments that contribute significantly to traumatic stress, differing from survivors of interpersonal trauma who have not endured injustices such as torture, exile, political or religious persecution (Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015), as well as homophobia and transphobia.

The original focus of Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) has shifted to other contexts. Research on survivors of torture and war found that CPTSD could occur when there is no history of childhood abuse (McDonnell et al., 2013). Ebert and Dyck (2004) contended that defining various patterns of PTSD is essential. They proposed that the crucial factor in determining whether an individual develops a more severe and complex form of PTSD is the extent to which the trauma leads to psychological disintegration within

²⁰ Racial trauma, also recognised as race-based traumatic stress, pertains to the harm, stress, or emotional distress resulting from one's encounters with racism and racial discrimination, whether experienced directly or witnessed (Resler, 2019; Cénat, 2023).

²¹ post-traumatic stress disorder

the person – namely causing mental death²² (Ebert & Dyck, 2004). However, the nature of trauma that sexual and gender-expansive persons face is ongoing trauma (Alessi et al., 2018; Bhatia, 2020; Golembe et al., 2020; Shaw & Verghese, 2022; Yarwood et al., 2022). Research shows that the challenges that sexual and gender-expansive individuals continue to experience on arrival in global minority countries have long-term physical and mental health consequences (Carter et al., 2019; Haeny et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2018; Williams, 2020; Ziersch, Due & Walsh, 2020). The post-migration stressors claimants and refugees suffer include everyday structural violence (Hou et al., 2019; Kim, 2016), structural and symbolic violence (Canning, 2017; Freedman, 2016; Hourani et al., 2021; Hourani, et al., 2022; Menendez-Menendez, 2014; Montesanti, 2015; Tschalaer, 2023; Ravid, 2022) and interpersonal violence (Abo-Zena, 2017; Carlsson & Sonne, 2018; Wachter et al., 2017).

A study by Hou and colleagues (2019) demonstrated that at times post-migration stressors or trauma can have a greater effect on mental health than previously experienced trauma and trauma experienced during migration. Activists and scholars are engaging in discussions about the concept of trauma as a 'post' concept, specifically in the context of 'post' traumatic stress as a European concept. They argue that this perspective may not be helpful as a framework for understanding the traumatic experiences of formerly colonised people (Hill et al., 2010). Cycles of trauma, for asylum claimants and refugees continue to occur even after resettlement and down generational lines (Sangalang & Vang, 2017; Hoffman et al., 2020). Other studies in South Africa, demonstrated that contexts of high levels of ongoing violence and threats to the community created conditions for continuous traumatic stress (Eagle, 2015; Eagle & Kaminer; 2013; Kaminer et al., 2016).

Similarly, over the years indigenous scholars such as Hill and colleagues (2010, p42.) recognised how the western and colonial concept of trauma focuses on trauma as a “singular episode”, ignoring ongoing stress such as everyday oppression and continuing injustices. The notion that trauma is a fleeting occurrence for formerly colonised communities, including sexual and gender asylum claimants, ignores the ongoing challenges they encounter. Even upon arrival and resettlement, these individuals continue to grapple with racial trauma and navigate various systems of oppression and violence²³. For sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and refugees, trauma is enduring (Alessi et al., 2018). Such ongoing cyclic emotional wounds are likely to hinder healing. Consequently,

²² According to Ebert & Dyck (2004) Mental death is distinguished by loss of core beliefs and values, distrust and alienation from others, shame and guilt, and a sense of being permanently damaged. It is a primary attribute of a distinct post-trauma syndrome.

²³ Also see work on Structural Whiteness in Mental Health (Minsky-Kelly & Hornung, 2022).

labelling the trauma experienced by asylum claimants and refugees as 'post' trauma raises questions and may be misplaced. There is evidence indicating that they endure ongoing trauma, stemming from continuous harm resulting from intersecting identities and experiences.

Literature on sexual and gender-expansive refugees has also focused on how trauma affected them and how they engaged with the asylum process. For example, persons who experienced trauma have had difficulties recalling information, and providing coherent and consistent narratives of their experiences (Bogner et al, 2007; Millibank, 2007; Sandalio-Naranjo, 2018). Several research illustrated verbal declarative memory deficits related to PTSD, in experiences of adult persons with PTSD diagnosis related to childhood abuse (Bremner et al, 1995; Bremner et al., 2004), sexual violence (Jenkins et al., 1998), political violence (Johnsen & Asbjørnsen, 2009), and other forms of violence. Acknowledging and understanding the impact of trauma on memory is important for the research, as this is likely to influence the asylum process, for asylum claimants. Immigration officials rely on asylum claimants' autobiographical memory and their ability to communicate details of their difficult experiences (Bloemen, Vloeberghs & Smits, 2006; Brewin, & Herlihy, 2010; Herlihy & Turner, 2007). Any difficulties with memory represent challenges when interviewing asylum claimants. The area of memory processes in trauma is itself complex (McNally, 2005). Some studies on traumatic recall have indicated a tendency for involuntary memory (such as intrusive memories) to be more vivid compared to voluntary memory, which is often incomplete, fragmented, and disorganised (Brewin, 2007). In the context of asylum procedures, it remains challenging to determine precisely how trauma or emotional arousal affects the memory process. Questions have been raised regarding the extent to which asylum applicants recall central or peripheral details from the traumatic event (Christianson, 1992; Ginet & Verkampt, 2007).

Interviewing survivors of violence and trauma differs from interviewing individuals who have experienced non-traumatic events (Strand, n.d). Most interview techniques are designed to engage the more advanced portion of the brain, such as the prefrontal cortex, to gather specific details or peripheral information like the *colour of clothing, description of perpetrators, time frames*, and other relevant details (Strand, n.d). While some trauma victims or survivors may be able to provide this information to some extent, many are unable to do so accurately. When asked for such details, they may unintentionally provide inaccurate information, leading interviewers to question the reliability of the information provided (Bogner et al., 2007; Strand, n.d). It is not clear though what impact discrimination-related trauma experienced in the country of birth has on claimants' memory and ability to recall important aspects of their experiences. It is also not clear as to what impact this has

on claimants' capacity and ability to fully engage with the asylum interview process. However, besides the fact that claimants and refugees react to trauma exposure differently, not all refugees can be described as 'traumatised' (Herlihy & Turner, 2007) and not all refugees describe themselves as being 'traumatised'.

Overall, due to the concerns of not being viewed as 'LGBT' enough, individuals seeking asylum often feel the burden to prove their sexuality and gender identity as highlighted in one of the sections above. The act of having to prove such a personal aspect as one's sexual identity to a stranger can, in itself, be potentially traumatic (Markham, 2020). This burden of proof has in the past led claimants to disclose sexually explicit information (Asanovic, 2018; Townsend & Taylor, 2014), which is also likely to be a traumatic process. This raised the value of questions asked by Bettcher (2007): *'Why do some people (i.e., African, black and persons of colour) only have to describe themselves in detail while others do not?' Why do border control and immigration processes put queer (LGBTQI+) and, often, brown (African, black and persons of colour) bodies under such high levels of scrutiny?' These too are valid questions this research hopes to ponder. There has been a continuous poor management and discrimination of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants that need to be explored, understood, and resolved. Additionally, the challenges of facing asylum in the UK continue to expose claimants to re-traumatisation and structural violence. The re-traumatisation and structural violence combined with past trauma make it especially difficult for African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants to access culturally competent care and a just asylum process.*

The majority of research on LGBTQ refugees focuses on the legal and discursive aspects of asylum (i.e. Heller, 2009; or Lewis, 2014) rather than the asylum process itself, neglecting the first-hand lived experiences of impacted individuals. Similarly, there is a need for more research to make links between intersectionality approaches to LGBT asylum. Lastly, previous researchers have urged for further investigation into understanding structural violence towards LGBTQ forcibly displaced persons from a bottom-up perspective (Borgqvist, 2016).

2.4 Aims and Research Question.

The review highlights ongoing barriers and violations faced by LGBTQI+ asylum applicants and refugees within the asylum process. Addressing these violations requires identifying the forces behind structural violence and critically assessing the structures marginalising black African asylum applicants in particular. In particular, there is a lack of research that explicitly links the experiences of asylum applicants to racialised structural

violence. Additionally, the literature highlights the necessity for studies explicitly linking intersectionality and the experiences of sexual and gender-expansive individuals seeking asylum. Moreover, there is limited research utilising a decolonial intersectional analysis to understand the experiences of Black African sexual and gender asylum claimants and refugees.

Conversations within migration studies have highlighted how they continue to re-traumatise and re-stigmatise sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, often framing them within the discourse of "vulnerable" or "traumatised" queer refugees (Nematy et al., 2023). Research on marginalised communities, including sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, tends to perpetuate their experiences through the lens of "vulnerability," excluding many individuals from engaging in research and perpetuating practices that pathologise asylum applicants and refugees. This framing also perpetuates stereotypes that depict marginalised communities as lacking agency, powerless, and helpless, while depriving them of their agency. Additionally, much of the literature reviewed lacked the lived experiences and perspectives of forcibly displaced persons, especially those of black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and refugees. Previous scholars have emphasised the importance of acknowledging first-hand lived experiences of state violence and the asylum process in understanding state policies and their impact (Bhatia, 2015; 2020; Canning, 2017; Grewcock, 2012; Ravid, 2022). However, migration studies about the lives of black African people and persons of colour in Europe often rely on the knowledge of white liberal scholars, with few contributions from persons of colour and even fewer black scholars and scholars with lived experience of asylum-seeking. This tends to reproduce research on integration, which also depends heavily on state funding (See De Genova, 2016; Lentin, 2004; 2012; Lentin & Titley, 2012; Lentin & Moreo, 2012; Also see, Khosravi, 2024) and important voices and narratives from black scholars are excluded from academic discourse. While white allies in migration scholarship, practice, and activism are critical, there is a pressing need to centre, amplify, collaborate and encourage spaces for asylum applicants' voices and ultimately decolonise the production of scholarship and knowledge on the migration/ the asylum experience.

Studies on the migration experience of African sexual and gender-expansive forcibly displaced persons often fail to critically evaluate the language used in research and acknowledge the agency and capacity of claimants. This study emphasises the need for research that recognises the capacity of co-researchers and critically evaluates language nuances and praxis to avoid perpetuating systematic oppression. Manifestations of these concerns arise from limited scholarly understanding influenced by an oppressive white middle-class viewpoint, particularly in migration studies in the UK, which often follows a

white-saviour narrative. Issues affecting African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants are often side-lined on the world stage, pushed away from the centre. Furthermore, few studies examine the experiences of African sexual and gender asylum claimants in the context of structural racism and violence. While some research addresses the racialisation of LGBTIQ+ spaces in various countries (See Andersson, 2015; Caluya, 2008; Held, 2017; Livermon, 2014; Tucker, 2009), little research explicitly identifies the experiences of SOGI asylum applicants as instances of racialised structural violence.

Furthermore, there are gaps in research on the experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants by fellow African sexual and gender refugees or in collaboration *with*. This research, conducted by a forcibly displaced scholar who sought asylum in the UK, provides an interesting perspective. It centres the voices and lived experiences of forcibly displaced asylum claimants as co-researchers contributing their experiences of the UK asylum regime. Through anti-oppressive and remedial praxis that speaks to social justice, the research offers decolonial and feminist methodologies as sites for resistance, 'healing' and potential transformation.

The research question was shaped by conversations with co-researchers who steered the direction of the project and it primarily asks:

- What narratives are told about the UK asylum regime? How are structural and symbolic violences implicated in these narratives of experience?

Through further examination, the study also looks to understand:

- How do African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants narrate their experiences of the asylum process? Through narration, how do they make sense of these experiences?
- How are ideas of (African) sexuality and gender identity implicated in how the asylum regime is experienced?

CHAPTER THREE: Theoretical Framework.

The research integrated three theoretical frameworks, Trauma perspective, Structural Intersectionality Theory and Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory to explore narratives shared about the asylum process. Each of the theory employed promote the exploration and insight of the unique experiences, and concepts related to the experiences of applicants, as individuals with multiple and overlapping identities and vulnerabilised experiences. Relevant aspects of the Trauma theory, Structural Intersectionality Theory and Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory are combined to develop a comprehensive and holistic framework for understanding experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and how structural and institutional violences are implicated in the narratives of experience shared. The integrated theoretical approach is guided by a decolonial and feminist research process, representing a departure from Eurocentric ways of conducting research. The theories underpinning the methodology and analysis process engage with and are in conversation with one another throughout the research and shape the application of appropriate ways of doing and thinking about the research. Resultantly the following chapter presents the applied theories and perspectives, providing a critical discussion of why they were chosen and how they would be applied in the study.

3.1 Trauma Perspectives.

There were many variations on theorising of trauma which could help explain and understand the nature of the kinds of trauma experienced by sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. For example, Mollica's (2006) adaptation of Trauma theory appeared more closely connected to the experiences of African sexual and gender diverse asylum claimants and refugees. Mollica (1999) suggested that persons who had been exposed to a traumatic event and or had experienced trauma had an intrinsic ability to 'heal' themselves, alongside other psychological treatments. Mollica identified how there was a healing force hidden in every person that was continually striving for survival and found fault with medical practitioners for overly depending on medication in treating trauma (Mollica 2006). Mollica and colleagues (2001) emphasised that for healing to happen, it was significant that survivors and or victims of violence played an active role in their storytelling and interpretation of their trauma stories. Storytelling, and guiding claimants through the story telling process and the realisation that the knowledge produced could generate effective interventions was likely to be healing for claimants (Friskie, 2020; George, 2010; Kiser et al., 2010; Mollica, 2006).

As well as using their own experiences to cope with everyday life hardships, Mollica (2006) suggested that refugees exposed to, sitting with, and moving through trauma could heal themselves with the support of traditional medical intervention. It is recognised that refugees' ability to engage in self-healing and build resilience, often through activities like storytelling, is a crucial aspect not only for service providers (Mollica, 2006) but also for researchers and practitioners dedicated to comprehending the experiences of asylum claimants and refugees throughout the process. Mollica's (2006) concept of Trauma Theory focused on *self-healing* through spirituality, healthy eating, humour, physical fitness, and relaxation techniques, rather than being dependent on what George (2010) termed *long-term handouts* (p382). This perspective on trauma encouraged service providers to employ both traditional interventions (and medical ways of diagnosing) and concepts of cultural contribution and self-healing (George, 2010). Mollica (2006) proposed that through the application of his theoretical framework, individuals were able to lead abundant and meaningful lives. However, the theory did not appear to consider circumstances of ongoing trauma and explain what might occur in such instances.

Similarly, the theory was criticised for its definition of PTSD which did not consider the subtle and pervasive "trauma facing oppressed non-veterans in our community, in their everyday lives", (George, 2010, p382). More broadly, trauma paradigms have been criticised for being fragmented and exhibiting biases towards individualistic, past trauma, and single trauma perspectives (Kira, et al., 2013; Kira, et al., 2014). These paradigms often overlook intergroup systemic and ongoing traumatic stress (Straker, 2013) and fail to consider the complexities of accumulating trauma and exposure to various forms of collective harm, which may be central to the experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. Kira and Tummala-Narra (2015) highlighted the difficulties in applying existing stress and trauma frameworks to the complex circumstances involving refugees' past, present, and ongoing traumas. They noted that a sole focus on past traumas often disregards the ongoing dynamics of trauma, which can exacerbate the effects of past traumas and heighten vulnerability to future traumas (Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015). Similarly, an exclusive emphasis on 'human-caused' trauma fails to acknowledge stressors and trauma stemming from institutions, social systems, and intergenerational transmission of trauma through cultures and histories (Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015). Regardless, Mollica's (2006) trauma theory of asylum claimants and refugees' ability to self-heal and 'resiliency' (and possibly resistance and post-trauma growth) through the telling of their stories was a central consideration for the methodology which centred remedial practices. It was not clear how well the theory would understand asylum claimants' trauma as influenced by their political, social, and historical experiences. It was however hoped that this trauma

perspective would provide insight into African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants' unique struggles and the role trauma played in their everyday lives and the asylum process.

Sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants experience different types of violence at various stages in their lives and during the asylum journey. Lewis (2014) explored narratives of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in the UK, highlighting how the asylum process itself can be a source of trauma and violence. The stringent and often discriminatory nature of asylum procedures, in the US and Europe, including the UK is a form of state violence that exacerbates the precariousness of sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants, denying them safety and subjecting them to further trauma (Alessi, 2017; Bachmann, 2016; Baillot & Connelly, 2018; Khan, 2016; Lewis, 2019; Shaw & Verghese, 2022). Bhatia (2023) highlighted how reproductive injustice and racialised-gendered state violence intersect to produce a unique and severe form of systemic violence against sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants through policies that control and suppress reproductive rights. The UK's asylum system, critiqued for its exclusionary practices, subjects claimants to racial discrimination, homophobia, transphobia (Gruberg, 2013; Singer 2021) and other intersecting forms of violence such as sexual and gendered violence (Anderson, 2010). Spade (2011) discussed how legal and administrative systems inherently marginalise and criminalise sexual and gender-expansive persons, reinforcing Bhatia's (2023) points about state-imposed violence. Immigration laws and policies are not just neutral frameworks, they are embedded with heteronormative and racial biases that disproportionately impact sexual and gender-expansive forced migrants. Bhatia's (2023) analysis, emphasises the need for intersectional approaches in research, practice, policy-making and advocacy to protect better and support marginalised sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. By situating experiences of sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants within these broader theoretical discussions, we can better understand the multifaceted nature of the violence endured and the critical need for intersectional approaches in addressing their experiences, rights and well-being.

Additionally, understanding the impact and manifestations of trauma, whether it be through intersecting violences experienced or during the research process, could be useful in developing a trauma-informed approach to participatory research methods. The research hoped, therefore, to adopt a trauma-informed approach that focused on centring capacity-building with co-researchers to co-exist with trauma and to create a research space where autonomy, agency, safety, healing, validation, joy, listening, crying and co-sharing could all take place. Here capacity-building does not refer to conversations and practices by NGOs and researchers from colonial countries whose ideas of capacity strengthening and capacity-

building have sometimes failed to learn from and acknowledge lived and local experiences as valuable knowledge and expertise (Pinet & Leon-Himmelstine, 2020). In this research, capacity building with and for co-researchers involved establishing partnerships, fostering collaboration, and engaging in meaningful exchanges to address co-researchers' needs. This approach adopted a praxis model, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and resources to strengthen capacity both during and after the research process. I expand more on this in the following sections.

3.2 Structural Intersectionality Theory.

The concept of intersectionality emerged from the ideas debated in critical race theory in the 1980s and 1990s and among a group of legal scholars who challenged the US court's narrow view of discrimination (Coaston, 2019). Intersectionality Theory was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in a paper that presented three legal cases dealing with issues of both racial discrimination and sex discrimination. However, the long history of intersectional thinking in black feminist thought goes back as far as a speech by Sojourner Truth (Institute for Economic Justice, 2024). The Combahee River Collective also had very similar ideas but did not use the term intersectionality (Decherney, 2023). Nevertheless, Crenshaw's (1989) argument presented how the court's narrow perspective of discrimination was an example of the "manifestation of the conceptual limitations of the single-issue analyses" p149. The theory explained specific oppressions faced by black women and ²⁴women of colour in the US, discussing the complexities and forms of oppression that black women faced because of their multiple identities based on gender and race (Crenshaw 1989). When the framework was initially birthed in the 1980s it explained the oppression of black women more generally and within the US criminal justice system (Crenshaw, 1989). In particular, the framework examined how US courts framed and interpreted stories of black women plaintiffs (Crenshaw, 1989).

In addition to gender and race, Crenshaw (1989) also identified socio-economic status as a third factor operating in the system of oppression shaping the experiences of black women. However, while Crenshaw was the first to coin the term "intersectionality" in the late 1980s within the context of the emergence of critical race legal studies, the concept

²⁴ WOC / POC is a term used and popular in the US to describe American terms that have previously used a coalition of historically colonised people who experience racism. However, it is very much an American term which has also been criticised for flattening people's varying experiences with racism, into a monolith. Black and POC do not mean the same. In cases where asylum claimants are from other cultures and countries that might be identified as 'politically Black' but not *racially black – i.e. if persons are from India/ Afghanistan/ Syria/ Iran/ Palestine for example I use 'black and persons of colour'. The thesis will not use 'non-white' as it centres white people and whiteness as the neutral default.

has evolved, travelled, and been expanded by numerous other black and Indigenous feminists thinking about struggle and oppression across various contexts and identities. Notable figures who have contributed to this expansion include Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Cherríe Moraga, Namukasa E. Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, and Robin Zheng.

Over the years various literature began to apply the theory to other areas of intersection or identities, such as sexuality (Brotman & Lee, 2011), ability and age (Lutz 2011). Intersectionality is a lens which helped examine “where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects” (News from Columbia Law, 2017). In an interview with one of Crenshaw’s former students, Kevin Minofu, Kevin described the concept of intersectionality as being concerned with deep structural and systemic questions about discrimination and inequality, and not the assumed shallow questions of identity and representation as they were often applied (Coaston, 2019). This research incorporated insights from Crenshaw’s intersectionality perspectives with other literature on structural racism, structural violence, structural homophobia, and other forms of structural oppression to examine systems of injustice and inequality at a macro level through a structural intersectionality approach to bordering practices.

Historically, intersectionality focused on the individual level, theorising the effects of larger systemic inequalities on individuals (Homan, Brown, & King, 2021). As a result intersectionality theoretically reflected overlapping systems of inequality in the beginning (Crenshaw 1991). Additionally, most studies that had previously used intersectionality theory had focused on the oppression of women. However, researchers have expanded the scope of intersectionality theory by incorporating various perspectives into their analyses. For instance, Brotman and Lee (2011, 2013) utilised intersectionality theory to examine the specific impacts of structural violence within the Canadian refugee system on the lives of LGBTIQ refugees. The necessity to validate one’s sexual orientation and gender identity compelled sexual and gender-expansive refugees to reveal their identities. This disclosure, in particular, pressured sexual and gender-diverse individuals to articulate their experiences and identities by western norms and ideals (Brotman & Lee, 2011; 2013).

Furthermore, the process of re-telling experiences of harm forced asylum claimants to relive their trauma, a form of structural violence (Brotman & Lee, 2011; 2013). Intersectionality theory illuminates how sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, due to their intersecting identities encompassing race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, migration status, or age, encounter structural injustices and are marginalised legally, socially, and culturally (Brotman & Lee, 2011; 2013). Structural intersectionality offers insight into the distinct social and legal facets of structural violence they confront. For example, Murray (2014) mentioned how language (telling their stories fully and coherently, during the asylum

interview and in migration hearings) created obstacles for persons whose first language was not English. Research in Sweden showed a lack of trust directed towards language interpreters in the asylum process (Borgqvist, 2016). Equally, some of the interpreters who were from the same native countries and UK communities as claimants, had been discriminatory and homophobic during the asylum interviews (O'Leary, 2008; Raj, 2013; Mathysse, 2013).

Moreover, sexual, and gender-expansive claimants continued to face re-traumatisation and stigmatisation (Borgqvist, 2016) from structures and processes which advantaged white, heteronormative bodies and treated African sexual, and gender diverse claimants as unworthy of protection, and as undesirable (Puar, 2007, Galdeano, 2019). Experiences gathered from co-researchers will be critically interrogated using intersectional theory. This approach aims to understand how oppression manifests for co-researchers due to their intersecting identities as sexual and gender-expansive individuals, Africans, and forcibly displaced persons with diverse experiences and identities. Through this analysis, I seek to discern how oppression is manifested and its various forms. Structural intersectionality theory will be used to examine evidence of structural violence and discriminatory practices claimants faced due to their intersecting identities and how this may have further structurally marginalised them. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory demonstrated that people have individual identities that intersect in ways that have shaped how they are perceived, understood, and treated. For example, co-researchers in the study are African, black, asylum applicants and refugees. However, within that some people will also be women, and lesbian, or women and bisexual, or women and trans.

Similarly, some co-researchers are African, black, asylum applicants, non-binary or gay and so forth. Whilst sexual and gender-expansive persons are often placed under one category, they have individual identities, varying experiences, and would have experienced different discriminations within the asylum process. Moreover, the experiences and discriminations applicants would have faced within the UK asylum process will be different from those of white persons journeying from other global minority countries. Outside of that, once in the UK forms of discrimination and intersecting structural inequalities experienced would also be different from black British-born sexual and gender-diverse persons, due to access to language, class, and citizenship status. A structural intersectionality approach will make efforts to address the more obvious forms of oppression, whilst also considering all the other forms of oppression that might be less obvious. The approach will allow for complexity in the effects of trauma both within and between asylum claimants and other migrants (Coaston, 2019). When the intersectional lens is used to guide the methodology, it will operate as both the observance and analysis of power imbalances and the tool by which

those power imbalances could be mitigated and eradicated (Coaston, 2019). The trans-geographical lens raised important and difficult questions to examine how systems of oppression varied and related to one another and structural inequalities shaped the asylum system and the experiences of asylum claimants. Integrated with key aspects of trauma perspectives and Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer theory, an intersectional analysis will uncover the ways heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and processes of racialisation shaped and organised the experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants.

In the study, the concept of structural intersectionality will demonstrate how sexual, and gender-expansive asylum claimants were, according to their own experiences, subjected to structural marginalisation socially, economically, and legally during the asylum process (Murray, 2014; Shamsari, 2014). Applying the concept of structural intersectionality in the research, as a theoretical instrument will allow an understanding of specific forms of economic, social, and legal aspects of structural violence that African sexual and gender-expansive claimants may have faced.

3.3 Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory (ADKT).

Williams (2016) introduced a framework aimed at conceptualising, comprehending, and addressing same-sex sexual practices within individuals of African descent. Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory serves as a method for decolonising Black sexualities, relationships, and the corresponding scholarship (Williams, 2016). Various theoretical perspectives have contributed to the exploration of gender and sexuality within African and Black scholarship, including Afrocentric Thought (Ashby, 2003; Hudson-Weems, 2004), Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2005; hooks, 2001), and Black Queer Studies (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer theory approaches the discussion of gender and sexuality from an Afrocentric standpoint that aligns with the principles of African intellectual thought. This framework prioritises Africa in any examination of African history, culture, and experiences (Williams, 2016), while also recognising its connection to other perspectives within African and Black scholarship (Williams, 2016). Williams (2016) discussed Reviere's (2001) five principles Afrocentric scholarship should be characterised. The principles written in Kiswahili, a Bantu vernacular language spoken in the African Great Lakes region and other parts of Eastern and south-eastern Africa, include, *ukweli* (interpreted, truth), *kujitoa* (meaning, commitment), *utulivu* (meaning, harmony), *ujamaa* (translated, communalism), and *uhaki* (meaning, action). Williams's (2016) Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer framework proposes that to effectively participate in Afrocentric

investigation of sexual and gender-expansive experiences, homosexuality and same-sex sexual practices in black communities, these principles should guide the work.

Queer theory (Butler, 2002; de Lauretis, 1991; Jagose, 1996; Jagose, 2005; Walters, 2011) was initially considered as a potential theory to underpin research but abandoned in the earlier stages. The reasons are outlined below. Queer theory is primarily focused on analysing and critiquing societal and political norms about sexuality and gender experiences. However, it may not adequately address the complexities, nuances, cultural, and political contexts in which African sexuality and gender identities are situated. Queer theorising disrupts and politicises perceived relationships among sex, gender, bodies, sexuality, and desire (Butler, 2002; Sapinoso, 2009). Yet, as long as sex and sexuality remain central to the analysis within 'LGBT' studies, there is a necessity for intersectional analyses that also account for factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, migration status, culture, religion, geography, and colonial history. In the past some of the critiques of queer theory have noted that the theory is elitist (Brim, 2018, Jayathunga, 2022) largely focuses on sexuality (Johnson, 2014; Seely, 2020;) and does not adequately capture the experiences of trans and gender nonconforming people (Bauer et al., 2009; Namaste, 2000, 2005; Serano, 2007). The theory's intersectional approach begins with the hypothesis that sexuality cannot be disconnected from the other categories of social status and identity, thereby providing a perspective of how sexuality is shaped and shaped by other factors (Butler, 1999; Seely, 2020; Johnson, 2014).

However, queer theory evolved from a white queer context that seldom examined the intersectional identities and experiences of black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants (See works of Judith Butler, 1990; 2004). Not only are black African sexual and gender-expansive persons' unique experiences often overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when the northern hemisphere speaks for, about, and defines their experiences and identities for them. When queer theory attempts to describe and define black African persons' experiences and identities through analysing patriarchy and heteronormativity, it often overlooks the role of race, culture, colonialism, geography and even language. As a result, the value of queer theory to black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants can be limited. By employing Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory (Williams, 2016), the research will depart from utilising Eurocentric frameworks to understand the gender and sexualities of African individuals seeking asylum in the UK, whose origins, cultural beliefs, and experiences are rooted in the African continent's history and context. While decolonising theory does not entail excluding Euro-American thought, the research process will exercise caution in adopting theories, tools, language or terms, and methods associated with or originating from western intellectual systems and history, ensuring they

are not applied in a decontextualised manner. Euro-American thought has often proven inadequate for studying marginalised and historically colonised populations whose human experiences and challenges differ significantly from those of dominant cultures (Alvares, 2011).

Afrocentric epistemological approach allows scholars to centre their study in their experience (Clarke, 2015), as well as study the ideas and events from the standpoint of Africans as the key players rather than as victims. ADKT framework strongly speaks to the practice of deconstructing whiteness, eurocentrism and reimagining how research is conducted in the academe. The research will achieve this by examining Black sexuality and gender identity through methods that are inherently inclined to involve the body, mind, and spirit (Williams, 2016), thereby re-centring the knowledge and experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. Williams (2016) proposes that scholars interested in engaging Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory must be guided by African thought and be prepared to work outside of the limits of western epistemological traditions. Afrocentric thought has significantly contributed to the ongoing discourse on sexuality and gender in black and African studies, as noted by Williams (2016). This perspective has critically examined how sexual and gender-diverse identities are defined and controlled by the state through border controls and bordering practices.

Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer theory also considers the difference between homosexuality and same-sex sexual practice within the African context. Williams (2016) noted that there were distinctions between *homosexuality* - homosexual or gay identity - and same-sex sexual practice - the practice of male-to-male or female-to-female sex, within black and African communities. Similarly, other scholars have identified that within black communities in the US men who had sex with other men (MSM) did not specifically identify with homosexual or gay identity (Millet et al., 2005) and similarly on the African continent, same-sex sexual practice did not always fit the notions of homosexuality or gay identity as defined or described in contemporary times and by colonial countries (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Williams nods to other scholars who noted how in some societies gender has little to do with physical anatomy and is entirely energetic (for example among the Dagara people, Hoff, 1993; the Dogon society, T'Shaka, 1995) same-sex sexual relationality that was gender based, age based, and spirituality based (Murray & Roscoe, 1998; Williams, 2006). Williams (2016) provided some of the methods scholar-practitioners might use when adopting Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer theory to their work. Some of these methods included rhythm/ music, ritual, trance/possession, and divination/oracle (Williams (2016). For example, *ritual* was as an epistemic tool and used as an intervention and maintenance. *Ritual* involved words of power, symbolic movement, and rhythm in the form of music and

movement and were essential for the health and vitality of individuals and communities (Williams, 2016). In *trance/possession* individuals triggered a form of consciousness other than their usual waking state and individuals opened themselves up to being possessed by spirits.

Under colonisation sexuality was regulated through laws and social norms imposed by colonisers, often criminalising indigenous sexual practices and imposing heteronormative, patriarchal and Christian structures (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2020; Smith & Johnson, 2018). This regulation was central to the colonial project as it reinforced control and power over colonised and subjugated bodies, upholding racial hierarchies, and justifying colonial rule through moral superiority. In particular, 'sexual freedom' has been framed by the global minority as a hallmark of modernity and progress, positioning 'western' norms as the global standard. This framing reproduces coloniality by continuing to marginalise the global majority's sexual identities and practices, asserting global minority dominance in defining what constitutes sexual freedom (González & Santos, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2021; Patel & Nguyen, 2019).

ADKT will therefore be used to understand African/ black sexual and gender-expansive identities within systems of imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, and from an African perspective, as well as to challenge sexuality and gender rigidity and nurture space for gender maroon cultures and spaces that challenge Eurocentric and conventional forms of gender (Maat, 2014; Williams, 2016). Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory is not merely a framework for understanding sexual and gender-expansive identities and experiences. It will promote understanding of African/Black sexualities that embody all of who they were, had been, are and will be (Williams, 2016) and help understand how co-researchers framed their own sexual and gender identities and how this may have been oppositional to how the asylum system (underpinned by colonial and European understandings) understood them and expected of them. However, this framework was recently developed and there is a need for more work to validate, demonstrate and elaborate methods proposed to move beyond a deconstruction of the dominance of Western academe (Williams, 2016). Overall, the proposed integrated theoretical framework of trauma perspectives, structural intersectionality theory and Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory will highlight the importance of understanding the experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, their sexualities, and experiences in the context of the UK asylum process, whilst not separating these experiences from their cultural identity, history, and heritage. This was achieved by centring African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants' experiences and attempting to

make sense of it on their own terms and centring their human experiences in the context of African identity.

Chapter Summary:

This chapter discussed the integrated theoretical frameworks that underpin the research, namely the Trauma perspective, Structural Intersectionality Theory, and Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory. A critical discussion was provided on why these frameworks were chosen and how they would be applied in the research, arguing that each framework offered unique insights into the experiences and concepts related to asylum applicants with multiple and overlapping identities, as well as their vulnerabilised experiences. The chapter emphasised the importance of understanding the experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants within the context of the UK asylum process, while also acknowledging the significance of not separating these experiences from their cultural identity, history, and heritage.

CHAPTER FOUR: Decolonial Feminist Methods, Procedures and Research, in Theory and Practice.

This chapter presents the rationale for the use of deliberate and intentional, decolonial feminist methodologies that display research processes as ethical and moral acts which have the potential to be restorative and remedial (Chirape, 2020). The chapter begins by discussing methodologies supporting decolonial feminist participatory actions that advance a feminist, decolonial and social justice agenda. I examine the context within which the project was being undertaken, highlighting the implications of conducting psychology research during the COVID-19 pandemic and the research revisions made in response to this crisis. Methodological processes of gathering asylum experiences of African gender and sexual expansive claimants are outlined and within this I underline some of the challenges and ethical concerns faced and resolved. I then share how the research, attempted to be remedial, through adopting praxis that humanised and dignified co-researchers' experiences, and responded to social injustices. Finally, the chapter provides a reflective practice journal as an opportunity to think back on lessons and challenges faced during the research process.

4.1 Context for Method and Procedures Chosen for the Research.

During the process of conceptualising the research proposal and methodology, I intentionally carved time, and space to reflect on what psychology research at the intersection of migration focused on centring healing and transformative social change might look like. My background in forensic psychology, critical and liberatory psychology, community activism and personal experiences with the UK asylum system were a catalyst for the deliberate reflexive process that I engaged with before conducting the research (Chirape, 2021). In 2010 I sought asylum in the UK, based on sexuality, after the UK HO withheld my passport for over 6 years, without a substantive reason. Following the process of lodging my asylum claim, I was detained for over 48 hours in the Dover Immigration Removal Centre (formerly known as Dover Prison). The HO gave me a three-year visa, which I declined, and with the support of litigators, community activists and NGOs I chose to represent myself in front of a judge, in a tribunal immigration court. This decision allowed me to directly challenge the HO about their mistreatment of me. The asylum process, in its entirety, deepened my awareness and knowledge of the issues and trauma that arise in this project.

The experience became a catalyst for my Masters in Forensic Psychology research project. The project evaluated the impact of detention-related trauma on LGBT refugees and

explored the idea of personal constructs and ²⁵constructive alternativism in LGBT individuals' experiences of the UK asylum process (Chirape, 2018, 2022). The work also revealed the mistrust participants felt with researchers. This was also corroborated by Hynes (2003) who analysed the history of mistrust and relationships of mistrust in research with refugees who had arrived in the UK. Hynes (2003) noted that the experience of seeking refuge created mistrust at several levels and explored why that might be the case. Similarly, a preliminary review of refugee health literature by Seagle and colleagues (2020) concluded that research undertaken with refugee communities required additional care and attention to ensure respect for and welfare of the participants. Seagle et al., (2020) recommended a refugee-specific ethics framework and best practices for research with refugee groups. In the same year, the European Commission (2020) provided guidelines to make research with migrants, refugees and asylum applicants, ethically compliant. Some of the general principles in the guideline included, "treating the refugee communities with care and sensitivity and rigorously safeguard[ing] the dignity, wellbeing, autonomy, safety and security of their family and friends" (European Commission, 2020, p1).

We know that research with communities on the margins of society (including refugees, asylum applicants, sexual and gender-expansive persons, and black and ²⁶POC communities) continues to be dehumanising, insensitive, prejudiced, racist, homophobic, transphobic, harmful and violent (Django, 2011; Maynard & Luft, 2023; Okeke & La Vigne, 2019; Reyes & Haines, 2021; Savage et al., 2021; Smith, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2014). A plethora of research implemented practices that neither contribute toward social change nor position marginalised communities as experts in their lived realities (Chirape, 2020). Following my experience of the violent UK asylum system, I also participated in several research and projects which, unfortunately, were not trauma-informed, lacked sensitivity, objectified and dehumanised me, causing further harm. It is in response to such dehumanising research practices (Maynard & Luft, 2023; Smith, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012, 2014), that the current research seeks to reimagine a practice of humanising knowledge production. If my doctoral research intended to be remedial, restorative and motivate social change, it was crucial that I applied rigorous reflexivity, have transparent conversations with the researched community and actively involve the community in the research process.

In 2020, I published some of my reflections on my intentions to centre healing and discussed why this was important (Chirape, 2020). The paper became one way of holding

²⁵ Constructive alternativism is an example of a theoretical perspective on how individuals interpret and understand their experiences and the world around them. (Kelly, 1963).

²⁶ People of Colour

myself accountable to this intent, as well as a point of reference for meaningful conversations with differing communities, including possible co-researchers, activists and professionals working with asylum claimants. Conversations had with the community included discussions about their previous experiences with research/ers, identifying their specific needs, discussing how they would want to contribute to research, issues they wanted to be highlighted and what social change could look like for them. More importantly, the conversations revealed how crucial it was for the research to be responsive to challenges arising during the COVID-19 pandemic, for the claimants pushed further into poverty. The reflexive process utilised before undertaking the research allowed me to deliberate and sit with questions such as: *Beyond simply applying innovative methodological processes, how and what decolonial practices could lead to real social change that responds to the pandemic crisis?; What could meaningful power sharing and exchange of knowledge between the lead researcher and co-researchers look like?; What decolonial practices could lead to the humanisation of knowledge production to make the knowledge more useful and pertinent to the lived experiences of marginalised communities (Chirape, 2020)?; If the research and more specifically, I as the the lead researcher was focused on being 'of service' to the communities participating in the research, what could this look like?; Which collaborative approaches that prioritise the needs of co-researchers could be adopted for the research process?; What role will co-researchers play and if methodology could be used as a healing modality, what methodological approaches might be remedial for them?; How can the project avoid dehumanising contributors and be instrumental in humanising communities and prompting real social transformation, and in the immediate?* These questions became a premise and a basis for reimagining and adopting decolonial feminist methodologies.

In decolonial feminist research, a co-researcher actively engages in the research process as a person with agency, control and (some) power, rather than as a subject or a mere informant. This approach emphasises collaborative, reciprocal, and inclusive methodologies to dismantle traditional power hierarchies and knowledge production mechanisms often found in colonial frameworks (See Mohanty, 2003; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In the current study, discussions were held with all willing participants to clarify the role of co-researchers, who then decided how they wanted to engage with the process. Barriers such as COVID-19, co-researchers' capacity, and PhD research ethics limited individual contributions. Nonetheless, co-researchers were involved from the outset, directing research questions, deciding on data collection methods, and reviewing the analysis chapters before the thesis was archived in the university library. To disseminate the study, I plan to produce a graphic book based on the shared experiences, a book, and several journal papers, aiming to collaborate with all or some of the co-researchers to co-

produce knowledge. Co-researchers will have the choice to publish anonymously under pseudonyms. In the collaborative knowledge production process, thorough discussions will take place regarding potential risks, privacy, confidentiality, autonomy, agency, data ownership, authorship, community impact, and possible harm. Transparent dialogue will guide the management of ethical concerns, with ongoing transparency, collaborative engagement, reflective practices, and involvement of the PhD supervisor and ethics board as needed. In decolonial feminist research, co-researchers are distinguished from traditional research participants by emphasising equity, collaboration, and the dismantling of hierarchical power structures. Despite these intentions, achieving true egalitarianism remains challenging, as academic researchers in institutional contexts still hold more power. Furthermore, co-researchers often lack the same access to resources, training, or support, impacting the balance of contributions.

4.2 Decolonial Feminist Theory and Methods.

My starting point to this study began with assuming that my approach to and thinking about research, like many people, was likely going to be deeply influenced and informed by imperialist thinking, interests, and practice. The thought that through this research I might unintentionally and unconsciously (re)produce the logic of coloniality and perpetuate harm in ways research has historically done to me and others in my community gave me anxiety (See Ortega, 2017). This starting point and the anxiety not only motivated me to attempt to unlearn some of those colonial ways of doing and thinking about research, but it encouraged me to re/imagine the sort of research that would align with my politics as a black feminist, lesbian/queer and activist practitioner. I imagined collaborative research that witnessed co-researchers and I, in our wholeness. Community conversations with fellow scholars, activists and feminists led me to decolonial feminist methodologies (See Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2019; Cornell, Mkhize & Kessi, 2019; Lugones, 2011; Shefer & Bozalek, 2022; Suffla et al., 2015; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; van Niekerk & Boonzaier, 2019; Velez, 2019).

The 'decolonial turn', an old phenomenon on the African continent can be traced to thinkers of liberation such as Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Thomas Sankara and Steve Biko, to name a few. Decolonial theory argues that colonial relations continue to shape and ground knowledge systems, present-day political, economic and social systems (See ; Lugones, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2011; Mignolo, 2000, 2009, 2011; Quijano, 2000; 2007; Wynter, 2003). Historically, scholarly

research repeatedly dehumanised people of the ²⁷global majority, perpetuated harmful stereotypes, and discrimination, focused on negative social issues and employed a pathologising lens (Bishop, 1998; Poupart et al., 2000). As a result conversations on decolonisation encouraged researchers to critique and rethink the way research was thought and practiced, as well as how knowledge was produced. Although the colonial administration has 'ended', there continues to be a domination of colonial forms of knowledge production (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007). Eurocentric knowledge systems continue to be privileged over other knowledges and epistemes (Mignolo 2007). As a result, knowledges which are not considered to fit into western systems are overlooked, ignored, marginalised or repressed (Mignolo, 2007, Chiumbi, 2017). This meant that western knowledge remained hegemonic and, the structure and practice of research continued to be embedded in a history of whiteness and coloniality (Chiumbu, 2017). Currently, many scholarly frameworks are deeply entrenched in Euro-American ideals and shaped by western knowledge systems (Chiumbi, 2017). However, traditional research methods often fail to address the needs of marginalised groups or effectively address their social issues. These conventional approaches may overlook the unique experiences and perspectives of marginalised communities, hindering efforts to understand and address their specific challenges and concerns.

Therefore, decolonial theorising invites scholars from the global majority to approach knowledge production from their standpoint, as the first step towards decolonisation of the mind and decolonial research, thought and practice. For a scholar of African heritage like myself, this entails utilising concepts of Africanity as conceptual tools, emphasising the importance of working from the standpoint of Africa and the "African experience" (Chiumbu, 2017, p3.), while also avoiding the essentialisation of communities. It involves recognising the diverse and dynamic nature of African identities and experiences and acknowledging the complexity of social, cultural, and historical factors that shape them. However, to be different to traditional ways of doing research, in practice, decolonial research methods demand purposeful and deliberate approaches (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Chinweizu, 1987). It demands approaches which are set in transforming the institution of research, the structures, and ways of organising, conducting, practising, and disseminating research knowledge (Smith, 1999).

For qualitative researchers in refugee studies, for example, drawing from theories of decolonisation can be in the form of embodying a transformative praxis, exercising critical reflexivity, embracing 'Other(ed)' ways of knowing and practising reciprocity and respect for

self-determination (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). However, decolonisation is not specifically about discarding western knowledge and western ways of producing knowledge but rather about re-centring Africa (and the global majority and its multiple experiences) (Mbembe, 2015). It is about re-centring the knowledge and experiences of communities oppressed by colonial legacies. It demands that the positionality of the people being researched, the positionality of the researcher and the 'geopolitics of knowledge' are all considered (Mignolo, 2011; Chiumbu, 2017). Reclaiming the process of knowledge production enables communities who are on the margin such as myself and co-researchers in this study to theorise their lived experiences and encourages researchers to acknowledge this knowledge and experiences as valid and official academic knowledge (Zavala, 2013).

Decolonial feminism emerged as a theoretical concept (Lugones, 2008; 2010) which centred decolonial theory in a racial and gendered feminist context, while carving space for the voices and experiences of silenced, 'Othered' gendered communities (Bhambra, 2014; Lugones, 2010; Paludi et al., 2019; Schiwy, 2007). Decolonial feminism acknowledges gendered communities, such as women, as dehumanised groups that fall under the concept of the "coloniality of gender" (Lugones, 2011). For example, the voices and agency of women from the global majority are silenced and the discourse around them Other and universalises their experiences (Lugones, 2011). Building upon the work of black and indigenous activists and feminists (Cunningham, 2006; Espinosa Miñoso, 2017; Hernández Castillo, 2010; Lugones 2007, 2008, 2010) decolonial feminism offers a framework that provides feminist practice, space for historically silenced voices to become agents in the production of knowledge. The framework offered new ways of seeing, doing, and understanding gender (and sexualities), in the context of the global majorities (Lugones, 2011). A decolonial feminist theoretical framework is a critical, reflexive tool that (Lugones, 2011) when applied to examining narratives of African asylum applicants with non-normative sexual/gender identities help to identify and understand the complexities of their lived experiences of the asylum system. In the context of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, I use decolonial feminism to challenge coloniality, patriarchy and other systems of oppression such as heteronormativity, and use it as a lens to think and re-think from the perspective of co-researchers, as 'othered' bodies, to unravel new understandings of race, gender, and sexuality and how each relates to normative heterosexuality and oppressions (Lugones, 2011). As a result, decolonial feminism asks the 'coloniality question' of feminist theories and practices to uncover how coloniality reinforces the categories of oppression that structural intersectionality identifies (Velez, 2019).

4.3 Participatory Action Research Methods.

In reimaging research practice which could be transformative and fully considers the needs of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, I was drawn to the feminist and liberatory potential of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods. Whilst not all Participatory Action Research decolonises research (Chiumbu, 2017), there has been writing about the decolonising potential of PAR by South African scholars (Kessi et al., 2021; Malherbe et al., 2017; Seedat et al., 2017). Participatory Action Research (PAR) represents a radical departure from traditional research approaches (Chiumbu, 2017; Kessi et al., 2019; Ayaya et al., 2020; Fernandez, 2022; Peters et al., 2022). PAR offers a solution to the conflicting goals between academia and the researched community, as well as the hierarchical power dynamics that historically favoured academia over the knowledge of marginalised communities (See Akom, 2011; Caxaj, 2015; Chiumbu, 2017; Kemmis et al., 2015). Enabling people to participate in a study as *co-researchers*, using less traditional data collection and analysis methods, Participatory Action Research had a clear goal of **action** for the problem areas being explored (Irizarry & Brown, 2014). Drawing from critical theorists such as Paulo Freire, and others, PAR identified how the production and control of knowledge were pivotal to dominant groups perpetuating and exerting power over marginalised and oppressed communities (Irizarry & Brown, 2014).

Whilst I, the lead researcher, initiated and led the project, I was committed to power sharing and addressing social boundaries between co-researchers and myself. Even though power could not be completely equalised, applying Participatory Action Research meant that co-researchers and I could work together, toward the ideal of equalising power (Egid et al., 2021; Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Wallerstein et al., 2019;). This meant consciously aiming to ensure that power was not used in oppressive and suppressive ways. Irizarry and Brown (2014) describe this as power which was used **with** and not **over** others. In Participatory Action Research co-researchers ideally participate in every stage of the Participatory Action Research process. However, engaging co-researchers in different stages of the Participatory Action Research also had its challenges. Regardless, the research process encouraged co-researchers to collaboratively contribute towards the *data collection*, lead and decide how data was collected and carry out the *action*, during and following the gathering of participants' experiences. In participatory action research, co-researchers influenced every step of the process. They shaped the research during consent acquisition and collection of their experiences by sharing what was important to them and what they wanted to convey to the world. Their feedback helped revise the research questions at the study's outset. As experiences were collected, this information further refined the questions posed to legal caseworkers, NGOs, and other co-researchers. Consequently, the research

questions were collaboratively formulated, altering the study's direction from the original proposal. Co-researchers also decided how their experiences would be collected and defined the remedial praxis of the research methodology. I elaborate again on how this was done when describing the actual research process later on.

4.4 Research during the Pandemic: Barriers and Revisions to Methodology.

It was in the early stages of engaging possible NGOs to collaborate on the research that the world was faced with the COVID-19 crisis. It was decided (between myself, the ethics board and my supervisor) that the research would move online. With the disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic and the research being moved online, I was met with new barriers that made it difficult to maintain how I had imagined the research would take place. Sections that will follow will discuss how I had imagined the research would take place, before the pandemic and then go into how the practical processes were then reimagined. Firstly, this section will discuss some of the barriers presented by the crisis, and moving the research online. It was also these barriers which shaped the methodological processes.

The COVID-19 public health crisis and lockdown restrictions put in place because of the crisis led to some temporary changes to the UK asylum and immigration process. For example, whilst the HO continued to register asylum claims, claimants in vulnerable circumstances, unhoused and or houseless were no longer able to just turn up and register their asylum claims without telephoning for screening interview appointments first ("Changes to the asylum and immigration process", 2021). Substantive (main) interviews were paused for three months during the COVID-19 Lockdown. Before the pandemic there had always been very long delays for many asylum claimants waiting for their asylum interview and the COVID-19 crisis made the situation worse, extending the delays. Other changes required asking claimants to travel long distances to make further submissions, in person. For example, claimants were expected to travel either to Liverpool, Glasgow, or Belfast (Right to Remain, 2021). Depending on where one is located in the UK, these locations could be far and expensive to travel to. The changes made it challenging for people without access to this (new) knowledge, access to telephones and financial security (i.e., being able to purchase mobile credit/airtime to make the calls), to lodge a claim. In addition, with borders closed off due to the pandemic in 2020, overall immigration was lower than usual and asylum claimants made up around 12% of immigrants (House of Commons Library, 2024). The pandemic made it difficult to access enough people who met the initial research criteria (See the Research Participation Criteria section below). Additionally, already marginalised by society and by immigration policies, sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants were further disadvantaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, in ways that made it difficult for the community to participate in research. Many people were faced with food insecurity, left

unhoused, in vulnerable circumstances, and experiencing a huge impact on their mental well-being (Gordon et al., 2023; Knights et al., 2021; Mamluk & Jones, 2020; Boyle, 2020). Similarly, NGO and community organisations I was affiliated with globally, including in the UK reported an increase in suicidality and suicide ideation among marginalised migrants specifically in forcibly displaced communities (See Goodwin, 2022; Kenny et al, 2022; Mittendorfer-Rutz et al., 2020). With disruptions to essential health services, and adaptations to care and relief processes and practices, many marginalised communities, including asylum claimants missed out on vital health care and support. Faced with numerous challenges, including experiences of ²⁸houselessness, social exclusion, food and financial security, many African sexual and gender-expansive claimants did not have the mental capacity to engage with the research. Most persons were already living in poverty and precarious circumstances before the pandemic (Waite et al., 2015; Wilson, 2021) and the pandemic exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities (Mukumbang et al., 2021). Additionally, once the decision to move the research to virtual platforms, I found that many individuals did not have access to Wi-Fi (internet), computer hardware or access to virtual platforms that allowed them to partake in online research. For example, without computers and modern mobile phones to download applications such as Zoom, it is difficult for people to engage in online interactions. Similarly, many people were unhoused and or in shared accommodation, with no privacy (often sharing rooms with other people, who were homophobic and transphobic). This also discouraged numerous people from engaging in the research. These difficulties made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic made it more challenging for people who met the initial research criteria. In the sections that follow I outline and reflect upon the initially imagined qualitative research methodologies and the revisions employed.

4.5 Recruitment of Co-Researchers: Context for Reimagining Methodology.

I took steps to build rapport with organisations supporting African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. The organisations were not only chosen based on their access to this specific community. I was especially interested in organisations that had access to resources that could assist with the selection process to contribute to the research. Several similar UK organisations were under critique for their self-serving and sometimes racist and degrading practices. It was, therefore, important to approach organisations whose ethical processes and practices aligned with the ethics and politics of the research and lead

²⁸ In the recent years people have been moving away from using the term homeless, replacing it with houseless/ unhoused and others. The reason is the important distinction between a house and a home. People described as homeless are not necessarily without homes.

researcher. Two organisations that fit that specific criterion, the *African Equality Foundation* and *MicroRainbow*, were approached. *African Equality Foundation* is purposed to promote inclusion and empowerment, centring the experiences of African sexual and gender diverse claimants. The group had a Facebook and WhatsApp group, with over 200 members. Some of the services the group offered included counselling, mentorship schemes, social activities and advice on asylum processes. The group also supported their members by tackling issues relating to food security, mental health, accommodation, and other social injustices. The group was co-founded and managed by voluntary African sexual and gender-expansive claimants and created as a response to the discrimination, racism, and exclusion of African people in other UK Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) spaces.

As written on their website, the second organisation *MicroRainbow*, focused on creating opportunities for LGBTQI+ persons in the hope that they could go on to “*fulfil their potential in life and create innovative models for social change that are sustainable, scalable and replicable*” (MicroRainbow.org, 2021). The organisation’s vision was, “*to create a world where lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, gay and intersex (LGBTQI) people are safe, free from discrimination, persecution and have equal opportunities in life, including in accessing employment, training, financial services and housing*” (MicroRainbow.org, 2021). The organisation did this by providing safe housing to sexual and gender-expansive refugees and asylum claimants. It also supported people to access employment, volunteering, training and education; using its resources to research the specific issues faced by persons seeking asylum in the UK, to better understand their needs and make recommendations that improved their lives. I am a resident in the UK but undertook the PhD in South Africa. As a result, I came across the two organisations through my own community and academic activism in the UK. I am therefore acquainted with some of their members, employees and volunteers.

Following several communications over email, meetings were set with the two organisations. I travelled from Cape Town to London, UK, in March 2020, for three days. On one of those days, I attended a general meeting that the *African Equality Foundation* was holding in Soho, London. In attendance were at least 12 -15 members. During the meeting, I had an opportunity to introduce myself and present my research proposal. Present members had an opportunity to ask questions about the research, raise concerns, and give feedback/advice/ ideas that shaped the research questions and methodology. During the meeting, members expressed concerns about some of the exploitative and harmful practices they had previously experienced with organisations and other researchers. We had an opportunity to unpack some of these concerns. Some of the issues raised included, (mis)trusting the researchers’ motives; that the researcher had insight and cultural

understanding of their specific experiences, and that the researcher would humanise their experiences and treat their experiences with respect and integrity. Following the presentation I left members with leaflets that had further information about the research (see Appendix D).

Some of the members immediately expressed interest in engaging with the research and were moved at the prospect of having *one of their own*, an *insider* conduct research that they too could shape and have their *voices fully represented*. We exchanged mobile numbers, and asylum claimants were encouraged to take away the paperwork to read and think about it further. I then contacted persons who had expressed interest, in the following weeks. In the meeting with *MicroRainbow*, I travelled to their offices in East London, UK and met up with some of their employees, including one of the organisation's managers and a counsellor. Although at the time it was not possible to meet some of their service users, the meeting was useful. We discussed the research and how I could collaborate with *MicroRainbow* service users. The organisation also had rooms I could use for interviews and gathering circles with research collaborators. I left information, including leaflets, posters and consent forms (Appendix B) with both organisations and made plans to return to London in a few months, to begin the process of collecting data. I was also added to the *African Equality Foundation* WhatsApp group where I had access to 200+ African sexual and gender asylum claimants and refugees. Unfortunately, a week after returning to Cape Town from London, news of the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread globally and within weeks borders, including the South African and UK borders were closed. This meant that plans to return to the UK were cancelled. I placed the research, particularly the recruitment of and collection of co-researchers' experiences on hold. I hoped that within six months the pandemic would have passed. However, after 6 months of focusing on other aspects of the research, I realised that the situation with the pandemic was not improving within the hoped timeframe. The section below outlines the criteria I set out to use when I was designing my study and directly below that is how the study turned out after I had to make adjustments in response to the pandemic.

4.5.1 Research Participation Criteria.

Before the pandemic, I imagined that experiences of the asylum process would be collected only from African sexual and gender-expansive persons seeking asylum in the UK. The research methodology looked to involve accessing (through co-researchers) their HO substantive interview transcripts. I planned to employ a purposive sampling approach and engage at least 45 African sexual and gender-expansive persons. Specifically, I was

interested in persons who identified with the labels, *lesbian*, *gay* (men), *bisexual* and *transgender*, and were in the process of seeking asylum in the UK. I was also including myself in the study. Approximately 46 persons (including myself) were to engage in the research. Co-researchers were also to play a role in accessing or recruiting other co-researchers. Criteria for participation included; being born and coming from an African country, being over the age of 18, and at the initial stage of seeking asylum or about to lodge a claim. In particular, the research aimed to engage co-researchers while they were actively navigating the asylum process. However, I recognised early on that the pool from which I expected to draw co-researchers was quite narrow. I anticipated that there would be a limited number of African persons actively claiming asylum in the UK, at the time (especially during the pandemic). As a result, I recognised the need for flexibility with the criteria and considered that if I could not access co-researchers who met the initial criteria, then persons who had already gained UK refugee status in the last two to three²⁹ years leading to the research would also be considered.

4.5.2 Revisions to Research Participation Criteria.

Participation criteria were revised to include persons who had lodged an asylum claim but were now waiting for the substantive (main) interview; persons who had done their substantive interview and were waiting for a decision on the claim; and persons who had either been granted asylum and or denied asylum in the three years prior to 2020 (from 2017). Also included were persons who had been waiting a long time for the substantive interview or for a decision. Due to the barriers and challenges related to capacity and access to resources that most claimants were faced with during the pandemic, I had to re-think about where else I could gather asylum experiences, so as to add more context to the asylum seeking process. Resultingly, the research also included legal case workers and NGO caseworkers. Their inclusion still fitted in with the aims of the research. The research was especially interested in engaging immigration lawyers and persons working in refugee organisations, supporting African sexual and gender-expansive persons with their asylum processes. I was especially interested in gathering the perspectives of professionals who were also members of the LGBTIQ community. Recruitment of immigration lawyers and NGO case workers was also a challenging process. Many people declined, citing that they were at the time of research, overwhelmed with caseloads because of the pandemic and did not have time or capacity to engage. Initially, the study had hoped to engage at least eight

²⁹ However, I sought refugee status in 2011.

professionals, four legal immigration workers and four NGO caseworkers. Instead, the study ended up with two legal case workers and two NGO workers, a total of four professionals.

4.5.3 Co-researchers.

Twenty, African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants volunteered to participate in the research. All co-researchers described themselves as African and of the twenty, sixteen people were from Uganda, two were from Zimbabwe, one from Tanzania and one from Zambia. Eleven persons identified as *lesbian women*, one identified as a *bisexual woman*, one identified as *bisexual* and possibly *non-binary/ trans*, another person as a *trans man* and six people identified as *gay men*. The person who identified as possibly nonbinary trans and or bisexual was not certain about how to identify themselves, especially in the English language. This experience spoke to some of the points made in the literature review about identity and identifying, the fluidity and complexity of identities, especially identities framed in English and western/ global minority perspective, for African sexual and gender-expansive persons. During the process of explaining research and acquiring consent, the individual described how they did not always identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. They did not think they identified as a woman and did not identify as a man either. They explained that because they had children, they did not want to erase that part of their identity, for their children and therefore would only (sometimes) identify as a woman to acknowledge that aspect of their identity. "*I identify as neither. I am both*". The co-researcher was not familiar with the 'western' labels and the English terminologies such as non-binary, 'genderqueer', 'queer', trans or bisexual. In fact, besides the terms 'lesbian' and 'gay' they had never heard of them and were more familiar with descriptions of identities and behaviour and labels in their vernacular language, *Luganda* language spoken in Uganda. They described how people in their community back in Uganda often described them as, "*they used to say that woman is like a man and called me Kyakula sajja. When people said I am like a man, I used to be like wow....*". We settled on the identity, *neither a man nor a woman*. They then agreed to be connected with trans and non-binary communities and organisations in London for an opportunity to explore their identity a bit, especially in the English language. Persons who perceived themselves to be bisexual were often seeking asylum based on being lesbian following advice from their litigators. This was unpacked further in Chapter Six. Overall, it was challenging to find trans and gender-expansive persons who were willing to engage with the research. Not being part of the trans community, the pandemic and attempting to engage people who had never met me whilst located in a different country were some of the barriers. Additionally, I was met with some mistrust by people who questioned why I wanted to collect their experiences from South Africa. I can understand

how suspicious trans persons were about contributing to research by a researcher geographically located in a country and continent they have escaped from and or left under traumatic reasons.

Overall, co-researchers' ages ranged from 22 to 44 years of age. Most persons reported that they were unemployed at the time of engaging with the research, while others said they were working in the informal sectors. Except for two people who had been in high school before coming to the UK all people spoken to had been trained in high-skilled employment and had stable employment before arriving in the UK. Training and employment before moving to the UK included a Lawyer, Accountant, Commercial farmer, teachers, Public Administration, Machine operator, in the Army and Graphic designers. At least, eight persons had bachelors' degrees and one a Masters degree from their countries of origin (See appendix A for a table of co-researchers). At the time of engaging with the research, one person had just completed his A-level studies and was accepted onto a Bio-medical sciences degree, with the hope of becoming a medical doctor. Another co-researcher had got onto a master's programme degree studying migration and experiences of young refugees in London. Several persons were talking about re-training as social workers and or undertaking further post-graduate education programmes. The majority of people were in unstable employment related to care, domestic, child care and other manual jobs. At least three were casually dating. Others were single and mentioned how living precarious lives and being in limbo made it challenging to develop authentic, long-lasting intimate relationships with others. Of the two legal case workers, one was a non-binary queer British/Indian person and another identified as a non-binary queer white /British person. Two of the NGO workers interviewed, included one person identifying as Zimbabwean and lesbian and the other, gay men and Ugandan. Of the four interviewed, I was already acquainted with three from my activism and work in the community. One of the persons was recommended by someone from the community. At the end of the recruitment stages, co-researchers and participants' demographics showed that coresearchers and participants were located in various cities and towns across the UK. Most persons who contributed were at the time of research suffering from depression and anxiety, and or had previously been diagnosed with depression and anxiety. Some people were on medication and or had recently stopped taking medication. A few people described presenting with signs of neurodivergence and one person confirmed after the research they had been diagnosed as neurodivergent. Many people had battled suicidality and suicide ideation at some point during the process of their asylum claim.

4.5.4 Collecting People's Experiences and Perspectives.

Before the pandemic, the initial plan had been to provide co-researchers with a selection of methods to collect their experiences. These methods included dicta-phones, journals, and notebooks – to self-record/ collect their experiences and or face-to-face interviews. Co-researchers could also choose to use audio/voice recording tools on their mobile phones (i.e., using voice memos or voice recording application software WhatsApp). Once it became clear that it would be challenging (when located in Cape Town) to get dicta-phones, journals and notebooks to claimants it was decided that WhatsApp messaging was the best platform for collecting experiences. Strategies for collecting asylum experiences were discussed with co-researchers during both the initial assessment and consent-seeking processes. It was hoped that multi-data collection strategies would provide co-researchers with options, and allow autonomy, power over some of the decision-making, and privacy with a choice of where, how and when they contributed to the research. As a result, co-researchers were encouraged to choose options that best suited them and their circumstances. The majority of the claimants were already members of *African Equality Foundation* and feedback that they would find it easier to access and use WhatsApp for recording voice notes and the interviews.

During the consent process, persons decided how they wanted to contribute to the research. Four people decided to write down their own experiences, guided by questions that had been sent via WhatsApp or email. Following this I sent the comments and prompting questions back to co-researchers asking them to expand and or add to their writings. There was a lot of back and forth with co-researchers, filling in gaps and adding to the narratives. Sometimes the probing and adding of information happened over voice notes. Five people chose to self-record via WhatsApp voice notes. Questions were sent to them via WhatsApp text and voice notes. Once co-researchers had sent their audio-recorded experiences they were sent prompts and further questions via voice notes. Eight people, including myself, chose to be interviewed and or be in conversation with me. The interviews lasted anything between 45 minutes to one hour and thirty minutes. Legal case workers and NGO caseworkers were not given an option and were interviewed via the platform Zoom. The interviews were anything from one and a half hours to two hours. When it came to my contribution as a participant, I opted to be interviewed, although there was some discomfort with this. I will reflect on this and the process in the reflexivity section. One of the participants, a manager of *MicroRainbow* interviewed me. She used the same questions I used for co-researchers and expanded on them as she saw fit. The participant who interviewed me is African, Lesbian, sought asylum in the UK and works with LGBTIQ asylum claimants and refugees in the UK. Co-researchers in particular welcomed the

opportunity to record their own experiences and expressed how well this worked for them. Numerous claimants reported that they struggled with capacity, privacy, mental health and fluctuating motivation (to undertake any tasks). Additionally, finding time to engage in interviews was also a factor. Many people were in shared rooms and shared accommodation with no privacy. They reported audio-recording their experiences in toilets, in the park, in the middle of the night and when no one was home. To avoid putting any pressure, causing further stress, anxiety and unnecessary worry on co-researchers I did not give co-researchers a deadline on when they needed to record their experiences by. As a result, it took co-researchers anything between a month to a year for them to complete the process of self-audio recording or writing their experiences.

4.5.5 Semi-structured Conversational Interviews with Co-researchers and Participants.

I considered that semi-structured interviews, guided by open-ended prompt questions would be an effective method for co-researchers to share their experiences. Open-ended prompt questions created a space for co-researchers to determine the depth of their focus and for the lead researcher to probe new and emerging narratives. I conducted all the in-depth interviews with caseworkers and all the co-researchers who chose to be interviewed instead of recording their own experiences (See Appendix D for the guiding questions). Co-researchers spoke English as a second language and their proficiency in the English language varied from basic (novice) to advanced (distinguished). Everyone but one person felt comfortable to communicate in English. The person who was initially not comfortable communicating in English stated that they were worried that I would not be able to understand. They said, previously people had expressed that it was *hard to understand* their communication in English. However, this was not the case for our interaction. I understood them well. We took time, providing explanations and descriptions where necessary. In addition, the individual and many other people felt comfortable once they realised that the English language was also a second language for me. It was communicated early on that co-researchers could communicate in 'broken' English and it was more than acceptable. The space of comfort, ease and safety created encouraged co-researcher(s) to relax and communicate with me with confidence and a sense of ease.

At the start of each interview, I thanked co-researchers for their contribution and went over consent, reminding co-researchers that their contribution was voluntary. We discussed aspects related to confidentiality, in which co-researchers had a choice to be anonymous or to have their actual identities revealed in the research (see below). I explained that the

interviews would be audio-recorded and that recordings would be stored safely, and password protected. The interview process (as well as the gathering circles) were curated to be places of *exchange* of experiences between the lead researcher and co-researchers. It was explained to co-researchers how an *exchange* might look, for example, they could ask me questions in return, in which I would be sharing my own experiences in the conversations. This allowed for an exchange to occur and an interview that was more conversational, than a one-way *extractive* process. It was also explained that although I was coming to the space with pre-developed research questions it was just a guide and was expected that co-researchers would guide and shape the questions and research process. As a result, co-researchers had control over what they wished to share, what questions they responded to and how they responded to them. The consent session was also used to discuss and clarify issues and concerns co-researchers may have had about the research, the research process and their circumstances at the time. A few people reported being upset during the sharing of their experiences (See ethics section where I elaborate on issues of harm). The research process evoked different feelings in different people, including anger, grief, anxiety and sadness. Otherwise, the *exchange* of experiences with a researcher who had also been through a similar process gave co-researchers the security and confidence to be open and comfortable, according to their feedback.

The majority of asylum claimants who participated lived in shared accommodations, often sharing rooms with one or more other people. This made it difficult for co-researchers to gain private spaces where they could freely and comfortably speak to me. As a result, interviews occurred at different times of the day and night – sometimes at weekends and other times close to midnight. On one occasion a co-researcher had to go to their local park to speak to me in private. Co-researchers had autonomy on when and how the interviews could happen. There was a lot of rescheduling done and times when interviews had to be terminated (i.e., when their privacy was disrupted/ when someone walked into the room). For example, during an interview with a Zimbabwean co-researcher, there were people who walked into the house. The co-researcher communicated this in *Shona*, and we terminated the interview. In such instances the interviews were rescheduled via WhatsApp and we came back to the interview at a later date. As a result there were times when interviews were conducted over multiple days, and even then there continued to be a back and forth via WhatsApp voice notes.

As asylum claimants often had and were living precarious lives, there was a need for flexibility with the data collection processes. Co-researchers often had multiple reasons to mistrust others and persons in authority, it was important therefore that they had control about where and when meetings took place and what they contributed, so they felt

comfortable and able to participate in the research process on their terms. Whilst it was less complicated and cost-effective to not use translators, these were not the main reasons why translators were not used in the research. In my previous MSc research, sexual and gender-expansive claimants refused to engage with translators, for fear they would be 'outed'. Similarly, past reports have also stated that sexual and gender-diverse claimants were anxious and hesitant to engage with translators (Tschalaer, 2019). Some of the studies highlighted that persons who were not public about their sexuality and gender identities feared that translators could be from the same communities as them and likely to 'out' them. Additionally, sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants had reported that translators they have engaged withheld in the past presented homophobic attitudes during the translation process and secondly did not translate information correctly, due to their lack of knowledge of gay/ lesbian/ bisexual/ queer/ trans/ gender-expansive issues (Tschalaer, 2019). Resultingly, this has at times been a barrier to sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants being able to talk openly about their sexuality and gender identities. Speaking for others, in any language, is always a political issue that involves the use (or the power of) of language to construct the self and others and, for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants there can be implications for choosing others to do the translation. Thus, I did not use any translators during the process of data collection and only engaged co-researchers who were able to converse in some form of English and were able to give voice to their needs during the interviews and gathering circles. One of the co-researchers who was also Zimbabwean, like me, also spoke Shona. I have not lived in Zimbabwe nor spoken the language in over two decades which meant I was not fully confident to conduct the whole interview in Shona. The co-researcher was able to communicate in English and self-recorded most of her experiences. However, I also conducted two interviews with the co-researcher, in which she shared some of her descriptions in Shona. I then translated these into English.

4.5.6 Focus Groups.

Focus groups are group discussions curated to explore collective perspectives, attitudes, behaviours and experiences (Goodman et al., 2015; Kitzinger, 1995; Shaha et al., 2011; Stewart et al., 2007). As part of the method, focus groups explicitly used group interaction (Kitzinger, 1995). When used in research, focus groups could include anything between half a dozen to over fifty persons in groups, depending on the aims of the project and the resources available (Kitzinger, 1995). They are also often used as one of the multiple qualitative methods of data collection, for example in conjunction with observations, in-depth interviews, document reviews, case reviews, artefact analysis and others (Davis,

2016). As a feminist-type methodology, it was designed to centre the voices of marginalised communities and share power with researched communities (Wilkinson, 1998; 1999). When designed to be culturally responsive, focus groups lead to a collection of rich and authentic data (Rodriguez et al., 2011). Feminist focus groups are therefore useful in gaining knowledge from persons who have been traditionally marginalised. The practice of feminist focus groups reduced some of the issues that often occurred in data collection, such as artificiality, exploitation, and power dynamics between the lead researcher and co-researchers (Aanand, 2013). This shift in the balance of power, away from the lead researcher toward co-researchers often led to the consciousness-raising, liberation and empowerment of both the researched population and the researcher (Aanand, 2013). Asylum claimants often experience isolation in their process of seeking asylum, and potential liberation and forms of empowerment could be achieved through countering this isolation by bringing them together. However, in the current research bringing people together involved collaborating with co-researchers and encouraging them to lead and decide on how and what formed the research process.

4.5.7 Gathering Circles.

I was not convinced that the concept of focus groups would fully capture all the intersecting identities and overlapping experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. In alignment with the decolonial feminist framing of this project, I therefore adapted and developed the practice of focus groups to mirror the concept practised in African oral traditions, of storytelling. The practice of gathering in circles was ancient and rooted in indigenous practices across the globe, including across Africa. It seemed more fitting for this research to adopt such a concept as a way of gathering co-researchers' experiences of the asylum process. I reimagined focus groups to become, 'gathering circles'. Gathering circles was a term and concept that I also used in my practice with activist and sexual and gender-expansive communities, to carve a space for sharing experiences of trauma, and for collective healing. The initial plan for the gathering circles was meant to be in-person gatherings that encouraged co-researchers and the lead researcher to bring into the circle all aspects of themselves. This meant bringing into the circle all of their full being and identities. This could also be in the form of rituals/ traditions and spiritual processes of extracting knowledge/ experiences/ feelings, like those in African traditions of oral storytelling methodological frameworks.

The utilisation of an African oral storytelling framework, as a culturally responsive research practice, was well-suited for this study, which involved African co-researchers and

aimed to redefine knowledge production (Tuwe, 2016). African oral storytelling, characterised by its communal and participatory nature, provided a means to explore and document the meanings, emotions, attitudes, and lived experiences of African co-researchers (Gbadegesin, 1984; Tuwe, 2016). Storytelling in the African context is viewed as a form of ritual (Tuwe, 2016) and a communal participatory activity where individuals of African descent gather to listen and share narratives and stories (Utle, 2008; wa Thiong'o, 1982; 1986). In the setup of African storytelling, both the storyteller and the audience members engage in interactive dialogue, with each participant holding authority and fulfilling a role (Soyinka, 1978; Vambe, 2001), resembling the dynamics of a focus group setting.

Adapting focus groups to construct *gathering circles*, created a further deconstructed and re-imagined methodology, adopting a more holistic approach. A holistic and African-centred practice strived towards a balance between different areas of lived experiences and did not "separate intellectual, social, political, economic, psychological and spiritual forms of human life from each other" (Tuwe, 2016). Co-researchers and I, the lead researcher were all of African heritage and the African oral storytelling framework was closely connected to our own culture, without denying the complexity of being African as a non-singular identity. Cultural practices and expressions were mirrored in the research process through the use of language, style, structure, and methods (Kuokkanen, 2000).

The use of storytelling, therefore, as an African paradigm was hoped to potentially emancipate African co-researchers in the UK while they shared their personal and collective experiences of the violent asylum process (McAdams 1993). Additionally, besides sharing knowledge and experiences, storytelling has the potential power to heal trauma (Friskie, 2020; Kiser et al., 2010). As a result, the practice of *gathering circles* in the research went beyond 'collecting data'. The research had hoped to curate at least three face-to-face gathering circles, depending on need. The first gathering circle aimed to collectively discuss research aims, objectives, process, and data collection strategies and how the collected experiences would be analysed. The first gathering circle was also to be used to discuss and agree on the questions and themes which co-researchers would use to guide the process of audio recording their own experiences. It was also during this circle that co-researchers were to be provided with tools such as dicta-phones, diaries and or journals to later record and reflect on their experiences.

The second gathering circle was going to be held after co-researchers had finished collecting their experiences. There was an understanding that revisiting and sharing experiences would activate difficult emotions/ thoughts and could surface discomfort or traumatic experiences. The purpose of this particular gathering circle therefore was to debrief and reflect on the process and issues that arose during the process. Co-researchers

would be given an opportunity to collectively reflect on their experiences, as well as to collectively add to what had already been collected. The third and last gathering circle was going to be facilitated by a *queer Nigerian and black-British integrative counsellor, psychotherapist, anti-racist and wellness consultant*, who incorporated movement/ dance in their practice. The psychotherapist's practice was "concerned with the sensual, the spiritual and the ancestral" (www.thisisdreamroots.co.uk, n.d). The healing offerings "were intent on bridging the gap between western psychology and traditional West African and ancestral healing practices, as a decolonial, regenerative and practical resolve of the timeline we currently find ourselves in" (www.thisisdreamroots.co.uk, n.d). This gathering circle was to be carried out, possibly in nature (such as in a park or near a body of water), through movement, meditation, breath work and over food. This gathering circle was meant to be a guided opportunity for co-researchers to engage with collective care/ and learn/ practice healing practices. However, faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, I was forced to revise the research process and move it online. It became evident early on that most co-researchers did not have the capacity, time, privacy, and access to WIFI or hardware to engage with gathering circles online. I was therefore hesitant to facilitate virtual gathering circles. However, some co-researchers communicated that they could benefit from gathering online and requested at least one debriefing *gathering circle*. However, we ended up facilitating two debriefing gathering circles, as not everyone was able to attend the dates initially proposed by other co-researchers.

The gathering circles were conducted on the platform jitsi.meet which was a slightly easier platform for co-researchers to access as they could access it via a link and without downloading the application. The gathering circles were also co-facilitated with co-researchers, without the support of a psychotherapist or healing practitioner. The space was used for debriefing, reflecting on the research process, and affirming and supporting each other. Co-researchers shared stories, quotes and testimonials to uplift and support each other. In one of the gatherings, one Muslim co-researcher closed the gathering by reciting a prayer and in another, co-researchers closed with positive affirmations. Questions and themes that guided the gathering circles included, *checking in* on co-researchers' well-being, reflecting on "*What came up for you during the process of sharing your experiences?*", "*What was difficult about the process?*", "*What went well and what didn't go well?*", "*What are you taking away?*", "*How could the research process and other future research processes be better?*".

Co-researchers fed back that the debriefing virtual gathering circles provided a valuable space to connect with others in similar circumstances, reflect, and share their asylum journeys and experiences during the pandemic. They fed back to feeling affirmed

and less alone. However, facilitating virtual gatherings had challenges. COVID-19 lockdown conditions limited some individuals' attendance due to a lack of privacy. Additionally, many persons lacked access to necessary hardware and reliable Wi-Fi, leading to disruptions. While virtual gatherings allowed for anonymity, they lacked the intimacy of face-to-face connections, and co-researchers also commented on this lack. Using gathering circles instead of focus groups would have better aligned with the thesis's theoretical framework and enhanced the participatory nature of the research. Unfortunately, the pandemic forced these gatherings online, deviating from my original plan and limiting full participatory involvement from co-researchers.

4.5.8 Accessing Substantive Asylum Interview Documents.

To lodge an asylum claim, persons first make an application at an Asylum Screening Unit and this becomes the screening Interview. The Screening Interview establishes who the claimant is, and how they arrived in the UK and asks basic questions about the claim. Historically it was possible to be detained at the screening unit, but since the detained-fast-track was suspended, detention was now unlikely (UKLGIG, 2019). Individuals seeking asylum are then invited to the Substantive (main) interview. The substantive interview, sometimes referred to as the asylum interview is when claimants are asked for a more detailed account of why they were claiming asylum. The interview can last several hours. Sometimes claimants were asked the same questions several times in different ways. The interview is said to be difficult and traumatic ("Substantive Asylum Interview", n.d). However, this was the most important aspect of the asylum application. Before the asylum interview, the HO might send asylum claimants a Preliminary Information Questionnaire to fill in before the interview ("Prepare For An Asylum Interview", 2019). The Preliminary Information Questionnaire asked questions such as: *why you are afraid of returning to your home country* and, *what happened to you and when* ("Prepare For An Asylum Interview", 2019). In cases where asylum claimants had not been sent a Preliminary Information Questionnaire, their legal representative could advise them to send a written statement before the substantive interview, to support their claim.

The substantive asylum interview was usually a face-to-face interview. However, during the pandemic, the interview was often conducted via video conference. The claimant's responses were recorded and this recording made up the substantive asylum interview document/ transcript. It was based on the substantive interview and other documents submitted that the HO made decisions on individuals' claims. It is this interview, the substantive Interview, which I asked to access through co-researchers. The substantive

interview demonstrated the nature of questions asked and the type of responses sometimes elicited from claimants. This data was important as it contributed to the understanding of the interview process, including the nature of questions asked, probed and the nature of responses elicited. However the documents contained very private/ confidential information and the majority of co-researchers were uncomfortable sharing the document, especially via email. I was also in conversation with one of the above-mentioned organisations to receive and anonymise the document before scanning these to a secure email address. Co-researchers were not comfortable with anyone else handling their documents, which was understandable. In the end, I only managed to access three substantive interview documents.

4.5.9 Transcription.

Some of how co-researchers shared their experiences and or stories was by writing them down and sending them through email or WhatsApp text. Such cases did not require me to transcribe the stories, beyond inserting further questions and sending those back to co-researchers. In other cases, interviews conducted via WhatsApp, Zoom and other platforms were audio recorded. Similarly, co-researchers also send voice notes via WhatsApp messaging and these were downloaded and saved as audio recordings as well. Initially, I transcribed these narratives verbatim. I attempted to use online transcription services but it was difficult for them to pick up a lot of the conversations due to difficulties picking up accented English. There were also a lot of hours of audio recordings which needed careful listening, and revisiting several times to factually capture some aspects of the conversation. Some of the audio recordings were not very clear – especially in instances where co-researchers had made the recordings quietly for fear of being overheard by others in the house. This and the length of recordings meant that transcribing demanded a lot of time and capacity.

As a result, I received help through the project, Unsettling Knowledge Production on Sexual and Gendered Violence in South Africa, of which this thesis is also a part and had some of the audio recordings transcribed by professional transcribers historically used in the project and already aware of issues regarding confidentiality. For the narratives co-researchers wrote and sent via email or WhatsApp, these were copied directly from WhatsApp or email to a Word document. This meant that the transcripts remained as they were and none of the narratives were changed or lost in the transcription process. As for the audio recordings I transcribed and or sent to professional transcribers, there was a lot of data which was lost due to the poor audibility of the interview recording. Some of this shaped

and or affected the flow of the narratives as evident in the analysis of data, in Chapters five and six, making these transcripts particularly interesting in this regard.

4.6 Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis.

To explore the narratives told by African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants regarding the asylum process and the implications of structural and institutional violence within these narratives, I employed Boonzaier's (2019) Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis (DINA). There were multiple reasons why Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis was a fitting analytical tool for this study. The analysis aligns with the research's approach and intention to reimagine the research process and its ability to humanise African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants while prioritising questions of social justice.

Co-researchers in the study had multi-identities and the analysis which is rooted in the understanding of African persons within African contexts emerging from histories of colonisation and imperialism appeared appropriate to examine co-researchers' experiences with their multi-intersecting identities. Boonzaier (2019) drew from narrative research which could illuminate on the, often silenced experiences of communities on the margin of society and represent these experiences according to the narrators' terms. The asylum process is structurally a violent system, especially towards African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants. A Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis approach can illuminate on, *What kinds of stories, African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants tell about their experiences of the system and why?* (Boonzaier, 2019). Boonzaier (2019) developed the Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis to be in four different phases which are a starting point for analysis. The four phases include an "analysis of narrative content"; an "analysis of decolonial, intersectional power; reading against the grain: articulating resistance"; and "crafting a plurivocal narrative" (Boonzaier, 2019, p8-21). Whilst the phases were rooted in and led by different approaches, they centred a decolonial, intersectional lens (Boonzaier, 2019). I applied three of these phases to guide the analysis of the experiences gathered.

In the first phase of analysis, analysis of *Narrative Content*, Boonzaier employed Riessman's (2019) thematic narrative analysis as a starting point. Here, the analysis began by examining common narratives lifted from the transcripts. Boonzaier (2019) provided useful analytic questions to guide this phase of analysis and I adapted some of these questions for my study. For example, questions that guided my project included; '*What would I have liked to hear more about from the conversations?*', '*What are the narratives*

being told?, *'What are the themes in the transcript?'*, *'What kind of narrative is it?'*, *'What narratives appear common amongst co-researchers?'*, *'What are the differences?'* I looked for shared stories and themes among co-researchers' lived experiences, focusing on similarities and differences between the stories (Wiles et al., 2005). I created a Word document with rows of colour-coded themes and segments from co-researchers' experiences. Noting the contexts in which these themes came and the patterns forming I highlighted how co-researchers co-constructed and gave experiences they shared (Riessman, 2008).

In the second phase of the analysis, I listened to some of the audio recordings again (especially parts that had been difficult to transcribe) and revisited the transcripts, looking for broader narratives. For this phase, which Boonzaier termed, an analysis of *decolonial, intersectional power*, I employed an intersectional lens to highlight how co-researchers' identities and experiences of the asylum process correlated with power and social-structural oppressions (Boonzaier, 2019). This phase looked to see how identities such as gender, sexuality, race, nationality, religion, culture and geographical origin had shaped co-researchers' experiences and narratives and what this meant concerning power dynamics that played out in different aspects of the asylum process. Boonzaier (2019) also provided questions to guide this phase and from that I adapted the following questions :

What meanings do the narratives hold for co-researchers? Beyond the manifest meanings in the narratives, what else might co-researchers be calling attention to in their narratives? How do the stories implicate the lived, intersectional experiences of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and geographical origin? I thought through Boonzaier's (2019) questions whilst repeatedly re-reading transcripts and or re-listening to audio recordings. This process of reading, re-reading transcripts and re-listening to audio recordings allowed me to become more familiar with the depth and breadth of the experiences shared and highlight meanings and themes in those experiences. In this phase I began to gather the themes I had coded and looked to see what narratives of structural and symbolic violence co-researchers told, how and why they told these narratives, seeking new levels of meaning. In this phase, I also paid attention to how asylum claimants spoke about themselves and the asylum process, others and of themselves within the process, how they made sense of this as well as how language was used to describe these experiences (See Crossley, 2000). I adopted the same process for NGO and legal case workers. I initially analysed themes and narratives that arose from the two groups separately and then brought them together in the writing of my findings.

In the third phase of the Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis, *Crafting a Plurivocal Narrative*, I was encouraged to refer back to my research questions and consider

how the analysis addressed these questions. To guide this phase Boonzaier (2019) encouraged to ask questions such as,

What are the research questions?; How will the analysis address these?; What narratives will be crafted about the lives and realities co-researchers? Why am I, as the (lead) researcher, electing to tell this particular story (over others)? Where am in this narrative? How have my own identities (i.e., being a refugee/ Zimbabwe/ queer), history, politics and context been implicated, not only in the experiences co-researchers told but throughout the research and especially in the crafting of the narrative?; Who will benefit from this research (and how)?

These questions helped me reflect on my positionality, politics and own experiences with the asylum system and how these were implicated in the methodology, analysis and what I chose to highlight in the research. I began to think about some of the questions early on in the study and reflect on them throughout the research process. Most importantly there was a constant back and forth between the questions this analysis and the experiences gathered. The analysis guided me to think more critically about the experiences gathered, and from an intersectional and feminist perspective. Additionally, I felt that as a researcher who is also contributing to the research and one who lives on the margin and intersections of being black, woman, queer and refugee, the analysis held space for me, the questions that arose during the research.

4.7 Ethical Considerations.

In this research, I attempted to make certain that I adopted decolonial and feminist values and thinking so values and customs of the co-researchers were respected and central to the research approach (Kamlongera & Katenga-Kaunda, 2023). A decolonial and feminist framework enabled co-researchers to drive the research approach, amplify their voices and share knowledge that was true to their reality of the asylum process. Below I highlight how an ethics of care approach helped facilitate decolonial research practice.

4.7.1 Informed consent.

Concerns regarding power dynamics also extended to considerations of informed consent measures and decisions related to research design, including research processes, methodology, data collection, and analysis. Action research is characterised by collaborative decision-making processes that empower communities to have control over the research (Hart, 1995). However, in terms of research ethics, it is important to acknowledge that the research community may not always possess all the information or informed knowledge necessary to make ethical decisions, which academic researchers may be ethically

obligated to consider. However, this is not to say that the researched communities cannot make meaningful contributions to ethical decisions, that I could not collaboratively decide on these with the co-researchers and or the community.

When African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants were initially approached during my meeting with several organisations in London, it was difficult to determine whether they could freely give informed consent. As a refugee who has previously contributed to other people's research to share my experiences of displacement and of the asylum process, I was aware of how asylum claimants and refugees are part of communities that often face issues relating to coercion from researchers and humanitarian organisations collecting data. This risk was especially high with asylum claimants approached through organisations, as I was doing, in which co-researchers might then feel obligated to contribute to the research or feel that contributing to the research will reward and or assist with the outcome of their asylum claim. To minimise such harms, assumptions and outcomes to occur, these issues were initially brought up in a community with co-researchers during the meetings in London. I presented a proposal for the research to the community, in person, during meetings in London. Co-researchers then had an opportunity to share their concerns and some of the negative and positive experiences they had faced with previous research. I also had an opportunity to share my own past experiences with researchers. We then discussed how we could work together to avoid a repeat of similar harm. Following this, co-researchers were also approached individually and separately from NGOs they were members of.

During the meeting potential co-researchers were provided with physical information which further explained the nature of the research and consent forms, to take away. I emphasised that engaging with the research would not (positively) affect their immigration outcome or count against them in any way. We discussed some of the ways the nature of the research I was proposing could contribute to recent conversations around migration and the asylum process. It was emphasised that while I was coming up with pre-thought ideas, the research aimed to involve co-researchers who could actively shape and guide the direction of the research. We discussed and explained the implications and involvement in the research and how co-researchers' contributions would be entirely voluntary and co-researchers could withdraw at any point in the process. We also discussed their possible roles as co-researchers and that it was both flexible and directed by co-researchers dependent on their capacity and different circumstances. Equally, I explained that I was neither working for nor aligned with the Home Office or any immigration organisations in any way. Co-researchers were also encouraged to recruit other co-researchers, which many of them did. Some people expressed motivation to engage with the research and wanted to

submit their consent forms during the meeting but I encouraged people to take the information with them and sit with it until we had an opportunity for another conversation.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened inequities for forcibly displaced communities which created further ethical and practical concerns (Singh et al., 2021). Many persons found themselves living in overcrowded spaces with restricted mobility. In addition to this, the pandemic visibilised and exacerbated asylum claimants' challenges with mental health (El Tatary & Gill, 2022; Mukumbang et al., 2020) and capacity to engage or contribute to research. The research process, including the process of obtaining co-researchers' experiences, needed to be directed by decolonial and feminist values and 'ethics of care' approaches that value people more than their experiences, for research (Pinet & Leon-Himmelstine, 2020). As a result, there are steps I took and decisions I made to collaboratively assess potential co-researchers' circumstances and their ability to contribute to the project. I discussed some of these steps taken in the sections above and others in the sections below.

4.7.2 Harm: Question of Inclusion and Exclusion on Basis of Mental Health.

Traditionally, the notion of protecting research participants from harm has been associated with the exclusion of communities deemed too vulnerable to contribute (Amann & Sleigh, 2021). However, this raises questions about whether research exclusion itself can be harmful. Vulnerable individuals and communities are frequently systematically excluded from clinical research for scientific, ethical, and practical reasons. While the intention is often to safeguard communities (See Coleman, 2009; Gordon, 2020) and uphold research integrity, excluding vulnerable communities from research through the use of standard exclusion criteria may not always be necessary. Communities categorised 'vulnerable' often end up being excluded from adding their voices, lived experiences, and knowledge to research, and highlighted in Singh and colleagues' (2021, p2) paper, forcibly displaced communities are "often excluded from decisions in research intended to benefit their communities". The line between protecting communities and excluding them can be blurred. When we label communities as 'vulnerable' without interrogating the factors that led to their vulnerability and what made them susceptible, we overlook the role of the systems we use to either exclude or protect them in contributing to their vulnerability and vulnerabilisation. In this research, I could not be certain that the research and research process would not cause harm, especially when co-researchers were being asked to engage in the co-production of research during a pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened inequities and exacerbated mental ill health in displaced communities. Doing research virtually, with communities that were living precarious lives in overcrowded spaces, with restricted mobilities and digital exclusion raised ethical and practical concerns around confidentiality, privacy, and safety. There was a risk that the research would perpetuate harm and other inequities. I spent time in sessions with potential co-researchers discussing their circumstances, capacity, and mental health, identifying their needs and challenges. Extensive efforts were undertaken to mitigate risks and optimise the benefits of participation in the research. Individuals were encouraged and provided support to exclude themselves from the research if they were experiencing active mental health symptoms or if their circumstances, such as privacy or living conditions, warranted it. Potential co-researchers needed to be in control of their decisions.

Nevertheless, when individuals chose not to exclude themselves, the concern of increasing risk persisted. Below I discuss some of the methods applied to overcome these barriers. I also decided that the exclusion criteria would be applied as a last resort, if and when necessary.

I believed that the benefits of including, for example, neurodivergent individuals and tailoring research to their needs and capacities far outweighed the risks. Research has shown that vulnerabilised individuals such as asylum claimants disproportionately experience negative mental health outcomes as well as being disproportionately diagnosed with mental health issues (See Shaw & Verghese, 2021). Excluding neurodivergent individuals, vulnerabilised individuals, and persons experiencing trauma or trauma-related manifestations from research that focuses on vulnerabilities perpetuates certain responses to oppression as pathological. Diagnostic practices and the criteria and history of diagnostic tools have been ingrained in colonialism, white supremacy, and other dominant modes of control while overlooking the realities of racial trauma (See Minsky-Kelly & Hornung, 2022). Therefore, excluding individuals from research based on these diagnostic criteria perpetuates colonial and capitalist practices of isolation, exclusion, and disempowerment of individuals with mental health conditions and neurodivergent individuals. It takes away agency from impacted communities.

Additionally, I understood that many of us, black, indigenous and people of colour were still healing from racism, oppression, poverty³⁰ and generational trauma and experienced difficulties accessing political care, healing and healing modalities that understood and acknowledged this history and care was accessible and did not perpetuate

³⁰ Poverty here is inclusive of economic, cultural, social and psychological – i.e., erasure of cultural references/ cultural theft, erasure of languages etc.

further harm (See Chirape, 2022). As a result, I believed it would be more ethical to have meaningful conversations with people, discussing possible risks and according to their circumstances to enable persons to make informed decisions on whether to participate or not, and with full agency. On an instrumental level, I considered, in community with others that the kind of research we hoped to carry out was much needed and excluding the very people who needed representation was seemingly counterproductive.

To mitigate possible negative repercussions and minimise risk, I considered a system of how I would identify such risks and refer any persons showing any signs of being symptom-activated by any of the research content. I developed a culture of transparency and encouraged co-researchers to report any negative thoughts/feelings/ emotions and or signs of impact on mental health. I also conducted numerous quick check-ins for everyone throughout the research process and months after the research. In reality, I continued to check in with co-researchers, not only in the months following the research but this practice of after-care continued through the writing stages of the project. Co-researchers continued to seek support/ advice and help with different tasks.

I also aim to continue checking in on co-researchers for a while longer, following the research to receive updates on their asylum claims and offer emotional, material and information support where possible. Whilst this requires much effort on my part, I am committed and determined to offer research collaborators support and care when they need it. As well as regular checking in there were also persons and support services linked to their organisations that co-researchers could access. In the initial stages of proposing the project, I had gathered various support systems in the form of, a Reverend and a counsellor, a spiritualist, a traditional healer, a bodyworker, a massage therapist, a Forensic Psychologist, a clinical Psychologist, a Psychotherapist, mental health organisations, LGBT counselling services and LGBT+ immigration support groups. All of these services were to be offered by persons who were black and queer. However, the research suffered financial resource-related challenges, and then when we were faced with the pandemic it became difficult for asylum claimants to access some of the resources. In addition, a majority of the co-researchers were not open to being referred to other people or different services – especially persons they were to meet online, as they were not trusting of new people and did not want to open up to new people or “strangers”. A lot of the people were already engaging with support and counselling services via *African Equality Foundation* and their GPs. Co-researchers were therefore encouraged to seek support from services they were already familiar with and or had built rapport with. There were instances when I asked *African Equality members* to check in on some of the co-researchers who had been upset during the

research process. Similarly, when difficult feelings/ emotions emerged, I also referred co-researchers to the *Microrainbow* organisation, and they received support that way.

Before the research commenced, individuals were given information about the topics to be addressed during the research through consent forms and discussions. Acknowledging the practical challenges faced by co-researchers, including limited access to technology and financial constraints, providing them with a list of local resources for support would have been inadequate. Consequently, co-researchers were referred to various organisations based on their specific needs, ensuring a more meaningful approach to support. During the consent process, individuals were asked about recent hospitalisations for mental health conditions, which became the arbitrary exclusion point; otherwise, no one was excluded based on self-reported mental health diagnoses. By the time co-researchers contributed to the research, they had navigated various traumatic experiences including criminalisation (Bhatia, 2015, 2020), trafficking (Bro, 2019), not having legal statuses (2019; Sanchez, 2019), modern slavery (Caritas Internationalis, 2015), exploitation and forced labour (Lewis et al., 2014), sexual violence (Belanteri et al., 2020), physical violence (Deps, 2021), detention (von Werthern, 2018) and more.

Given the challenges to mental health likely experienced by sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants participating in the research, recruiting individuals who had not encountered trauma and its psychological repercussions was difficult. While some participants could access support, legal restrictions in the UK limited asylum claimants' access to certain services. Consequently, many lacked formal diagnoses but could articulate their experiences with mental health issues. For some, engaging in the research marked their initial exposure to emotional and psychological support. The research aimed to offer remedy through its attentive process and provided support, aiming to avoid causing further harm to co-researchers.

4.7.4 Power within Research Practice.

Research with individuals from marginalised communities, such as African sexual and gender-expansive persons seeking asylum, has often reflected a power imbalance that is also embedded in colonialism. Researched individuals and groups from low socio-economic class, sexual and gender-expansive communities, black communities, refugees and members of other marginalised communities in 'western' society are identified as lacking power in research. Decolonial feminist research has provided guidance, on how best to interrogate and address unequal power hierarchies for research striving for social justice, especially during the pandemic (See Lokot, 2019; Pinet & Leon-Himmelstine, 2020; Singh et

al., 2021). African feminists in particular have a long history of using participatory, relational and collaborative approaches to co-produce knowledge and engage with various communities to privilege and acknowledge their knowledges (for example see works of African women feminists, activists and researchers, Dr Fortunate Machingura, Jessica Horn, Hope Chigudu, Lucy Mazingi, Madonna Mlambo, Dr Rudo Chigudu, Dr Yaliwe Clarke, Makanaka Tuwe to name just a few). This research also drew guidance from some of these feminist values.

Even though I am part of the same community I am collaborating research with I recognise that my positionality as a PhD researcher and as part of institutions with histories of epistemic violence and eurocentrism, my refugee status and access to certain resources that most co-researchers could not access meant that I had to recognise dynamics of power that could be presented in the project. Some of this power was addressed by how, as a refugee based on my sexual identity, I also participated in the research as a contributor and the conversations or interviews we had were more like exchanges between myself and co-researchers, in which co-researchers were also able to ask me questions. Co-researchers were able to ask me intimate, traumatic and personal experiences of my asylum journey and questions were answered from co-researchers throughout the process and as they arose. This process and practice disrupted the construction of co-researchers as objects.

Additionally, one of the participants facilitated the interview where I shared my experiences. This way I could veer away from conducting research with the community under the guise of being an 'expert.' Instead, African sexual and gender-expansive persons asylum claimants were treated as *experts* in their life experiences and included in the research as co-collaborators or co-researchers. Creating a partnership with co-researchers, individually and as a community reduced the risk of unethical or unintentionally insensitive action. Co-researchers not only had autonomy over how they contributed to the research and focus of the study, but I also used feedback from co-researchers to create research processes that were likely not to reproduce experiences embodied by the same power imbalance embedded in HO asylum interview processes. Since co-researchers often have precarious lives, there was much flexibility allowed with data collection processes. For example, co-researchers who had multiple reasons to mistrust others and or persons in authority, it was important that co-researchers had control of when and how meetings took place so they were comfortable to participate in the research process, and on their own terms. However, although much was done to minimise issues relating to power, there were still power imbalances. I was still in a privileged position (perceived or real) and asylum claimants continued to perceive me as an individual with access to privileges and resources. Therefore, this placed co-researchers at the risk of potentially feeling and or perceiving

themselves to be *at the mercy*, of the research. It was important therefore to individually and collectively continue having transparent conversations reflecting on this risk.

Research with asylum applicants involves a complex interplay of distance and closeness, particularly when considering the insider-outsider dynamic (See 4.9 section, Reflexivity: On Occupying the 'Insider-Outsider' Position) and the movement away from traditional objectiveness in psychology research. As researchers, embodying the role of an insider-outsider means being aware of our positionality and the inherent power dynamics at play (Chavez, 2008; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This dual identity can foster a unique closeness, enabling deeper empathy and trust with participants, as researchers may share similar cultural or experiential backgrounds (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, it also necessitates a conscious distancing to prevent biases and maintain ethical integrity. Moving away from the objectiveness expected in psychology research, closeness in the insider-position approach demands and embraces a more reflexive, participatory methodology, acknowledging that complete detachment is neither possible nor humanising (Berger, 2015; Gair, 2012). This reflexive practice allows for a richer, more authentic understanding of asylum claimants' experiences, highlighting the importance of relational ethics and mutual respect in research (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011; Ellis, 2007). Ultimately, balancing the distance and closeness not only enhances the depth and validity of the research but also respects the humanity and dignity of co-researchers.

4.7.5 Anonymity and Confidentiality.

The issue of anonymity was addressed during the ethics process, with co-researchers before undertaking the research, during the research process and again before the research was submitted to the University library for archiving. Overall, co-researchers were given the option to either be anonymised, use pseudonyms, use their first names if wanted to and or choose how they wished to be identified (i.e., using real initials, first names, fake names or other symbols/ letters). Several options were provided so that if there were co-researchers who could benefit from disclosing or highlighting their contribution to the research (i.e., on their CVs, and letters to the HO), they could do so. However, because of the approach the research was proposing to implement, there was a need to discuss how this may look, and the short-term and long-term implications of this for co-researchers. This was discussed with co-researchers throughout the research process. Some persons did not opt for full anonymity. For example, the majority of co-researchers chose to use their real first names. Further conversations were had with co-researchers before the research was made public, to make certain that persons who had not opted for anonymity had not since

changed their minds. It then transpired that using real first names or any identifiable information of co-researchers could potentially put co-researchers at risk of harm, at a time when the Home Office is using artificial intelligence software in live asylum cases, making it easy to deduce co-researchers' identities. Further communication was had with co-researchers. They were encouraged to choose pseudonym names. Persons who could not be reached (i.e. mobile numbers had changed and or did not respond to emails), I assigned pseudonym names on their behalf. Any other information, such as ages, employment type and when co-researchers sought asylum was removed from the research.

In research, anonymity means that no one will know the co-researchers' identity (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). Thus, to maintain confidentiality and minimise any reprisals, for co-researchers who had opted for anonymity, any information that could identify co-researchers was at large omitted from the research. Co-researchers' signed consent forms were kept separate from their audio and written narratives. If any co-researchers were to withdraw from the research at a later date, but before the time-bound deadline, co-researchers who had opted for anonymity were also allocated a number that was recorded with their collected narratives and on a separate list. This would be destroyed five years following the completion of the research.

Equally, the offer of anonymity was explained, clearly stressing the independence of the research from the authority (i.e., from HO), organisations supporting individuals seeking asylum, legal firms supporting individuals seeking asylum, the state and most importantly, co-researchers' countries of birth. Another ethical consideration was the importance of debriefing co-researchers after the process of gathering their experiences (Blanck et al., 1992) and providing co-researchers with feedback on the outcome of the research (Francis, 1999).

4.8 Research as a Site of Remedial Praxis and Transformative Exchanges.

I recognised that obtaining a PhD qualification at the end of this research collaboration would primarily benefit me, prompting a transparent discussion about how I and the research could serve co-researchers, both individually and as a community. Conversations were held to identify the priorities, needs, and challenges of co-researchers, as well as what they hoped to gain from the research. These discussions revealed priorities such as skill, information, and knowledge sharing, emotional support regarding mental health, referrals to organisations, and assistance with communication between co-researchers and other professionals (i.e. solicitors). It was crucial for co-researchers to autonomously identify their own needs and required support, rather than being dictated by

my assumptions. Additionally, the support offered avoided generalised assumptions and universalised remedies (Cornwall & Rivas 2015). Throughout the research process, and particularly during the pandemic, remedial practices aimed at transforming co-researchers' lives in meaningful ways were implemented, some of which are shared in the following section.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, after the initial meeting with the *African Equality Foundation* and its members in London, I joined the group's WhatsApp group. Subsequently, many individuals had access to me via WhatsApp, and a significant number of community members, who had been further impoverished by COVID-19, began reaching out to me for support. Many of these individuals were facing houselessness, economic challenges, and struggles to meet basic needs such as food and personal necessities. Additionally, they were dealing with active mental health issues and suicidal thoughts. Upon contacting me asylum claimants did express motivation to contribute to the research. However, it became apparent to me that some individuals' circumstances, exacerbated by the pandemic, significantly diminished their psychological, emotional, and cognitive capacity to make informed decisions and provide consent. Their ability to consent was influenced not by a genuine exercise of agency, but rather by their current state of disempowerment, material deprivation, and desperation.

Taking this into account, we had discussions about the research's aim to create a supportive environment for individuals in need and clarified expectations from both parties regarding participation. It was emphasized that the research's role in offering support and holding space did not impose any expectations on asylum claimants to actively engage with the research process, as these aspects were connected but not dependent on each other. Furthermore, individuals who did not meet the research criteria but sought support were not turned away. The research needed to accommodate everyone who reached out, regardless of their capacity to engage or meet the criteria. The aim of the research also included centring the possibility of 'healing' and remedy, in particular, thinking about how decolonial feminist methodologies could also be of service and sites for transformative exchanges (Chirape, 2020). Here, when thinking about what this could look like I also drew from the approach of Healing Justice³¹ framework which, *reimagines wholeness at the intersection of trauma, structures of oppression, and a generative and co-created future* (See works of Cara Page). However co-researchers decided on how the research could be of service to them, for example, they decided on the services/ resources they needed and the research/er made

³¹ Healing Justice is a framework created to recognise and address the impacts of racism and oppression and Cara Page is one of the architects of the healing justice framework. See, <https://carapage.co>.

an effort to offer these. It was always important that I centred/ listened and responded to demands that resonated with the priorities, needs and experiences of co-researchers. However, there were limitations as the research was on the majority self-funded/ without financial resources.

With co-researchers' feedback as a guide, using my knowledge, skills and connections in the community, how the research was of service to the community of co-researchers included:

- compiling information and contacts for immigration legal aid;
- referring co-researchers to immigration organisations, so they could be supported to; access housing, and mental health services;
- referring co-researchers with mental health to counsellors;
- contacting charitable organisations and linking co-researchers so they could receive food, WIFI data, and menstrual towels;
- advising and collecting information for volunteering opportunities that co-researchers could engage with (this was for people who communicated that they needed to keep busy for the sake of their mental well-being);
- advising co-researchers on back-to-school processes, for people that had been out of school for too long and or along the migration route lost their physical qualifications;
- advising on university applications, interviews and how to seek support from the universities. One person got onto a Biomedical sciences Bachelors' degree and another onto a Masters' programme. A London university had rejected an asylum claimant' (and now with a refugee status) application, on their Masters and Degree programme and cited that her qualifications were not valid and that she needed to do another degree and potentially a foundation course. This asylum claimant already had an (English) degree from Uganda and many years of experience both in Uganda and the UK. Using my knowledge of the UK university system and process I supported the claimant to apply for a Masters programme at a more diverse University that would be less likely to be biased and prejudiced towards her, on the basis that she had refugee status. The individual was accepted onto a Masters programme and completed her programme with research that interrogated issues related to migration;
- sharing advice and resources on educational funding/ scholarships;
- sharing experiences and advice on HO processes and information about resources they had a right to access from the HO;

- supporting co-researchers with their mental health. I spent a lot of time doing this and sometimes late into the night as everyone who contacted me was struggling with mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, suicide ideation and states – I held conversations with claimants on understanding trauma, suicide ideation, validating their experiences and most importantly referring them to appropriate support organisations and resources;
- I took action by writing emails to legal representatives on behalf of asylum claimants who expressed concerns about their representation. This included addressing issues such as lack of progress in their cases, recurring errors, failure to acknowledge and address claimants' concerns, lack of communication responsiveness, and misunderstanding of their needs. Claimants made requests such as, "...my lawyer doesn't understand my mental health can you write to her...she never asks me questions and I have tried to explain..." These emails were sent by individuals who felt that their legal representatives (and GPs) were *insensitive* and did not fully comprehend their mental well-being or the underlying causes of their mental health difficulties, hindering their ability to provide helpful diagnoses, prognoses, and informed reports for the Home Office (HO).

The purpose of these emails was not to dictate how lawyers should perform their duties, but rather to support both the lawyer and the co-researchers. Through this process, we collectively explored what trauma-informed litigation might entail for each asylum claimant. In some cases, instead of directly communicating on behalf of co-researchers, I engaged in discussions with asylum claimants to empower them with knowledge and understanding of their symptoms and mental health, and how to effectively communicate this with their legal representatives. In such instances, I provided my contacts to the legal representatives for further discussions if needed.

- provided support letters for asylum claimants who asked for letters to support their asylum claims. There were very few people who asked for such letters. The letters outlined claimants' engagement with the research – providing some of the information claimants had shared with me during the research – with their consent. The letters also provided a little background on country-of-origin information. The letters were proofread by both the claimant and their legal representative;
- provided support with creating CVs and or filling job applications.

All practical work was conducted remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, with me physically located in South Africa and asylum claimants scattered across different parts of the UK. Despite the distance, I received support from collaborators at *MicroRainbow* and

African Equality Foundation, who provided guidance on addressing some of the identified needs.

4.9 Reflexivity: On Occupying the 'Insider-Outsider' Position.

I view myself as an activist-scholar and a researcher-practitioner, and often consciously and intentionally embed myself, by way of intimate autobiographic accounts, in the theory and practice of research and writings I engage in. As a psychology practitioner, the act and practice of reflecting is an important part of the practice for personal and professional development (Carmichael et al., 2020; Ooi et al., 2023). As a result, I am a reflexive researcher by nature and adopted the same practice throughout the research process.

I situated myself in the current research, not just from a decolonial feminist stance but because this is a topic that is extensively personal and important to me. The active decision to situate myself in the research as both the researcher and the researched led me to occupy the insider-outsider position (Bukamal, 2022). I embody intersecting marginalised and shared identities with co-researchers in the project and positioned myself as both the researcher and the researched. I am lesbian/queer although as a Shona Zimbabwean, I am also not fully comfortable with adopting these western terms. Instead, I often use the term 'ancestral wife'. In South Africa and other parts of Southern Africa 'ancestral wife' refers to the person given to a Sangoma to help them undertake their healing work, and the sex of the ancestral wife is immaterial (See Nkabinde & Morgan, 2006; Nkabinde, 2008; Mkasi, 2016). For me, as a Shona person of the VaRozvi people, an ancestral wife can also mean someone who was chosen as a symbolic wife to an ancestral spirit. I am also black African and a forcibly displaced individual. I sought asylum in the UK in 2010 which led to detention and representing myself in a tribunal immigration court (Chirape, 2014).

I considered that these identities would be implicated in the way the research is carried out and the narratives and themes produced. Consequently, it was crucial to not only observe my research practices and scrutinise my methodologies, as suggested by Hibbert and colleagues (2010), but also to reflect on and engage with the emotions, thoughts, and questions that arose during the research period. Reflexivity was integrated into the research process from its inception. Before commencing the study, I engaged in discussions with sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and the refugee community. I also published a paper, reflecting on my PhD plans (Chirape, 2022), which served as a form of accountability to the proposed methodological plans and sparked crucial conversations with and within the community. Some of the issues raised related to language, the importance of

adopting humanising language (See, Note on terminology, p7), adopting humanising praxis in the research process (Paris & Winn, 2014; Pitts & Smith, 2007) and the issue of being labelled vulnerable by others or in research (Walker et al., 2018).

Throughout the process of gathering co-researchers' experiences, I audio-recorded my reflections. As a result, I engaged in the process of continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of my positionality (Berger, 2013) and had an ongoing conversation with peers and the community about the experience while also immersed and living in the moment of doing research (Hertz, 1997). In this section, I reflect specifically on two issues that continued to be present throughout the process of study. These issues are positionality and authoring trauma as a refugee researcher.

I begin by discussing my positionality as the researcher and the researched and, how this positionality shaped the relationship between myself and co-researchers and the narratives produced in the research. The matter of whether qualitative researchers, be it that we are members of the community we are researching, has been previously discussed extensively, but generally reserved for discussions of observation, field research, and ethnography (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As the researcher positioned as both the researcher and the researched I played a direct and intimate role in both, the gathering of our lived experiences and in doing the analysis (Corbin-Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Whether I functioned as the lead researcher with shared identities and asylum/refugee experiences alongside co-researchers, or as an outsider to their common experiences, my identities, including my membership status in relation to co-researchers, remained a vital and consistently present aspect of the investigation (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Throughout the research process and the interview experience, I was positioned as an 'insider-outsider' which created a specific relationship between myself and co-researchers. In my case, occupying an insider position was influenced by my attributes as an African and Black individual (cultural background and race), my socio-economic status and access to resources (class). Others shared insider status based on identifiers such as gender (woman), age (similar age bracket), immigration status (having gone through the asylum process and holding refugee status in the UK), and sexuality (being queer/lesbian). Since I shared multiple identities and profound experiences with co-researchers other scholars might view my positionality as that of a 'total insider' (Chavez, 2008; Ross, 2017). However, if we were to veer away from the binary opposites of insider and outsider position, Tilley's (1998) use of the term "someone familiar" might be considered more suitable in my circumstance. It was evident from the initial stages of proposing the research to NGOs serving African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in the UK that potential co-researchers viewed and received me as someone familiar and as belonging to their

community (See Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000). While this approach facilitated the development of trust and community access, it also brought with it a significant sense of responsibility. I was especially mindful of avoiding the perpetuation of historical research harms against marginalised communities and the risk of contributing to existing disappointments. This concern became a core motivation, compelling me to go to great lengths in establishing a safe, trusting and supportive research environment for co-researchers in specific instances.

In my initial meeting with one of the NGOs, potential co-researchers were hesitant to engage with me till the moment they found out that I too, had gone through the asylum process. In that meeting, a few people mentioned that in the past they had felt exploited by outsider researchers. During the meeting with potential participants, individuals reflected on how other people did not fully “understand our experiences”, that “white researchers only want to interview us” and do not care to follow up after they are done with their interviews, and or are often not interested “to listen to all of our experiences”. African asylum claimants expressed frustrations with how some “white researchers” continued “to treat us as victims”, speaking to problematic relationships, practices and observations that have been highlighted by other scholars engaging with ‘refugee research’ (Daley, 2021). Co-researchers also communicated how they would not have been open to disclosing certain aspects of their experiences with me if I had not previously sought asylum and was not African lesbian and lesbian identifying. They reported how these shared identities led them to trust me more with their experiences stating comments such as, “..I know I can trust you Skye, you have gone through this as well..”; “you are one of us...”; “You know what it’s like”; “I trust you, I can tell you everything...I can tell things”. I think the increased level of trust and acceptance was also evident in how co-researchers were comfortable sharing some of their most difficult, intimate and traumatic experiences with me (Unluer, 2012).

Early in those communal meetings, I observed also that I was perceived as a ‘success’ story—a person who had obtained refugee status, was pursuing a PhD, and had access to resources, information, knowledge, and networks. These perceived ‘privileges’ and social positions seemed to inspire hope among many asylum claimants regarding their asylum-seeking journeys. However, I was cautious not to offer unwarranted hope or make promises that I could not fulfil. Nevertheless, being seen as ‘familiar’ and understanding their positions, with the potential to provide support, cultivated a distinctive relationship that influenced how co-researchers perceived and interacted with me. Throughout the research process, this dynamic influenced the narratives co-researchers chose to share and those they opted to withhold. I observed a level of ‘honesty’ and vulnerability that might not have been present if I had been an ‘outsider’ (Forster, 2012) For example, co-researchers

expressed statements such as, “I am only doing the research because it is you, you are one of us...”; and “.....because you are [also] a refugee I knew you would understand...” Consequently, co-researchers shared with me intimate and vulnerable experiences that they wanted me to hold space for but could not be used for the research, and this was across genders and sexualities. Due to my positionality (as a refugee and *lesbian) the research space occasionally transformed into a space of gathering, sharing, mourning, unpacking, and or reminiscing about home. Many of these experiences, though rich in content, did not find their way into the final dataset.

My legal immigration status, class privileges, access to resources, pursuit of a PhD, and freedom of movement set me apart as an outsider compared to the majority of co-researchers. I was well aware that these insider and outsider roles would dynamically shift throughout various stages of the research process, influenced by the perceptions and unique circumstances of each co-researcher involved at any given moment. Similarly, there were instances where co-researchers positioned me as an insider when I had considered myself an outsider, and vice versa. Although I anticipated shared experiences and overlapping similarities, I also expected to uncover differences between myself and co-researchers, as well as among the co-researchers themselves. Recognising the dynamic nature of identity and the non-homogeneity of communities, I understood that identity is not static (Bennet et al., 2022; Corbett, 2008; Jourian, 2015; Fausto-Sterling, 2019; Vignoles, 2017). Despite my personal experiences of seeking asylum in the UK, undergoing detention, and engaging in activism on the topic, I deliberately avoided assuming the position of an 'expert' on the phenomenon. Nevertheless, this approach permitted me to use my experience and knowledge about the community and to establish rapport, trust, acceptance, openness and motivation to actively engage with the research process.

These multiple overlapping identities and positions as insider or outsider also led me to reflect on the position of power with co-researchers. Considering the influence of power differentials was particularly crucial not only within the ethical framework during the formulation phase but also in the ethical steps undertaken throughout the data collection phase of the research (Moroke & Graham, 2020). In this research, I attempted *doing* qualitative research with asylum applicants or refugees, as co-researchers (Moroke & Graham, 2020). Asylum claimants and refugees' active participation as co-researchers meant that I was not the main or only data-collecting instrument (Moroke & Graham, 2020). In this approach, we were able to negotiate power, to some extent. Individuals' power shifted back and forth between co-researchers and myself, depending on the decisions being made, who was making them and when and the tasks at hand (Hoffman, 2007). For example, co-researchers who had the capacity, directed the research and made decisions about when

and how their experiences were to be collected. I think this practice and clearly articulating and reminding co-researchers of their power and how they could use it in the research gave people agency and control. I got the sense that co-researchers did not think that they were being used. Instead, co-researchers truly saw and believed the research to be a collaboration – even in cases where co-researchers were not able to contribute beyond merely sharing their lived experiences.

On the second issue of authoring trauma, I am not emotionally detached from the experiences of the sexual and gender-expansive individuals examined in this research. The study also incorporated my personal experiences of navigating the UK asylum process. In 2003, I submitted my passport and a student visa application, and despite the requirement to submit my passport annually for a student visa, the UK Home Office withheld my passport for about six years without providing any reasons. After enduring six years in limbo and reaching out to the Home Office through my local MP, No10, and a litigator, I faced the threat of deportation. With the assistance of a legal team and an activist community, I sought asylum. After submitting my application, I spent approximately 48 hours in Dover detention centre. Subsequently, I received a three-year visa, which I declined, choosing instead to represent myself in a tribunal immigration court. The tribunal court process resulted in the granting of refugee status. I have previously documented my asylum-seeking and detention experiences, describing them as among the most dehumanising and traumatic encounters I have ever faced (Chirape, 2015). This personal journey was a driving force in my decision to explore the migration experiences of sexual and gender-expansive individuals. The experience, coupled with my contributions to other scholars' studies, shaped my decision to embrace a decolonial and feminist methodology. This approach centred on providing remedy, and establishing a research space aimed at amplifying co-researchers' voices while humanising and dignifying their experiences. Although I had previously researched the experiences of sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and refugees in detention for my master's program, I was surprised by the emotional impact the PhD study had on me.

In the course of the research, not only was I holding space for other people's traumatic experiences, but I also observed that the process continually activated my own nervous system. While historical research has explored the role of feelings in research and questioned their place (Darra, 2008; Emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Fahie, 2014; Mallon & Elliott, 2019), there is limited scholarly exploration of the specific emotional implications of 'insider' research (Ross, 2017). Throughout the research, I observed emotional implications tied to my 'insider' positionality, affecting both me and the co-researchers. Many instances

arose where I strongly resonated with co-researchers' feelings and emotions, and vice versa.

There were numerous experiences that I shared with co-researchers, some intensely personal and emotionally charged, which were not included in the research. Some of the lived experiences co-researchers shared with me were extremely horrific and distressing, leading to moments where I found myself crying during our conversations (Kutin, 2017). Being an emotionally engaged researcher, bearing witness to the trauma, inhumane experiences, suffering, humiliation, and indignity of co-researchers was overwhelming (Campbell, 2002). While crying is sometimes thought to bring relief (Vingerhoets & Bylsma, 2016), in these emotional moments with co-researchers, it did not feel that way, at least not for me. The emotions often lingered in my body longer than I had anticipated. However, I believe that sharing tears validated the traumatic and emotional experiences endured by co-researchers and emphasised that they were not just data (Kutin, 2017). Co-researchers also provided feedback that they experienced relief, feeling seen, and validated, and an opportunity to resist the stigma around mental health. We also managed to form a community and friendships formed over our shared trauma and experiences of the asylum regime.

As the one responsible for writing up the study and holding more power and control, I recognised the 'privilege' of deciding what to include and exclude in the research. I consistently reflected on how emotions triggered by the research, and the shared experience of 'feeling with' co-researchers, influenced the questions I asked and the narratives I chose to tell. My emotions played a crucial role not only in establishing social bonds with co-researchers (See Williams, 2001; Blackman & Walkerdine, 2002) but also in fostering a sense of solidarity, camaraderie, validation of experiences, and an understanding of the 'pain' resulting from those experiences.

In those moments, I realised that there were parts of me still wounded from my asylum-seeking experience and race-related trauma during my time working for the Ministry of Justice. When it came time for me to be interviewed by another participant - an NGO caseworker - to share my own experiences of the UK asylum process, I felt challenged. I observed myself continuously delaying the conversation. I eventually recognised my anxiety and apprehension about engaging with the interview, despite having the autonomy to choose when and with whom to have this discussion. I selected an individual I had known for years, also a refugee, lesbian, and Zimbabwean who had participated in the study. Despite the power and control to choose the time and the person for the conversation and being in dialogue with someone I had known for years, I still experienced anxiety. I noticed that I

stuttered more than usual during the conversation. However, the depth of my emotions became more apparent afterwards when it was time to transcribe and analyse my interview.

Transcribing my personal interview proved challenging. It was especially challenging to listen to my own experiences. The anxiety in my voice, evident through stuttering and sadness, was notable. Yet, even though there was an option to have the audio recording transcribed by professional transcribers, I opted not to send it. I believe that my anxiety stemmed from the discomfort of having a stranger listen to my story and being privy to a difficult time in my life. This realisation echoed concerns similar to those expressed by co-researchers at various stages of the research when offered professional support - they were hesitant due to not wanting to share their experiences with "strangers." Analysing my own experiences and incorporating them into the research also proved challenging, and I felt vulnerable. Consequently, many of my experiences do not appear in the research. At that moment, I became acutely aware of the power I possessed in making decisions for myself compared to the co-researchers. Throughout the process of including myself in the research, I grappled with discomfort and difficult emotions. My discomfort, vulnerability, and anxiety also made me recognise the potential emotions and vulnerabilities co-researchers might bring to the research or that might be activated by our conversations.

Through being vulnerabilised by my own research, I realised that I was also potentially vulnerabilising the co-researchers I had invited to participate. This realisation invited me to think more critically about what holding space for co-researchers and for their experiences could look like when guided by decolonial, feminist and indigenous knowledge and values around care and ethics of care. Importantly, I refrained from judging myself for experiencing and reliving certain moments. Instead, I recognised these emotional reactions as a necessary part of the research process and formulated a comprehensive plan to support my well-being during my PhD journey. This plan involved a range of activities, rituals, and spiritual practices, including mountain hiking, long-distance walking, maintaining a healthy diet, engaging in ancestral rituals, receiving massages and acupuncture, participating in monthly healing circles, and designating individuals as soundboards who could hold me accountable for adhering to my plan and taking care of myself throughout the PhD journey.

Researching trauma and violence as an insider - being a member of the same community or having experienced similar experiences as the participants - is inherently challenging. This challenge is intensified when you are Black or POC (add queer, poor, disabled, refugee, migrant, English as a second language, survivor, etc.) researcher conducting research from within institutions with colonial histories that have perpetuated violence towards them. Nevertheless, generating new approaches to doing, thinking, and

feeling with and about researching marginalised communities, this research - akin to the larger Unsettling Knowledge Production project - is rooted in a decolonial feminist practice of ethics of care (Behari-Leak et al., In press). It prioritises humanising, preserving co-researchers' dignity, valuing their ways of knowing, and promoting social justice (Behari-Leak et al., In press).

Chapter Summary:

In summary, this chapter provided an overview of the rationale behind employing decolonial feminist methodologies in studying marginalised black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants. It detailed the research design and process, including methods of recruitment, co-researcher criteria, and data collection. A critical discussion of the intersectional narrative analysis approach used to analyse the data was presented. The chapter also addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the research process, discussing how initial plans were adjusted to navigate pandemic-related barriers. Additionally, it highlighted the aim of the research to centre the possibility of 'healing' and remedy for co-researchers, both individually and as a community. The subsequent chapters will present the findings resulting from this research process.

CHAPTER FIVE: Narratives of Violent Uncertainty and Exclusion.

The discourse, policies, and processes around migration in the UK and across Europe highlight subtle, pronounced, and hidden structural violence former colonial countries continuously inflict on asylum applicants and refugees. Migrants, refugees, and persons seeking asylum are England's most disadvantaged communities (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016) and often the communities who not only hold multiple identities but face multi-layered forms of discrimination due to their intersecting identities and experiences (Nematy, Namer & Razum, 2022). Positioning co-researchers as experts of their lived reality, centring their experiences of the asylum process, the research also drew from the perspectives of NGO and legal case workers. These experiences and perspectives gathered were examined using a Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis (Boonzaier, 2019) and located it within the wider context of structural and symbolic violence related to the migration experience. Six primary narratives implicating intersectional structural and symbolic violence emerged from an analysis of the data. This is the first of two analytical chapters that discusses three of the primary narratives African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and refugees told about the UK asylum-claiming process. The three overarching narratives discussed in this chapter include narratives of violent uncertainty, exclusionary state practices and deliberate dis/location and geographical isolation. The thematic patterns discussed in this chapter are presented in Diagram 1 below.

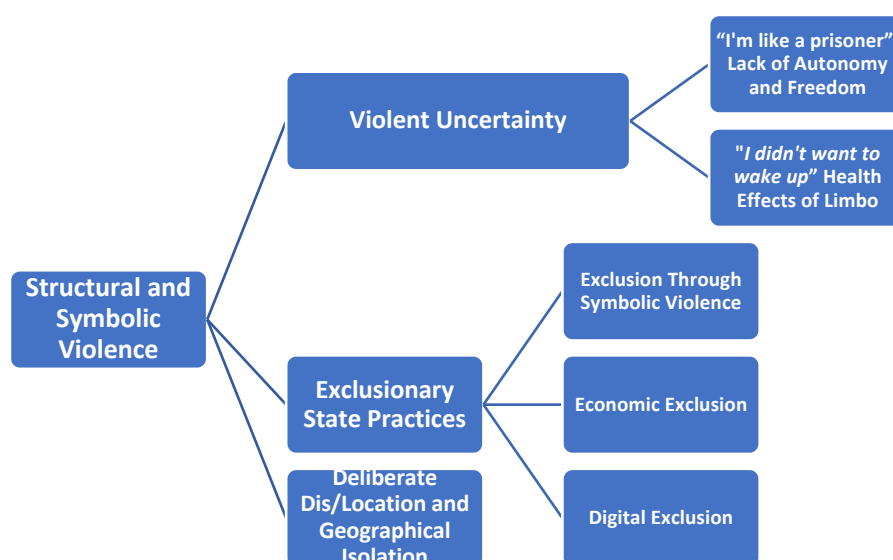


Figure 1- Narratives of Violent Uncertainty and Exclusion.

5.1 Violent Uncertainty.

The violence inflicted on asylum applicants and refugees, marked by systematic personal, social, and institutional instability, was conceptualised as “violent uncertainty” by Grace and colleagues (2018). This form of violence not only exacerbates inequality but also instils fear in asylum applicants’ everyday interactions (Grace et al., 2018). State policies, such as those exemplified by the UK’s hostile environment policies form violent uncertainty in the way they perpetuate systematic insecurity, causing direct and indirect harm towards asylum claimants (Phillimore & Cheung, 2021). In the context of the UK and other states globally, violent uncertainty is evident in the prolonged waiting periods imposed on asylum applicants during the decision-making process. During the waiting period, asylum claimants are left in a state of limbo, enduring continual insecurity and uncertainty (Griffiths, 2014).

In the study, African sexual and gender-expansive individuals revealed their experiences of being trapped in a state of legal limbo. This limbo was characterised by extended waiting periods between the screening interview and the substantive interview, as well as between interviews and the outcome. During this process of insecure immigration status, claimants endured prolonged uncertainty and fear that forced them into a marginalised existence in the shadows. WhatsApp conversations below with co-researchers highlighted the long waiting periods claimants were subjected to before being invited back for substantive interviews and when waiting for decisions on their asylum claims.

Co-researchers such as Mary (lesbian, Uganda) described waiting periods as varying between one year to *“nearly two years now. I don’t know why. So I’m still waiting while laying in limbo”*. In some instances, co-researchers described waiting for as long as five years or more. At the time of interview, Abby (lesbian, Uganda) and Haddy (lesbian, Uganda) had been waiting for the substantive interviews for over two and three years, consecutively. During the consent process, at least fifteen of the co-researchers had only had their initial screening interview and were still waiting to be invited for the substantive interview (second interview). They waited in uncertainty and limbo. About six individuals were then invited to participate in the substantive interview. Notably, one person (lesbian, Uganda), had a screening interview in 2017 and was subsequently invited for the substantive interview in 2022. This meant a staggering five-year waiting period left in a state of uncertainty. When asylum claimants’ claims were pending for years, they were left stuck in a state of limbo. While occupying this position of uncertainty co-researchers’ lives were placed on hold. They were not in control of their lives and unable to plan for the future. The way the HO controlled time and timeframes, using periods as a form of violence to keep claimants’ lives on hold uncertain about their status and future, formed a violent form of

uncertainty. Phillimore and Cheung (2021) commented that whilst waiting for asylum decisions applicants' "lives are intentionally put "on hold".

In their own words, co-researchers further discussed the complexities of what constituted the limbo state. They discussed the impact on their lives while occupying this position. In the following excerpt, Mary provided a glimpse into the challenges and experiences faced when life was put on hold.

It's put me in a position of being in limbo, not knowing where I stand. Some days I wake up and I'm thinking okay what happens if I'm thrown out of the house, who do I go to? I don't have any finances, how do I survive? How about if I am deported or anything like that. So it's left me with a lot of unanswered questions. I've been trying to search for these answers and I can't find them. Of course I've spoken to people about it but well they also don't have solutions to this, all they're trying to do is sell me hope. Hold on to this, hold on to that but at the end of the day they can't do much themselves really..... - WhatsApp conversation.

Mary's narrative reflected a sense of uncertainty, ongoing anxiety, and feeling trapped in a state of limbo. She expressed concerns about her situation, at the time of the conversation, including the fear of facing financial instability and potential deportation. Mary's narrative also conveyed a sense of vulnerability, isolation, and the struggle for security in the face of uncertainty. These were concerns and worries shared across several co-researchers' narratives. For example, in another conversation, Haddy's excerpt highlighted that she felt, "stuck in my asylum-seeking situation.....For sure, I feel stuck in my situation. Having to depend on others has been hard for me..." These two excerpts, as well as narratives across co-researcher's demonstrated how asylum claimants grappled with uncertainty. They were concerned about survival without financial resources, highlighting the immediate and tangible impact of the limbo period on accessing basic needs. Having "lived in limbo" and a state of uncertainty myself for almost six years I knew very well the toll of the constant worry and anxiety on one's mental health, well-being, and everyday life that Mary described (Burchett & Matheson, 2010; Refugee Council, 2021; Moore, 2022). These descriptions and my own during a conversation with NGO caseworker, MG (lesbian, Zimbabwe) talking about how desperate, difficult and lonely that period was, highlighted the isolating nature of living in continual uncertainty.

When left waiting for outcome decisions for lengthy periods, co-researchers were left feeling a sense of vulnerability, and isolation, and struggling to find security in the face of uncertainty. In their effort to make sense of their "suffering" (Abraham, gay, Uganda) and to understand the injustice happening to them co-researchers ask rhetorical questions such as,

"Why is it God created me in this kind of life to suffer, been suffering like this..." –
WhatsApp conversation

Rhetorical questions such as these gave weight to the extent and depth of claimants' distress and adversity. Abraham's statement reflected a deep sense of existential questioning and emotional distress. The repetition and use of the words "suffer" and "suffering" which were used frequently by many of the co-researchers emphasised the intensity and duration of their pain, highlighting the profound impact the waiting had had on their lives. In the same conversation, Abraham woefully stated that,

"Sometimes I call God and ask God if life hasn't been unfair to me, I don't know what I did to you but life hasn't been unfair to me...First of all, I am a foreigner. It's better to suffer in your own home. But suffering in foreign country not easy"

These sorts of statements or rhetorical questions were not unusual at all among co-researchers. Many persons who were majority, Christian or Muslim often questioned and wondered why God or Allah had abandoned them to "suffer" in "foreign countries". The narratives expressed a deep sense of struggle and injustice, questioning whether life had been unfair to them. They struggled with the complexities of their circumstances and the insecurity that accompanied the limbo period. The mention of being a "foreigner" as similarly shared across conversations also added another layer of complexity to co-researchers' experiences. It indicated feelings of displacement, isolation, and cultural alienation, which exacerbated the challenges the challenges in a foreign land.

Overall, the narratives co-researchers shared demonstrated the disbelief and shock claimants experienced to how the host country treated them on arrival. Persons often assumed that the UK would provide protection, safety, sanctuary and freedom as highlighted in numerous narratives across interviews. Instead once in the UK claimants were deprived of their liberty (Bachmann, 2016) and trapped in wait in which the challenges faced were worse, just in different ways (Hall, 2022). Statements co-researchers shared about their circumstances of living in a state of limbo and uncertainty (Posselt et al., 2018) also demonstrated the state of their mind and the toll this had on psychological well-being (Bernhard et al., 2007; Kramer & Bala, 2004; Tschalaer, 2023). I discuss the effect of limbo on co-researchers' mental and physical well-being later on in the chapter.

During moments of expressing hopelessness and insecurity, co-researchers articulated how being trapped in limbo hindered their progress and the subsequent impact on their future prospects. XX (lesbian, Uganda), voiced similar concerns about the repercussions of being unable to work on her future career trajectory. Parallel to other co-researchers, XX feared that the limbo period would impede her ability to keep pace with

advancements in her field of Accounts, potentially hindering her chances of catching up with evolving qualifications and experiences in the discipline.

Its working you know it's studying you know before we came here you were studying, I was doing my professional chartered accounting course, management accounting like the time whatever happened, happened. And when I came here I can't continue with my studies because I don't have money to study, and I'm not allowed to study because I'm an asylum seeker. So you can imagine all of those things that leads to a temperamental issue... You pull yourself from a wall like you can't pass through that wall it is finished for you know... That's what I have been praying for. That's what I have been praying for to go back to school. So with Accounting I don't think its gong (sic) be easy for me because there is this thing, they always change, like the rules already change, every year they have to change rules and principles regarding accounts. So I have, I don't think I will catch up with whatever has been happening that is the saddest story but I will look for something else I can do. – WhatsApp conversation.

XX's concerns regarding the impact on future career opportunities and the resulting skills gaps in her CV were echoed by multiple co-researchers. These skills gaps posed future challenges for asylum claimants trying to integrate into the labour market (³²EEPO, 2016). Additionally, refugees and asylum claimants faced language barriers that prevented them from accessing opportunities that could aid their integration into the labour market (EEPO, 2016). These challenges stemming from the asylum process created barriers that further hindered claimants, keeping them trapped in a cycle of poverty and marginalisation even after securing legal status.

Allsopp and colleagues (2014) once described the UK asylum system as a poverty-producing machine, highlighting the state's limited efforts to improve the asylum system and the lives of asylum claimants under their 'care'. Instead, the state has been criticised for continuing to "practice a deliberate policy of destitution" (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2007, p. 110). This was part of the hostile environment policy which intended to push rejected asylum claimants into extreme poverty and in return force them back to their country of origin, and secondly to deter potential asylum applicants from arriving in the UK (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2007; Squire 2009; Spencer 2011). In situations where asylum claimants already possessed qualifications, there were still barriers to joining the labour market after securing legal status (EEPO, 2016). Discrimination and biases against

³² European Employment Policy Observatory

education and training acquired outside of the UK led to many asylum claimants facing challenges in having their skills and qualifications recognised. This issue was frequently discussed by co-researchers during the study, highlighting their struggles in getting their qualifications acknowledged. In some cases, I had to intervene on behalf of co-researchers, particularly for individuals holding Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Uganda, who were being excluded by UK universities from registering for their master's programs.

Reports highlighted that refugees who have been residing in the UK for a longer duration are more likely to secure employment (Archer et al., 2005). Additionally, refugees possessing UK qualifications are also more likely to be employed (Archer et al., 2005). However, research on barriers to employment among refugees suggested that individuals who manage to enter the labour market often find themselves under-employed (Bloch, 2004; Rosenkranz, 2002). They were more likely to take up positions beneath their level of skills or qualifications, typically in the low or unskilled sector (Bloch, 2004; Rosenkranz, 2002). In these roles, refugees are prone to encountering poor working conditions (Bloch, 2004; Crawley et al., 2004; Rosenkranz, 2002). The reports mentioned above align with concerns expressed by co-researchers during the study, who encountered difficulties in obtaining courses and employment opportunities, despite holding degrees, postgraduate qualifications, and experience from outside the UK. This highlights the challenges faced by refugees and asylum claimants in accessing suitable educational and job opportunities that align with their qualifications and skills.

Many co-researchers grappled with the paradox of leaving behind their lives in search of safety, only to encounter situations where although they found some safety (such as the freedom to live their sexualities and gender identities openly), they had lost other freedoms. This included the loss of recognition for their educational achievements and the opportunities they provided. The paradox of freedom for SOGI individuals seeking asylum lies in the tension between the quest for liberation and the constraints of legal and social systems experienced during the asylum process. They flee from persecution in their home countries, hoping to find safety and acceptance. Instead, the UK asylum process subjects them to invasive scrutiny, facing scepticism about their identities and experiences from authorities. Additionally, once in the UK, they encounter discrimination, isolation, exclusion, detention or insufficient support, undermining the very freedom they sought. Thus, while seeking refuge in so-called 'more tolerant' societies, SOGI asylum claimants navigate a complex landscape where their rights and identities remain contested and vulnerable. Embedded within the overarching theme of violent uncertainty that emerged from co-researchers' narratives are two deeper sub-themes that require exploration: the lack of

autonomy and freedom and the effect of violent uncertainty on the health of asylum applicants. I discuss the sub-themes in detail below.

5.1.1 ***"I'm like a prisoner": Lack of Autonomy and Freedom.***

Throughout the asylum process, a prominent concern for co-researchers was the perpetual risk and uncertainty surrounding the decision outcome. This uncertainty not only highlighted the ongoing anxiety but also the issue of autonomy and freedom. While awaiting asylum decisions, claimants encountered restrictive barriers and structural conditions that eroded their agency and restricted their mobility, further exacerbating their sense of limited autonomy and freedom. In conversations with co-researchers, there was a distinct sense that by choosing the freedom to express their sexual and gender identities, free from persecution, they felt they had forfeited other fundamental freedoms. This dilemma left co-researchers perplexed, questioning why this trade-off was necessary, and instilled a sense of hopelessness about whether life would improve even after gaining legal status. The following excerpt from Mary's interview illustrated one such instance where a co-researcher pondered the significance of attaining safety when it came at the cost of being excluded from other basic rights.

Well, most people have been affected mentally because first of all you leave your home country just in search of safety, not that you don't have like your lack anything. You have a house you have a job, you have your degree. I mean you're living life the way you want to live it in your own country and then you come here in search of safety. And yes the HO says okay yes we're going to give you safety, but for you to get safety you don't have to work, you don't have to have a house, you don't have to go to school. I mean they are taking away so much from you just in return for that one thing that you so badly need. So it affects you mentally, physically, I mean all these things are taken away from us. Those are basic rights - right to health care, right to accommodation, right to food. Yeah, they're taking all this away just because they can give you safety, which is not right. So all this will impact you mentally and physically because you're just in limbo. This is a new country, you probably haven't met any friends, you don't have no relatives here. You don't know where to start from. All you're relying on is yes the HO knows me, they have my details but what are you living for?

Mary's narrative highlighted the profound challenges faced by individuals who have left their home countries in search of safety, only to encounter a complex and often overwhelming UK immigration system that stripped away fundamental aspects of their lives in exchange for

safety. It highlighted the paradoxical nature of seeking safety through the UK immigration process. While the UK provided safety, to an extent, it also came at the cost of co-researchers' basic rights and necessities, such as the right to work, housing, education, healthcare, and food. This loss of basic rights and the uncertainty of starting anew in a foreign country also contributed to and exacerbated a sense of limbo and isolation. Without the support networks of friends or relatives and with limited resources, co-researchers struggled to navigate their new circumstances and find meaning in their lives. In the excerpt, Mary emphasised the stark contrast between the comfortable lives co-researchers had led in their home countries, where she, for example, had a house, a job, and a degree, and the difficulties they encountered in the UK. This compromise, where Mary and others must sacrifice fundamental aspects of their lives for safety, was depicted in the narrative as unjust, burdensome, and detrimental to co-researcher's well-being. Mary noted the toll it took on co-researchers' sense of identity, stability, and purpose.

Rider's (2013) research with asylum claimants in the US revealed that while the asylum system viewed claimants as individuals with privilege and resources expected to present strong cases, it overlooked the lack of autonomy they experienced during the process. Structural and institutional barriers within the asylum system created an environment of insecurity that undermined applicants' agency and often hindered their ability to attain asylum status (Rider, 2013). The liminal space intentionally restricted asylum applicants from accessing fundamental rights and essential resources. These structural limitations, coupled with the lack of access and resources, not only serve as barriers to mobility and basic rights but also impede asylum claimants from constructing a robust asylum case (Rider, 2013). Furthermore, when basic rights and essential needs are unmet, it becomes exceedingly difficult for asylum claimants to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance (UNHCR, 2004)

Another way in which co-researchers felt their autonomy and freedom stripped away during the limbo stage was through restricted mobility. Through extensive conversations and self-recorded audio, co-researchers passionately expressed their dreams and desires to travel and explore the world. This longing for mobility was pervasive among multiple individuals. For instance, Haddy's excerpt below described how being in limbo constrained co-researchers' movement, both within and outside the UK.

... I can't even travel anywhere outside the UK. And this has also affected my well-being, as I'm experiencing accumulated stress. For I feel stuck in my asylum-seeking situation... - Self recorded audio

Haddy's statement above also expressed a sense of confinement and of being trapped. The inability to travel represented a significant limitation on the Haddy's freedom and mobility, which led to feelings of confinement, isolation, powerlessness, and helplessness. For persons navigating the asylum process, restrictions on their mobility and freedom of movement intensified feelings of being trapped. The phrase "accumulated stress" suggested that this ongoing restriction had taken a toll Haddy's mental and emotional health.

The restriction on one's freedom of movement was also reflected in a separate conversation I had with an NGO caseworker, MG. I spoke about my historical experiences of being in limbo for almost six years, not being able to travel or proceed with my studies.

:...six years of not having legal status felt like I might as well be in prison.... I couldn't travel. I could not proceed with my studies, I couldn't work legally. It was difficult to rent rooms. At some point I even became homeless and lost everything...

My statement in the conversation with MG highlighted the profound challenges and emotional strain experienced by asylum applicants facing insecurity and legal limbo, more generally. I compared my six years without legal status to being in prison, also highlighting the sense of confinement and powerlessness I felt during this period. The excerpt highlighted some of the hardships that stemmed from this period, including the inability to travel freely. This limit and more meant that I could not lead a fulfilling and productive life. The excerpt also revealed the precariousness of my situation and the devastating consequences of being marginalised and excluded from society due to my legal status. There were many statements and sentiments across narratives in which co-researchers spoke about a lack of freedom, as manifesting itself psychologically, physically and in the way they were unable to progress in life. Additionally, co-researchers reflected on how limbo pushed them further into poverty and further reduced their autonomy and freedom to access opportunities that required economic stability.

Equally similar to my statement above, many other co-researchers also equated and compared their situations to 'prison' and 'prison-like' conditions. Sentiments were expressed by co-researchers who felt that their experiences of isolation, dehumanisation, harm, and indignity during the stage of limbo and insecurity blurred the line between freedom and detainment, instituting the concept of "prison-like" and "prisoner" experiences. Below Abraham described how his situation or experience of being in limbo as having left him feeling like a *prisoner*. He said:

I was free. Right now I'm like a prisoner. Because I don't know what will come out from the HO. What is the HO they decide to deny. Where will I go? Where

will I start from? Because sending me back to Uganda is like sending me to be killed. Because now people they are aware about me.

This excerpt captured the profound sense of fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability experienced by co-researchers awaiting a decision from the HO regarding their immigration status. Abraham contrasted his previous sense of freedom with his state of mind at the time of conversation, of feeling like a prisoner, highlighting the intense emotional impact of the uncertainty surrounding his future. Abraham's statement indicated uncertainty about the future and that the potential consequences of the HO's decision weighed heavily on his mind, leaving him feeling trapped and powerless. His rhetorical questions, *Where will I go? Where will I start from?* reflected the existential uncertainty and ambiguity about his options if his asylum claim was denied. Overall, this excerpt highlighted the psychological turmoil and existential fear experienced by individuals awaiting decisions on their claims, particularly when faced with the prospect of returning to a country where they feared harm.

The metaphor of being a "prisoner" was frequently communicated during conversations with co-researchers who were either in limbo or had previously experienced detention. In recent years, many individuals seeking asylum have used this metaphor to depict their circumstances and experiences of being trapped in a state of limbo and to compare their experiences, and immigration detention centres, unsafe accommodation and hotel conditions to prisons and prison-like conditions (Asylum matters, 2021; Cartwright, 2023; Meredith, 2022). Co-researchers employed this metaphor to highlight their feelings of confinement, helplessness, and lack of freedom while awaiting decisions on their asylum claims or while stuck in a state of uncertainty regarding their legal status. This sense of being "imprisoned" highlighted the psychological toll of their situation.

In a separate conversation, Batanai (lesbian, Zimbabwe) articulated how the state of idleness and absence of distractions from worrying thoughts made her and other asylum applicants feel not only imprisoned by their thoughts but also led to feelings of depression and worthlessness, akin to being in a prison.

...it's like you're in a prison because you just wake up it's you in your mind the whole day your mind is [indistinct] not doing anything you know. You can't even go out go for lunch or meet anyone because you're only earning 35 pounds...and I think that as well just depressed me like I felt worthless cause like I said you've got no papers you can't go to school you can't do anything I went to college for a year and that was it ...
– Self recorded voice audio.

'Prison', 'prison-like' or feeling 'as if in prison', were descriptions many people across conversations used to describe their states of mind, situations, conditions and feelings

related to the nature of their experiences. The narrative depicted a sense of entrapment and hopelessness experienced by Batanai. The words she used, such as "prison," "worthless," and "can't do anything," conveyed a feeling of being stuck in her situation with limited options and opportunities, highlighting a monotonous and stagnant existence. About half of the co-researchers had previously been incarcerated in detention centres, either in the UK or in their countries of origin which meant that most people had informed experience of the condition of actual prisons. As a result the deliberate choice of the prison metaphor to explain feelings of being trapped and not having autonomy or control over their circumstance was important (Sagbakken, et al, 2020). Batanai's account highlighted a profound sense of disempowerment and the impact of restrictive living conditions and legal barriers on her mental and emotional well-being. References of long waits, abruption of opportunities, destitution and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness were part of the reason why the asylum experience felt 'prison-like' to asylum applicants.

Moreover, IDs provided to co-researchers and the requirement to ³³*sign-in* subjected them to state surveillance and limited their freedom of movement. Asylum claimants were aware of the surveillance they were subjected to when they went to *sign in* and it exacerbated anxiety. In the excerpts below, Batanai and Ruth describe feeling and knowing that they are being watched.

...and every time I would go insane like the anxiety.... anything to do with signing on I would feel like they are watching me and I think Oh my God what if they detained me in like that what you know I got today's way now I would just wake up I didn't want to wake up.....so I stopped going to sign on... I was, you know, I stopped going signing because the anxiety was just too much.

Ruth: *....signing in is so scary.....you know you are watched, they know where you are and anytime you could just get detained and deported...*

The requirement to report at immigration centres as part of the asylum process had significant impacts on asylum applicants' freedom and autonomy, both in practical and psychological terms. It restricted claimants' freedom of movement, as they needed to travel to designated locations at specific times. The requirement to regularly report also created feelings of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty among asylum applicants, uncertain whether each trip to sign-in could lead to detention or deportation. This fear weighed heavily on their

³³ Persons who are awaiting a decision on their asylum application– including modern slavery victims/ survivors and torture survivors – are obliged to regularly report and or sign in at a designated HO building, or occasionally at a police station.

mental well-being, affecting their ability to fully integrate into their new environment and engage in daily activities. These narratives signified asylum applicants' forced dependency on the immigration system, which left people feeling powerless and vulnerable, as their freedom and autonomy were tied to bureaucratic processes and decisions made by the asylum process.

Co-researchers' fears of surveillance and potential detention were not unfounded. There is a history of claimants being detained and deported without warning when they attend reporting centres (Right to Remain, 2023). Sometimes asylum claimants are not aware that their asylum applications are unsuccessful up until the moment they arrive to report at a centre and are detained (Right to Remain, 2021; 2023). Similarly, IDs provided to asylum claimants subject them to state surveillance (Sadan et al. 2018) and monitoring of their movements. Often the surveillance and fear of arrest, detention and deportation deter many people from signing in and or engaging with reporting centres (Dart, 2017; Refugee Council, 2022).

This framing of co-researchers experiences and mistreatment as 'prison-like' represented the asylum process as inhumane or undignified. It demonstrated the asylum process as a process which violated claimants' rights to private, family life, and autonomy and failed to recognise their personhood and humanity. Within this co-researchers also addressed the impact of uncertainty and limbo on their overall health and sometimes used the 'prison' metaphor to describe this impact. As a result, the following sub-narrative discusses the health effects of limbo and violent uncertainty on co-researchers' mental well-being in more detail.

5.1.2 "I didn't want to wake up" Health Effects of Limbo.

Asylum claimants have previously described the limbo state or rejection of their claims 'as the worst part of their journey, even worse than prison and torture' and as prison-like (Bhatia, 2021; Douglas, 2010; Rescue, 2022; Sagbakken et al., 2020). Stages of limbo excluded co-researchers from opportunities and pushed them further into poverty where their mental health suffered. They are exposed to various stress factors which affect their mental health and well-being before and during their migration (World Health Organisation, 2021). However, these difficulties are magnified during the limbo and uncertainty period, particularly for people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lambert, 2018). Co-researchers shared narratives of how the violence of living in limbo took a toll on their psychological well-being. The impact and devastation of having their life put on hold was

evident in Batanai's self-recorded audio where she reflected about the deterioration to mental health she experienced.

... I got really depressed. Like, April of this year I got to a point where I could not wake up? Like, you know, the stammering that we spoke about? I stopped going to sign in because the anxiety was just too much. I was so depressed. I didn't even know I was depressed. I didn't want to wake up... I didn't want to do anything like a task that takes 30 minutes, It took me three days because of the procrastination... So imagine since 2015 to 2020, five years of doing nothing. Imagine that. Nothing, you can't work. You can't go to school, you can't do anything. I was just so depressed. I didn't even know I was depressed. I didn't want to wake up. I didn't want to do anything like a test that takes 30 minutes. It took me three days. Because of the procrastination. Then my aunt said to me, You know what? Why don't you go for counselling, I went for counselling.

Batanai's narrative of limbo evidenced the debilitating nature of depression asylum applicants experienced. Batanai described days when she wished she did not wake up to the reality of her situation. This narrative provided a candid and poignant insight into the profound mental health impact of uncertainty and limbo. It highlighted Batanai's experience of depression and its profound impact on her daily life and well-being, reaching a point of such deep despair that she struggled to and or did not want to wake up, highlighting the severity of her depression. The simple tasks that would typically take a short amount of time became insurmountable challenges. This illustrated the debilitating nature of depression, which impaired motivation and cognitive functioning. Batanai's description of the manifestations of psychological effects, including stammering and avoiding signing in due to overwhelming anxiety was reported by several co-researchers. For example, due to anxiety and mental health challenges sometimes individuals avoid engaging with the HO and or anything related to the asylum process, for periods, regardless of the consequences. In other instances, individuals such as myself developed stammering/ stuttering – in my case following my time in detention – which has continued to be a barrier to this day, and for other people during the asylum process. At least two other co-researchers also described stammering, experiencing brain fog, memory and attention deficits and the inability to verbally articulate thoughts as some of the ways their cognitive function was affected. The impact of limbo, uncertainty and detention that co-researchers described was similar to the effect of trauma exposure found in persons (Do Trang et al., 2019; Kartha et al., 2008; Schock et al., 2016). Similarly, the emotional effects on cognitive function (i.e. the behaviours and cognition function impairments) described by co-researchers have been

recorded in PTSD symptoms (Hayes et al., 2012; Nakayama et al., 2020; Qureshi et al., 2011).

Refugees and asylum applicants, particularly during the limbo stage of the asylum process, commonly experience depression and other mental health challenges (Jesuit Refugee Service UK, 2021; Moore et al., 2022; Hafeez, 2022). A telephone conversation with Sanyu (gay, Uganda), revealed his recent struggles with anxiety and intrusive thoughts, particularly heightened during the COVID-19 lockdown. The pandemic exacerbated the plight of asylum applicants worldwide, increasing their needs and hindering trauma recovery (Vijayaraghavan & Mukhopadhyay, 2022). Living in limbo, with limited financial support (about five British pounds a day) (Hewett, 2021), and little assistance, has led to deteriorating mental and physical health among asylum claimants. This prolonged uncertainty, poverty, and lack of support resulted in increasing illness over time.

In many cases, this violent and erosive asylum process that caused depression in claimants also led to self-harm and suicidal thoughts. At least thirteen co-researchers in a state of limbo at the time of research reported to have attempted suicide and or sat with suicidal thoughts at some point during the asylum process experience. In the excerpt below, Abby described reaching a point where she could no longer envision a future.

Abby: So I was getting involved in that (volunteering) and it was kind of like keeping me active or not thinking a lot about what's happening. I had, I was thinking of you know, once I'm granted, I'm going to study, I'll be able to do this and do some little work you get and then move on with my life really. But all that was shattered, all that was shattered, really. And then I kept on thinking I even thought that perhaps my life was over. Like I wasn't, I started not seeing the future, you get it? Because things were not, things were not working as I imagined them, as I was expecting you get. – WhatsApp conversation and Self-recorded voice notes.

In the excerpt, Abby depicted her emotional journey of grappling with shattered hopes and dreams due to being stuck in the asylum process for a long time. Her excerpt showed the extent of hopelessness and despair she experienced as she grappled with challenges and setbacks related to the immigration journey. She reflected on feeling stuck in a situation and could no longer envision a future for herself, alluding to losing hope of continuing. The excerpt not only highlighted the psychological impact of limbo during the asylum process but also the unmet expectations that resulted from limbo and the toll it took on one's mental well-being.

For many co-researchers the realisation that their hopes, dreams and plans were disrupted and for lengthy periods caused despair. Similar to Abby who described feeling that

her life was over, co-researchers also expressed the same sentiments stating how struggled to see a future for themselves in the face of uncertainty. Many had lost hope. This loss of hope and uncertainty about the future was notable in this narrative and the narratives of other co-researchers. A study examining the impact of precarious status on the well-being of refugees discovered that they faced uncertainty and a lack of control over their lives and futures, leading to psychosocial distress and suffering (Bjertrup et al., 2018). Additionally, being compelled to lead a passive life exacerbated feelings of meaninglessness and powerlessness (Bjertrup et al., 2018), contributing to existential limbo and suffering (Haas, 2017). These findings resonate with the experiences and feelings expressed by co-researchers when their lives were disrupted and put on hold.

In a separate WhatsApp interview, Bale (gay, Uganda) also shared of a time in limbo when and described how he struggled with suicidal thoughts. He vividly described his nights filled with suicidal thoughts, highlighting the severity of his mental distress. Bale's statements highlighted the profound toll mental health difficulties took on asylum applicants' lives, emphasising the critical need for access to mental health resources. Co-researchers' experiences of suicide ideation shared during the consent process revealed the common occurrence of suicidality among asylum applicants (Hewett, 2021).

All study participants, including NGO and legal caseworkers, described the limbo space as a realm of hopelessness and endless waiting, characterising it as, "quite traumatic." Suicidal thoughts were frequent, especially when applicants lost hope of a better life, with few reporting previous suicide attempts before arriving in the UK. However, the challenges of the asylum process and the hostile UK environment heightened claimants' risk of suicidality. Co-researchers expressed shock and disbelief that the country they believed would offer protection and safety treated them in such an inhumane manner.

During our exchanges, co-researchers expressed extreme surprise, shock, and disbelief, revealing their lack of preparedness for the mistreatment they encountered in the UK asylum process. These emotions, coupled with the realization of this new reality, contributed to the erosion of their mental health. First-hand accounts from asylum claimants on blogs and media platforms corroborated this, with many individuals in limbo contemplating or attempting suicide during the asylum process (Alen, 2023; Arab News, 2022; Fox, 2023).

Previous studies have linked extended periods of uncertainty and liminality to suicidality (Hagen et al., 2020; Sagbakken et al., 2020), self-harming among asylum claimants (Gargiulo et al., 2021), and depression and suicidality in refugee communities (Morrow & Krishna, et al., 2019). While the prevalence of suicidality among sexual and

gender-expansive refugees and asylum claimants remains unknown, research indicates that both LGBTQI individuals (Adams et al., 2017; Mereish et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2021) and refugees/asylum claimants (Akinyemi et al., 2015; Wasserman, 2017) are at higher risk compared to the general population. Therefore, it's reasonable to assume that individuals whose identities intersect both groups may face an equal or greater risk of suicidality (Burgess et al., 2021).

In addition to affecting mental health, the narratives shared also revealed that prolonged waiting or rejection of asylum applications had an impact on co-researchers' physical well-being. Several co-researchers reported being diagnosed with physical illnesses or presenting with physical symptoms. For instance, Batanai's self-recorded audio-documented experiences of medically unexplained physical symptoms

...It got to a point where like, my whole body was tired. I couldn't even to walk to the corner, like to walk a mile or like a one block a few metres like it would like my legs would be so painful. Like I can't even. Of course I gained weight. But I feel like no, something is wrong. I did blood tests, I did everything. And there was nothing wrong with me. I spoke to my counsellor, my cousin like no the symptoms and I had really bad insomnia. I could only sleep for like, two hours a day, like, you know, and my counsellor said no issue. So like you've got depression...

Batanai explained how her body began to exhibit signs of exhaustion and fatigue, to the point where even simple tasks like walking short distances became physically painful and challenging. She described the physical toll that depression took on her body, highlighting the interconnectedness of mental and physical health. Batanai's testimony of her medically unexplained physical illness illustrated the link between poor health and the duration of asylum waiting times, as highlighted by Phillimore & Cheung (2021). Co-researchers' narratives revealed that prolonged waiting periods were highly stressful and had a significant impact on the health of claimants. Individuals like Haddy reported experiencing mental exhaustion, while others, such as Mary, described the ways in which their physical health was affected.

Well, it's really impacted my mental health, and in turn it's also impacted my physical health. Because when you're depressed you go days without food, because you don't have appetite for anything you feel helpless.

Mary's description of her experiences of ill health captured the reciprocal relationship between mental and physical health, emphasising how depression profoundly impacted both aspects of the co-researcher's well-being. Furthermore, Mary described feeling helpless,

another common emotion experienced by individuals grappling with depression and common between co-researchers. This sense of helplessness further exacerbated the cycle of depression and impacted on Mary's ability to engage in self-care practices, including maintaining a healthy diet and engaging in physical activity. When co-researchers described the impact of the long waits on their well-being and everyday life during our conversations I could hear the emotion in their voices. It was clear from narratives shared how deeply traumatic the life of limbo was to claimants.

At the *National Expert Centre for the Treatment of Victims of Persecution, War, and Violence*, Rohlof and colleagues (2014) encountered many refugee clients exhibiting medically unexplained physical symptoms, more common among refugees than non-refugee communities. This somatisation in refugee communities was strongly linked to psychopathology, trauma, and adverse life events, with connections between pain and PTSD symptoms (Rohlof et al., 2014). Studies also found PTSD to have the strongest relationship with somatisation and medically unexplained pain (Andreski et al., 1998). Co-researchers like Batanai shared narratives reflecting somatisation, revealing a relationship between physical pain and PTSD, a common psychiatric disorder post-trauma (Rohlof et al., 2014). The narratives highlighted the violence of uncertainty in the asylum process, which undermined claimants' health (Grace et al., 2018).

In this section, co-researchers shared narratives of violent insecurity as structural violence. Narratives showed that asylum claimants were subjected to long waiting periods between interviews and decision-making. During this process of insecure immigration status and pending legal status claimants lived in a state of prolonged uncertainty that pushed them further into the margin of society. When talking about limbo co-researchers described what happened to them and their lives while occupying this position. They described up to a five-year waiting period left in a state of uncertainty. During these periods their lives were put on hold. They were not in control of their lives and unable to plan for the future. were left feeling a sense of vulnerability, isolation, and struggling to find security in the face of uncertainty

They faced structural barriers to accessing education and career opportunities, the labour market and other necessary resources and opportunities. This uncertainty not only highlighted the ongoing anxiety but also the issue of autonomy and freedom. Narratives shared highlighted some of the hardships that stemmed from this period, including the inability to travel freely and feeling as if they were prisoners. Through this co-researchers expressed a sense of confinement and of being trapped. Additionally, stages of limbo excluded co-researchers from opportunities and pushed them further into poverty where their mental health suffered.

The limbo state had an impact on asylum claimants' mental and physical well-being often leading to depression, suicidality and poor physical health. Asylum claimants described limbo as a space of hopelessness, of endless waiting and as being prison-like. Phrases such as prison and prison-like were used to describe co-researchers' states of mind, situations, conditions and feelings related to the nature of their experiences in limbo. Uncertainty illustrated time as violence. Experiences and perspectives shared by co-researchers showed how the HO and the state applied time as a violent tool, controlling the time when asylum claimants were 'screened', interviewed and received outcomes in a deliberately oppressive way. Similarly, the long waits of uncertainty were in itself violent, undermining asylum claimants' autonomy, agency and humanity. The violence of uncertainty and other forms of symbolic and structural violence resulting from the exclusions and conditions created by limbo were damaging. The limbo state and uncertainty that co-researchers were forced into, was calculated cruelty that denied claimants their human rights and dignity. It was a form of structural violence used by the state to cause human suffering, to deter asylum applicants from staying and forcing them to leave the UK.

5.2 Exclusionary State Practices.

Black African asylum claimants and other black and non-black persons of colour are deliberately excluded and discriminated against by internal boundaries and everyday practices of bordering in the UK, and in other countries globally (for example, Australia (Doherty, 2015; 2021; McAdam, 2013b), Israel (Ravid, 2022), USA, (Gilman, 2020; Eagly & Shafer, 2020; Washington, 2020), and Germany (Schuster, 2004; Esposito, 2022; Tschalaer, 2023). The UK's control of *unwanted* groups of people within its borders and the employment of deterrence-based policies can be understood as another way in which structural violence of geographical borders is perpetrated (Weber & Pickering, 2011; Ravid, 2022). Some of the state's structural violence involves bureaucratic abuses, pressure and harmful processes and policies that force claimants to opt for *illegality* or instability to avoid direct interactions with the state, its agents, and for survival (Ravid, 2022; Schuster, 2004; Tschalaer, 2023; Walsh & Sumption, 2023). This section presents narratives highlighting legal exclusion experienced and the discriminatory and harmful effects of policies placed upon co-researchers by the UK asylum process. The discussion draws from the experiences of asylum claimants and NGO key workers interviewed, and their testimonies highlight forms of exclusion as structural violence encountered in multiple contexts. This section discusses the over-arching narrative, of exclusionary state practices. Within this, I first describe exclusion within the state through the application of symbolic violence in the form of visibly different forms of identification and cultural identity exclusion. Then I go on to discuss

narratives of economic exclusions, and violence and lastly structural violence through digital exclusion.

5.2.1 Exclusion Through Symbolic Violence.

Symbolic violence, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (1979), refers to non-physical forms of violence rooted in power imbalances among social groups, perpetuating inequality and marginalisation. In this narrative, symbolic violence encompasses ideologies, behaviours, and non-verbal communications that reinforce power dynamics in daily interactions (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015; Thapar-Bjorkert et al., 2016). For sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in the study, symbolic violence is evident in their exclusion and isolation, especially regarding identification documentation and cultural identity.

Identification documentation is essential for accessing services, employment, and legal protection in host countries. However, for asylum applicants, ID documentation can be used against them as a tool of exclusion and to isolate them from the rest of society. One of the practices in which the UK government isolated and excluded co-researchers was by providing them with forms of identification (ID) and visa bank cards visibly different from those of the general UK public. Co-researchers told of receiving IDs and visa cards provided to them, that generally identified them as asylum claimants. In the excerpt below, for example, Abby and Yellow (lesbian, Tanzania) name the card assigned to them and told of the process of obtaining these IDs and cards.

Abby:...they only saw me for 10 minutes and that was it. They, they gave me my questionnaire signed. And then they just told me now you can go and your, your³⁴ ARC card (Application Registration Card) will be dropped on your address ... Yeah, that's what they give me. And on it was saying that I can I can study they ticked that. And then they also ticked that I was allowed to work they ticked all that. And the lady, the lady who interviewed me even assured me that okay don't worry, you know you can go back study and then you can also work ... So now all those were ticked, only for my ARC card to

³⁴ The ARC card certifies that one is an asylum claimant and can remain in the UK while their claim is pending ([Bale.gov.uk](https://www.bale.gov.uk), 2023). The card contains information about the asylum claimants' identity or claimed identity ([Bale.gov.uk](https://www.bale.gov.uk), 2022). It provides details of the asylee's nationality, age and whether their age has been disputed by the HO pending the outcome of a Merton age assessment ([Bale.gov.uk](https://www.bale.gov.uk), 2022).

come .. it said that I'm not entitled to public funds, and no not permitted it to work. Yeah

Yellow: *I also cannot use the card (³⁵ASPEN) to buy cheap foods... - WhatsApp conversation.*

Experiences co-researchers provided demonstrated that upon registering asylum claims, claimants were provided with ARC ID registration cards as well as ASPEN visa cards, to access any entitled public funds. In conversations shared Abby and others described the process that led to them receiving their ARC cards. For many claimants in receipt of the ARC card, it gave a sense of hope, symbolising a fresh start and the possibility of moving forward. However, this was not necessarily the case for the many claimants provided with the card. Many persons, similar to Abby's experiences above, quickly realised that being holders of the ARC card only registered and identified them as 'asylum claimants' and did not automatically give them access to many rights, such as study, work or financial support. Instead many persons were denied permission to work. Evidence from claimants and the literature available suggested that the ARC card as with other forms of identifying cards assigned to claimants, is created to identify, monitor claimants' movements and visibly separate them from the rest of society (Bale.privacyinternational.org, n.d; Tillyard, 2019). Rather, the identifications marked a representation of their statuses as asylum claimants 'outsiders' or not belonging to the country. When discussing the impact of receiving visibly different IDs and visa cards that identified them as "asylum claimants", co-researchers shared that the cards often led to them being othered, as not belonging and facing discrimination. Excerpts below from WhatsApp conversations with XX, Namukasa (bisexual, Uganda) and Ssentango (gay, Uganda) share how visibly different forms of identification exposed them to prejudice and discrimination.

XX: *When people see the asylum card, they treat me different...*

Namukasa: *Also with the different cards, they tell everyone that I am an asylum seeker and then people make bad comments about it or treat me bad. - WhatsApp conversation.*

Ssentango: *...but usually when people see my ID and that I am an asylum seeker their faces change. They make comments that we're are too many in this country and we are taking away their jobs – WhatsApp conversation.*

³⁵ An 'Aspen Card' is a debit payment card given to UK asylum claimants by the HO. The Aspen Card provides basic subsistence support – Bale.privacyinternational.org

The statement highlighted the stigma and discrimination experienced by individuals who held asylum status. Upon service providers seeing their asylum cards, they treated co-researchers differently, indicating a change in behaviour and attitude towards asylum claimants. This points to the social and cultural stigma surrounding asylum claimants and refugees in the UK (Goodfellow, 2023; Lynn, & Lea, 2003; Pandir, 2020). In the case of Namukasa, when her status as an asylum seeker is disclosed to others through different cards this has led to negative comments and mistreatment from people. Ssentango's experiences reflected a common experience among asylum applicants, where their immigration status led to negative reactions and discriminatory comments from others. Ssentango described how people's demeanour toward him changed upon learning that he was an asylum applicant, often accompanied by remarks suggesting resentment or hostility towards immigrants. These experiences further highlighted the challenges and discrimination faced by co-researchers.

The narratives shared highlighted a link between different forms of identification for asylum claimants and hypervisibility. Claimants' ethnicity, such as identifying or identified as black African hyper-visibilised claimants in a country that was majority white. Additionally, visibly different forms of identifications only further visibilised claimants as the Other. Asylum claimants were hyper-visible even among other black migrants who were UK citizens and or had migrated to the UK through different routes. Furthermore, the narratives shared highlighted the distress experienced from this hypervisibility and how the attention brought by different forms of identification and cards made asylum claimants not recognised as full individuals beyond their immigration status. Overall, the identifying cards separate the *deserving* from the *undeserving*, and rightful citizens from those perceived as not entitled to reside in the UK or access many of the rights given to citizens (Marchetti, 2020; Sales, 2002; Siviş, 2022). As a result, IDs that visibly separate claimants expose claimants to discrimination, prejudice and anti-refugee rhetoric (Pehrson et al., 2009; Ravid, 2021).

The sole purpose of an ARC card is to show that one is an asylum claimant, or the dependant of an asylum claimant (Bale.gov.uk, 2022). Occasionally the card is also used by officials, employers, educators and health professionals to confirm one's asylum status. However, outside of this, it does not hold any other role. The card is a representation of claimants' statuses as 'outsiders', not belonging to or different from UK citizens and British-born residents. Yet still, other claimants desired it, as it offered proof of their immigration status when asked by officials and organisations. For example, as claimants received their ARC cards during the research process they would text and or send me messages expressing their excitement and relief for receiving the card.

The UK government website states that the ARC card provides the UK “public sector bodies with assurance” that the holder of the card or their dependant is an asylum claimant (Bale.gov.uk, 2022). It is not clear what assurance is needed, why the UK public needs such assurance and how the card offers the said assurance. The card which was a representation and symbol for how different, separate from and not belonging to the UK was not only discriminatory but fed into the rhetoric that asylum claimants were ‘dangerous’ and ‘criminals’ who required controlling to keep UK citizens safe. In reality, it is asylum claimants who are often not safe in the UK (Aljazeera, 2023). At the time of writing the research, the UK was experiencing a rise in anti-refugee rhetoric, and protests, claimants and migrants live in continuous fear of violence, racism, discrimination and prejudice (Taylor, 2021; Aljazeera, 2023; European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2023).

Moreover, the cards identified and visibilised persons as asylum claimants and refugees in everyday life. Co-researchers told of experiences of discrimination, disapproval and prejudice from shop owners and service providers when using cards such as the ASPEN card. For example several co-researchers shared instances where shop owners refused to serve them. This is depicted in XX and Haddy’s experiences below.

XX: *...Some shop keepers discriminate against us when they see our cards and say asylum claimants do not deserve to receive benefits...*

Haddy: *...some stores say they do not allow the cards even when I know that they do, so it is uncomfortable sometimes using the card....*

These experiences further highlighted the discrimination and challenges faced by asylum applicants when accessing goods and services. Service providers often displayed prejudiced attitudes towards individuals in receipt of ASPEN cards, exacerbating the already difficult circumstances faced by co-researchers. Even though the ASPEN card can be used in any shop that accepts visa debit payments (Bale.privacyinternational.org, 2021), co-researchers’ narratives showed that shopkeepers often refused to serve them. These narratives align with reports made by asylum claimants more broadly, detailing technical difficulties, surveillance associated with the card, and instances of poor treatment from shop staff, as well as refusals from authorized retailers (Bale.privacyinternational.org, 2021).

ID documentation was also sometimes used as a tool for the exclusion of trans and non-binary asylum claimants. For many trans and non-binary genders, ID documents can become instruments of exclusion when their gender identity or sexual orientation is inaccurately recorded or not recognised. Narratives from litigators and NGO workers who supported black and non-black persons of colour in their asylum process showed that trans

and non-binary claimants were sometimes referred to by their ³⁶dead-names and assigned incorrect gender markers on HO papers. The narratives described the impact of these harmful and irresponsible actions. RB who was a gender non-conforming senior legal immigration case worker problematised the identity-based framework of gender identifying and the acknowledgement or lack of, adopted by HO officials. In their narrative, RB (Legal case worker) shares the following,

:...And even when I've assisted a client in drafting a deed poll of change of name and served on the HO, I made a complaint to the HO about their continued mis-gendering of the client and the use of the client's birth name... I think there is a real dearth of legal lawyers who sort of understand the violence of this and the effect that this is having on the client in terms of you know dysphoria, but also putting the client at risk of harm...I represent clients who are living in shared accommodation perhaps HO accommodation, maybe even hotels that the HO put them in and where letters, their official correspondence from the HO is received into a shared space and then sort of everyone can see the name on the letter or distribute it by sort of accommodation manager...which immediately outs the person as being trans because the name on the letter, the addressee name is different, is a name that is associated with different gender than the gender that the client, person is presenting with....I have had clients who have said to me that they have received uncomfortable questions and then gossip is spread around.... So, that can lead to potentially very harmful consequences. And then obviously the application registration card if that's issued with the incorrect gender marker and the clients' birth name then again it outs the person as being trans and especially when that's the only form of ID that they have to rely on when the HO has their, well usually the passport. Well the passport will also have the wrong gender marker and a name too. So that's an issue and something that's quite hard to resolve... I've had clients who are trans who present as passing ... because either they have had surgery before and, and or are taking hormones, or for whatever reasons passed and then who then get issued with ... an application registration card with their explained gender on it but with the name that's on their passport. So that's also unhelpful and weird. So yeah that sort of specific violence is an issue that I have observed that trans clients experience – Zoom Interview

RB's statement addressed the challenges and systemic issues faced by transgender asylum applicants, particularly concerning legal documentation and recognition of their gender

³⁶ the birth name of a transgender and or non-binary person who has changed their name

identity. They highlighted the complexities and consequences of misgendering and deadnaming by the HO, which had profound effects on transgender individuals' well-being and safety. RB described instances where transgender clients had been misgendered and their birth names used by the HO, despite efforts to update legal documentation through deed polls. This not only caused dysphoria for trans individuals but also put them at risk of harm, as it outed them as transgender in shared accommodation settings and exposed them to uncomfortable questions and gossip. These actions have an impact on claimants' safety and well-being (Migrant Help UK, 2020). For example, deadnaming of claimants on letter correspondences that could be accessed by others in shared accommodation outs passing claimants and expose them to the risk of harm, an issue which has previously been raised by trans refugee communities and various charities (Migrant Help UK, 2020). The continuing acts of outing and misgendering trans and gender non-conforming persons is in itself violence, as identified by RB in their statement.

Transgender persons' relationships to names are complicated (Riedel, 2020) and one's chosen name becomes an integral part of their identity, usually reflecting their own journey toward self-discovery (National Institutes of Health, 2023). Many trans persons have taken active steps to prevent people from discovering their deadnames, including destroying documents and old photos (Riedel, 2020). As a result, the act of deadnaming and misgendering can lead to dysphoria-inducing anxiety (Riedel, 2020), and can leave trans people feeling invalidated and unseen (Katz-Wise, 2021). The HO has previously been accused of transphobia (Milton, 2022; Migrant Help UK, 2020), with trans communities and charities identifying the violent actions of misgendering to be part of a wider pattern of practice from HO officials (Milton, 2022). This form of violence can lead to emotional distress (Milton, 2022) and impact trans asylum applicants' mental health and ability to function fully in the world (Katz-Wise, 2021; McLemore, 2018; Gunn, 2020).

On the contrary, while other NGO workers supported RB's narrative and acknowledged instances where the HO misgendered and deadnamed claimants, they also noted that in recent experiences, upon being challenged, the HO corrected the identification documents. These contrasting narratives indicated inconsistencies in how the HO handled cases involving trans and non-binary claimants. Moreover, the system lacked immigration litigators who were fully informed about the impact of misgendering and deadnaming on trans asylum claimants. The system's "errors," whether intentional or unintentional, can be attributed to a system designed for cis-gendered asylum claimants and to transphobia (Migrant Help UK, 2020). Regardless of the reason, these actions are dehumanizing, harmful, and have long-lasting effects on mental well-being (Migrant Help UK, 2020).

The HO failed to provide a more inclusive framework, leading gender non-conforming and non-binary applicants to experience specific and unique challenges. Below RB drew attention to how the ARC card which displayed the asylum claimant's gender, only offered two gender constructs 'Male' or 'Female'. This created problems for transgender persons including non-gender confirming persons whose original IDs were not reflective of their internal gender markers.

RB: ... the HO will be like oh yeah you are you know you're F or you are M. And then of course there is no if you are non-binary you still have to, you can't choose not to have a gender marker or to have a gender marker that says other. So that's a problem as well.

MG: ... but I definitely know, for trans people, if they see this, if they're transitioning to female, then they'll get F and if male, they'll get M, but I haven't seen one that's non binary.....

These statements highlighted the challenges faced by non-binary asylum applicants when navigating bureaucratic systems, particularly regarding legal documentation and gender markers. Both RB and MG described how the HO typically assigned gender markers of "F" for female and "M" for male, but there was no option for non-binary applicants to opt out of having a gender marker or to select a gender marker that accurately reflected their identity. The transphobic treatment through exclusion demonstrated a ³⁷heteropatriarchal and cis-normative system designed for cis-gendered heterosexual applicants.

The HO's practices of disbelieving African asylum claimants as LGBTQI+, especially the treatment of trans and non-gender conforming individuals (See Millbank, 2009; Berg & Millbank, 2013; Dustin & Held, 2018; Andrade et al., 2020), highlights the discrimination faced by African sexual and gender-expansive communities. This discrimination is deeply rooted in systems and social principles of sexism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, gender discrimination (McEwenn n.d), racism, and colonialism. The HO's failure to establish a framework that protects identities, practices, and expressions of gender that are non-normative and align with the sexual minority characteristics of claimants, whether these identities are outwardly expressed or internalised (Avgeri, 2023), constitutes a form of structural violence in itself.

³⁷ A sociopolitical system that privileges and prioritises cisgender men and heterosexual persons. The term highlights how discrimination exerted upon women and LGBTQI+ communities is rooted in the same systems and social principles of sexism, heteronormativity and gender discrimination (McEwen, .

UK and Europe as a whole have legal systems in place to protect all minoritised identities, including LGBTIQ communities (Markham, 2020). However, when it comes to protecting African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants from homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, the legal systems are overlooked (Markham, 2020). With the constant debate on transgender identity in the UK (Migrant Help UK, 2020), trans persons from marginalised communities, especially black and persons of colour asylum claimants face multiple and unique intersecting challenges and obstacles. Co-researcher's narratives demonstrated an increased risk of violence that trans people faced in the UK, both physically and to sense of self and as compounded by gender, the asylum process and their immigration status.

Furthermore, the various cards issued to claimants came with restrictions that effectively monitored claimants, imposing limitations on how and where they could be used. Mary, Namukasa, XX, and others' narratives highlighted the common challenges such as cultural identity exclusion claimants encountered in utilising the cards.

Haddy: Food is expensive and with the card we are given I cannot buy cheaper food from the market or food from my country.

Bale: I also miss food from my country. A lot of it I can get from the market I cannot take out cash to buy from markets and a lot of the times I cannot use the card.

The statements expressed frustration over the limitations of using their cards to purchase food, particularly cheaper options available at street markets. The inability to use the card for such purchases restricted applicants' access to culturally familiar and affordable food options, further exacerbating their sense of displacement and isolation. The restrictions on the cards perpetuated symbolic violence by denying them access to culturally specific foods. Additionally, financial constraints and surveillance on how and where the card could be used often left co-researchers unable to afford essential self-care needs, such as having one's hair done, as shared in a WhatsApp conversation with Batanai. This was particularly important to African applicants, especially trans asylum claimants. These barriers inadvertently excluded co-researchers from participating in and preserving their cultural and gender identities. For trans asylum applicants access to such essential self-care needs can help align their physical appearance with their gender identity, affirming their identities and alleviating body dysphoria (Abramovich et al., 2020).

Overall, culturally specific needs are often closely tied to preserving one's identity, traditions, and values (Idang, 2015; Reddy & van Dam, 2020). For many African asylum applicants, maintaining their cultural identity was not only a matter of personal pride but also

a way to cope with displacement and trauma. Meeting these needs helped them maintain a sense of self despite the challenges they faced in their new environment.

Since the cards are allowed to be used in certain geographic areas and in specified retail outlets to only buy food, essential toiletries and clothing it makes it difficult for claimants to travel and shop around for the best prices on other items such as vegetables and fruits which are cheaper in outdoor markets (Carnet, 2016; Bale.privacyinternational.org, 2021). It then made it difficult for people to shop around for culturally specific and preferred foods at street markets. Accessing cultural foods does not only provide familiarity, comfort, a sense of belonging and reconnecting with culture but supports holistic health, including physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social wellbeing (Gingell et al., 2023; Rabikowska, 2010; Rokach, 2020). There is a relationship between food and identity, and cultural food plays the role of creating a sense of inclusion and stability among migrants (Capatti & Massimo 2003; Krishnendu, 2004; Rabikowska, 2010). It was evident from conversations with co-researchers that the lack of liberty to purchase cultural foods had an impact on their emotional, spiritual and physical well-being.

This narrative highlighted the experiences of co-researchers within the UK immigration system, with a particular focus on the impact of the identification cards provided to them. Co-researchers shared narratives that illustrated how these ID cards were perceived as symbols of hope and a fresh start initially but soon became symbols of their status as 'outsiders' who did not belong. They realised that the cards deprived them of essential rights such as the ability to work, study, and receive full financial support. Moreover, the visually distinct cards further marginalised claimants, resulting in discrimination and heightened visibility. Co-researchers' narratives shared about the daily discrimination they faced, including store refusals and prejudiced comments, highlighting systemic challenges. In particular, transgender and gender non-conforming claimants encountered additional hurdles due to misgendering and deadnaming by HO officials, which jeopardised their safety and mental well-being. The limitations imposed by the ID cards, which restricted access to essentials and cultural foods, had a significant impact on claimants' well-being.

5.2.2 Economic Exclusion.

Economic exclusion of asylum applicants and refugees refers to the systemic barriers and limitations that prevent asylum claimants from accessing economic opportunities, resources, and essential services within the host country (Allsopp et al., 2014; Kavuro, 2015; Masuku & Rama, 2020; Omotoye, 2022). This exclusion can be experienced

in different forms, including, legal barriers that prevent persons from working or accessing certain types of jobs due to their immigration status, difficulties in accessing education and training programmes, limited access to financial services, exclusion and discrimination in the job market due to their refugee status, lack of recognition of applicants and refugees' skills and qualifications and the struggle with language barriers and cultural differences.

During the study, co-researchers highlighted the various financial hardships and struggles they experienced because of policies that prohibited them from engaging in employment. Below, Mirembe (lesbian, Uganda) and Omari (gay, Uganda) offer examples of the financial difficulties they faced during the asylum process and their dependency on charity for support and survival.

Mirembe: ... the financial support given to us, isn't enough at all yet we are not allowed to work. However, charity organisations in the UK are really supportive. We appreciate - from a written script sent via WhatsApp

Omari: I'm really struggling, like really really struggling. I tried to call support, the support I told them that. For my second interview, they were like, they can't help me. I don't know why.... They told me they can't help me struggling financially, especially in terms of food - WhatsApp voice call conversation.

These experiences highlighted the inadequacy of financial support provided to individuals seeking asylum, coupled with restrictions on their ability to work, which exacerbates their financial struggles. Similar to Mirembe and Omari, many co-researchers expressed frustrations and helplessness over the insufficiency of the financial support provided, which forced them to rely on charity organisations and the community. Omari's excerpt, in particular, highlighted the food insecurity often faced by asylum applicants during the asylum process. His repetition of the word, "really" emphasised the severity of his experiences and heightened level of hardship. It also called attention to the significance of the challenges being faced by co-researchers more broadly. Yet despite the inadequate financial support from the state, the speaker expresses gratitude for the assistance provided by charity organisations in the UK. It highlighted the critical role that charity organisations played in assisting struggling co-researchers, while also highlighting gaps and limitations within the state's official support channels.

Economic exclusion pushed co-researchers deeper into the margins of poverty. Destitution is a major problem faced by many persons in the UK asylum system (Destitute Asylum Seeker Service, 2021). During the study co-researchers highlighted how making the limited financial support stretch to meet basic everyday needs, without being pulled into

destitution, is a huge challenge (Destitute Asylum Seeker Service, 2021). As a result, many refugees and asylum claimants are living in poverty across the UK (Red Cross, n.d) deliberately exacerbated by the inhumane asylum system. Without support from charity organisations and the community, they are likely to become destitute (Red Cross, n.d). Reports by various organisations and scholars demonstrate that subsistence support provided to persons seeking asylum is insufficient (Bale.privacyinternational.org, 2021; Carnet, 2016; Destitute Asylum Seeker Service, 2021). When people are forced to live in poverty and rely on charity handouts, it also affects their mental well-being. Studies demonstrate that the mental well-being of individuals is shaped by the social, environmental and economic conditions in which they are living and working (Macintyre & colleagues, 2018; Mental Health Foundation, 2020; Centre for Mental Health, 2020). Links have been made between socioeconomic factors and mental health, identifying that psychosocial factors, as well as the experience of ongoing acute stress, have an injurious impact on individuals' mental health (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). Most asylum claimants have previous and ongoing experiences of trauma and mental health difficulties, by the time they arrive in the UK (Michultka, 2009; Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015). Historically, the UK tabloid media has headlined reports of asylum claimants as enjoying luxury provisions from the British welfare state (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; ICAR 2012). This is not the reality and the government's strategy to tackle poverty within claimants and refugee groups, has been limited and partial. Rather, the government has been set on 'practising a deliberate policy of destitution', (Allsopp et al., 2014; Randall, 2015) intentionally pushing refused asylum applicants, including those undergoing asylum, into extreme poverty and deprivation, to force them back to their countries of origin, and to deter potential asylum applicants from coming to the UK (Zetter et al. 2003; Bloch and Schuster 2002; Flynn 2005; Squire 2009; Spencer 2011).

To further elaborate on Alan's experiences of food insecurity mentioned earlier, the inability to afford or access a healthy and nutritious balanced diet was a recurring pattern among co-researchers. Below, Bale and ES (bisexual, Uganda) share their experiences regarding the level of food insecurity faced by asylum applicants.

Bale: *Yeah (cannot afford to buy) like healthy food. Yes... you have to save up. But then again where you buying the food from its far away. So I have like to travel every two weeks to Liverpool to buy the foods I eat, at a cheaper price..... it's hard to survive on thirty-five pounds.....you end up like sacrificing stuff to eat. Yeah and we find yourself like yes eating bread for a week or weeks...*

ES (NGO worker):...*I didn't know how expensive that food is till I started buying it for people. You know, sometimes we go buy chicken or someone asks you for blueberries, this or that, you know...people cannot afford healthy food and sometimes have nothing in the fridge..... You know, I [inaudible] was speaking to a girl, and she was always sleeping, and some was asking why are you always sleeping, but the girl said you know, the food they give us, so if I eat it and move around I'm not going to have anything left in my body.* - Zoom Interview

These statements represented the challenges of affording food on a limited budget for asylum already facing financial constraints. In particular, they emphasised the difficulty of affording healthy food options, which came at a higher price compared to more processed or unhealthy alternatives. The financial barriers forced individuals to make sacrifices and compromises in their dietary choices, often resorting to eating less nutritious options, like bread, and beans daily. Bale also pointed out the disparity in access to healthy food, highlighting having to travel to different and far areas, in search of more affordable food options. His experience illustrated the geographical and logistical challenges faced by many co-researchers in accessing nutritious food, particularly when living in remote areas with limited resources or where they could not access culturally specific foods, as many co-researchers expressed in other separate conversations during the study. The second half of ES's excerpt in particular underlines the stark reality of food scarcity and the lengths individuals went to conserve what little sustenance they had. Overall, these statements highlighted the intersection of financial insecurity and food insecurity, emphasising the need for greater access to affordable and nutritious food options for asylum applicants facing economic hardship.

Despite consultation with charities and non-governmental organisations which suggests otherwise, the HO denied that the asylum support was insufficient to afford essentials (IMIX, 2022). In a report the HO produced, they state that the "total amount of cash assessed as meeting all essential living needs of the average adult asylum seeker was ³⁸£39.63 per week" (Home Office, 2022). The HO did not believe that travel and communication were essential. The state believed that a total of 12.74 British pounds a week is sufficient to cover required essentials that were not food or drink, such as clothing, non-prescriptive medicine, travel, communication and such (Home Office, 2022). When looking at the cost of living in the UK in 2023, it is absurd to think that sum is sufficient to meet those needs, 3.01 British pounds for clothing and footwear, 69p for toiletries when

³⁸ By September 2023 asylum claimants were now getting £47.39 per week support for each person in the household.

sanitary towels alone can cost anything between 0.95p to 3.99 pounds (Bale.pricehunter.co.uk, 2022) and the cheapest prices mostly found on online shops. The HO report states that they do not believe it appropriate for claimants to have a “socially acceptable standard of living”, similar to members of the UK general public (Home Office, 2022). Instead, they believe that it is only appropriate for the state to meet asylum claimants’ “essential” needs (Home Office, 2022). Co-researchers’ shared experience demonstrated that the state was not meeting asylum claimants’ essential needs.

Likewise, the UK's various forms of asylum structural violence through economic exclusion, also impacted claimants with young families, leading to children of asylum applicants experiencing poverty. This was evident in the narratives shared by co-researchers such as Namukasa, XX, Miremba, and others during WhatsApp calls.

Namukasa: At the moment, the priority is the children. If I buy food, nappies and milk I try to like to budget for other stuffs...*The thing is my first baby she's just one year....Any food you give she eats but she drinks more milk. And the other one she's just three months, she just turned three months so she's breastfeeding and bottle feeding. So what I could say I buy more milk because the milk goes faster.....No, they're not cheap (nappies) and [indistinct] where I live the nearest shop is Asda and Asda is very expensive....but sometimes when I get time I go to Lidl if I want to buy like food for the whole house like fend for myself, I have to go to far shops like Aldi and Lidl because they are a bit cheaper...All on that money but the whole thing is that every all the bills I have to pay end of the month. Every end of the month so the money I get for the first week I normally buy food for the house. And then the next week is to buy like children milk and Pampers. So every week I plan to buy something different...But the last two week in the month I make sure that that money has to pay bills, my own bills.*

This experience described a scarcity of essential resources for asylum claimants to feed and care for themselves and their young families. For instance, Namukasa, who had two children—a six-month-old baby and a one-year-old toddler—received 120 British pounds per week, totalling 480 pounds a month. Namukasa, like other parents in similar situations, was forced to prioritise essential food for her children over her own needs. Her experiences highlighted the intricate financial balancing act undertaken by parents to meet the needs of their family while managing limited resources and financial constraints. It also called attention to the importance of access to affordable essentials like food, diapers, and milk for asylum applicants with young families.

Parents' narratives highlighted that asylum claimants with young families were structurally vulnerabilised to deprivation and poverty and their children suffered the impact of the poverty. Refugee children, in particular, are three times more likely to experience poverty compared to adults, even within their own families (Beltramo and colleagues, 2023). In 2014, Matthew Reed, the Chief Executive of the Children's Society, expressed to Children & Young People Now (CYP Now) that instead of offering support and assistance, the UK is pushing children seeking safety from violence and persecution into poverty by subjecting their families to appallingly low levels of support (Lepper, 2014). With the ongoing increase in food and transportation costs in London and the UK more broadly, it is theoretically estimated that one person in a household might spend 28.9 British pounds per week (approximately 115.6 pounds a month) on food alone, depending on individual caloric needs (Yurday, 2022).³⁹ Chest-feeding parents like Namukasa and others require more calories per day than non-chest-feeding parents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Similarly, families with young children also required specific food for the children, as well as other essentials such as diapers, all of which could not be covered by the subsistence asylum applicants received. Despite these challenges, many co-researchers attempted to resist poverty by budgeting and prioritising payments for essential bills such as WIFI and phone credit in case of emergencies involving the children. Various reports indicate that asylum support levels force asylum applicants with families to live in poverty for months, or even years, as they wait for decisions on their asylum claims (Refugee Action, 2015; Asylum Matters, 2020; Birks, 2023).

Furthermore, co-researchers told of experiences of hardships, detailing how the financial support received was not sufficient to meet other needs, such as purchasing clothing. Narratives shared described how co-researchers were forced to decide on how best to use the funds provided, sometimes sacrificing food over other essentials such as clothing and winter wear. For example, below Bale shares the struggle of having to make the difficult choice of survival.

Bale: *...Like say you want to buy like a jacket, when it was winter like you have to save to buy like a nice jacket for the winter. So you end up like sacrificing stuff to eat. Yeah and you find yourself like just eating bread for a week or weeks.*

³⁹ Chestfeeding. A term used by many masculine-identified trans people to describe the act of feeding their baby from their chest, regardless of whether they have had chest/top surgery (to alter or remove mammary tissue – (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022)).

Bale's excerpt called attention to the difficult choices asylum claimants faced when navigating financial exclusion and especially when trying to afford essential items like warm clothing during the winter. Making these difficult decisions reflected the challenging circumstances co-researchers encountered when trying to balance their financial priorities and meet their basic needs. He described the trade-offs co-researchers made, forced to sacrifice certain food items or limit their diet to essentials like bread to save money for winter wear.

Winter wear was essential for coping with the UK weather, especially considering the significant number of excess winter deaths estimated to have occurred during the UK winter of 2020 to 2021. According to the Office for National Statistics (2021), approximately 63,000 excess winter deaths were reported in England and Wales during this period, which was 6.1 times higher than the winter of 2019 to 2020. While this increase in winter mortality is largely driven by a large number of COVID-19 deaths during the non-winter months of 2020 (April to July) and the winter months of 2021 (December to March), it's important to note that annually, many people in the UK die during winter due to harsh weather conditions and cold homes (National Energy Action, 2020). The most affected are people living in poverty, such as asylum claimants.

In other instances, when confronted with poor health, asylum claimants and refugee communities found themselves unable to afford the medical expenses. This forced them into the difficult position of choosing between paying for medicines or purchasing food and other essential resources. In the narratives below, co-researcher Yellow and NGO caseworker MG describe the challenges applicants encountered when making this choice.

Yellow: I have a sight problem so that means I need to go to the doctor, I have to pay some of those things myself even though they cover some percentage of it but not all of it. So I have to pay some things on my own. Like medications and things like that. Some of them I have to pay on my own. So to me, honestly 35 is not enough it's just survivable. But not really enough.....I had to go for eye check-up because I had a lot of dryness on my eyes and as well as headaches and I had to go and check that out. So I was surprised when they told me like the health insurance that I'm having, that the HO gave it to me, it doesn't cover all the medical bills, I have to pay some, they only cover maybe like 60 or 40% of certain things and I have to pay for some things on my own.....so I had to pay that with the 35 that I had and not buy food.

MG: ... it's gonna be a problem and they (trans persons) can't afford to buy those things because of the money that they get. And I think at that point, they will also just be using some of the money saved to continue buying hormones privately. Because of

the waiting list on the NHS in terms of accessing hormones, and it's not very clear it's not really clear, you know, they go to the GP and sometimes they are inconsistent. So for example, some of our clients were in the London houses, they went to the GP they could access hormones, though not straightaway, some were not able to. Somewhat it's not that for some of our trans beneficiaries in Birmingham, as there's a specific doctor near the houses, was very aware and get them (hormones) straightaway. So, you know, like, they put them in a queue to gender clinics and give them the bridging hormones quickly...

Insufficient or lack of subsistence asylum support and economic marginalisation made it challenging for co-researchers to afford both food and medicine, as well as other healthcare needs. Since many individuals were not permitted to work, it was difficult to bridge the financial gap when needed. Yellow's experiences highlighted the financial struggles faced by individuals seeking asylum when it comes to accessing essential healthcare services and covering associated costs. It demonstrated the challenging reality of having to prioritise medical needs over basic necessities like food due to financial constraints. In numerous instances, claimants were forced to take medicine on empty stomachs, leading to further complications. The shared experiences, including missing out on attending healthcare appointments due to a lack of funds to pay for travel between home and appointments, are consistent with findings from other research (Bulman, 2018). Practitioners and researchers have highlighted how the lack of access to a nutritious diet and other basic needs often leaves asylum claimants vulnerable to further ill health (Maharaj & colleagues, 2017; WHO, 2022; Kamelkova and colleagues, 2023). When asylum claimants are forced into situations of starvation to meet healthcare costs, they are trapped in a cycle of ill health. This situation disproportionately impacts differently-bodied persons, individuals with disabilities, and pregnant people, as they have a greater need for healthcare services and are required to follow nutritional advice (Bulman, 2018; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Furthermore, the NGO worker's statement spotlighted the specific challenges faced by transgender asylum applicants in accessing trans-specific healthcare, particularly due to inconsistencies in the healthcare system and lengthy waiting times for NHS gender clinics. MG discussed how some transgender individuals struggled to afford hormone therapy due to financial constraints, which led them to use their limited savings to purchase hormones privately. She also pointed out the variations in access to hormone therapy depending on geography and awareness of healthcare providers. While some individuals in London houses were able to access hormones through their GP, other applicants in different locations faced difficulties and discrimination. MG's excerpt emphasised the need for

improved and consistent access to hormone therapy and other gender-affirming healthcare services to support the health and well-being of transgender asylum applicants.

Trans persons in asylum procedures often have specific healthcare needs, such as expert psycho-social support, hormone replacement treatment, or post-surgical care (Transgender Europe, 2018; Migrant Help UK, n.d). Different platforms have documented trans persons' unique healthcare challenges with accessing hormones and other medication prescribed for transitioning. For example, the NHS waiting list and inconsistencies that directly or indirectly disadvantage trans persons, exclude them from accessing trans-specific healthcare (Gillett, 2023; Leven, 2022; Migrant Help UK, n.d). It was these structural disadvantages and inconsistencies which left some trans asylum applicants having to purchase hormonal treatment privately.

In some instances, trans and gender-expansive asylum claimants arrive in host countries experiencing complications related to gender reassignment surgery, requiring immediate medical care (Transgender Europe, 2018). However, once in the asylum process, trans individuals find that the countries where they sought asylum do not always provide resources that meet their trans-specific healthcare needs (Czimbalmos & Rask, 2022; Hermaszewska et al., 2022; Transgender Europe, 2018; Migrant Help UK, n.d). In addition, applicants whose claims have been refused or have active asylum claims struggle to afford prescription and over-the-counter medicine, highlighting structural barriers to medicine access, including hormonal treatment. Although asylum claimants with an active application are entitled to free NHS primary and secondary care, the situation is more complicated for individuals whose asylum claims have been refused (British Medical Association (BMA), 2022). Consequently, barriers to accessing healthcare, both at the systemic policy level and in implementation and practice, exacerbated claimants' experience of destitution and survival from a place of deprivation.

Structural violence through economic exclusion and other systemic barriers left claimants struggling and further marginalised, dependent on charity and community support. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and charity organisations and communities were also impacted, it created further barriers and challenges for asylum claimants as they could no longer access the much-needed support. The excerpt below from Mary highlights challenges related to the pandemic.

Well before the lockdown there were charity organisations I would go to and get clothes, but because of the virus and the lockdown they all closed down. So those luxuries and things don't come, they are hard to come by these days. So I just survive with the little I have.

Mary described the absence of these "luxuries" and resources as challenging, indicating that she now had to make do with what little she had to survive. This highlighted the additional strain placed on co-researchers facing financial difficulties during the pandemic, as access to support and resources became limited. Some co-researchers reported to not having food and other essentials such as sanitary towels. There were instances where I used my connections with communities and linked asylum applicants with food and sanitary towels. These are some of the things applicants would have received from charity organisations but the closure of these organisations due to the pandemic made it difficult to access such essential resources. Mary's narrative emphasised the disruptive effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on the availability of essential resources for vulnerabilised asylum applicants, highlighting the importance of addressing the needs of marginalised communities during times of crisis.

The COVID-19 emergency increased claimants' food insecurity and added to asylum claimants' financial precarity (GMIAU, 2021). Globally, asylum claimants and refugees are among the social groups most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately suffering from the social and economic consequences, as well as the policy responses to addressing the crisis (Santillana, 2021). Additionally, the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of asylum claimants is more severe in comparison to other social groups (El Tatary and Gill, 2022). For asylum claimants and refugees, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis overlapped with many other challenges and inequalities that existed before the pandemic struck (Finlay, Hopkins, & Benwell, 2021). As a result, the COVID-19 crisis both exacerbated and visibilised hardships and challenges that already existed before the pandemic and left many asylum claimants and refugees highly vulnerabilised at the time of the crisis (Burton-Jeangros et al., 2020; Tschalaer, 2020; Segalo, & Fine, 2020; Mittal & Singh, 2020; Plášilová et al., 2021).

Observations and discussions during the research revealed differences in the economic exclusion faced by African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants compared to the broader 'LGBT' refugee community. African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants experienced intersectional discrimination, where their identities as sexual and gender diverse and people of African descent intersected to compound their economic challenges. This intersectionality made it difficult for co-researchers to access resources or support tailored to their specific needs. Black African asylum applicants faced systemic racism and colourism, which frequently hindered their access to economic resources and opportunities, including within refugee organisations and support networks designed to assist asylum claimants and refugees. Addressing the economic exclusion of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants necessitates a multifaceted approach that tackles

systemic racism, colourism, class discrimination, language barriers, and other structural inequalities. In conclusion, the state's economic exclusion of asylum claimants reflected a belief that granting them equal treatment would encourage more migration. Policies intentionally limited their rights and access to resources to deter asylum claimants from staying or entering the UK. Co-researchers' narratives highlighted how the state differentiated between deserving and undeserving individuals, exemplified by restricted economic support leading to material deprivation and exclusion from society. These policies, aimed at all asylum claimants but impacting different subgroups in different ways constituted structural violence by the government.

5.2.3 Digital Exclusion.

Other structural barriers that co-researchers experienced because of exclusionary policies and structural violence imposed upon them by the state included digital exclusion, which refers to limited or no access to the internet and digital devices. Access to WIFI and digital devices is crucial for asylum applicants as it enables them to access resources, navigate their new local areas, manage their asylum claims, access digital healthcare, connect to local services, and stay in touch with friends and family (British Red Cross, 2023). During the research, asylum claimants described suffering from digital connectivity inequality. In the excerpt below, Yellow and ES share experiences of digital inequality.

Yellow: *It's part of their [indistinct] I don't know, because when they call here they tell me I am not to have Wi Fi or anything like that. So I basically live with just credit buying credits and If you want to buy enough credit, sometimes I spend 20 pounds a month just for buying credit. It's really expensive to be honest.*

ES: *...So you can imagine I've been to many, many accommodations. There's no internet, there's no TV ... She (asylum claimant) came out of the house walking on the streets, and the streets were empty. And she was wondering what's going on? She has no TV. She has not internet. (She said...)... I looked at the road and thought, what's going on here. She said to me, I went out and I was wondering what is really going on. Where are the people?...she did not know the country had .(and continued in the same interview)... So I saw this guy sitting outside, on the phone. No shoes. And so with this guy. It was not good. So I called the person to see if he was okay. So he was speaking, said he was from Uganda. So we started chatting. Um, well, um, well, why is he outside? He said to me... We just moved me to this area, so where they put me the office where they put them in, there's no internet.*

There's no TV. I have no credit. And I have to speak to people and have to mix myself So I was walking around, ..., there is no Wi Fi. So he is outside this building, this hotel. But it did not allow us to go inside because of COVID. So he says, I come and sit outside so I can speak to people using their Wi Fi via WhatsApp and then what you do but other things make myself occupied. Oh, that broke my heart. So I was wondering if this person is here. Just to access the internet. Does he have food?

Her narrative illustrated the barriers to accessing digital connectivity faced by asylum applicants, highlighting the need for affordable and accessible communication options to ensure connectivity and participation. The importance of digital connectivity was emphasised by ES's narrative, which depicted the challenges faced by asylum claimants regarding access to essential amenities such as the internet and television. ES also highlighted the impact of social isolation and limited connectivity on the well-being and safety of asylum claimants who were digitally excluded. ES's encounter with an asylum applicant who had been unaware that the world had gone on lockdown highlighted the disconnection experienced by asylum applicants living in accommodations without basic connectivity amenities.

Mobile phones are essential for asylum claimants, not only for staying connected but also for safety, security, and self-empowerment (UNHCR, 2016). Individuals like Namukasa, with young children, rely on mobile phones as lifelines, for emergencies (Smith, 2021). Asylum support includes provisions for mobile phones, WIFI data, and phone credits (Smith, 2021) but it is simply insufficient, leading to digital exclusion of asylum claimants. Digital connectivity, crucial for participation, education, and accessing services, requires smartphones, laptops, and WIFI data, which are invaluable for claimants and refugees (Andronic, Lewandowski & Easton-Calabria, 2021) but also difficult to afford on limited funds. Technology's role in community life, education, and accessing services has expanded, posing challenges for digitally connecting asylum claimants and refugees to essential services (Jama, 2022). The growth of digital connectivity predates the COVID-19 crisis, but the pandemic accelerated its usage due to social distancing and lockdowns (Jama, 2020; De' et al., 2020). The increased reliance on digital connectivity exacerbates social isolation and deprivation for digitally excluded asylum applicants (Jama, 2022).

A report by Finlay and colleagues (2021) highlights how digital inequality further isolates refugees and asylum claimants during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also details how limited and intermittent Wi-Fi data access, and insufficient access to smartphones, personal computers, or televisions are barriers for many asylum claimants needing to access virtual spaces (Finlay et al., 2021), at a time when the world was mostly connected virtually. Lack of

connectivity particularly impacts asylum claimants' mental well-being and access to essential services. E.S's example above highlighted the extent of social isolation and loneliness asylum claimants are vulnerabilised to during the pandemic (Lim, Van Hulst, Pisanu, Merry, 2022; Phillips, 2023). Numerous reports from charities demonstrate evidence of isolation and loneliness in asylum claimants prior to the COVID-19 and reports these conditions as increasingly damaging claimants' health (The Forum, 2014; Finlay, Hopkins & Benwell, 2022; Nedoma, 2021). Additionally, both isolation and loneliness predict a range of physical and mental health problems, such as premature mortality and depression (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Beller & Wagner, 2018). New migrants, asylum claimants and refugees are especially known to have high levels of social isolation (Strang & Quinn, 2014; Lim & colleagues, 2022), however, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the situation.

Pre-existing hardships along with the challenges presented by the pandemic left many claimants highly vulnerable during the time of the crisis (Finlay et al., 2022, Lim). This intensified the hostility of the already hostile environment, with many asylum claimants and refugees faced with the intersecting pandemics of inequality, racism, and COVID-19 (Finlay et al., 2022). ES's example also highlighted how hardships forced claimants to live in a state of lockdown, pre-pandemic. With the state's imposed restrictions on many aspects of life including access to services/ resources, employment opportunities, housing, education and finance, many claimants were not only left in limbo but forced into a state of lockdown (Finlay et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened what were already difficult circumstances. His narrative describing claimants using public WIFI on the grounds of hotels and other buildings with open access to WI-FI revealed the level of claimants' desperation. Smith (2021) identified this desperate practice of accessing public wi-fi in public spaces as both a security risk digitally and a risk of spreading the coronavirus further. Equally, using public WIFI to access support services such as counselling and other appointments in public spaces would not provide claimants with privacy, dignity and autonomy to fully engage with said services.

Lastly, access to television (TV) was not universal, making it a luxury for asylum claimants, yet it offered not only entertainment but also crucial information and relief from boredom and loneliness. Co-researchers emphasised the detrimental effects on their mental well-being due to the lack of resources like TV, which could provide much-needed distraction and entertainment in otherwise monotonous and passive living situations (van Eggermont Arwidson, 2022). Despite the reported benefits of TV and radio for mental health, including stress relief, mood improvement, healing, offering rest and relaxation (Eden et al., 2017; Goodman et al., 2017; Sharman et al., 2020; Sacilotto et al., 2022; Yim, 2016), asylum claimants were deliberately excluded from accessing such resources during the asylum

process. This exclusion contributed to loneliness, boredom, and significant impacts on mental and spiritual well-being among co-researchers.

Digital exclusion poses significant challenges to all asylum claimants, but African sexual and gender-expansive claimants face unique and compounded difficulties due to their intersecting identities. These challenges differentiate their experiences from those of the general asylum-seeking community, exacerbating their vulnerabilities, and hindering their well-being and ability to resettle in multiple ways. Sexual and gender-expansive claimants require access to specialised legal information and support services tailored to their unique circumstances (Gottlieb et al., 2020). While general asylum claimants also need legal aid, sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants must navigate additional layers of complexity, such as proving their sexuality or gender identity, which is often a sensitive and stigmatised subject (Fuglei, 2023; Nematy et al., 2023; Yarwood et al., 2022). Digital exclusion prevents sexual and gender-expansive from accessing online resources, forums, and organisations that offer targeted advice, reducing their chances of successful asylum claims. Similarly, sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants, particularly those from African backgrounds where homosexuality may be criminalised or stigmatised, often rely heavily on digital platforms for connection and support. Digital exclusion isolates them from accessing these critical online communities, depriving them of emotional support, shared experiences, and potentially, a sense of belonging.

For general asylum seekers, while social isolation is a significant issue (Lim et al., 2022; Salway et al., 2020; Strang & Quinn, 2014), the added layer of needing to find a community that accepts their sexual orientation or gender identity intensifies the feeling of loneliness for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. The intersectionality of being both African and sexual and gender-diverse exposes asylum claimants to multiple layers of prejudice. Digital exclusion prevents sexual and gender-expansive claimants from accessing educational resources and advocacy tools that might help them understand and combat some of these discriminations. It also hinders their ability to participate in online activism, if they wanted to and community-building efforts, which are vital for post-trauma growth, healing and empowerment in a new country. While general asylum claimants also face discrimination, the compounded prejudices against African sexual and gender-expansive individuals require nuanced support that digital tools can uniquely provide. Overall, digital exclusion disproportionately affects sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants in the UK by compounding their vulnerabilities and limiting access to vital resources and support networks. Unlike general asylum seekers, they face unique challenges related to their sexual orientation and gender identity, necessitating specialised information, community

connections, and healthcare services that are often only accessible online, especially during the pandemic crisis.

In conclusion, the narrative of digital exclusion highlighted the exclusion of asylum applicants through limited digital connectivity, essential for accessing healthcare, managing asylum claims, and staying connected with family and services. Insufficient asylum support left many individuals unable to afford WIFI data or devices that would allow them to remain connected, forcing reliance on insecure public WIFI, compromising privacy and autonomy. Digital exclusion exacerbated challenges like loneliness and isolation, negatively impacting asylum applicants' mental health. The state's imposition of barriers to digital access constituted structural violence, aiming to make life uncomfortable to deter asylum claimants from entering or remaining in the UK.

5.3 Dis/Location and Geographical Isolation.

This narrative discusses a pattern of practices in the UK asylum system that locate and relocate asylum applicants in remote areas, detention, and inhumane accommodation often isolating them geographically, and socially from the general community. These practices induce anxiety and fear in applicants who worry about being detained or relocated away from their support networks. The history of immigration detention in the UK dates back to 1905 when peacetime control of 'aliens' entering Britain began (Bacon, 2005; Bosworth, 2014; Mackinnon, 2017; Taylor et al., 2018). The Aliens Restriction Act, enacted in response to Britain's entry into World War I, aimed to protect the country from "enemy aliens" during times of "national danger or great emergency" (Taylor et al., 2018). This act required individuals of certain nationalities, such as Germans and Austrians, to register with the police, be deported when deemed necessary, and have their travel restricted, including prohibiting them from entering certain areas of the country (Taylor et al., 2018). Men categorised as enemy aliens were arrested, excluded, and detained in temporary holding camps (Pearsall, 2017). Subsequent legislation, including the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 and the Immigration Appeals Act of 1969, extended exclusion and detention practices initiated by the 1905 Act, contributing to structurally violent immigration policies (Taylor et al., 2018).

The opening of Harmondsworth Detention Centre in 1970 marked a significant development, becoming the largest detention centre in Europe. As of 2022, there are at least 13 reporting centres in the UK, where asylum claimants are often detained as part of bail requirements (Silverman & Griffiths, 2022). Individuals subjected to immigration control are excluded from society and detained without judicial oversight for indefinite periods

(Mackinnon, 2017). Since the 1905 Aliens Act, foreign nationals incarcerated for criminal offences have been kept in prison beyond their sentence as detainees (Mackinnon, 2017). This practice continues to the present day, with individuals held in prison-like centers, hotel rooms, ports, and in recent years, army barracks and boats or barges as the UK's first offshore accommodation for asylum claimants. Detention and exclusion practices have profound effects on asylum claimants and refugees, forcibly removing them from their support networks and communities, and isolating them in remote areas.

5.3.1 Deliberate Geographical Isolation.

In migrant studies, geographical isolation is a term that has been used to describe the extent to which varying boundaries that were concerned with politics, time, distance, and other such aspects have been employed to isolate asylum claimants and refugee communities from other communities (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008; Coddington & Mountz, 2014; Mountz, 2017). Historically states have used geography strategically to prevent, dissolve and undermine access of asylum claimants and migrants to the rights acquired when individuals arrived in host countries – including their right to seek asylum (Mountz, 2017). Isolation patterns, including dispersal, restricting social activities, labour market exclusion, and detention (Jones, 2008; Schuster, 2004; Tryggvadóttir & Skaptadóttir, 2018; von Werthern, 2018), were observed in asylum applicants' narratives. Co-researchers recounted sudden relocation to remote UK areas. In the excerpt below Batanai describes one of the locations she was relocated to as a, "a dead town"

*OK so now I'm in Middlesbrough I'm living in a house like my [indistinct]
Middlesbrough is like a town like in like one dead town like....*

The excerpt highlighted the desolate nature of the town, Batanai was relocated to. The choice of words she used to describe the condition, alluded to the town not only being quiet but also unproductive, isolated, and lacking in opportunities. This experience was similar to other co-researchers' experiences of relocation including Yellow, a practicing Muslim lesbian who was forcibly relocated 85 miles/137 km to Coventry from London a journey of over 90 minutes by train. Below Yellow describes the isolation she experienced because of the relocation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yellow: I was completely isolated during this month of Ramadan. I know someone who knew some people, a friend of mine who just told me like oh instead of fasting alone and just doing things on your own, why don't you maybe just try to go and visit with this sister of mine? They're also fasting so maybe you can just go in and have dinner with them or eat there with them. So that's what I was doing... Now everything

is back to normalcy and I'm just back to my house...But I'm going there maybe once, like sometimes twice or three times a week...And just going to eat and then come back to my house...So at some point it was very difficult. So, my friend doesn't get it, (and would ask) why are you not going today or why? I'll just make excuses but it's because I just knew I was just not comfortable with that, and I couldn't be myself. I couldn't say anything (about her personal life). I just had to basically just go there, keep quiet just eat and just leave and come back home. It was honestly very difficult ... you kind of have to lie because you don't know those people...

Yellow's narrative highlighted her experience of isolation during the month of Ramadan when she was relocated to a new environment. Despite attempts to find companionship by accepting an invitation to gather with others, Yellow, who is lesbian, expressed feeling discomfort and a lack of authenticity during these interactions. In this context, Yellow's experiences illustrated the challenges of seeking connection while navigating religious, cultural, or social barriers. Despite the isolation and desire for companionship, Yellow grappled with feelings of discomfort and the need to conceal aspects of her identity or personal life. This highlighted how African sexual, and gender-expansive individuals sometimes face fear and anxiety about how they will be received in new and unfamiliar social settings. Loneliness and isolation are significant challenges faced by migrants, refugees, and asylum applicants (The Forum, 2014). Factors such as arriving alone, language barriers, lack of social networks, exclusion from education, limited employment opportunities, and lack of permission to work exacerbate and contribute significantly to feelings of isolation and loneliness among refugees and asylum claimants (Refugee Action, 2017).

Additionally, co-researchers expressed experiences of and a fear of homophobia, discrimination from their communities and or racism in the wider community. Yellow and Ssentango's excerpts below share these experiences of disapproval and feeling unsafe.

Yellow: Yeah, it still feels the same with certain communities especially people from my country. I thought maybe people out here (located in the UK) they will be more open-minded [indistinct] but I noticed that even the few times I was there with them (the hosts she spent Ramadan with) one time they just came up their conversation about it. When they just spoke about it (conversations on sexuality), it just made me feel like oh I can't, they're not really accepting of this instead of who I am, or people who are like me. So obviously you can't feel comfortable to even say things like that to them. So, you just end up just keeping quiet and pretending...

Ssentango: *...first of all, I may say that racism is just a lot, [indistinct]. If you're on the train... to sit somewhere next to a white person, a white man is seated, when he sees you sitting down next to him, he stands up and he leaves that he leaves that seat and go into the next cabin, you know, [indistinct] things like that and in the community you can't just come out to everyone, sometimes it is your own people too who don't like you when they hear you are gay so you have to be careful. You can't trust everyone here too; you don't feel safe with everyone which can be tough to make friends.*

Yellow's narrative highlighted the struggle for acceptance and understanding within one's community, both in the country of origin and in the current location as an asylum applicant, could lead to concealing one's true identity. This experience was shared by many asylum applicants and demonstrated the ongoing barriers to authentic expression, which exacerbated feelings of isolation. Co-researchers like Ssentango have faced similar challenges, illustrating the complexity of navigating sexual identities within their communities. The fear of discrimination or harm often led to reluctance to disclose sexual orientation, contributing to a sense of isolation and difficulty in forming genuine connections. Black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants often went to great lengths to build networks and support systems where they felt safe and understood. However, when relocated to new communities even where they were surrounded by fellow black individuals, they could still encounter homophobia and isolation. Ssentango's narrative also highlighted the pervasive issue of hostility and racism faced by the wider community, revealing the intersectional challenges African sexual and gender-expansive individuals endured as both black individuals and as sexual and gender-expansive persons.

African asylum claimants often expected a safe new home-away-from-home experience once they reached the UK. Instead, they are left facing a multitude of challenges, including homophobia, transphobia, stigmatisation, xenophobia, and racism (Agu 2017, UNHCR, 2020), especially when deliberately uprooted from their geographical areas where they had established connections, community, and support, to remote areas. Several co-researchers shared the impact being relocated to remote areas had on their daily life and well-being. In an account that was typical of those shared by other co-researchers, below Bale describes living further away from shops and having to travel every two weeks whilst Ssentango describes the impact of relocation and isolation was having on his mental well-being.

Bale: *... its like a village..., because when you walk around, you see people like farms, horses. They told me that the place where I was in Liverpool is just an initial accommodation that this is the permanent accommodation. The other*

one was temporary. I would say like to the previous place; shops are a bit far... where you buying the food from its far away. So, I have like to travel every two weeks to Liverpool to buy the foods..."

Bale's narrative demonstrated the remoteness of the locations where asylum applicants were placed. Bale drew attention to the proximity of shops for purchasing food. With the shops further away, it required Bale to travel every two weeks to buy groceries. This suggested that access to basic amenities like food was more challenging in this new environment. Claimants' narratives showed that when relocation pushed them deeper into geographical isolation, it not only restricted access to social activities but that it also had an impact on their psychological well-being. The locations where claimants are placed are far from opportunities, population centres and other essential services, leading to mental health harm (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Placing asylum claimants in remote locations where legal support is very limited or non-existent increased delays in asylum applications, especially at a time when the UK government had massively reduced legal aid (Human Rights watch, 2023).

Additionally, co-researchers' narratives revealed that relocation to a new environment, often remote made it challenging for them to fully express their identities, as highlighted by Yellow, who described the difficulty of hiding her sexuality from the community. Discrimination against applicants of diverse sexual and gender identities persisted across the UK, influencing them to continue living in secrecy (O'nions, 2010; Markham, 2020). Asylum claimants in the diaspora sought community and often desired to remain part of a community from their countries of origin, sharing similar cultural and religious backgrounds. However, the risk of facing homophobia and transphobia within those communities was sometimes heightened, as described by Ssentango, Yellow, and others. Nevertheless, distancing themselves from their desired communities due to fear of discrimination alienated claimants from much-needed support systems. Many studies indicate that even after an initial disclosure, individuals of sexual and gender-expansive identities continue to conceal their sexual orientation by choice or necessity in various situations (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009; Pachankis et al., 2011). Constantly navigating whether to reveal or conceal one's identity and the resulting isolation can have lasting consequences for the mental well-being (Pachankis, 2007; Pachankis et al., 2020) and spiritual health of asylum claimants and refugees. Previous research shows that relocation to remote areas not only creates barriers related to isolation, social connectedness, and access to services and opportunities but also poses safety concerns (Ziersch, et al., 2020).

In rural and remote geographical places claimants suffer discrimination, including racism and homophobia (Alessi et al. 2018, Held, 2023; Tschalaer, 2023; Wimark 2020).

These experiences contradicted the HO's and theorists' beliefs that assume that the UK automatically guaranteed security and protection. Those beliefs did not accurately reflect the diverse experiences of most displaced persons, especially persons displaced because of their gender and sexuality. The opposite is often true (Bachmann & Gooch, 2017; European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights, 2020; OHCHR, 2022). African sexual and gender-expansive asylum persons' experiences of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and other harms and injustices sometimes increase once arrived or are engaging in the asylum process and as well after receiving asylum (Agu, 2017; UNHCR, 2020; Ritholtz & Buxton, 2022). It is crucial to acknowledge and understand the complete experiences of displaced African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. The failure, often deliberate, to recognise and comprehend their interconnected experiences perpetuates structural violence and contributes to ongoing harm.

Stories of the detention of asylum applicants have been widely reported (Nyers, 2003; Bhatia, 2015, Chirape, 2019). Several co-researchers, including myself, had previously been detained at one point in our asylum processes and we all agreed that the experience had had a huge negative impact on our lives. Extensive research has previously studied detention, including the impact of detention asylum applicants (Bhatia, 2015; International Detention Coalition, 2015; Robjant et al., 2009; Ravid, 2022; Refugee Council, 2022; Santos, 2023; Wasolua, 2018). On many occasions, co-researchers minimised immigration detention conditions by comparing their experiences with those of other people who they perceived to have had worse treatment. Many individuals commented on feeling fortunate and grateful to be in the UK, expressing sentiments about detention and other traumatic experiences as "less bad" (Bale), "I cannot complain" (Alan), "I am happy to be here [UK]" (Abraham), and acknowledging that it could have been "much worse" (Abby) or "more terrible" (Mary). This trend was also observed in my conversations, where I describe my experience of detention experiences as traumatic, whilst also acknowledging my privileged situation compared to others. These expressions of gratitude toward the UK align with previous documentation demonstrating asylum claimants' appreciation for the country (Farrant et al., 2022). Despite facing difficulties, many asylum claimants tend to blame themselves and believe they have no moral right to ask for more from the state or society at large (Gholami, 2020). Participants' positivity is often directed towards the researcher and the host society as a whole (Petäjaniemi et al., 2021), reflecting a sense of obligation to express gratitude for the protection provided by the country (Back, 2003). Minimising experiences of detention was also potentially one of the strategies co-researchers adopted to curb and resist vulnerabilities caused by the harmful effects of detention and the asylum process more broadly. It was possible that acknowledging and or holding to the idea that

their experiences weren't as *bad* as what other people faced, allowed co-researchers to retain their self-identity, autonomy, dignity, self-respect, and humanity.

However, it's important to note that asylum claimants also acknowledge the injustices they face but may feel compelled to accept the violence, including racism and prejudice, and even downplay or minimize their experiences (Petäjämäki et al., 2021). Experiencing friendliness and care from others in similar situations, including myself, may have provided co-researchers with humanity, safety, and comfort, thus making their experiences feel less severe. Furthermore, co-researchers' comparisons and minimisations may also stem from their recognition of the compounding factors that exacerbate traumatic experiences for some individuals more than others. Overall, these statements reflected co-researchers' perspectives and awareness of their circumstances within the broader context of detention experiences, highlighting the complexity of their feelings and attitudes towards their situation.

Otherwise, the HO's practice of relocating asylum claimants to remote areas, detaining and deporting claimants, including threatening them to carry out these acts caused fear and anxiety among asylum claimant communities. In her narrative, Abby reflects on the day of her interview and how anxious she was thinking she might get detained and not leave the building.

So I just sat, I just sat there just waiting for my name to be called. I could, I didn't even go to eat I was just there waiting and also seeing people coming and coming in, you know. Some people were coming in with luggage's you know like, it gives you a different vibe like oh my God, I think I'm going to be detained. I'm not going to live out. I'm not going to leave this building, you know.

Abby's narrative highlighted the level of apprehension and anxiety co-researchers experienced about being detained. Like Abby, some co-researchers spoke about the fear they felt and held during their interviews and when visiting the HO building and other signing-in centres. Ssentango, for example, describes how he felt on the day of his interview,

...really didn't know what was wrong inside but I was quite scared, I was quite afraid they might keep me there or detain, but then I wasn't...

This level of fear was reported by other co-researchers like Mukasa below who commented on how he felt scared about being detained, on his way to the interview.

... the fear in the morning when I went to the train station I was like where am I going? You know they might detain me from there. You know, I just lost it like what am I going to do because I didn't really want to go because I was scared you know...

These accounts highlighted the pervasive fear experienced by many asylum claimants throughout the asylum process. Stories of detention and being detained at reporting centres induce the fear that asylum claimants could be detained at any point and no matter how long they had been reporting without being detained, the fear never went away (British Red Cross, 2023). This fear often prevents them from seeking support, as they fear potential detention or deportation (Refugee Council, 2022). The fear of detention leads many asylum applicants to consider living in hiding, left vulnerabilised and without formal support (Refugee Council, 2022). Given this fear, it was not surprising that some co-researchers withheld information about their living situations from the HO or used friends' addresses. Co-researchers who withheld such details from the HO also refrained from sharing them during the research, fearing it might reach the HO. Other co-researchers even requested certain elements of their narratives to be anonymised and other parts of the conversation to be omitted.

During conversations, co-researchers commented on how they often made decisions to protect themselves from detention, even if it meant deceiving the HO and or not asking for help with accommodation. This fear was also expressed about remote locations. A few co-researchers resisted any assistance with housing offered and avoided asking for help for fear they would be relocated to remote places and away from established communities. This fear was evident in XX's narrative who although pregnant, did not ask for help with accommodation and when offered she declined the offer fearing that she would be removed from her community and support systems to a remote place.

XX:...No, it's me who did not ask for accommodation because I was scared by my friends who are already there in the system... I was scared so; I was scared of being there with my daughter. When I was pregnant, I went through a lot, a lot so I needed to be around people who were supporting me mentally and physically, and those people were the circle of people that were around me, they were [indistinct] and London. And these social workers they were talking about me going to [indistinct]..., if they are going to help me with accommodation, they will send me to where is this place, this other country in the other part of UK...whereby I was going to really struggle, so I had to refuse. That's why I ended up staying with friends yes because I did not want to be taken away from my friends. The thing is that this was my first daughter I didn't even know how to breastfeed a child or take care of a child, so I needed support from my friends. ...So she was saying we will take you to Scotland if

we are going to find for you accommodation. If you don't, like everything she was saying it was so negative and just torturing me. So, I told her I cannot live far away from the place where I am because everyone who's going to help me with my child, I will be myself. They are all my friends LGBT friends; they are around me. Scotland is too far I don't know anybody there. She did not want to listen. That caused a big problem. And she reported me. She said me I have nowhere to stay. So, they planned me in the hospital they said I can't just go out of the hospital after giving birth, because I have nowhere to stay with the child. Remember everything the child is the first priority. She really stressed me so much, so much so I had to plan with my friends and we lied to her, we lied. Seriously I would lie to you that I have the place to put my baby this is the place here, and she had to come and see the place there. But that's not where I was going to stay. I didn't have a place until when God helped me I got another lady who helped me. She said I will help you don't worry. I'll help you when you give birth you come and stay with me.

Skye: That sounds like it was such a tough period.

XX: It was really bad and I've just, I've haven't told the whole story I'm just breaking because it's too long. It was tough...And I nearly lost my child.

This narrative highlighted the fear and struggle faced by XX, during a vulnerable time of pregnancy and transition into motherhood. Her narrative demonstrated feelings of fear and feeling unsupported by social workers who were trying to provide accommodation but did not understand XX's need for familiar support systems, such as friends and community, especially during this period. Additionally, the narrative touched on themes of autonomy and agency, as XX described feeling pressured and stressed by the social worker's insistence on a course of action that did not consider her needs and preferences. The narrative conveyed the challenges and complexities of navigating the asylum process and systems of support and assistance while balancing other needs and preferences.

For many co-researchers, in similar situations as XX, deceiving officials was also a way of resisting violent practices and policies that would otherwise leave them abandoned in a remote area to exist in isolation and excluded from support networks. This form of resistance showed the extent of claimants' desperation. It showed that some persons would rather be unhoused, just so they could remain surrounded by the community they had already established, highlighting how community and support networks were important to African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants. It was not surprising that many persons resorted to providing false realities to HO officials to hold on to stability, a sense of security and belonging already established. XX understood the impact forced relocation

would have on her mental well-being and daily life if she was removed from her support systems. Similar stories of choosing to live with friends emerged for claimants such as Abraham, Abby, Alan and Vic who feared ending up detained and deported or relocated and isolated from the community if the reality of their situations was shared with the HO. Refugee Council (2022) also reported that asylum claimants who had taken part in their study had disclosed choosing to hide and abstain from accessing support for fear that they could be deported.

One of the HO's justifications for relocating asylum claimants to rural areas was that they aimed to secure a *fairer distribution of migrants around the UK* (Hymas, 2022). However, African asylum claimants were being dumped in rural areas, small towns and or remote locations making it structurally difficult for them to settle or form meaningful connections. This was practice from a set of policies introduced in 2012 by the then Home Secretary Theresa May, to treat asylum claimants as less deserving of dignity and humanity than British citizens and therefore making life difficult for them to continue living in the UK (The Joint Council for The Welfare of Immigrants, n.d). Rural areas were more likely to be more homophobic (Chakraborti & Hardy, 2015) whereas, in bigger cities asylum claimants and refugees have access to other migrant, established refugee and diaspora communities and therefore access to familiar cultural and religious institutions as well as access to other advantages such as familiar foods and languages. During the study claimants spoke about the importance of community, emphasising how meetings held by African Equality Foundation gave them a sense of belonging. They spoke of how happy they were to "have found other people from my country" and "...I can be myself with them...". Being in close proximity to familiar cultural and religious communities could assist asylum claimants in maintaining cultural integrity while building a new identity in the community (UNHCR, n.d). In turn, this was likely to lead to better physical and mental health (UNHCR, n.d). Asylum claimants' narratives revealed relocation to geographically isolated areas and a profound fear of relocation and the subsequent isolation and exclusion it entailed. Remote relocations posed significant challenges to rebuilding lives and reintegrating into society.

Furthermore, locating asylum claimants in rural and impoverished areas presented every day challenges due to structural factors like lack of access to and or being far away from supermarkets and other services and opportunities. Most asylum claimants and refugees expressed a preference for larger cities due to the greater opportunities available and the presence of established support networks. Despite threats of relocation, asylum claimants demonstrated tenacity, resisting the challenges imposed by the system. Overall, the ongoing practice of socially and geographically marginalising black African sexual and gender asylum applicants isolated them from familiar cultural and religious activities and

exposed them to homophobia and racism. It also represented a deliberate effort to deter, control, and manage immigration, characterised by racism and violence. This systemic marginalisation constituted a form of structural violence that exacerbated vulnerabilities for African asylum sexual and gender-expansive applicants. The next section shows how in addition to being relocated to geographically isolated accommodations, the shelters applicants were placed were considered to be inhumane.

5.3.2 Inhumane Living Conditions.

Asylum claimants were not only relocated to remote and impoverished areas and or detained but the accommodation they were assigned was often considered inhumane and degrading. Since 2019, the number of asylum claimants placed in accommodation provided by the HO has increased to approximately 37 000 (Mahase, 2022). Although the accommodation is described as temporary and only intended for use for less than 35 days, many asylum claimants continue to live there for much longer (Mahase, 2022). Overall, accommodation provided to asylum claimants do not meet basic standards and is unsafe and damaging to claimants' well-being (Mahase, 2022; Jones et al., 2022). Conversations with co-researchers and NGO caseworkers supporting sexual and gender-expansive asylum cases showed that individuals were placed in accommodation that was poor in condition, inhumane, inadequate, degrading, and unsafe. In a self-recorded voice note, Batanai describes the conditions of the accommodation the HO placed her in, as "very dirty".

...we went to Middlesbrough and then we go to a house very dirty house and I remember the first time that the doors with the asylum claimants lived with rage they were painted red and remember the gatewatch seniors are saying well you know just feel free to knock on any doors to make friends because the red ones are there [indistinct] it was a small town in and the house very dirty house very very very dirty house...I was taken to a hostel with two pregnant ladies, because I just met a driver who was very friendly with me. And he just he said, don't go to the hostels because they're dirty, there is infections...

Batanai's narrative painted a vivid picture of the harsh realities faced by asylum applicants including substandard living conditions and a lack of adequate support. She used the word "very" at least five times to emphasise how dirty the house was. In the same conversation, Batanai also described the inhumane condition of another hostel accommodation she was placed in at a different time during the asylum process. In that conversation, Batanai emphasised the gravity of the condition by repeating the phrase, "so", to describe how dirty the hostel was. The narratives shared by co-researchers highlighted the urgent need to

address the inadequate living conditions experienced by vulnerable and vulnerabilised sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. Ensuring their well-being, safety, and dignity required immediate action to improve the quality of temporary accommodation provided to them.

It was evident from Batanai's narrative that other professionals contracted by the HO were aware of the inhumane housing conditions and pre-warned claimants, suggesting that HO officials deliberately failed to safeguard and dignify housing assigned to claimants. Among 11,800 complaint calls made to the Migrant Help charity helpline, at least 1,400 complaints were related to hotel accommodation (Open Democracy, 2023). Research by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) corroborates that the HO placed asylum claimants in dirty, unsuitable accommodation that failed to meet human basic needs (Bolt, 2018). The report describes inspectors finding the accommodation not only dirty but with visible defects including leaks, dampness, and broken equipment (Bolt, 2018). Similarly, a report by the Independent newspaper showed that women and children seeking asylum in Britain are placed in overcrowded houses festered with vermin, such as rats, mice, and bedbugs (Bulman, 2018; Bolt, 2018). The asylum accommodation is reported to have been so dirty that children's health deteriorated, and some women claimants were driven to self-harm (Bulman, 2018). The accommodation fails to meet the basic needs of dignity (Bulman, 2018).

In other narratives, claimants described overcrowding. For example, in the excerpt below Mukasa describes observations he made about how his friends were placed in a overcrowded shared accommodation of eight people, making it difficult to socially distance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mukasa: ... I see my friends, both of them are suffering. You know and...Housing, some are put in a shared accommodation you know. Small spaces, they don't have enough space, and I know with this COVID thing, and they have one bathroom stuff like that you know, even where you are eight in the house, and all of you coughing and all the social distancing you cannot really maintain the rules and regulations because you are too many in the house, and you have one bathroom. You know, it's all pretty simple it's not easy at all.

Skye: Yes, and are they also sharing rooms as well?

Mukasa: Exactly.

Skye: That's really difficult, especially to be in such a full house and some people are not even out. Some people maybe are living with people who are not gay or

lesbian or bisexual or trans you know and they don't want to be out because they fear that other people might be homophobic as well.

Mukasa: Exactly and they still living under cover, living under fear as well. They cannot express themselves.

In this exchange, Mukasa discussed the difficulties in housing arrangements and conditions of shared accommodations with small spaces and limited facilities. These conditions become even more problematic, making it challenging to adhere to social distancing guidelines. The exchange between Mukasa and I also highlighted the issue of safety for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in shared accommodation. In shared accommodation sexual and gender-expansive applicants were likely not to feel comfortable being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity due to fear of discrimination or homophobia from others sharing the living space. This fear forced claimants to live in secrecy, possibly inhibiting their ability to express themselves freely. Overall, this dialogue shed light on the intersecting challenges faced by African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, including poor housing conditions, privacy concerns, safety and the added difficulties brought on by the pandemic.

The issue of safety in cramped HO living spaces was a concern for many co-researchers spoken to. Overcrowded housing did not only create barriers related to privacy, they generated a potentially unsafe environment for sexual and gender-expansive persons, whether they were *out* or not. Persons who were not *out* in particular, could be *outed* when forced to live in shared rooms, increasing their risks for discrimination, violence, homophobia and transphobia. When activities and interactions moved to virtual platforms, and shared accommodation limited privacy for sexual and gender diverse claimants it removed access to the much needed virtual services. Most persons who were not open about their identities were afraid to engage in case they were *outed*. This fear saw many asylum claimants being completely excluded from engaging with virtual services that would have been necessary and supportive to them. In the excerpt below Abraham shares why he could not attend virtual mental well-being meetings and other interactions African Equality foundation offered online.

... I cannot attend the meeting, because there is always people in my place and they are straight, even when wearing headphones they can see and hear from my side....I cannot do it.

Some of the co-researchers who were able to contribute to the research, did so by self-recording their experiences whilst sat in the toilet and or in public parks, during the winter

season for fear that other occupants in overcrowded house shares would listen in to their conversations.

Batanai...I am recording this from the toilet as there too many people in the house and I have no privacy...

Ruth (lesbian, Uganda): I am talking to you sitting in the park I don't have the room to do it where I stay...

Abraham, Batanai, and Ruth's narratives shed light on the pervasive lack of privacy in their living situations and its detrimental impact on their daily lives. This lack of privacy not only hindered their ability to communicate freely and maintain confidentiality but also made engaging in virtual and personal activities uncomfortable and unsafe. The HO's disregard for their well-being led to housing placements with occupants they felt unsafe with, further marginalising African sexual and gender-expansive individuals. This structural exclusion prevented asylum claimants from accessing essential services and support they urgently needed, during the pandemic. Despite the expectation of eventually being placed in more permanent accommodations, asylum claimants have no say in the housing provided by the HO, even if they have connections or established communities in certain areas of the country (British Red Cross, 2023).

A survey by Refugee Action (2020) revealed that approximately 77% of respondents reported issues with facilities and physical space in asylum accommodations, including inadequate or inappropriate food options. As a result, poor physical health is disturbingly common within the community (Boyle, n.d). Most claimants and refugee communities are likely to have underlying health conditions exacerbated by living in overcrowded and poor housing conditions, exposing them to dampness, mould, and inadequate ventilation (Boyle, n.d). Lack of access to a healthy diet further leaves claimants susceptible to other illnesses, including respiratory diseases like COVID-19 (Refugee Action, 2020). The cramped living conditions also increase the threat posed by COVID-19 and its impact (Boyle, n.d). Living in inhumane and abject conditions, particularly for persons with compromised immune systems, leads to irreversible effects and severe health outcomes, including death. Announcements of asylum claimants' deaths from COVID-19-related illnesses on the African Equality Foundation WhatsApp group, in which the majority of co-researchers and myself were members, highlighted the significant risk the virus posed to co-researchers.

There were numerous narratives of homophobia and poor living conditions shared by co-researchers. In addition to this, co-researchers also shared incidents of racism and of sharing living spaces with persons who exposed other claimants to drug use. This placed already vulnerabilised asylum claimants at risk of further harm and violence. Narratives from

co-researchers and case workers highlighted the replication of homophobia, transphobia, insecurity and other forms of violence that sexual and gender-expansive applicants suffered in UK asylum accommodation (Fletcher & Greatrick, 2022). Narratives highlighted serious concerns about the safety and well-being of persons housed in inhumane living conditions. Despite evidence of poor accommodation standards, the HO continued to deny and downplay these concerns (Smith, 2019). Violent uncertainty and exclusion have severe gendered impacts on sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, increasing their vulnerability to gender-based violence, transphobia, discrimination, mental health issues, physical safety threats, social integration challenges, and barriers to justice. Trans individuals and lesbian or bisexual women are particularly at risk of exploitation, sexual assault, harassment and lack of medical care, in detention centers or asylum accommodations, where protection from homophobic or transphobic staff and other claimants is inadequate. In the UK, these systemic challenges profoundly impact sexual and gender-expansive asylum seekers, exacerbating their vulnerability and marginalisation.

Co-researchers shared that they were deliberately dislocated and placed in geographically isolated areas. They narrated how they endured constant insecurity and fear of relocation, detention, or deportation, and when relocated they ended up in desolate locations with limited access to services. This practice uprooted applicants from established support networks and communities, exacerbating loneliness and exposing them to homophobia, racism, and transphobia, leading to deterioration in mental health. Inadequate accommodation, resembling prison-like centers, failed to meet basic needs, increasing susceptibility to illnesses, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic in cramped spaces. Limited privacy and dignity in these overcrowded environments left sexual and gender-expansive persons vulnerable to intersectional violence, including homophobia, racism, and sexual violence. Overall, the UK's choice of distant relocations aimed to limit asylum claimants' visibility, isolating them from public interactions. The intersection of racism and sexuality presented profound challenges for African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, whose experiences of compounded discrimination and violence in the asylum process call for a nuanced analysis through trauma and Structural Intersectionality. These frameworks collectively provide a deeper understanding of the multifaceted oppression faced by vulnerabilised African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. Trauma perspectives (Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015; Maté, 2003; 2022; Mollica, 2006; Ogden et al., 2006) offer a lens through which we can understand the severe psychological and emotional impact of the intersections of racism and sexuality on asylum claimants. Many persons have fled homophobic and transphobic violence, only to encounter further systemic discrimination and racial violence in the UK (Hudson-Sharp & Metcalf, 2016; Stonewall, 2017). This

ongoing trauma is exacerbated by the dual stigma of being both a sexual minority and a racialised forcibly displaced immigrant. The persistent threat of racial violence through violent uncertainty, exclusion, dislocation and isolation - a hostile asylum process - is not only re-traumatising but impedes claimants' ability to heal and resettle into their new communities (See Freedman et al., 2022). Structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) theory explains how overlapping social categorisations such as 'race', sexuality, and immigration status created complex and compounded forms of discrimination (Brotman & Lee, 2011). As highlighted in the sections above sexual and gender-expansive claimants encountered bias and exclusion within both LGBT communities and broader migrant communities, resulting in heightened vulnerabilisation. For instance, they experienced prejudiced and discriminatory violence from immigration authorities and within asylum accommodation, where their sexuality and gender identity further marginalised them. This double bind limited their access to essential services, including, legal protection, community support and healthcare, exacerbating their precarious situation.

Chapter Summary:

This chapter discussed narratives of violent uncertainty, exclusionary state practices, and dislocation and geographical isolation. co-researcher narratives highlighted the extensive waiting periods between various stages of the immigration process, exacerbating feelings of uncertainty and fear among claimants. This prolonged state of limbo forced individuals into marginalised existences, metaphorically likened to a prison, as they grappled with the psychological toll of enduring insecurity and awaiting visas that would offer legal protection. Furthermore, the chapter delved into the adverse effects of this limbo state on claimants' mental and physical well-being, with experiences of depression, suicidality, and deteriorating health commonly reported. The deliberate imposition of uncertainty by government agencies was depicted as a form of violence, denying claimants their autonomy and dignity while perpetuating structural violence aimed at deterring asylum claimants from remaining in the UK. The narratives also highlighted how policies, such as the provision of identification cards, symbolised both hope and exclusion, amplifying feelings of alienation and discrimination among claimants, particularly transgender and gender non-conforming individuals.

Asylum applicants faced systemic marginalisation through relocation to rural and impoverished areas lacking essential services and community support networks, exacerbating vulnerability to homophobia, racism, and structural violence. The deliberate placement in poor and inhumane shelters, often in geographically isolated locations,

heightened feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and exposure to intersectional violence, adversely affecting mental and physical health, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The UK's strategy of distant relocations aimed to remove asylum claimants from public view, perpetuating a cycle of marginalisation and isolation. The chapter emphasised how the UK asylum process, through its exclusionary practices and intentional limitations on rights and resources, perpetuated structural violence against asylum claimants. From economic exclusion to digital barriers, these policies aimed to make life uncomfortable for claimants, ultimately serving as deterrents for entering or remaining in the UK.

CHAPTER SIX: Narratives of Intersectional Discrimination and Vulnerabilisation.

African asylum claimants are continuously not humanised or seen as worthy of protection from harm by the UK government. In her Aljazeera reflective opinion piece, Gopal (2023) describes how the British Empire's history of enslavement, subjugating, conquering and dispossessing peoples over four centuries continues to result in the evolution of specific ideologies (Gopal, 2023). These ideologies consider darker peoples of the global majority inferior to white Europeans or less than human altogether (Gopal, 2023). Stemming from a history of racial violence and ethnic cleansing these are the same ideologies that underpin the violent/ racist policies and systemic neglect faced by African asylum claimants. The unnecessary, preventable or avoidable harms and treatment differentially inflicted upon African persons seeking asylum, directly and indirectly, is de/constructed as structural violence (Ravid, 2022). Depending on the countries and geography, structural violence inflicted upon African persons seeking asylum takes different forms and varies in degrees. Co-researchers in the study shared narratives that highlighted patterns of overlapping systems of oppression and marginalisation, systemic barriers to accessing justice and vulnerabilisation to sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation. The chapter begins by discussing discrimination applicants experienced in the system exposing how this is underpinned by western-centric beliefs and ideas about gender and sexuality. The chapter illustrates a larger narrative of vulnerabilisation to sexual violence and exploitation and lastly illuminates barriers within the asylum process that hinder asylum claimants from effectively seeking and accessing justice. The thematic patterns discussed in this chapter are presented in Diagram 2 below.

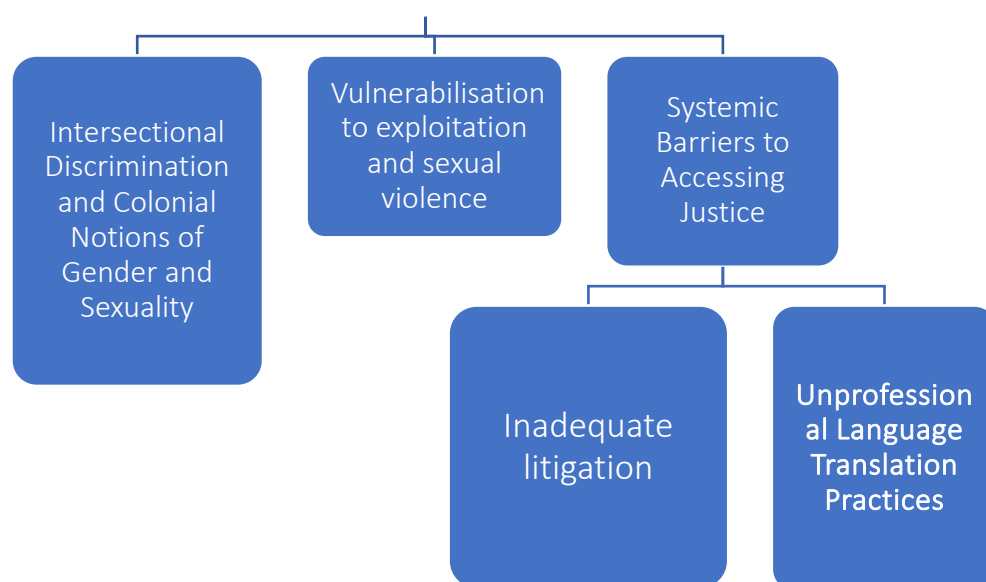


Figure 2 - Narratives of Intersectional discrimination and vulnerabilisation.

6.1 Intersectional Discrimination and Colonial Notions of Gender and Sexuality.

This narrative acknowledges how historical processes of colonisation have shaped and perpetuated overlapping systems of oppression and marginalisation based on gender, sexuality, race, and other intersecting identities. The narrative highlights how colonial legacies continue to impact contemporary social structures, power dynamics, and African sexual and gender-expansive individuals' experiences of discrimination and marginalisation within the UK asylum process. The UK, like many colonial countries, has created a system that consistently and deliberately privileges individuals who conform to western norms and ideas about sexuality and gender norms (Giametta, 2017; McKnight & River, 2020; Thomson, 2022; Powell, 2023). This disadvantages African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants who face intersecting discrimination, making it difficult for them to meet the criteria used to judge "genuine" experiences and identities falling under the LGBTIQ

category. In an excerpt below Bale shares how he was asked to provide evidence that proved his sexuality, as a gay man. When unable to provide sufficient evidence his asylum claim was rejected.

Skye: Okay, and then the letter that they sent you, rejecting, did it say why they are not giving you asylum?

Bale: Yeah, there were like three major points. They said, the first one they said I wasn't gay, that there's no proof. The other one was...the other one was, because I told them that, back home when they found out that I had a relationship with someone, I was tortured. And they said, that's not true as well.

This dialogue highlighted a concerning aspect of the asylum application process. Bale's rejection letter citing a lack of proof regarding his sexual orientation as a reason for denying his asylum claim raised important questions about the burden of proof placed on sexual and gender-expansive applicants. Additionally, the dialogue foregrounded the potential biases or misconceptions within the asylum application process. Refusing claims based on a perceived lack of evidence regarding sexual orientation disregarded the complexities and nuances of black African sexual and gender-expansive identities and failed to acknowledge the unique challenges and risks they faced. In Bale's and many other co-researchers' cases sometimes the asylum refusal outcomes stood on the premise that one's sexuality was confirmed by their relationship status. The immigration system itself assumed that individuals who had not engaged in or could not *evidence* same-sex relationships or relationships outside of heteronormative paradigms were not gay, lesbian, or queer. As a result, the system failed to recognise that relationship status does not define or prove sexuality. In fact how people globally experience and understand their sexual orientation varies significantly according to applicants' geography, culture, socialisation, gender, family background, religion, social class, and 'education' (LaViolette, 2004; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Parker & Aggleton, 2007).

There is no singular way to recognise or be gay or lesbian (LaViolette, 2004; Seidman, 2002), and there are no universal characteristics that represent sexual and gender-expansive persons any more than there are for heterosexual individuals (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). However, African sexual and gender-expansive claimants were often required to provide evidence and proof of their sexuality and gender identity that aligned with a specific 'western' model and ideology. European countries' asylum systems continue to perpetuate limited 'western' heteronormative understandings of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans, turning non-normative identities into active accomplices (Gartner, 2015). This meant that when claimants were

unable to demonstrate a history of relationships and behavioural characteristics perceived to fit this limited model, their claims were refused, as highlighted in Bale's example. In reality, many African sexual and gender-diverse persons had deep and significant relationships that did not conform to this model.

Relatedly, some western societies and asylum systems refuse to believe that persons of African heritage were and could be gay, lesbian, bisexual, non-binary, or trans. These harmful beliefs are demonstrated in the narratives shared by caseworkers MG and ES, where they examine the racism and discrimination underpinning the culture of disbelief in the immigration asylum system.

MG: And then I think maybe if I can take from my own experience, as well, is sort of an issue where sometimes if you're black African people don't believe you're gay, or don't believe there can be gay Africans. So that is a challenge in itself....

ES: There are so many issues associated with Africans claiming for asylum... I think some of those problems actually stems back to our history. And it's also racism. If I can talk to all the cases that we've dealt with. We've had a number of cases where people were told actually at the HO, that they shouldn't be gay....we're dealing with that case where she was challenged by the home office person when she was signing on, the look that this that this person (HO) would give to this person wasn't good and the comments weren't really good. I think when you look at some of the people coming from Africa, who have got that story [indistinct], so when they get into positions, like in Home office and other places, so they still hold on to those beliefs. So when they see another African coming, you know, to them saying, Oh, I didn't find themselves as LGBTI. So they feel like it's a shame to their race. So they get challenged. That is one thing. But then again, there's that (general) sense of disbelief any of our service users face that, because it's like we are not believed. I've been to like two court hearings where I was asked, whether I believed that the person was gay, when they've got kids, and they claim to be religious. I had to put my hands up and say to the person, look, I've got many religious leaders, bishops, friends of mine, who are gay. So What would you say to them? So there's that character of disbelief....

These statements reflected deeply ingrained stereotyped and misconceptions about sexual and gender-expansive identities within different communities, particularly concerning the intersection of race and sexual orientation. Drawing from her own experience, MG highlighted the challenge of being believed or accepted as sexually diverse when one is also Black African. This stereotype suggested that there was a prevailing belief that being gay

was incompatible with being African. It spoke to broader societal attitudes and perceptions regarding race, sexuality, and cultural norms, which can contribute to the erasure and marginalisation within sexual and gender-expansive communities.

In particular, the statements call attention to systemic issues and prejudices faced by African sexual and gender-expansive claimants as deeply rooted in historical factors and racism. ES's excerpt in particular indicated racial bias within the asylum process and examples of applicants explicitly told by HO officials that they shouldn't identify as gay, reflected a discriminatory attitude within the system. This bias extended to instances where Africans were met with scepticism and disbelief regarding their sexualities and gender identities, with courts questioning the authenticity of their claims based on cultural stereotypes and preconceptions.

Moreover, ES's detailed excerpt highlighted the homophobia experienced from HO staff of African heritage, a narrative raised by multiple voices in other sections of this chapter. This narrative suggested that some people within the HO and other institutions continued to hold onto discriminatory beliefs and ideologies which influenced how they handled African individuals' asylum claims. Literature highlights the prevalence of biases and discrimination faced by sexual and gender asylum claimants within the refugee protection regime, particularly in interactions with decision-makers (Danisi & Giametta, 2017; Dustin et al., 2020; UNHCR, 2010; Venturi, 2024). Decision-makers' understandings of gender and sexuality can significantly influence the outcomes of asylum claims, often resulting in adverse attitudes and biased decision-making. A UNHCR (2010) questionnaire engaging various stakeholders including NGOs, academics, legal practitioners, and other experts familiar with the refugee protection regime highlights the detrimental impact of staff's adverse attitudes on the asylum process. By highlighting the role of decision-makers attitudes in shaping asylum outcomes, this research addresses the need for greater awareness, training, and sensitivity among staff involved in the refugee protection regime. Addressing biases and promoting a more inclusive and equitable approach to assessing asylum claims is crucial for upholding the rights and dignity of African sexual and gender-expansive applicants.

Similar to reflections in ES' excerpt, the UNHCR (2010) report highlights the challenges faced by sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants not only within host countries' asylum systems but also in accessing support from service providers and NGOs. Despite some asylum systems having policies in place to assist LGBTI persons, authorities on the frontline may still demonstrate unwelcoming and prejudiced attitudes, reflecting a broader lack of understanding of the complexities surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity issues within the asylum process. This lack of understanding, coupled with adverse

staff attitudes, further exacerbated the difficulties faced by sexual and gender-expansive individuals navigating the asylum process.

In other instances, besides being disbelieved, African asylum claimants were sometimes assumed to use their sexuality as an option or excuse to resettle in the UK. A conversation between myself and Bale draws attention to the suspicion and assumptions African sexual and gender-expansive claimants faced from Home Office officials, who often assumed claimants to be lying because, *Africans cannot possibly be gay*.

Bale: I don't know, he said that most Ugandans...he said something about most Ugandans, was it Ugandans or Africans, they always claim to be gay.

This excerpt highlighted the pervasive prejudice and suspicion faced by African sexual and gender-expansive applicants. The assumptions that African claimants fabricated their sexual orientation or gender identity as a means to secure resettlement in the UK reflected deeply entrenched biases and stereotypes. It also perpetuated harmful stereotypes and undermined the validity of applicants' claims. This suspicion not only added additional layers of stress and scrutiny to the asylum process for African claimants but also reinforced racist systemic barriers to accessing protection.

White people's identities are not questioned in the way co-researchers were because *gayness* is seen as white and European, so there is no perceived contradiction, and in cases where white asylum claimants' sexual and gender identity is questioned, it is not because of race. Overall, UK asylum practices and narratives shared revealed underlying racist and colonial preferences for asylum claimants who fitted the model – western assumptions and stereotypes of what it meant to be a sexual and gender-expansive individual. Racism and structural racism have continuously been at the root of the HO's inability to read African persons as beings who could occupy the spectrum space of sexuality and gender identity. As a result, borders and immigration policies have continuously forced African asylum claimants to put extensive effort into proving their sexual and gender identities. Although the European legal framework extended its invitation for protection to identities seeking asylum based on gender and sexuality, access to the legal framework premises seems to increasingly be restricted to such persons complying with an expected physical appearance and sexuality and gender expressions (Gartner, 2015).

The 2014 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration report revealed that new Home Office (HO) caseworkers underwent a five-week intensive training, with one full day dedicated to sexual orientation (Vine, 2014). However, details on the specific content of this training, including any coverage of issues pertaining to trans people, culture, colonial history, language, mononormativity, or western-centric normative, were not provided.

Reports from co-researchers indicated instances of caseworkers expressing and demonstrating homo/transphobic attitudes, highlighting shortcomings in the effectiveness and adequacy of HO screening and training. This failure to effectively address such attitudes contributed to the HO's inability to safeguard asylum claimants, forming part of a systemic issue of structural violence resulting in heightened levels of harm and violence.

A conversation I had with legal case worker RB, reinforces sentiments magnified by ES and MG. RB, using their Ugandan client as an example, highlights the racist attitudes and unhelpful assumptions within the UK immigration system that made it challenging for the client to be accepted as gay.

RB: I think of a client that I represented from Uganda a cis gay man who claimed asylum from within prison and he was unrepresented, and his asylum claim was refused. Then at the appeal stage he was referred to me and I took it on. He had been released from prison by this point on probation. I knew that that he would have a tough time because of racist attitudes and assumptions, like persuading someone else that he is really gay. I think if he was white and you know and that that would be easier, it would take less, less effort... And so simply that white cis gay man simply just saying I'm gay I think in terms of communication that's enough right? ...I have represented white clients from Russia and Eastern Europe and [indistinct] and I think it's easier for them just to say I am gay and a few things that then derive from that for that to be understood and for that person who is saying I am gay to understand what that represents. For black and people of colour especially when you take into account you know cultural and other, other things, saying I'm gay isn't representative or I am lesbian isn't representative enough of their experiences and isn't also enough to persuade a decision maker that they are gay.....But then the thing is, that affects so many different things when you're a black or a person of colour who is queer and trans who is going through the asylum process in this country and who has multifaceted and complex needs that need to be met...

RB's reflections emphasised the intersectional challenges faced by black and people of colour persons within the asylum process. The comparison drawn between the experiences of white cisgender gay individuals and black or POC queer and trans individuals highlighted the disparities in how their identities are perceived, understood, and treated within the asylum system. RB's narrative demonstrated the systemic biases and racist attitudes that contributed to the disproportionate scrutiny, scepticism and disbelief faced by black and POC asylum claimants when disclosing their SOGI identities. Unlike their white counterparts, who required less effort to have their identities believed, black and POC persons encountered additional barriers due to being black and POC. This narrative, along with

multiple others shared during the research, builds on historical scholarship in queer migration studies, illustrating how 'Western' ideas about gender and sexuality are perpetuated as superior, standard, and authentic. Any identities that do not match these expected standards are considered "illegitimate" or not credible (Akin, 2019; Chossière, 2021; Giametta, 2017; Giametta & Havkin, 2021; O'Leary, 2008; Powell, 2020).

Similarly, NGO worker MG's narrative below highlights the different standards held against African lesbians in comparison to white lesbians.

...So are you believable as a gay person? Oh, you know, do you fit the stereotype at times? Or, depending on the questions as well, if you answer them correctly. I know for some lesbian mothers have been asked, how are they lesbian when they have children. But this is a narrative that is the same almost for every lesbian in the world, including those in the UK that, you know, they don't sometimes, they don't come out until late in life, or they're in denial of their sexuality. Yet I certainly know a couple of British born white lesbians who have gone through the same journey...Or sometimes it's, you don't look like a lesbian.

The narrative reflected on the various ways in which black and POC lesbian applicants were scrutinised, questioned and judged against stereotypes or expectations of what it means to be lesbian. MG specifically highlighted the intersectional experiences of lesbian mothers who are black or POC, who face additional scepticism and scrutiny about their sexual orientation. She drew attention to the common narrative of late-in-life coming out or denial of sexuality among lesbians, which was not exclusive to any particular racial or ethnic group. Furthermore, the narrative noted the discriminatory practice of judging individuals' sexual orientation based on their appearance. It addressed the harmful stereotype that equated certain physical attributes or appearances with specific sexual orientations. These sentiments were shared across co-researchers, including XX's descriptions of how wearing a hairpiece or presenting in a way that did not conform to traditional gender norms could lead to disbelief or scepticism from the Home Office,

so if you've go to HO when you're wearing hairpiece they will believe that you're not like, you're not a homosexual you are not a lesbian because you're putting on hair piece. They think that lesbians are supposed to behave like guys (men). So that's a common problem yes some people unfortunately they don't believe them

This discriminatory attitude reflected a broader issue within the asylum process and reinforced the need to challenge and dismantle narrow and biased assumptions about gender and sexuality in the system. It demonstrates how African asylum applicants are

consistently confronted with assumptions and stereotypes about their own identities and the experiences they have had (Gartner, 2015) which do not fit western standards of sexuality. This is supported by García-Rodríguez (2023) who discusses how asylum decision-makers arrive at their outcomes and refuse asylum claims based on western-centric normative "gayness".

Asylum jurisprudence across Europe, including the UK, is riddled with cases where decision-makers rejected claims on the basis that African gay men were not 'camp' enough or lesbian women were not 'butch' enough (Fadi, 2005; Jansen & Spijkerboe, 2011). As pointed out by co-researchers, it did not appear that the same standards were applied to white asylum claimants. The origins of fixed categories of gender and sexuality and the colonial laws in African countries are connected to white supremacy and colonialism (Kurze, 2022; Massad, 2019; Sussman, 2012). It is these same categories and assumptions about gender and sexuality that the UK asylum regime uses to demand proof of identities and, in specific ways, to be protected from 'backward' countries (Lalor & Browne, 2018). To be seen as worthy of protection, the Home Office also expected asylum claimants to be out, publicly living, and expressing their identities. Some of the questions claimants have previously been asked include why they do not have partners in the UK, why they do not know certain clubs, or why they are not out (Jansen, 2019; Jansen & Spijkerboe, 2011) as discussed in the previous chapter.

Batanai had her claim and appeals refused and during a self-recording of her experiences, she shares how the judge questioned her sexuality because she had not been out or visited gay clubs whilst in the UK.

I got denied and the judge said you know it 'cause even to be honest with you like I said 'cause I was living with my aunt so I couldn't really go to gay clubs do gay stuff you know because I was living with my aunt and you know she wouldn't have accepted it in her house but then I [indistinct] I had only been in the UK I think for about a year then as well so like things were, you know like I didn't know my way 'cause I'm always at home babysitting the kids like you know I'm so nervous and anxious every time I go outside... I was rejected I cried my eyes out at him (the judge) but they told me that because I was doing well ... they believe me lesbian but I'm not open, I'm not out like that like you know, and there's no I'm not in danger in Zimbabwe it's official four I've only been in the country for like 5 months... you are vulnerable because people like using you. I remember at one time like literally I went on Tinder connection myself you ...I'm a lesbian you know it's not you know they

don't you know, they are saying I should be open I don't know how to 'cause I was trying to be you know i joined in situation where like you know you pretend

As highlighted by Batanai, claimants resorted to desperate measures to fulfil the expectations imposed by the Home Office. For instance, Batanai recounted joining the dating application Tinder as a solution, viewing it as an attempt to meet people. Her narrative underscored the pressure on claimants to openly disclose their identities to others and society, often through evidence of participation in the local commercial "queer" scene (Gartner, 2015).

Despite being believed as a lesbian, Batanai still faced scepticism and disbelief from the judge during her asylum hearing, as she was not open about her sexual orientation due to personal circumstances and cultural norms. This highlighted the challenge of proving one's sexual orientation or gender identity to immigration officials when cultural or familial factors restricted open expression. Batanai's excerpt portrayed the complex and challenging experiences of black lesbian individuals navigating the asylum system.

The multiple narratives presented in this chapter demonstrate that asylum claimants continued to face homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia from their communities even after being resettled in the UK. However, asylum decision-makers often overlook this reality and complexity, imposing "western" standards and expectations on African claimants without considering their unique circumstances. The expectation and practice of being "out," particularly visiting gay clubs, were not universally applicable and were more common in Western/European contexts. For many African claimants, especially those from rural or remote areas, or countries where expressing their identities could result in severe consequences such as imprisonment or death, being openly "out" was not a safe option.

ES's narrative below also addresses the problem of being forced to live openly,

.... asking you, do you tell people that you're gay? Okay, so there's a case that I've been dealing with this person was asked, Have you told your GP? that you get the person thought maybe it wasn't that important, though my GP?..... there's a case we're dealing with and went to court. Actually, the person was asked. So this guy was dating, yes a man who was living with his mother. So now the problem was, have you guys told his mother? So you can imagine the guy was saying, Look, I know the feelings and actions of my mother. I don't feel like breaking her heart at that age. That's my personal life, my private life, but they're saying that means you're not open. So it's like...when you are LGBT, you have to tell everyone. But that's not what it is with other people. They don't have to tell everyone...Okay, coming from Africa, claiming asylum here, people have to know.....You see, I don't think Same thing with

other you know, its not the cases that you have to go and declare and tell everybody....people are being pressurized to come out to even people they are not supposed to come out to...Have you told your family does your family know that you are LGBT? Telling them that the family doesn't know is like you're not open. It's not easy for people who've been living a discreet life as for many years... you're asking people to be open, but have you thought about where they are living? Have you considered whether they are comfortable talking to other people, whether they are safe? You know, and also, you know, if you're seeking asylum, they'll put you in accommodation with other people who are not and other people have been raised here we had such cases.

ES's excerpt addressed the pressure faced by African asylum applicants to publicly disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. It highlighted the problematic expectation placed upon applicants when questioned about whether they had disclosed their identities to their healthcare providers or family members as a means of determining their openness about their identity. This expectation disregarded the complexities of personal relationships, cultural contexts, and safety concerns that African sexual and gender-expansive individuals faced and continued to face when navigating the asylum process. Co-researchers narratives across the two chapters showed that it could take a long time for claimants to start to feel safe in new countries and be public about their personal lives.

In addition to facing homophobia and transphobia, African asylum claimants also encounter other forms of violence such as racism, xenophobia, and other structural oppressions within queer spaces. These additional challenges make it difficult for them to feel safe or open about their identities (Electronic Immigration Network, 2019). The UK Home Office's expectation for African asylum claimants to be openly LGBTQ+ overlooked the diversity of ways individuals express their sexuality or gender identity. Many persons have previously hidden their identities and may continue to do so upon arrival, challenging the assumption that "coming out" is universal. Shulaiba (2022) argues that the dichotomy between being "out" and "in the closet" is flawed, recognising multiple levels of disclosure, including selectively sharing one's identity or living discreetly, particularly for persons prioritising privacy over visibility.

In colonial countries, visibility is essential for achieving equal rights, yet the perceived need to "come out" stems from Western heteronormativity, assuming everyone is cisgender and heterosexual unless stated otherwise (Shulaiba, 2022). This expectation is not applied to heterosexuality. Discussions from Arab activists suggest that "coming out" is rooted in Western individualism, focusing on personal identity rather than collective identity (Shulaiba, 2022). While this perspective is specific to the Arab world, it may apply to other colonised

states. Research shows that colonial countries lean toward individualism, while colonised countries lean toward collectivism (Oyserman and colleagues, 2002; Hamamura, 2012; Green and colleagues, 2015; Lomas, et al., 2023). Therefore, societies in colonised countries often prioritise privacy over visibility, and the concept of the "closet" may not exist in some cultures as "coming out" is not deemed necessary.

AG's (non-binary, legal caseworker) narrative also challenges the asylum system's expectation for black applicants to have similar coming-out narratives to white persons/claimants.

... just the expectation of immigration judges and the home office, of people seeking asylum in the UK to express their sexuality, that they will have a similar coming out narrative to a white person with immigration status in the UK, is just laughable. Like, just won't happen. It's not safe. And even if it is safe, like he said, there often are so used to behaving in a certain way because of the pressure being used, for example, in Uganda, where things have been, you know, violence has been so high and the law has been against individuals, gay people. It felt like a heightened thing in the last few years... Yeah, the expectation needs to be changed...

AG's narrative emphasised this expectation as not only unrealistic but also unsafe. The pressure to conform to expectations set by immigration authorities (and western societies) overlooked the unique challenges and risks faced by asylum applicants from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the narrative advocated for a change in this expectation, emphasising the need for immigration judges and the Home Office to not only understand and respect diverse experiences but also refrain from imposing unrealistic expectations during the asylum process.

The intersectionality of identities, such as being queer, black, or a person of colour, leads to complex and often misunderstood experiences within both queer and broader societal spaces (Shulaiba, 2022). Individuals with these intersecting identities face unique challenges and forms of marginalisation stemming from factors like socioeconomic status, migration status, ability, and religion (Shulaiba, 2022). These challenges are exacerbated within the asylum process by the biases of decision-makers, which may not adequately consider the nuanced experiences of black and people of colour with diverse sexual and gender identities. As a result, individuals navigating these intersecting identities may face external pressures and expectations from the asylum system and broader societal norms influenced by western ideals, limiting their autonomy and creating barriers to accessing protection and support. Recognising and understanding these intersecting identities and

experiences is crucial within the asylum process, alongside broader efforts to address systemic inequalities and biases perpetuating these disparities

This lack of linguistic and cultural sensitivity not only hindered effective communication between asylum claimants and decision-makers but also reinforced barriers to accessing protection. The asylum process and legal framework need to recognise and accommodate linguistic and cultural diversity, ensuring that individuals can express their identities and experiences in ways that are meaningful and authentic to them. RB, a legal case worker, echoed the sentiments expressed by co-researchers regarding the challenges faced by applicants in fitting within the established framework of *legible* queer identities. RB highlighted the barriers related to language that applicants encountered within the asylum process. The advocated changes required incorporating considerations beyond language interpretation services, to include cultural competency training for decision-makers and a more inclusive approach to terminology and communication within the asylum process. The limited access to technology, western literature and living in rural geographical locations may not have exposed some to English terms commonly used in colonial countries. However, this aspect was often overlooked by the Home Office and asylum litigators when processing asylum cases. The failure to recognise the influence of these factors on individuals' understanding and articulation of their identities (and from a western perspective) could result in misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and ultimately, unjust outcomes in asylum proceedings.

The intersection of race and sexuality in the context of coloniality can be traced back to colonial-era European preoccupations with documenting, scrutinising and criminalising 'African sexuality' (Lugones, 2007; Mbembe, 2001; McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 2002). Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule. University of California Press). These practices were rooted in racialised and moralistic standards, portraying African sexuality' as deviant, criminal and backward compared to European norms. This colonial legacy persists in contemporary systems, including the UK asylum system (Akin, 2017; Murray, 2014). Mbembe (2001) extensively discusses the colonial obsession with African bodies and sexualities, contextualising these within broader frameworks of power and control. This provides us with a critical framework for understanding the contemporary treatment of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in the asylum system. It is this colonial legacy of power and control over African bodies that persists in modern asylum systems. In countries in the global minority, including the UK asylum system, black African, and people of colour sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants are consistently subjected to invasive and morally charged scrutiny regarding their sexuality and gender identities (Giametta, 2017; Lewis, 2014; Murray, 2016).

As highlighted elsewhere in this thesis, claimants are asked to provide detailed personal narratives and evidence to "prove" their sexual orientation, reflecting a continuation of colonial-era attitudes that view black and people of colour sexualities through a European lens and a lens of suspicion and moral judgment (Giametta, 2017; Khan, 2019; Lewis, 2014). This process reinforces racial hierarchies and perpetuates the colonial mentality of assessing and controlling African and people of colour bodies and identities according to European standards, beliefs and practices.

In summary, co-researchers, legal professionals, and NGO caseworkers discussed instances of intersectional discrimination and biased assumptions rooted in colonial beliefs and understanding, regarding gender and sexuality within asylum processes. They noted how conformity to 'western' norms privileged some applicants while others faced identity scrutiny for not fitting these norms. Asylum claimants perceived to deviate from western gender and sexuality frameworks risked refusal, particularly if they couldn't demonstrate approved relationship histories or behaviours. Personal accounts and legal caseworker observations highlighted how HO asylum practices perpetuated violence through racialised policies, leading to differential treatment based on race. The pervasive hetero-normative and essentialist views of sexual and gender minorities, particularly affecting African claimants, were utilised to dismiss their asylum claims. This culture of disbelief, along with culturally insensitive understandings and adverse staff attitudes, compounded a structurally violent and racist asylum system.

6.2 Vulnerabilisation to Sexual Violence and Exploitation.

A report by the British Red Cross and UNHCR (2022) found that UK asylum applicants suffer sexual violence, intimate partner violence and forms of exploitation such as domestic servitude and ⁴⁰modern slavery (British Red Cross & UNHCR, 2022). Various investigations indicate that asylum applicants placed in accommodation, including the HO hotels across the UK, encounter sexual violence, harassment, humiliation, and verbal and emotional abuse from senior hotel staff (Kelly, 2023; Townsend, 2021). Inside sources from HO subcontractor Serco described a culture of 'institutional abuse' with how asylum claimants were treated in the accommodation provided to them (Kelly, 2023). The allegations demonstrate that women, specifically, are sexually violated and exploited inside unsafe shelters and hotels, (Townsend, 2021). This section discusses narratives of exploitation and sexual violence African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants

⁴⁰ Modern slavery lacks a legal definition but is employed as a broad term encompassing various practices including human trafficking, forced marriage, forced labour and debt bondage (UN, 2022).

experienced within the asylum system, as well as how they were vulnerabilised to exploitation and sexual violence by the asylum system. I begin by discussing sexual violence and then follow with experiences of exploitation.

Co-researchers and case workers told stories of sexual violence suffered from within HO accommodation. The sexual violence was committed by hotel staff members contracted by HO as well as by other asylum applicants. In a self-recorded WhatsApp audio, Batanai narrates the experience of a senior hotel worker who sexually exploited asylum claimants sheltered in the hotel accommodation under his management.

Batanai: ... one of the guys, one of the leaders there, one of the top people in charge, I remember even in Croydon, one of the guys that was in charge of the hotel, he was, he would take advantage of all these asylum claimants and sleep with them and things like that but I think I think he since got sacked because I think someone reported him, remember you are vulnerable.....

Batanai's account highlighted abuse of power and vulnerability. It sheds light on the exploitation of vulnerable asylum applicants, and hotel staff in positions of authority. Additionally, Batanai's reference to vulnerability served as a reminder of the power dynamics at play in such situations. It demonstrated the HO's failure to safeguard and protect vulnerabilised asylum claimants in their care and the need for safeguarding the safety, rights, dignity and well-being of marginalised asylum applicants. In the same self-recorded audio, Batanai shared her own experiences of sexual harm and abuse of power from a senior hotel staff.

Batanai: ... know yeah so we I met a man (at the hotel), he was one of the leaders like one of the man in charge who told me you know [indistinct] I can help you with a good lawyer and they can they can help you with your application and little did I know. So now he says OK I'm gonna come and pick you up because I'm going to be off tomorrow...it was a Saturday...I followed this man he came to pick me up, so now were in Wakeford and he was driving. I said where are we going and he said we're going to Leeds and he said you sleep over at my house. At the time I had figured out that this is not to help me with Home Office, actually he just wants to sleep with me. I remember I even took a video because I started getting scared... I had gotten a phone from one of my friends. She had given me her phone to use when I was going there because I told her that just for safety, so she said that you know just take her phone and call me like if anything happens you can call me or whatever because when I came I didn't have a phone [indistinct] so I just recorded the whole

conversation he was trying to touch my lap so I just flipped the phone around and it was kinda recording him...

Batanai's descriptions of a senior hotel staff misusing his position of power to isolate her from the hotel and others under the guise that he was helping her highlighted the HO's significant failings in safeguarding claimants. This narrative spotlighted the broader issue of abuse faced by vulnerabilised applicants navigating the asylum system and the risks they faced, including abuse by individuals in positions of power who took advantage of their desperate situation. Batanai's narrative revealed that marginalisation and disadvantage within the asylum system created an environment where staff members could abuse their power and exploit claimants. Perpetrators used their knowledge of the vulnerability of asylum claimants and targeted them for exploitation, knowing they were isolated, lacked strong networks, lived in fear of authority figures, and relied on others for support. This abuse of that knowledge/ power and manipulation led to exploitation.

It was this lack of care that likely allowed and gave contracted staff permission to mistreat claimants in their care. After all, neither the state nor the HO cared nor humanised asylum claimants, particularly black African asylum claimants. Refugee women in the asylum system, in particular, face a disproportionate risk of violence against women, including rape and other forms of sexual violence (Refugee Council, 2009). This reality indicates the heightened vulnerability of women in the asylum system to such forms of violence. While women refugees and asylum claimants are primarily affected, research also indicates that men in the refugee community also experience sexual violence during transit and upon arrival (Belanteri et al., 2020). Despite this, the majority of migrant survivors, regardless of gender, did not report their experiences or seek help from authorities. Conversations with Batanai and others revealed that none of them had reported their experiences to anyone. Many of them found that the research space was the first time they shared their experiences openly. Previous experiences of trauma and negative interactions with individuals in positions of power have caused asylum claimants to fear and avoid contact with authorities. When persons share their experiences of rape and sexual assault they are mostly punished and shamed for doing so (Dudhia, 2020). Besides shame, and the risk of being shunned by the community are also barriers to reporting sexual violence (Dudhia, 2020).

Furthermore, women – both trans and cis-heterosexual women, as well as non-binary persons within the asylum system were vulnerable to sexual harassment and sexual violence perpetrated by other asylum claimants and refugees. Below MG's Zoom interview provides an account of sexual and gender-expansive persons suffering sexual assaults from other asylum claimants in shared accommodation.

...there are some instances when people have been sexually assaulted, and you know, rape in such spaces by other refugees, because of their sexuality, so they chose to abandon the accommodation or sometimes they just stay with those issues..... including sometimes in a situation where somebody has been sexually assaulted and even though it's reported, we have got organisations like Galop, that support victims of hate crime, that sometimes these people who are also assaulting other refugees and in the same space, so it's quite, that's quite a challenge.

This excerpt emphasised the distressing reality experienced by sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, exposing the myriad challenges and risks they faced while residing in shared accommodations with non-sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants. Reports indicate that refugees of all ages and genders face a significantly heightened risk of sexual violence while in detention or sheltered in Home Office-run hotels (Coomaraswamy, 1995; WGRZ, 2023). In a 2022 ITV news clip, charity worker Christabel Yeboah reported that the charity had observed rape allegations, sexual assault, and sexual harassment of asylum claimants by individuals both inside and outside the hotels, including by security guards contracted by the Home Office (Corker, 2022).

In cases where asylum applicants were forced to leave HO-run accommodation due to abuse or substandard conditions, this act of desperation and resistance frequently resulted in houselessness and destitution. This situation further exposed asylum claimants to the risk of sexual violence and other various forms of exploitation. An excerpt from AG highlights that when asylum claimants become destitute and houseless, they are susceptible to domestic servitude and sexual exploitation.

AG:....in that you can't work. You're living in poverty. Sometimes we experience homelessness, and they are exploited by other people sometimes, whether it be domestic servitude or sexual exploitation for a roof over their head. You know, you you're just basically living in poverty...

Here AG underlines how asylum applicants' experiences overlap and influence each other. In the case of asylum applicants, houselessness could lead to situations beyond poverty, often leading to other forms of intersectional oppression. Asylum claimants' vulnerabilised circumstances made them targets for exploitation by others who offered basic necessities such as shelter in exchange for labour or other forms of exploitation, including domestic servitude or sexual exploitation. This exploitation further exacerbated their already precarious situation and called attention to the urgent need for comprehensive support systems and protection mechanisms for vulnerable individuals within refugee communities. Asylum claimants also experienced violence from persons known to them, including family

members, intimate partners, friends, and others from their community. Miremba's excerpt below highlights that even persons in the community also took advantage of them, under the guise of offering support and help.

Miremba: *Someone who was accommodating me took advantage of my desperate situation and got me pregnant.*

The phrase, "took advantage of my desperate situation" highlighted Miremba's vulnerable circumstance, due to their immigration status or other challenging circumstances. The individual she initially perceived as providing support took advantage of her vulnerability abusing their power and trust. Although Miremba did not explicitly mention sexual violence in this narrative the use of the phrase, "got me pregnant" demonstrated that she was not a willing participant in this situation and emphasised the lack of agency and consent. The sexual violence resulted in a child that Miremba was raising as a single lesbian parent. Miremba communicated that the sexual violence had not been reported to authorities. She did not wish to share any further details of the violence. Similar patterns were observed among other asylum claimants who had experienced sexual violence. They declined to talk about and share details of their experiences. Consequently, the research refrained from pressing for these narratives.

The decolonial and feminist methodological praxis of the research meant it was important not to exert pressure on co-researchers to share lived experiences they found re-traumatising or difficult to speak about. To be decolonial was also to accept and be comfortable with refusals to share difficult experiences, to be comfortable with silences and to accept incomplete stories. Tuck & Yang (2014) theorise refusal to settler colonialism as not merely a no, a rejection, but a generative stance. They view refusal as "a critical response to the proliferation of damage-centered studies, rescue research, and pain tourism" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p811). I understood therefore that when co-researchers said, "I don't want to talk about this" as Miremba and several other co-researchers stated, that was a good enough reason and that the research was not entitled to co-researchers' pain, painful experiences or trauma. Instead, I asked co-researchers, "Where do you want to go?" which enabled autonomy and agency, in co-researchers, to direct and lead on experiences they wanted to share with me and with the world. As a result, even though experiences excluded from the conversations were important to the research, I aimed not to be a voyeur to people's pain. Instead, I aimed to bear witness to co-researchers' pain, trauma and violence they suffered, and empathetically walk through these experiences with them. Although we allowed the silence to be there, honoured it and accepted the refusals to share, I also understood why the silence and refusals occurred. In some cases, the silence itself also spoke to the depth of trauma. Silence and refusal to share can also be interpreted as

communication (Acheson, 2007, 2008) and silence and language are recognised as inseparable in communication research (Avila, 2021).

In other instances, co-researchers shared experiences of domestic servitude. For example, Batanai, Abby and a few other co-researchers were exploited working in sectors related to childcare, domestic work and care work. In a self-recorded recording, Batanai states, *"like literally I was a babysitter for almost 4 years, for free"* as well as similar experiences from Abby, *"..but then also staying with her it made like I'm a full-time maid. I was made as a maid"*. Caseworkers added to these conversations highlighting how asylum applicants pushed into poverty sometimes end in domestic servitude, *"If you're not eligible (for asylum support) for any reasons... some people can resort to working illegally... some people can fall into exploitation or domestic servitude"* (MG) and how limbo and claim refusals, *"pushes people to go underground, to not regularise their status, into exploitation into potentially being trafficked around the UK, you know it's just like there are so many, you open the door to so many more dangers..."*. These statements highlighted the complex and precarious nature of seeking asylum and the various challenges applicants encountered when trying to secure basic needs like shelter. When asylum applicants were denied basic support they needed, it not only demoralised them but also pushed them into other precarious situations. For many co-researchers when they relied on friendships, community, and irregular and illegal employment to secure their basic needs they were vulnerabilised to exploitation, including domestic servitude and other forms of free or underpaid labour. This included being trafficked around the UK, exposing claimants to physical and mental dangers.

The narratives of co-researchers highlighted how desperation and destitution drive asylum applicants into situations of exploitation. Research conducted by the UNHCR (2022) supports this, highlighting that inadequate support exposes asylum claimants to potential harm. The research provides examples of vulnerabilised asylum claimants being forced into modern slavery, including domestic servitude, sexual and labour exploitation, and forced criminality (UNHCR, 2022). The focus on immigration enforcement by the HO, rather than on the safety and protection of vulnerabilised asylum claimants, not only increases their risk of exploitation but also leaves them unable to report their experiences of exploitation (UNHCR, 2022). This emphasises the urgent need for a shift in approach to prioritise the safety and well-being of asylum applicants. Precarious asylum applicants, especially women are more likely to be employed in domestic and care work (Degani, 2022). It is in these sectors where migrant women are especially susceptible to abuse and exploitation, as migrants in the caregiving and domestic sectors are and continue to be one of the least protected work groups (Degani, 2022). The UK government's hostile policies and practices continue to push

asylum claimants into forced labour, predominantly low-skilled and low-wage settings and often outside of 'formal' employment relations (Lewis & colleagues, 2015).

Other conversations with co-researchers revealed additional instances of gendered violence co-researchers were vulnerabilised to, at the hands of partners and family members. Below, Batanai shares her experience of abuse in an intimate relationship during the asylum process while living in limbo.

...I met a girlfriend you know I met a lady, she was Zimbabwean, but she was still in the closet. I think she was also dating a man so yeah we're together you know [indistinct] but you know when you're vulnerable it comes to a point where she would disrespect you and her man is coming she would ask me to leave and I remember she said she was going to help with my papers (asylum process) so I just stayed [indistinct] because she's toxic and [indistinct] stress that was manipulative and all, and then every time I try to leave her, like breakup they would say I'm gonna get you deported... she was using me like you know she didn't want to go anywhere with me, she didn't introduce me to her family... I was only like 20 when I met her and she was I think 39 ... so yeah the abuse continued...and I think that as well just depressed me like I felt worthless' cause like I said you've got no papers...

Batanai's account formed part of a pattern of gendered abuse shared by other persons who shared experiencing violence from family and partners who used their insecure immigration statuses to manipulate them into remaining in the abusive relationship dynamics.

Caseworker, MG's narrative below highlights the form of gendered violence trans asylum applicants suffered during the pandemic.

...things like that, or a trans woman was going through the same experience but being abused by a partner. Having to find time to support her to leave was difficult because of (COVID-19) lockdown.

MG's narrative describing a trans woman in a domestic abusive situation highlighted how lockdown measures added an extra layer of complexity to an already difficult situation, making it difficult to provide necessary support and assistance. Studies documenting the impact of the pandemic on victims and survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) support MG's account, revealing difficulties in accessing resources, meeting basic needs, experiencing coercive control by abusive partners, and facing unique safety concerns due to physical distancing (Bullinger et al., 2021; Lyons & Brewer, 2021; Mittal & Singh, 2020; Segalo & Fine, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2020; Plášilová et al., 2021). Similarly, in other instances, lesbian applicants faced the risk of trafficking and forced marriages by family

members. An excerpt from MG shows African lesbian applicants in the asylum system vulnerabilised to abuse from family members.

... for some we can have some women who live in abusive situations, for example, recently worked with a woman who was living in a, you know, a situation where she was being coerced to go back home to get married. You know, she was forced to take voluntary return. She didn't want to, but she was forced to. And she couldn't talk on the phone while the person who was putting her in this situation was there, or the abusers they shouldn't talk on the phone, which means it was really difficult to support her, which means that we had to sort of wait and find ways to communicate...

These accounts represented a pattern of gendered violence African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants were vulnerabilised during their period of navigating the asylum system. It illustrated how vulnerabilised applicants could be manipulated and exploited in relationships, especially when they were dependent on others for support and assistance. In particular, women trapped in abusive situations could be coerced into returning home for forced marriages or fear and threats of deportation were used to exploit them. This showed how asylum applicants, especially women - both cis and trans, were often subjected to manipulation and control by others, leaving them feeling helpless and without agency. COVID-19 lockdown measures exacerbated the difficulties of leaving abusive situations by limiting access to support networks and resources. Overall, the pattern of narratives shared highlighted the importance of addressing the complex needs of asylum applicants, especially women and trans persons, who faced abuse and coercion, and the necessity of tailored support services that prioritised their safety and autonomy.

Victims or survivors of gender-based violence, who had already been marginalised by the asylum process, were further marginalised during the pandemic. Despite the escalating violence against sexual and gender-expansive individuals globally, there is limited understanding of victimisation among specific subgroups such as men who have sex with men (MSM) migrants but do not identify as gay (Alessi, et al., 2021). In the UK, there is also limited research addressing the experiences of trans women asylum claimants and refugees, and the associated risks of gendered violence and other health vulnerabilities (Perez-Brumer et al., 2023). Transgender claimants face anti-transgender and anti-immigration stigma globally, including within the UK's LGBTQI social scene, leading to increased exposure to physical and sexual violence (Camminga, 2019; Castro et al., 2022; Hermaszewska et al., 2022; Manganini, 2020; Muñoz Martínez et al., 2020). Co-researchers' narratives demonstrated that transgender claimants, especially those with multiple stigmatised identities, experience migration differently from other asylum claimants based on sexuality. Trans asylum claimants encounter multiple systems of oppression affecting their

migration trajectories (Perez-Brumer et al., 2023). For instance, trans women endure extreme intersectional stigma (Logie et al., 2011; Turan et al., 2029; Aguayo-Romero et al., 2021), leading to violence, as highlighted in MG's narrative.

Globally, studies documenting the impact of the pandemic on victims and survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) support MG's account, revealing difficulties in accessing resources, meeting basic needs, experiencing coercive control by abusive partners, and facing unique safety concerns due to physical distancing (Bullinger et al., 2021; Lyons & Brewer, 2021; Mittal & Singh, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2020; Plášilová et al., 2021; Segalo & Fine, 2020). Sexual and gender-expansive claimants with family members in the UK were particularly vulnerable to exploitation, with homophobia and transphobia serving as driving factors. In some instances, claimants were extorted for money under threat of being outed, as described here by Batanai, "...*they are using me to pay for like my uncle...*", who recounted her family taking her earnings and sending them back home. Additionally, lesbian applicants were at risk of being trafficked into forced marriages by disapproving family members. Although the Trafficking in Persons Protocol does not explicitly include forced marriage as a form of exploitation, some countries have reported instances of trafficking in persons for forced marriage (United Nations, 2022). In cases of trafficking through forced marriage, individuals have not consented to enter the marriage (Filip, 2022) and this is similar to experiences sometimes suffered by sexual and gender-expansive persons. While there is limited research on forced marriages among sexual and gender-expansive individuals, narratives from co-researchers indicated that trafficking through forced marriage also affected African sexual and gender-expansive claimants in the diaspora.

In summary, narratives of sexual violence and exploitation highlighted the UK government's consistent failure to implement safeguarding mechanisms to protect African sexual and gender-expansive applicants from various forms of violence, particularly sexual violence, and exploitation. The accounts shared highlighted instances where sexual and gender-diverse asylum claimants were subjected to sexual violations by individuals contracted by the HO, as well as abuse from other claimants and refugees residing in HO accommodation. Furthermore, narratives shared detailed instances of abuse and exploitation perpetrated by individuals known to co-researchers, such as intimate partners, family members, and members of their community. It demonstrated how due to their overlapping identities, experiences and marginalisation by the asylum system, co-researchers were vulnerabilised to other violences. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated the precarious situation of many asylum claimants in the UK and globally, further marginalising them in terms of access to infrastructure, resources, and societal support. This systemic neglect and failure of duty of care from the state left claimants

vulnerable to additional forms of violence, including exploitation, sexual violence, modern slavery, and intimate partner violence.

6.3 Systemic Barriers to Accessing Justice.

The over-arching narrative of systemic barriers to accessing justice refers to the pervasive and inherent barriers within the asylum process that hinder asylum claimants from effectively seeking or receiving fair treatment and or being granted asylum (Crosby Medlicott, 2022; De Maio & Ansell, 2018; Dustin & Ferreira, 2021; Gruber et al., 2021; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Lopes Andrade et al., 2020). Barriers can manifest in various forms and at different stages of the asylum process, often affecting sexual and gender asylum applicants with intersectional identities disproportionately. Systemic barriers vary depending on the country, asylum process, legal framework and migration policies. During the research sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants identified facing numerous barriers when accessing justice. Some of the systematic barriers identified include issues related to legal representation and language barriers. As a result, the narrative of systemic barriers to accessing justice discusses inadequate litigation and unprofessional language translators, as identified by co-researchers.

6.3.1 Inadequate Litigation.

Navigating the UK asylum process requires the support of a legal representative to help asylum claimants build a strong case (Crosby-Medlicott, 2022). However, most claimants cannot afford private legal representation and rely on legal aid firms, which face systemic underfunding (Crosby-Medlicott, 2023; Wilding, 2021, 2022). More than 40% of claimants are denied legal aid, making it challenging for them to receive adequate representation. Additionally, many claimants struggle to access legal aid due to distant lawyer locations and a lack of funds for travel (Crosby-Medlicott, 2022). The remaining legal aid providers are often overwhelmed with caseloads (Wilding, 2019, 2021, 2022). Co-researchers reported resorting to exploitative private immigration solicitors due to the lack of effective and affordable legal representation. In such cases, they received poor legal assistance or encountered solicitors who failed to deliver paid-for services. RB described the impact of legal aid cuts on asylum claimants' access to justice during a Zoom interview.

...to understand the situation to gently take a statement that is as detailed as possible it takes a number of appointments. So I think the cuts to Legal Aid specifically impact on black and people of colour who are queer and trans. And I

think yeah I also think that in turn I think the way that the structures exist both the silent decision making structure and the advocacy structure, so the advocacy structure exists to, you know must protect clients and, and represent them and in their asylum claims versus the decision making structure which exists to maintain borders and you know they are not as oppositional as we are made to believe. I think they are actually really part of a singular structure. I think the one structurally harmful way that the advocacy framework has sedimented is to just be very [indistinct] and this is you know amplified by the cuts to Legal Aid, is to further dehumanise asylum applicants to treat their experiences and their personal information as data to be really in some ways cavalier with that data that is private information. And to actually further take away agency from asylum applicants... I sometimes think when I give what advice to people that are referred to me you know through the community and whatever and I am just talking with people and they have not got a lawyer and I am giving this advice, I do try and incorporate that a bit an explanation about the way how Legal Aid cases are funded and, and why it is that you know a lawyer might do less work but actually how the lawyer is able to take the risk and do more work. But that's actually a risk the lawyer's organisation financially which is why they might not want to do that...

RB's narrative highlighted how black and people of colour sexual and gender-expansive claimants in particular were disproportionately affected by legal aid cuts, suffering layers of barriers to accessing legal justice. Their narrative drew attention to the existing structures within the asylum system, highlighting that both advocacy and decision-making structures were part of a singular structure aimed at maintaining borders rather than being oppositional. This structural harm was exacerbated by the dismissive treatment of asylum applicants' experiences and personal information as mere data, further diminishing their agency in the asylum process. Further highlighted in the narrative was the importance of informing asylum applicants about the limitations of legal aid funding and why lawyers may be unable to provide extensive support due to financial risks faced by their organisations. This highlighted the complexities and challenges faced by asylum applicants navigating a system where legal representation is limited by funding constraints.

RB's sentiments echo those expressed by members of the African Equality Foundation, as detailed in Chapter Five, and on social media platforms discussing UK NGOs that exploited African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants under the guise of support ("UnfollowMFJ – Truth blog," 2017). In the UK, legal aid has historically served as a safety net for many asylum claimants and vulnerable members of British society (Culbert, 2018). However, extensive reductions in legal aid funding by the coalition government in

2012 as an austerity measure have had significant repercussions (Culbert, 2018). The lack of legal aid has resulted in many individuals facing barriers to accessing fair legal representation, leading to overwhelmed litigators and law firms with excessive caseloads (Culbert, 2018). Consequently, many vulnerable asylum applicants, including child refugees, are left to represent themselves in court (Amnesty International, 2016)

Challenges to accessing adequate legal advice were mirrored in the narratives shared during the research. Co-researchers like Ruth, as reflected in the excerpt below, highlights ways in which she found legal representation to be lacking, incompetent, and inadequate, echoing points raised by RB.

The first one, told me about Duncan Lewis, the friend who used the lawyer... yeah it was Duncan Lewis the friend of ours, that was helped my them. So she really recommended them and I think she just got really lucky she got someone who was so active and they helped her out with her case like ASAP. And then I just got this Indian woman that just took her time, on my God I would remind her and you know, you cannot really reach her, she calls using no caller ID. Imagine our legal lawyer, like in case you have to reach out, how are you going to call back? So that's how she called me, no caller ID or the office number that she rarely picked, like she was always out of office. And she will get back to me like after two weeks or three weeks... I just feel like it was too much. I had to change to another lawyer because I explained to her everything when I was going for my operation. And I told her you know what, stop working on the work permit. This has come up, I'm going for an operation, I'm not going to be able to for work even though I was requesting you since last year to request for a permit because I was just home doing nothing....And then you can't believe after my operation, she calls me after months. And she's like, I'm still waiting for a reply for sending your work permit. I asked her, I do not need a work permit right now. I have twelve pins in my leg, I can hardly stand and we talking about a work permit. I don't need a work permit for anything right now. I just need an interview. You know, so honestly, she did not help me out at all. So I just got this other lawyer recently, like beginning of the month, no not beginning of the month, two weeks ago. It's just a fresh start now.....

Ruth's account illustrated the challenges faced by asylum applicants in navigating the legal system when dealing with unresponsive or ineffective legal representation. This narrative also highlighted the significant impact of the quality of legal representation, on the experiences of asylum claimants. The contrast in experiences between lawyers emphasised the importance of effective communication, responsiveness, and proactive engagement from legal representatives in supporting asylum applicants through the complex asylum process.

Ruth demonstrated that the lack of timely and appropriate support from lawyers significantly impacted their ability to address their immigration status and access necessary resources.

When co-researchers like Ruth were forced to submit "fresh" claims, due to legal barriers, they remained stuck in the asylum system for longer. This delay hindered their ability to attain legal status within a reasonable timeframe and move forward with their lives. In line with experiences shared by other co-researchers, Mary also highlights the difficulties she faced with her immigration lawyer. Dissatisfaction with their lawyers' lack of communication was an apparent pattern in the narratives they told. When asked about the timeline of her case and the two years that elapsed before being invited for the substantive interview part of Mary's response included the excerpt below.

"well my lawyer hasn't really said much she just keeps saying yeah the Home Office takes their time well we'll have to keep waiting. I mean if it's all just so [indistinct]... well I keep asking her the same thing (to chase up) and she says I have asked them, but she never really gives me the letters she's written to them. She never shares those with me so I'm not sure if she's written them or not...I paid her, I paid 1008 pounds... at the time, I wasn't given the guidance or legal options about Legal Aid. And then the first lawyer I met just said pay me this much and I'll help you with your case, because first of all I was also running out of time. I was afraid my visa was going to run out and then not have issues so I settled for the first lawyer that I come across..."

This narrative shared several issues concerning legal representation. It expressed co-researchers' dissatisfaction with lawyers' lack of communication and transparency with applicants about their claims. The lack of communication caused uncertainty in co-researchers, about the claims' progress. The narrative highlighted the challenges related to communication, transparency, affordability, and access to legal assistance. It called attention to the importance of providing clear and accessible information about legal rights and options to individuals seeking asylum, as well as the need for ethical and transparent legal representation to ensure fair and effective outcomes within the asylum process.

Mary's experience resonated with situations faced by other asylum claimants upon their arrival in the UK, where they lacked access to sufficient information about their rights and available legal assistance. Without adequate information and access to resources, many asylum claimants were vulnerable to receiving poor legal representation and exploitation. Her narrative highlighted the exploitation by various actors within and outside the asylum system, including some immigration lawyers who charged exorbitant fees but provided minimal assistance with applicants' cases. Often, asylum claimants are unable to

obtain the necessary legal representation needed to improve their chances of being granted protection (Refugee Council, 2019). NGOs have also reported asylum claimants' experiences of immigration lawyers who disappeared behind *a wall of unanswered calls, emails and hopeless messages*, leaving claimants in legal limbo and destitution (Refugee Council, 2019). Difficulties in accessing quality legal advice, although an overlooked phenomenon (Refugee Council, 2019) are not unusual across experiences of co-researchers in the research, and across experiences of asylum claimants more broadly as reported by Refugee Council in 2019. This is a consequence of austerity measures, which include reductions in legal aid for advice and representation, inadequate legal assistance persists, leaving claimants in a state of social and legal uncertainty (Refugee Council, 2019). While it is crucial to bring attention to the structural issues surrounding legal aid that disadvantaged asylum claimants and affected their chances of resettlement, it is important to note that this is not an attack on the work of legal advisors and immigration lawyers. Rather, it aims to highlight the limitations of the system in which immigration legal professionals operate (See Wilding, 2019, 2021, 2022), the financial burdens placed on asylum claimants and the inadequacy of legal support sometimes offered. All of these are barriers to asylum applicants' rights to access fair and just support, as emphasised by RB and AG.

The legal aid framework made it difficult for practitioners and advisors to meet the full needs of their clients. This is highlighted in a quote from RB below, who identifies how legal aid limited the level of support offered to asylees and placed legal advisors in positions where they are forced to extend themselves and stretch the resources available to them.

RB - No exactly and the thing is Legal Aid is extremely difficult framework in as a practitioner and as an advisor, and you know it's impossible to meet the needs of you know your clients you are often the only person that this person has regular contact with. Your role is limited but you find yourself voluntarily or at least trying to fit it within the relevance of the case undertaking referrals and contact with other people and trying to extend support networks and meet up with you know things and it's really really difficult.

RB identified the complexity and limitations of legal aid that made it challenging for practitioners to adequately meet the needs of their clients. The framework's constraints restricted the scope of support and services that could be provided to applicants, despite their often complex and multifaceted needs. Secondly, the narrative emphasised the significant role that legal practitioners and advisors play in the lives of asylum applicants, often serving as their primary point of contact and source of support. This placed additional pressure on practitioners to provide holistic support beyond legal representation, including referrals, networking, and accessing additional resources to address their clients' needs.

However, the inherent difficulties and limitations within the legal aid framework created barriers for practitioners to be fully able to meet the diverse and complex needs of sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants. Despite these challenges, there were practitioners such as RB, AG and many others who strived to provide comprehensive support within the confines of the framework they worked in, to ensure the best possible outcomes for their clients.

These accounts correlated with narratives shared by co-researchers in the study, highlighting the impact of austerity cuts⁴¹ to legal aid on immigration lawyers and the broader immigration legal system. These cuts have led to increased workload pressures and poor remuneration for lawyers, forcing them to diversify away from legal aid work (The Bar Council, 2022). Consequently, the capacity of the immigration legal system has been further reduced and resulted in poor litigation and barriers to accessing justice for African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. Cuts to legal aid have also contributed to the implementation of 'hostile environment' policies, making it increasingly challenging for asylum claimants and communities with precarious status to remain in the UK (Culbert, 2018). The cuts created a structurally violent system that excludes claimants unable to afford legal fees. It is a hostile and dysfunctional system that re-traumatised asylum claimants and perpetuates harm to force them to leave while deterring other immigrants from coming to the UK.

Cuts to legal aid represented one of the state's tactics to maintain a hostile asylum process and RB's quote below represented the frustrations felt by litigators.

RB - So then what could be a point of resentment to me as a legal advisor is that I am having to devote more time to clients who don't have that support network around them and that pulls me away from other cases. And then it is those other cases where a client is perhaps has more support it's a difficult balancing act...The individuals that are coming you don't understand what else you are balancing their cases against. And so it can be difficult...They want it to be as complex as possible...

⁴¹ In the UK, austerity cuts specifically refer to the significant reduction in public spending initiated by the government following the 2008 global financial crisis. Cuts to legal aid refer to reductions in government funding for these services. These cuts have been implemented over several years, significantly impacting the availability and scope of legal aid in the UK. The major changes were introduced through the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO), which came into effect in April 2013.

Bringing attention to the challenges and tensions faced by legal advisors when balancing their caseloads, the narrative expressed the resentment towards having to devote more time to clients without a support network, as this pulled practitioners away from other cases. The frustration stemmed from the complexity of managing multiple cases simultaneously, where some applicants, such as sexual and gender-expansive individuals may require more attention and support due to their vulnerable and vulnerabilised circumstances. The frustrated articulated highlighted the challenges of balancing competing demands within the legal advisory role, concerning clients with varying levels of support and the complexities inherent in asylum cases.

Furthermore, co-researchers highlighted litigators' lack of awareness and understanding regarding nuanced issues related to culture, race, gender and sexuality, particularly beyond western perspectives and practices. Legal caseworker RB articulated these concerns and emphasised the significance of lawyers being culturally sensitive and knowledgeable about the dynamics and subtleties of race, culture, and their connection to gender and sexuality. In the following excerpt, RB stresses the importance of litigators understanding the experiences of being queer, non-binary, black, or a person of colour, as well as the cultural, historical, and political context of being African within the asylum system.

..and you know nothing is particularly safe from it being weaponised against you whilst you are navigating an asylum process. So if you don't have a legal representative who is alert to these things, and who know what being queer a non-binary person of colour is at least you know, so numerous other significant markers are different. The different [indistinct] in terms of privilege and power for someone who is navigating an asylum process. But there are some things that, that position me in at least a better place than other white colleagues particularly white cis straight colleagues in terms of understanding how these difficulties with communication can lead to harm. And so many things and how interrelated everything is and understand the nuance of this stuff. So I think it can become a bit of a web where, where people then just lose out on, on the support that they need... - Zoom interview

African individuals seeking asylum based on gender and sexuality were notably vulnerable within the immigration process due to homophobia, transphobia, racism, and sexism. Moreover, when they encountered disadvantages related to race, culture, and geography, they were exposed to structural and racialised violence not experienced by other migrants. Therefore, it was crucial for lawyers representing African asylum claimants to possess a deeper awareness of these intersecting issues. RB emphasised the significance of their own positionality – being queer, non-binary, and of Indian heritage – as an advantage in understanding these intersecting issues compared to their white cis heterosexual

colleagues. This recognition highlighted the necessity for cultural sensitivity and awareness among legal representatives. Consequently, litigators from marginalised identities and experiences were more likely to comprehend the intersecting issues affecting African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants, as RB highlighted. For instance, they would likely be attentive to how claimants' disclosed experiences could potentially be weaponised against them in the asylum process. Conversely, a lack of understanding, awareness, and alertness to these challenges could result in harm to asylum claimants. Yeo (2020) documented how black clients in the immigration system are treated differently than white individuals. Despite this, Home Office (HO) lawyers deny that the differential treatment is based on race, attributing it instead to economic, social, or cultural differences (Yeo, 2020). However, evidence from existing literature and co-researchers' narratives demonstrated the falsity of this claim. Consequently, the HO was essentially ⁴²gaslighting groups of people who endured racism, structural racism, and racial structural injustices within the UK immigration system.

Unfortunately, immigration legal training was not tailored to provide practitioners and advisors with the necessary information to understand, articulate, and challenge racism and structural racism. While structural racism continues to pervade the UK immigration system, immigration lawyers remain largely unaware of the history of British immigration law (Yeo, 2020). Previous inquiries have recommended a more diverse teaching of British history as part of the UK curriculum (Macpherson, 1999; Williams' Windrush Lessons Learned Review, 2020). It has been suggested that the Windrush scandal was partly enabled by the poor understanding of Britain's colonial history, the history of migration, and the history of black Britons within UK society, both among the public and institutions (Williams' Windrush Lessons Learned Review, 2020). However, little to no progress has been made in implementing these recommendations (Yeo, 2020). Consequently, immigration litigators, even those committed to seeking justice for their clients, continue to be at risk of causing further harm or perpetuating structural violence.

Furthermore, legal advisors described how burnout resulting from the overwhelm of caseloads had an impact on their capacity and ability to provide adequate support to claimants. AG explained during a Zoom interview how overwhelmed and under-resourced some of the legal advisers were with asylum-seeking cases. AG's excerpt below describes the burnout experienced by legal advisors and solicitors and the impact this has on both litigators and asylum claimants.

⁴² Gaslighting is defined as manipulating a person or a group of people into doubting their own perceptions, experiences or understanding of events (Conrad, 2023).

...which I think is probably the biggest problem across the charity sector, If I would want clinical supervision, talk about the more emotional side of my work and how it impacts me and you know, like I'm a trauma survivor. I've been extensively through a lot of my own private trauma therapy to get to a point where I'm comfortable in myself, but also, I feel able to do this work. And I think at the moment the sector relies heavily upon a very individualised approach in terms of, colleagues are being listened to each other about hard things that say, being able to, for example, work certain types of cases that just Sanyuly isn't always feasible, and you know, informal support networks like friends who understand things and work in similar sectors... on a personal level, , it really made me happy to have that potentially raised, something that they could look into getting funding for because yeah I think it's just sorely lacking, and I have no idea what it's like in the kind of private immigration sector...

AG's narrative draws attention to the significant challenges faced by legal advisors working in the charity sector, regarding the lack of adequate emotional support and clinical supervision. The narrative expressed frustration with the current approach in the sector, which heavily relied on individualised support and informal networks for coping with the emotional toll of their work. It emphasised the importance and need for formalised clinical supervision and support systems to discuss the emotional impact of working asylum cases and the need for.

Researchers have extensively studied asylum attorney burnout and secondary trauma, shedding light on the challenges faced by legal professionals working in this field. Studies in the US found that self-reported symptoms of burnout and secondary traumatic stress among asylum attorneys are significantly higher compared to other professions such as immigration judges, social workers, hospital doctors, nurses, and prison wardens (Harris & Mellinger, 2021; Levin & Greisberg, 2003). Moreover, attorneys who identified as women, persons of colour, and solo practitioners reported even higher levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress (Harris & Mellinger, 2021). Similar studies conducted outside of the US, particularly in the UK and Canada, have also explored stress and burnout among immigration litigators operating in those systems. In the UK, research findings highlighted a significant association between stress-related factors and asylum litigation, as well as a correlation between greater contact with trauma-exposed clients and anxiety (Graffin, 2019; Rønning, Blumberg, & Dammeyer, 2020). In Canada, a study of 476 lawyers found that trauma-exposed lawyers were 2.62 times more likely to meet the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis (Leclerc et al., 2020). Addressing the risks of burnout and secondary trauma among legal professionals can help create a more supportive and sustainable work environment. The well-being of legal professionals does not only benefit the individuals

themselves but also enhances the overall effectiveness and fairness of the asylum legal system, ultimately ensuring better outcomes for asylum claimants.

The narratives shared highlighted how legal cuts and poor litigation contributed to the establishment of a system of barriers that hindered African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants from accessing justice. These barriers prevented them from accessing a fair, adequate, and holistic legal framework. The deliberate systemic underfunding, manifested through legal cuts and the removal of resources beneficial to asylum claimants, represented a form of structural violence intended to obstruct claimants' efforts to secure legal status and remain in the UK. With dwindling resources, particularly in terms of legal aid providers, those few remaining entities were left overwhelmed by asylum caseloads, leading to burnout, and resulting in poor litigation outcomes. This environment of resource scarcity and overburdened legal systems created additional barriers, especially for black African sexual and gender-expansive applicants who hold multiple overlapping identities. Their cases were often complex and nuanced, necessitating a holistic legal framework approach. The structural violence perpetuated by the government created environment claimants were susceptible to exploitation within an overwhelmed and under-resourced legal asylum system. Cuts to legal aid further exacerbated this situation, contributing to the creation of a "hostile environment" that not only exposed claimants to increased vulnerabilities but also aimed to push them to leave the UK. The following section discusses how language translation practices also contributed to systematic barriers in the asylum process.

6.3.2 Unprofessional Language Translation Practices.

During the asylum process, a language interpreter is not required to give advice, express their opinions to the parties of the interpreting situation or voice their views on the experiences being interpreted but rather act as a messenger (Refugee Advice centre, 2010). In cases where the interpreter deals with matters which go against their own beliefs in the working situation, the interpreter is disallowed to reveal their feelings or opinions either by gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice (Refugee Advice Centre, 2010). Instead, language interpreters were required to treat and interpret asylum claimants' narratives with the respect those experiences deserved, and without discrimination. However, this was not always the case, as evident in some of the experiences shared by co-researchers about the discrimination and homophobia from language translators. A WhatsApp voice call exchange with Mukasa (gay, Uganda) was another example whereby asylum claimants' negative stories about language translators were circulated in the community. In the example,

Mukasa retells a story where language translators accused sexual and gender-expansive claimants of lying about their experiences and the situation in Uganda.

Mukasa: ...I've also heard quite a few people who are saying that, that they felt because of course you know whilst people have got an interpreter, they can still understand some English right. So sometimes they would you know, the interpreter would say in the (vernacular) language, you're lying you know, that didn't happen to you. Like you know things are not like that in Uganda or whatever you know, and things like that, that the interviewer might not hear what they're saying...which is really worrying or sometimes people have been met with someone who they felt might have been homophobic you know and stuff and sort of like make some snide comments you know...and on top of that it's causing more problems to others because whenever someone tells another that my interpreter did this this this and this...these others will be scared to ask for an interpreter. So, instead of yes, saying no I don't want an interpreter, and if they got into the interview and because English is a foreign language, and they couldn't express themselves very well, you know, and that's another problem...

This narrative demonstrated the significant challenges faced by African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants during interviews, concerning the use of interpreters. The highlighted instances where interpreters have shown bias or unprofessional behaviour, accusing the applicant of lying or making homophobic remarks during the interview process. These experiences created a sense of distrust and discomfort among the asylum applicant community, leading some to avoid using interpreters altogether out of fear of encountering similar issues. However, this presented a new set of challenges, as individuals who are not proficient in English may struggle to effectively communicate their experiences and needs during the interview. Mukasa's narrative highlighted the importance of ensuring that language interpretation services were provided in a professional, unbiased manner during the asylum process, to ensure a fair and respectful process for asylum applicants. XX's narrative below supports the story told by Mukasa and others, highlighting the translators' unprofessional and inappropriate behaviours.

XX: The translator would say something (negative) in my language so the home office person didn't understand. She would say what I sharing (experiences of homophobia and violence) was not true...and I could not say to the home office. It was not good...

This narrative emphasised the detrimental impact of biased interpretation during asylum interviews. It also highlighted the urgent need for measures to address interpreter bias and

ensure that interpretation services are provided in a fair, impartial, and professional manner during asylum interviews. Reports from various organisations indicate similar incidents where interpreters brought their religious or cultural biases into translation processes with sexual and gender-diverse asylum claimants (Ware, n.d). In 2019, the UK Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration conducted an assessment of the Home Office's (HO) utilisation of language services during the asylum process. The evaluation concentrated on the effectiveness of meeting the language requirements of asylum applicants within the Borders, Immigration, and Citizenship System (BICS) of the HO (Bolt, 2020). Inspectors particularly examined the efficiency, effectiveness, and consistency of the HO's use of language services, with a focus on the quality and accuracy of interpretation services, written translations, and language analysis (Bolt, 2020). The findings from the inspection reveal unsatisfactory and inconsistent outcomes in terms of efficiency and effectiveness (Bolt, 2020).

Translators and interpreters play a crucial role in facilitating communication between asylum claimants and HO officials, serving as a conduit between the two parties. They are particularly essential when asylum claimants are not confident articulating their experiences in English (Refugee Advice Centre, 2010). How interpreters fulfil their role significantly impacts the lives of asylum claimants. Concerns raised by the UK Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration include the lack of statistics provided by the HO regarding appeals against asylum decisions that raised language and comprehension issues (Bolt, 2020). Mistakes made by interpreters resulting in inconsistencies in asylum claimants' accounts have been used as grounds for refusal by the HO (Bolt, 2020). Therefore, it is paramount that interpreters accurately interpret the narratives told from one language to another (Refugee Advice Centre, 2010).

The sense of distrust and discomfort among the asylum applicant community about using interpreters, raised earlier by Mukasa is illustrated in Sanyu's excerpt. In the telephone conversation below, Sanyu admits to refusing HO translation services even though he knew that he would benefit from such services.

Skye:....*I was gonna ask you, did you have also a translator for your interview?*

Sanyu: *No I didn't. No I didn't. Yeah.*

Skye: *Why is that?*

Sanyu: *I refused, I didn't ask for a translator because to be honest if I knew I would have, later, I would have, because I would be more comfortable you know. Yeah and speaking I think I would be more comfortable in my language, but because, because*

*of my experiences and others of translators I felt like I didn't trust anyone you know?
Yes so that is part of the reason why I didn't ask for, for an interpreter.*

Sanyu's narratives illustrated how the unprofessional behaviour of some language interpreters resulted in a legacy of mistrust and fear (Ware, n.d). This lack of professionalism led Sanyu and others to lose trust in translation services, influencing many to hesitate in seeking support to fully articulate their experiences, potentially compromising their asylum claims. Guidelines from the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre (2010) and similar expectations for UK interpreters state that if interpreters are unable to remain neutral, they must declare a conflict of interest. However, co-researchers' narratives revealed that interpreters handling sexual and gender-expansive cases, who harboured negative beliefs and perceptions about this group of asylum claimants, did not disclose conflicts of interest. This led to unprofessional and homophobic behaviour during asylum interviews, further exacerbating mistrust. The Finnish Refugee Advice Centre (2010) highlighted the challenge of detecting situations where claimants did not trust the interpreter or where the interpreter was not accurately or unbiasedly conveying everything during the interview. In such instances, it is difficult for the asylum claimant to communicate the problem through the same interpreter they mistrust (Refugee Advice Centre, 2010). This likely created a predicament for claimants, further complicating their situation.

Co-researchers like Sanyu felt compelled to decline or avoid translation services, even when they could benefit from them. Conversely, other claimants like Akiki felt they had no choice but to accept translation services, despite concerns about potential homophobia..

Akiki: I will have a translator because my English is not good but I am also not sure though because I hear all these stories of translators from my language who are not good and are homophobic but I have to because of my English...

In certain instances, after stories of harmful translators circulated within the community, individuals managed to arrange for the African Equality Foundation, an organization run by African sexual and gender-diverse individuals, to send a peer to provide translation services as expressed in Omari's excerpt below.

I was afraid because of these stories but I asked for African Equality Foundation to help and they send someone to come and support me to translate. I felt safe with them because I knew I could be myself and tell my story....

Omari's narrative emphasised the crucial role that charity organisations played in ensuring access to fair and accurate interpretation services for asylum applicants facing potential biases during translation. However, only a few individuals can seek and receive such support. Most individuals would altogether avoid translator services, or if unlucky encounter

biased and discriminatory translators, significantly impacting their asylum claim. This narrative highlighted the importance of creating a safe, fair, and respectful environment for asylum applicants to share their experiences and seek protection. The discrimination and unprofessional behaviours encountered by sexual and gender-diverse claimants during language translation practices prompted them to establish support systems for each other. Some claimants assumed the responsibility of preparing others for potential barriers and challenges during the asylum interview. For instance, in a separate conversation, Mukasa described how he mentored others on how to conduct themselves during the interview, advising fellow applicants to disclose early that they could understand some English. This was just one of the many ways in which black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants demonstrated active resistance against systemic barriers to accessing justice, both individually and as a community.

Co-researchers' narratives highlighted the significant impact and barriers that poor and biased interpreting could pose to the asylum claim process. In Europe, language services were identified as key elements of systemic issues within the asylum system (Young, 2017). Research conducted in Germany revealed instances where interpreters lacked adequate qualifications or language skills, underscoring the risk of placing interpretation power in the hands of unqualified individuals who could become unprofessional and irresponsible gatekeepers (Young, 2017). In addition to concerns about the abuse of power by language translators, issues related to regional differences, dialect nuances, and the social and religious background of interpreters were also emphasised. Similarly, asylum claimants in Germany reported a lack of trust in their interpreters' independence and suspected links with communities back in their countries of origin (Young, 2017). These concerns were also echoed by co-researchers in other parts of the study.

In the UK, Smith and Patel (2019), explored the interactions between language interpreters and sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants in the UK. Their research highlighted how interpreters' conduct affects the experiences of asylum claimants. The research indicated that interpreters sometimes struggled to accurately convey the nuances of sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants' experiences due to discomfort, cultural bias or lack of understanding of LGBT-related terminology (Smith & Patel, 2019). Specifically, the paper suggested that interpreters may exhibit silence or hesitation when translating sensitive or perceived-to-be taboo topics related to sexual and gender-expansive identities. This conduct can lead to misunderstandings, misrepresentations, further marginalisation or unable to fully express their experiences and needs (Smith & Patel, 2019). Similarly, another UK study suggested that interpreters did not consistently demonstrate cultural competency or sensitivity in their engagement with sexual and gender-

expansive asylum claimants (Jones & Brown, 2018). Instead, they struggled to accurately convey the unique challenges and experiences faced by sexual and gender-expansive persons, due to inadequate training or personal biases and sometimes inadvertently reinforced stereotypes or misconceptions about LGBT identities (Jones & Brown, 2018). These studies emphasised the need for specialised training and support for interpreters to effectively communicate with and advocate for sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants.

Overall, co-researchers' experiences with language translation practices revealed ongoing structural violence through discrimination and inappropriate behaviour from language interpreters. Many asylum claimants in the UK do not have a strong command of English, which is understandable as they already have their mother tongue languages. However, language proficiency though crucial in the asylum process should not be a barrier to making a fair claim. However, co-researchers' narratives showed that the quality of interpreting services was sometimes inadequate and biased, directly impacting the asylum process and their right to access justice. For example, co-researchers' narratives revealed instances of language interpreters behaving inappropriately and discriminating against them. These narratives highlighted the Home Office's failure to fulfil its duty of care towards African claimants with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, contributing to a deliberately hostile environment that hindered asylum claimants' freedom, safety, and barriers to a fair system.

Chapter Summary:

What does it mean for African asylum claimants to be free and to feel safe, secure, and free when they remained in environments where they continued to be minoritised, dehumanised, and were objects of the white gaze? Where was the freedom when being forced to navigate a system built on white supremacy, constantly reminded that they were not human, wanted, worthy or genuinely *queer. In this chapter narratives shared implicated structural and symbolic violences through intersectional discrimination and colonial notions of gender and sexuality, vulnerabilised to sexual violence and exploitation, and systemic barriers to accessing justice.

Asylum applicants, legal professionals, and NGO caseworkers engaged in discussions highlighting instances of intersectional discrimination within asylum processes, rooted in colonial beliefs and understanding regarding gender and sexuality. The privileging of conformity to 'western' norms resulted in some applicants being favoured, while others faced scrutiny for not fitting these norms. African claimants perceived as deviating from

western frameworks risked refusal, especially if they couldn't demonstrate approved relationship histories or behaviours. This discriminatory culture, perpetuated by HO asylum practices, perpetuated violence through racialised policies, leading to differential treatment based on race, geographical origin and cultural background. The pervasive hetero-normative and essentialist views of sexual and gender minorities, particularly affecting African claimants, were utilised to dismiss their asylum claims, contributing to a structurally violent and racist asylum system.

Furthermore, the narratives highlighted how legal cuts and poor litigation created barriers hindering African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants from accessing justice. Systemic underfunding, manifesting through legal cuts and the removal of resources beneficial to asylum claimants, obstructed their efforts to secure legal status. With dwindling resources, particularly in terms of legal aid providers, the remaining entities were overwhelmed by asylum caseloads, leading to burnout and poor litigation outcomes. This environment of resource scarcity and overburdened legal systems created additional barriers, especially for black African sexual and gender-expansive applicants with complex cases. Cuts to legal aid exacerbated the situation, contributing to the creation of a "hostile environment" that exposed claimants to increased vulnerabilities aimed at pushing them to leave the UK. Additionally, co-researchers' experiences with language translation practices revealed ongoing structural violence against asylum applicants based on their sexuality and gender identity throughout the asylum process. Inadequate and biased interpreting services directly impacted claimants' right to access justice, highlighting the Home Office's failure to fulfil its duty of care towards African claimants with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Thesis Summary, Concluding Thoughts, And Recommendations.

This study examined narratives told about the asylum process and how structural and institutional violences were implicated in the narratives shared. Within this, the thesis explored how sexual, and gender-expansive asylum claimants narrated and made sense of their experiences of the asylum process. It also explored assumptions and ideas of sexuality and gender identity implicated in how the asylum process was experienced. Secondly, the thesis presented a collaborative project that demonstrated decolonial feminist methodologies as sites for possible remedy and transformation. The concluding chapter of the thesis summarises the findings that emerged and explores the broader significance of these findings. This is followed by a discussion of the key theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions made by this thesis, as well as potential implications and recommendations for future research.

7.1 Summary of Key Findings.

Chapter Five presented narratives of violent uncertainty and exclusion. Findings that emerged from the study highlighted structural and symbolic violence through exclusionary state practices and dis/location and geographical isolation. According to participant narratives, the Home Office applied time as a tool to exert violence through controlling time in a deliberately oppressive way. The long waits of uncertainty that claimants were forced into through legal limbo were violent, undermining asylum claimants' autonomy, agency and humanity. The violence of uncertainty created conditions that perpetuated systematic insecurity and exacerbated inequality forcing applicants into marginalised existence in the shadows. In addition to prolonged uncertainty, the experiences and perspectives participants shared revealed the exclusion of asylum applicants in the form of economic, digital and symbolic violence. Symbolic violence was evident in the way ID documentation was used against applicants as a tool of exclusion, to isolate and visibly separate them from the rest of society. IDs provided to asylum claimants marked a representation of their statuses as 'outsiders' or not belonging to the country. Consequently, when othered as different and not belonging, asylum claimants faced hypervisibility, discrimination and hostility as well as prohibition from accessing needed services. The economic exclusion that asylum applicants suffered reflected a belief that applicants were undeserving of accessing economic resources and equal treatment to the rest of UK society. African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants faced intersectional discrimination, where their identities as both sexual and gender-diverse individuals and people of African descent compounded their economic challenges. For black African asylum applicants, the intersection of systemic

racism, class discrimination, language barriers, and other structural inequalities hindered their access to economic resources and opportunities, even within refugee organisations and support networks intended for asylum claimants and refugees. Furthermore, the ongoing practice of socially and geographically marginalising black African sexual and gender asylum applicants to remoted areas isolated them from familiar cultural and religious activities and established support networks. It also vulnerabilised applicants to intersectional violence, including homophobia and racism. The strategy of distant relocations and prison-like accommodation aimed to remove asylum claimants from public view, perpetuating a cycle of marginalisation, isolation and violence. Equally, narratives of being placed in poor housing highlighted serious concerns about the safety and well-being of persons. This reinforces ideas about dignity, humanity and being non-deserving. The narratives depicting individuals placed in inadequate housing not only raise alarms about their physical safety and overall well-being but also bring to light deeper issues concerning dignity, humanity, and the perception of deservingness. The mistreatment of Black African individuals (and other people of colour) by the UK's colonial system reveals the enduring devaluation of Black bodies. It serves as a stark reminder of the systemic devaluation of Black bodies and the persistent colonial practices that permeate bordering policies and procedures.

Chapter Six presented narratives of intersectional discrimination and vulnerabilisation. The research demonstrated structural and symbolic violence through intersectional discrimination and colonial notions of gender and sexuality, vulnerabilisation to sexual violence and exploitation, and systemic barriers to accessing justice. In particular, narratives of intersectional discrimination and colonial notions of gender and sexuality exposed the racialised colonial underpinnings of the UK asylum system. Racialised structural violence was evident in instances of intersectional discrimination and biased assumptions rooted in colonial beliefs and understanding of gender and sexuality within asylum processes. In particular, conformity to 'western' norms differentiated between applicants deemed as deserving or undeserving of protection. Such practices perpetuated violence. In addition, the HO's neglect and failure to safeguard and protect vulnerabilised asylum claimants in their care created an environment which vulnerabilised applicants to sexual and gendered violence. Beyond the asylum process' practices and policies dehumanising and stripping asylum applicants' of their humanity and dignity, the process permitted employees to mistreat asylum claimants in their care. The study highlighted the consistent failure to implement safeguarding mechanisms to protect asylum applicants from harm, including exploitation. These findings illustrated how through different forms of systemic barriers the state created a hostile environment that not only exposed claimants to increased vulnerabilities but aimed to push them to leave the UK.

Overall, the findings indicating the dehumanising treatment, discrimination, and exclusion experienced by black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and refugees within the UK asylum system reveal a reality wherein historical legacies of colonialism continue to shape contemporary institutions and practices. This perpetuation of coloniality is evident in the systemic violence and racism embedded within the asylum process, which disproportionately targets individuals belonging to historically marginalised Black and Brown communities - an ongoing colonial project of isolating black bodies as undesirable, unworthy and not human enough.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions.

Research investigating African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants' lived experience of the UK asylum process continues to be limited. This study contributes to the relevant literature in various ways. First, there are limited studies that have used a decolonial structural intersectional approach to centre voices of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants to gain a nuanced understanding of their experiences. As a result, the current study, as a whole is a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on the asylum-seeking process and migration more broadly. Research available acknowledges the systematic barriers and challenges asylum claimants face whilst navigating the asylum process (Asif & Kienzler, 2022; Crosby Medlicott, 2022; Danisi, et al., 2021; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Koehler & Schneider, 2019; Namer & Razum, 2018; Nematy et al., 2023; Shaw & Verghese, 2022; Sherif et al., 2022). For example, previous studies problematised issues around the procedure of proving the authenticity of LGBTI identity (Briddock, 2016; Jordan, 2009; Ferreira, 2022; Lopes Andrade et al., 2020; Millbank, 2009; Souter, 2011), highlighted social and economic exclusions faced (Allsopp et al., 2014; Eagly & Shafer, 2020; Hacker et al., 2015; Tschalaer, 2023), and other intersecting violences (Chossière, 2021; Czimbalmos & Rask, 2022; Dustin & Held, 2018; Held, 2015; 2019; Ravid, 2022). However, although studies acknowledged these experiences and conditions as contributing to creating and or resulting from the hostile environment, very few studies have explicitly framed these barriers as structural forms of violence and illustrated that they are structural forms of violence in the ways these barriers push African asylum applicants further towards the margins.

Time as a tool of violence - The study advances our insight into how the asylum process used time as a tool to exert violence toward sexual and gender-expansive persons, through legal limbo and the violent uncertainty and insecurity. Highlighting time in limbo as a

tool of violence, the thesis argued that the state used the time to control and keep asylum claimants under the systemic regime of oppression, depriving them of basic human rights. It confirms the impact violent uncertainty had on applicants' ability to sustain wholeness as human beings pushing African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants further into marginalisation and poverty (Brekke & Brochmann, 2015). In particular, African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants with unique and multi-intersecting identities were further vulnerabilised by the system, to spaces of exclusion and marginalisation with limited access to essential resources and meaningful activities (Refugee Action, 2017; Seitz, 2017; Tryggvadóttir & Skaptadóttir, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The structural production of sexual and gendered violence - The findings of this study also add to the literature on sexual and gendered violence. Black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants' experiences of sexual and gendered violence in particular at the hands of and under the care of HO staff and or from other claimants have had little exploration. There are few autobiographical accounts, research (Canning, 2019) and reports from NGOs and media telling experiences of sexual and gendered violence asylum claimants have suffered in HO accommodation and in detention (Kelly, 2023; Townsend, 2021). This study therefore builds on this literature and discourse on the structural production of sexual and gendered violence through the asylum process. The study argued that HO's neglect and failure to safeguard and protect vulnerabilised asylum claimants in their care created an environment which vulnerabilised claimants to sexual and gendered violence. The state's mistreatment of asylum claimants, subjecting them to practices and policies that dehumanised and stripped them of their humanity and dignity modelled to the public as well as those employed by the state how poorly to treat asylum claimants.

The othering and hypervisibilisation of asylum claimants - The findings from the study identified a relationship between the allocation of visibly different IDs and the Othering of asylum claimants. The relationship between visibly separate IDs and exposure of asylum applicants and refugees to discrimination, prejudice and anti-refugee rhetoric has been previously studied (Pehrson & Zagefka, 2009; Ravid, 2021). However, that relationship in the context of the UK and on black African sexual and gender-expansive applicants is still limited. Therefore findings from this study are significant. The findings confirm that black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants, who are deliberately Othered through IDs face hypervisibility, discrimination and hostility as a result.

Additionally, the study also contributes to asylum-seeking literature by linking structural violence in the UK asylum system to the racialised colonial underpinnings of the asylum and refugee system. The results from the research are important because they highlight how western ideas and assumptions about sexuality and gender continue to be

perpetuated in the immigration system. This discourse contributes to existing literature, which has previously emphasised that the global asylum system runs the risk of standardising western concepts of sexuality and gender, consequently marginalising and alienating individuals from the global majority (Luibhéid, 2008; Murray, 2014; Forcibly Displaced People Network; 2019; Cochrane & Wolff, 2022). A system that consistently favours individuals adhering to recognisable queer identities perpetuates the dominance of particular western, predominant identity groups and specific notions and presumptions regarding sexuality and gender identities (Cochrane & Wolff, 2022), thereby putting African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants at a disadvantage. This thesis argued that asylum claimants being confronted with assumptions, ideas and stereotypes about their identities and experiences and upheld to standards that were not applied to European asylum claimants was sexism, biphobia and transphobia (Cochrane & Wolff, 2022). This thesis also argued that these practices and ways of bordering were rooted in coloniality racism, and more specifically in anti-black racism.

7.3 Methodological Contributions.

The study was designed to make methodological contributions to knowledge on conducting research with African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants seeking refuge and impacted by the colonial bordering of black bodies, black sexualities and black identities. The research considered early on in the process that co-researchers' narratives about their experiences of the asylum would not only intersect with discourses of gender and sexuality but other factors too, including race and class, geographical origin, language access and cultural background. This highlighted the importance of taking a decolonial feminist and structural intersectional approach to the research. As a result, the study adopted feminist, decolonial and integrated frameworks and approaches to foster a multidimensional understanding of research on the lived experiences of African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants. It was especially important to avoid western feminism which had a colonial and patronising gaze over marginalised communities. The research process recognised African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and refugees as individuals with multi-complex identities and experiences that were not only interconnected but also defined the treatment from the asylum process.

There is limited empirical engagement *with* marginalised, sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and refugees in migration studies. Instead, the asylum process is often about and for, and rarely *with* this community. This research therefore attempted to produce different forms of knowledge/ways of knowing in asylum-seeking studies and *with* persons who are not only *othered* in the asylum process but also *othered* in research, thought and practice. Decolonial feminist praxis deepened the understanding of how African

sexual and gender sexual gender-expansive persons narrated and made meaning of their lived experience of the asylum system and how structural violence was implicated in these narratives. A decolonial feminist approach to research also encouraged the researcher to strive towards being ethically and reflexively engaged throughout the research process.

The research employed multiple theoretical frameworks, including structural intersectionality theory, KDT, and trauma perspectives. These frameworks guided the approach to research methodologies and facilitated collaboration with African sexual and gender-expansive individuals at the intersections of gender and sexuality, borders, and violence. An integrated theoretical framework offered a lens to explore how the various systems of oppression experienced by co-researchers were interconnected and related to each other. It facilitated an examination of how structural inequalities shaped their experiences within the asylum system and process. By employing collaborative methods that empowered co-researchers to self-record their experiences, shape research questions, and steer the direction of the research, the study centred their voices and experiences. As part of decolonial practice, the research carefully considered the language used to depict co-researchers and their experiences, recognizing and honouring the community's expertise. Embracing feminist values and principles, and transcending the traditional researcher/interviewee model, the practice treated community voices as authoritative and sources of wisdom (Bernstein et al., 2021). The study invited researchers to consider deeply the personal, political and ethical considerations of research and addressed the need for more research on asylum-seeking and refugees that centred remedial and transformative practices. Lastly, I situated myself in the research, as a decolonial feminist stance and because of the significance of the topic to my own life as a refugee. As a result, I used reflexive practice to observe my research practices (Hibbert et al., 2010), and reflected on the emotions, thoughts, and questions that arose during the research period. This reflective practice shaped the research methodology and praxis that aimed to centre research as remedial.

7.4 Research Limitations.

All research has limitations, and it is crucial to identify and acknowledge them (Price & Murnan, 2004). Doing so delineates the boundaries and constraints within which the study operates (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019), providing insight into the scope and applicability of the findings. As both the researcher and the researched, I played a direct and intimate role in gathering experiences and conducting analysis. This insider positionality carried emotional implications that influenced the process and practice. Therefore, integrated

reflexivity was embedded in the research process from its inception. Below, I outline some of the limitations of this study.

Co-researchers - There were challenges with recruiting asylum applicants during the pandemic. Initially, the study was only going to engage black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and at least 45 people. However, challenges during COVID-19 meant that I managed to access a small pool of persons who could and or had the capacity to participate. This meant that I had to be creative. Although I also included NGO and legal case workers the sample remained small. Similarly, the research also managed to engage a very small number of trans-identifying persons and bisexual persons. Additionally, most of the individuals who participated were from one country, Uganda.

Knowledge co-production - The research included co-researchers as co-collaborators in producing knowledge. This involved co-researchers actively leading on choices of methods used and directing the research questions. The research aimed to engage co-researchers throughout the process, including co-researchers reading the analysis and drafting of the findings. However, during the pandemic, co-researchers were faced with many challenges and did not have the capacity to fully engage. Due to the research being mostly self-funded and under-resourced, it was challenging to fully integrate capacity-building and empowerment goals into the research. Similarly, challenges with resources and access to research resources limited what co-researchers could do and limited how the research could be more transformative and remedial.

In particular, the research had planned to provide written informed consent again at the end of gathering co-researchers' experiences. This was hoped to reiterate 'formal' informed consent once the co-researchers knew and had an opportunity to reflect on what and how they had contributed to the research. This consent form was to also be accompanied by disclosure of transcribed data, so co-researchers had an opportunity to identify, redact, and rectify any sensitive information given. Additionally, once the analysis process was completed the research had hoped to share this section of the research with co-researchers, and collaboratively agree on the final write-up of the analysis. This process did not happen. Due to limited financial resources and several other factors, including co-researchers' capacity and barriers related to the pandemic it was not possible on this occasion to carry out these processes. This affected the decolonial practice element of the study.

7.5 Recommendations for Policy and Practice.

In line with my politics, I support the abolition of borders and imagine a future that is committed to the abolition of borders (See Bradley & de Noronha, 2022). Therefore, this research is careful not to offer practical recommendations that contribute toward the perpetuation and maintenance of borders. However, the research recognises that in reality border abolition is a futuristic goal. As a result, whilst working in solidarity with others toward such an imagined future, in the immediate there is a need for policies that humanise, and eradicate violence (symbolic, systemic, structural and physical) toward sexual and gender-expansive persons, especially those from the global majority and former colonised nations, harmed by bordering practices. Below are some of the recommendations that emerged from the research. These are reported alongside practical contributions co-researchers shared during the research process when asked what and how they thought this particular research could contribute toward remedying their situations and toward the betterment of all forcibly displaced migrants.

Trauma-informed practice - Numerous asylum applicants have endured severe traumas such as persecution, sexual violence, torture or physical assault. Even in instances where applicants haven't necessarily faced trauma, expressing emotions about one's gender or sexuality, which may have been suppressed for years as a survival tactic, can be a multifaceted and emotionally intense process. Hence, Home Office officials, immigration lawyers, NGO staff, activists, language interpreters, and researchers must possess an understanding of and receive training in the principles of trauma-informed approaches (Alessi, 2016; Kahn & Alessi, 2017). These principles should be an obligatory component of training for all persons and organisations working with refugees and asylum claimants. This will enable service providers to understand trauma, how it manifests, recognise signs and triggers of trauma and know how to engage with and respond to it and in ways which do not re-traumatise sexual and gender asylum claimants. The research highlighted different ways the asylum process re-traumatised sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants, calling for a trauma-informed asylum process.

Culturally sensitive, anti-racist, and intersectional practice - Narratives from the study highlighted the number of ways in which different actors, such as HO officials, language interpreters and legal caseworkers failed to be culturally sensitive. Intersectional discrimination including racism, homophobia, biases and western-centric assumptions were identified as barriers to black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants accessing justice. It is recommended that Home Office staff, litigators, mental health service providers, NGO workers, and language interpreters working with sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and in migration more broadly, should all receive training for

culturally sensitive, anti-racist, and intersectional practice to offer a nuanced understanding of issues that impact African and POC sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and refugees. Anyone working with African and POC sexual and gender-expansive asylum must know diverse forms of the possible gender and sexual expressions, and understandings in various cultures/ countries where their service users are/might be from. This will hopefully encourage the active inclusive language that is culturally aware/ sensitive and reduce internalised western-centric/hetero/cis-normative assumptions of sexuality, queer relationships, intimacy, sex etc (APA manual, 2019).

Other recommendations include providing gender-affirming healthcare to trans and non-binary asylum claimants who require it, such as hormone replacement and blockers, ensuring access to trans-specific healthcare needs, and providing psycho-social support early in the asylum process and throughout. Refugees and asylum claimants are entitled to the right to access healthcare services for physical and mental well-being. Policymakers should remove restrictions on healthcare entitlements for all asylum claimants, regardless of their legal residency status (Razum & Bozorgmehr, 2016; Ooms et al., 2019). Asking asylum claimants to prove their sexuality, especially through evidence of a history of relationships, is not helpful and is based on western-centric/hetero/cis-normative ideas about sexuality, relationships, and love. Relationship history does not necessarily define or evidence sexuality. Similarly, one does not need to transition or engage with trans-specific healthcare services to be trans or non-binary. Therefore, the asylum process should avoid asking claimants to prove sexuality/gender identity, particularly by providing a history of relationships. When conducting research with asylum applicants and refugees, researchers, activists, and service providers should avoid practices and discourse that frame and re-stigmatise asylum claimants as "vulnerable" or "traumatised" (Nematy et al., 2023), which strips them of agency. This perpetuates the stigmatisation of asylum claimants. The study highlighted forms of intersectional violence that sexual, and gender-expansive asylum applicants were vulnerabilised to in housing provided by the HO. As a result, appropriate assessments should be conducted when placing asylum claimants in temporary accommodation to safeguard them from gendered violence, sexual violence, transphobia, and homophobia. The safety and security of sexual and gender-expansive claimants should be a primary consideration. Regarding housing, asylum claimants should be treated with dignity and humanity, reflected in the accommodation provided for them. Lastly, the detention/imprisonment of all asylum claimants, including sexual and gender asylum claimants, is harmful. Policymakers should work towards abolishing the detention of asylum claimants altogether.

7.6 Suggestions for Future Research.

Possible areas for research emerging from the work include examining black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants' experience of sexual and gendered violence whilst navigating the asylum process. In particular, co-researchers reported narratives of sexual violence – including sexual harassment, and sexual assault from HO staff, directly or indirectly employed by the HO. Whilst there is growing literature looking at sexual and gendered violence few studies have looked at sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants' experiences. Below, I have also included other research suggestions where there are gaps within the asylum-seeking literature. These include:

Resistance and Disruption - During the research process co-researchers shared narratives and some insights into how they resisted and disrupted regimes of structural oppression and structural violence during the interview process and within the process of navigating the asylum system overall. However, these were omitted from the research (due to the magnitude of the project). The recent rise of critique around resilience vs resistance argued that definitions of resilience be redefined and reconceptualised (See Joseph, 2013; Joseph-Salisbury; 2018; Shaikh & Kauppi, 2010; Sims-Schouten & Gilbert, 2022). Research that problematises resilience in African sexual and gender asylum applicants and refugees and examines how the concept of resistance and practices of disruption show up in their experiences of the asylum process would allow for a deeper understanding of how to navigate this environment.

Decolonial feminist methodologies - There continues to be limited research with sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants and refugee communities whose methodological practices draw from decolonial, feminist and indigeneity practices that centre transformation, liberation and or healing. A majority of available research is conducted on and about the community and rarely with the community – future research projects should consider co-producing and co-publishing with the community and or with individuals in the community, and rethink how such knowledge can be produced/ written.

Other themes that were raised during the research but were not explored further and fully explored were trauma-informed litigation in the asylum process and vicarious trauma in sexual and gender legal caseworkers undertaking asylum cases with sexual and gender-expansive clients. Lastly, the current research struggled to attract African trans-identified asylum claimants to contribute to the research (possible reasons were identified in Chapter Three). It would be helpful if future research could examine African trans persons' narratives and how structural violence is implicated in their lived experiences. It would be good if such

research could come from the trans community and or in collaboration with trans communities.

7.7 Concluding Remarks.

This thesis examines narratives of black African sexual and gender-expansive asylum applicants within the UK asylum regime, focusing on how structural and symbolic violence is embedded in their experiences. Using a decolonial feminist framework that centres voices of co-researchers, the study highlights intersectional violences through stories of violent uncertainty, exclusion, intersectional discrimination, and vulnerabilisation. The UK state, through its policies and practices, actively perpetuates systems of structural, symbolic, racialised, and gendered violence against asylum claimants. This intersecting violence manifests in policies of exclusion, neglect, and dispersal.

Narratives of violent uncertainty, exclusionary state practices, deliberate isolation, intersectional discrimination, colonial notions of gender and sexuality, exposure to exploitation and sexual violence, and systemic barriers to justice are all part of the UK's hostile asylum regime. These narratives demonstrate how the state perpetuates violence by stripping away asylum claimants' autonomy and freedom, excluding them from everyday life, and using prolonged waiting periods as a strategy to keep claimants in a state of limbo. Through the lens of structural intersectionality, experiences of asylum applicants are understood as deliberately produced and perpetuated by the state and the asylum regime to control, exclude, dehumanise, vulnerabilise, and marginalise them. The study also highlights the UK Home Office's significant failings in safeguarding sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants and how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated their precarious situation.

Noone wants to leave home. People are forced to flee and in the broader sense colonialism, and imperialism, as well as capitalism and climate change continue to create conditions that force people to leave home. The colonial legacy influences the treatment of black African sexual and gender-diverse individuals in several ways. Formerly colonised countries still employ colonial-era laws and practices to criminalise and oppress individuals with diverse sexual and gender identities, compelling them to seek refuge in (ex-)colonial nations. Ironically the UK and other countries in the global minority countries now present themselves as protectors of LGBT rights and reinforce their self-image as moral exemplars. However, they often overlook their historical role in introducing colonial laws, beliefs, and practices that criminalised and marginalised sexual and gender-diverse individuals in formerly colonised states. Then, when African sexual and gender-expansive individuals seek asylum in the UK, they encounter a system rife with structural inequalities and biases where

they face racialised and gendered violence. Their asylum claims are met with scepticism, disbelief, racism and violence, reflecting deep-seated prejudices and misconceptions about their sexuality and gender identity. The pervasiveness of coloniality in the system shows that both the asylum regime and process are not grounded in humanity and neither does the regime nor the process affirm asylum claimants' humanity. Instead, asylum applicants' sense of being human is eroded. Thereby, the coloniality of the asylum system, and the broader migration regime continue to endanger black African sexual and gender-expansive individuals. Amid escalating harmful bordering policies, practices and aggressive culture wars negatively impacting trans and gender-expansive communities, there is an urgent need for a more equitable and decolonial approach to protecting forcibly displaced persons. This approach must recognise the intersecting forms of oppression and violence faced by marginalised communities and address the systemic issues perpetuated by the colonial legacy.

The metaphor 'The Hare and the Baboon', rooted in Zimbabwean folklore, is employed to summarise the dynamic of survival, dehumanisation, exposure to violence, and power imbalances experienced by African sexual and gender-expansive asylum claimants. The metaphor symbolises the various systems of oppression, including white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, colonialism, and transphobia, that uphold inequality and power imbalances. The metaphor is revealed in the dehumanising treatment, discrimination, violence, and exclusion faced, illustrating how the UK asylum regime is shaped by the historical legacies of colonialism. These experiences expose the "double standards" applied to black African sexual and gender-expansive forcibly displaced migrants, highlighting the colonial foundations of the UK asylum system. The racialised structural violence suffered by claimants highlights the persistence of coloniality in bordering practices, raising important questions about the ethics of care and the dehumanisation of black African asylum applicants.

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Appendices:**APPENDIX A:** co-researcher details in 2020

Name	Country of Origin	Gender	Sexuality	Relationship status
Yellow	Tanzania	woman	lesbian	single
Ruth	Uganda	woman	lesbian	single
Abby	Uganda	woman	lesbian	single
XX	Uganda	woman	Lesbian	single
Abraham	Uganda	man	gay	single
Haddy	Uganda	woman	lesbian	single
Batanai	Zimbabwe	woman	lesbian	single
Sanyu	Uganda	man	gay	Single/ “complicated”
Akiki	Uganda	Neither man or woman	bisexual	Single / dating
Miremba	Uganda	woman	lesbian	Not disclosed
Namukasa	Uganda	woman	bisexual	single
Mukasa	Uganda	man	gay	single
Omari	Uganda	man	gay	single
Komani	Zambia	Trans man	Heterosexual relationship	married

Mary	Uganda			
Skye	Zimbabwe	woman	lesbian	single
Ssentango	Uganda	man	gay	Single
Bale	Uganda	man	Gay	Single

APPENDIX B: NGO workers / Legal advisors details.

Name	Heritage	Gender and sexuality	Work
RB	Indian/ British	Non-binary/ Queer	Legal advisor
AG	White/ British	Non-binary/ Queer	Legal advisor
ES (refugee status)	Ugandan	Bisexual	NGO worker
MG (refugee status)	Zimbabwean	Lesbian	NGO worker

Appendix C: Informed consent form.

Department of Psychology

Gathering African LGBT experiences of the asylum interview process.

1. Invitation and purpose

You are invited to contribute to a research study about your experiences of the UK asylum process. I am a PhD researcher from the Department of Psychology at University of Cape Town, under the supervision of Professor Floretta Boonzaier.

2. Procedures

If you decide to contribute to this research, I will invite you to participate as a co-researcher. This means that you will actively make decisions about the different stages of the research process. For example, I will ask you to independently collect your experiences and have a say in how you want to collect these experiences. You will also have a say in the final write up of the analysis and results. The experiences collected will focus on the asylum interview. You will also be asked to take part in a small, informal group discussion (gathering circle) to

collectively make decisions as well as reflect on your experiences of the research process. These gathering circles should take no more than 2 -3 hours (including breaks).

3. Inconveniences

If at any point of the interview or group discussion you feel anxious or distressed, you can choose to stop at any point without any negative consequences. The initial interviews will be done online (via WhatsApp). Then you will collect your own experiences/ narratives via voice notes/ voice memos and any other anyways which works for you. Any group discussions in 2020 will be conducted at the organisation you attend or at location that is safe and convenient to you. The most convenient time for you and the lead researcher will be arranged.

4. Benefits

You are given an opportunity to share your views and experiences and your information will contribute to the larger purpose of understanding the asylum interview process, from the perspective of African LGBT asylum claimants.

5. Privacy and confidentiality

Your experiences and group discussions will be recorded on voice notes/ voice notes and dicta-phones during group discussions. The lead researcher will take strict precautions to safeguard your personal information throughout the research. Your information will be kept in a locked file cabinet without your name and other personal identifiers. Once the research is complete, your tape-recorded information will be stored for a further 5 years and after this period it will be destroyed. While this research will be used for educational purposes, there is a chance that this work might be published in an academic journal and or a book. In this case, your identity will still be kept confidential, unless you choose *otherwise. There are options for you to choose names you may want to be identified with, including pseudonym names, actual first names, actual first and second names. In 2020 when lead researcher can travel to the UK, group discussions and any face to face interactions will be conducted in a private room to ensure confidentiality. Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in gathering circles, I will make all efforts to encourage an environment of mutual respect and solidarity to minimise this risk.

6. Money matters

In cases of group gatherings in 2020, you will be reimbursed for any transportation costs incurred to and from the research venue.

7. Contact details

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about the study, please contact the **Researchers:** Skye Chirape on 0027(0) 631937719, email chrsky001@myuct.ac.za **OR My research supervisor,** Floretta Boonzaier on 0027 (0) 216503429, email at Floretta.Boonzaier@uct.ac.za **OR Contact for the Ethics Committee:** Rosalind Adams on 0027(0)21 650 3417 or email at Rosalind.Adams@uct.ac.za

8. Signatures

The co-researcher has been informed of the nature and purpose of the procedures described above including any risks involved in its performance. He/she/they have been given time to ask any questions and these questions have been answered to the best of the researcher's ability.

Researcher's Signature

Date

I (participant) have been informed about this research study and understand its purpose, possible benefits, risks, and inconveniences. I agree to take part in this research as a participant. I know that I am free to withdraw this consent and quit this project at any time, and that doing so will not cause me any penalty.

Co-researcher's Signature

Date

PERMISSION TO TAPE-RECORD

I consent to collecting and audio-recording my own experiences. I consent to the gathering circle / face to face interactions being audio-recorded. I understand that my own experiences/ face to face interactions and group discussions will be tape-recorded and that the lead researcher will take strict precautions to safeguard my personal information throughout the study.

Co-researcher's Signature



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First name (only).

Age.....

Country of origin.....

Gender.....

Your preferred pronoun... ..

Occupation.....

Relationships status....

Do you have any past difficult experiences with your mental well-being? Please specify, if possible.

Did you experience any symptoms of mental health difficulties in the last six months? Please

Have you seen a doctor in the last six months regarding your mental health?

Are you currently on medication regarding your mental well-being?

Have you ever harmed yourself in the last six months? Please specify, if possible. No

Have you ever thought of harming yourself in the last six months? Please specify, if possible.

Sexual identity.....

How long been in the UK?

When was the first time lodged in an application for asylum with home office....

Where in the asylum process are you now?.....

Appendix D: Guiding Questions.

Instruction: For your voice notes/voice memos/ written statements we will start with these guiding questions. We will continue to expand on them – for example, you will add your questions / any other information you want/ prefer to contribute to the research/

- Describe your experiences of being lesbian/gay/ bisexual/ trans in your home country.
- What led you to leave and seek asylum in the UK?
- Describe your first experience with the UK Home Office?
- Describe your experiences of seeking asylum in the UK.

- If you have had your initial interview with the Home Office and or any interviews at all – I.e. the screening interview and the substantive interview – please describe how the interviews were like for you - for example, who interviewed you, what happened how you felt, what you thought, how long the interview took etc.
- If you are still waiting for an interview with the Home Office describe what the wait been like – for example, has it impacted your life in anyway, how has it impacted your life?
- Describe what your life has been like since arriving in the UK and since seeking asylum in the UK.
- Describe your overall experiences of the asylum-seeking asylum - how did you feel/ what are your thoughts/ in what ways has it been challenging etc....
- How has the process of seeking asylum in the UK affected your mental health, if it has?
- You are welcome to add whatever information/ experiences you wish to add and that you want anyone who reads the research to know about your experiences of seeking asylum in the UK.
- We will be and can expand more on these questions.

We will also use the same questions for persons who choose to be interviewed. The interview will be an exchange between you, the co-researcher and myself. You are welcome to ask me the same questions and or any other questions you wish to ask me.

Appendix E: Recruitment advertisements

PhD research on questions of borders and migration

**1st & 2nd stage of
interviews will be done
remotely/ online**

**Looking for African LGBT asylum
seekers to share their experiences of
the UK asylum process.**



**CONTACT SKYE CHIRAPE
EMAIL: CHRSKY001@MYUCT.AC.ZA
WHATSAPP #+27 63 193-77194**



PHD RESEARCH CONTRIBUTORS NEEDED

Looking for persons to contribute to a PhD study. The research aims to understand, from your perspective, how as African LGBT individuals seeking asylum you experience the UK asylum process. Data will be collected in 3 stages, with the first two stages, virtually/ online.

- DO YOU IDENTIFY AS LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL OR TRANS (LGBT)?
- ARE YOU BORN IN ANY ONE OF THE AFRICAN COUNTRIES?
- DO YOU HAVE A DATE FOR YOUR HOME OFFICE ASYLUM INTERVIEW? OR
- HAVE YOU ALREADY GONE THROUGH THE INTERVIEW PROCESS?
- HAVE YOU STARTED THE PROCESS BUT ARE WAITING FOR AN INTERVIEW DATE?
- DID YOU RECENTLY SOUGHT ASYLUM IN THE UK (FROM 2017 >)?
- AND, ARE YOU WILLING TO CONTRIBUTE YOUR EXPERIENCES TO A RESEARCH THAT WILL CONTRIBUTE TO THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE ON THE UK ASYLUM PROCESS?



SCAN OR SEE CONTACTS BELOW

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

You will actively participate with the research in a way that is intentional. For example, as a contributor you will be involved in all the decisions of the data research process (i.e. how data will be collected) and have a say in the analysis of the data. In the 2nd stage you can independently collect your own data. You will also make collective decisions and reflections with others, in 'gathering circles'.

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If you are an African LGBT person seeking asylum in the UK do consider contributing to the research. Contribution is VOLUNTARY and you may STOP AT ANY TIME. If you would like to participate, please contact:

**Skye Chirape on,
WHATSAPP +27631937719 (SA)
Email: chrsky001@myuct.ac.za
/skyechirape@gmail.com**

Or

Scan below

